

MY SAY: Replacing foreign maids with local home managers

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MY SAY

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About a year ago, this column highlighted issues related to foreign maids in the country. The main concern was how they were being mistreated by their employers. Some were virtually turned into slaves. Although this involved only a handful of ugly Malaysians, the cases that were made public were highly explosive due to their barbaric nature. Malaysia earned a bad reputation with respect to human rights in the international arena. The distinction between the role of a regular house helper and a professional home manager was also highlighted, suggesting that the latter was preferable if employers insisted on a competent worker.

At the moment, Malaysia is almost entirely reliant on domestic helpers from seven countries — Sri Lanka, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, India and the Philippines. Problems with "China dolls" in the Chinese community means that the government is unlikely to approve maids from China although they are in demand. As for Indonesian maids, there is currently a stand-off between our government and theirs on issues that would allow these women to continue working here.

Recent news reports indicate that the abuse of Indonesian maids continues unabated. In fact, the most recent incident seems worse than what we have heard before. The impasse with Indonesia will not end until we can give the assurance that its maids will be treated with dignity. This should not be so hard since we are ever ready to bend over backwards for tourists to this country. Why can't we do the same for foreign maids who are in effect our "guests"?

In this respect, the announcement by Felda recently to train "home managers" opens up a host of opportunities for the country. Reportedly, the first batch of 100 potential managers, regardless of gender and age, will undergo training in January and attend courses to be conducted by Yayasan Felda.

They will be trained in the right skills — for example, cooking and child care — and given lessons on personal hygiene and proficiency. Indeed, this has the potential to reshape the business of hiring foreign maids. With the salary said to be between RM700 and RM1,000, hiring a home manager not only becomes more attractive but also more reliable. After all, there will be no additional costs like agency fees and no tedious process. The fact that they are Malaysians will also eliminate the headache of cultural incompatibilities and, hopefully, abuse.

If done properly, a locally instituted training programme for home managers can increase the number of skilled workers among Malaysians, who can easily take the place of foreign maids. This will go a long way to reduce our over-dependence on foreign workers, which is indeed one of the challenges identified by the New Economic Model.

This human resource development initiative by Felda is not entirely new to the organisation as it has trained millions of settlers to become successful farmers and entrepreneurs in agriculture. Felda can easily emulate this success, except that this time it will be dealing with a different generation of "settlers" and training them for a different kind of work, so to speak. Although this will mean that the sensitivities and strategies will be different, there will be no problem if the programme is well thought out and executed.

Although the announcement said the courses are for those who cannot pursue their studies at tertiary level, this should not be seen as something negative. After all, home management can be turned into a vocation with high demand. With additional skills like nursing, counselling and teaching, for example, one can add value and create a wider job scope. Experience will in turn help promote career mobility and better remunerations. This scenario of having a professional home manager could certainly happen in Malaysia as it morphs into an advanced economy and as Malaysian society ages.

In short, Felda seems to have found a simple and straightforward solution to the lingering problems in the domestic help industry. This is definitely a new challenge for the agency because if its home manager programme is a success, it could serve as a template for the creation of other jobs for Malaysians who are SPM holders, notably in the sectors that are currently dominated by foreigners.

The underlying message is that we should be more creative in coming up with job specifications — for example, being a home manager instead of a maid — that would mean better quality services in return for higher remuneration. In this way, not everyone needs to have a degree to live comfortably. It would be sufficient if they are adequately skilled in a demand-driven sector and their skills can be upgraded from time to time. In the long term, this could even solve the country's problem of relying too much on foreign workers.

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