

RIGHTS

SCMP

RELAX RULE ON MAIDS' HOUSING, SAY UNIONS

Immigration officials' snoop leads to calls to end policy that makes it an offence for workers to live outside their employers' homes

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The rule forcing domestic helpers to live in employers' homes must end, trade unions said yesterday after six workers were arrested by the Immigration Department for having their own outside living arrangements.

The workers, who were living in Nim Shue Wan village near Discovery Bay, were arrested last Tuesday for providing false information. Last night the Immigration Department said it was still investigating the case. It remained unclear whether the employers would be arrested.

Employers in the city are required to arrange "suitable accommodation with reasonable privacy" at their homes under the standard employment contract. Free food or an allowance of HK\$875 per month should also be provided.

The Mission for Migrant Workers, the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body and the Confederation of Trade Unions yesterday said the government should allow employers and helpers to decide living arrangements.

"The government is stepping into issues between employers and employees, and that's against its usual stance," said the confederation's Lam Ying-hing.

"The issue could totally be settled through negotiations between employers and helpers."

Cynthia Tellez, general manager of the mission, said it was "unacceptable" for the government to criminalise workers who lived outside their employers' homes. It should initiate a public consultation as soon as possible to review the policy, which was introduced in 2003.

Before that, she added, about 1,000 families arranged outside accommodation for helpers.

The groups said outside accommodation could alleviate tension in the home and ensure privacy for both parties.

They also called on the government to set up guidelines for employers on providing "suitable accommodation".

Tellez said: "The Immigration officers never knocked on employers' doors to check whether proper accommodation is provided at the employers' homes."

She said many workers had to sleep in bathrooms, corridors or kitchens, or even on verandahs.

Asked how helpers might afford decent outside living quarters given that some employers might provide only a small rental allowance, Tellez said it would be the government's responsibility. "I have never received any complaints about outside accommodation," she added.

The STANDARD

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Maids' group in for living out

A concern group for foreign domestic helpers wants to see the scrapping of a policy that requires maids to live with their employers.

Mission for Migrant Workers general manager Cynthia Abdon-Tellez said helpers should be given the option to live elsewhere in light of being given inadequate accommodation.

The mission conducted a survey of more than 3,000 workers from June last year up to January.

It found that 35 percent of them prefer to live outside their employers' flats with 30 percent saying they do not have suitable accommodation.

For instance, some have to share a room with boys or sleep in kitchens, corridors and toilets.

New questions were raised about the government's mandatory live-in policy earlier this month when six Filipino helpers were arrested in Discovery Bay for violating the rule.

"Domestic workers are chosen because they can do full-time work for a fixed monthly wage, not because they are live-in," Abdon-Tellez said.

The Immigration Department said the arrangement of living outside employers' homes will dampen the job opportunities for helpers.

But Confederation of Trade Unions organizing co-ordinator Lam Ying-hing said a live-out arrangement may enhance domestic workers' privacy, rest time, work safety and life satisfaction.

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