

Labour of love



Much needed yet often overlooked, migrant workers are firmly in the sights of one organisation dedicated to making their lives a little easier. Words *Christina Fernandes*

Ever whined about the lack of heating in your house on a chilly winter's evening as you wrapped your woollen sweater tighter around you? Or have you ever bemoaned the sweltering temperatures of a summer's day as you dashed from air-conditioned car to air-conditioned home? Now think about getting through a January night without a good blanket to warm you, or living through the heat of July in the cramped conditions of a labour camp.

Much of Bahrain's most luxurious accommodation is built by migrant workers, yet some of the most basic comforts are often denied them. A few caring souls are, however, devoted to improving the lives of those who make ours so much easier. They are the Migrant Workers Protection Society (MWPS). 'We work at a grass roots level on a pretty informal basis,' says Marietta Dias, head of the MWPS action committee and one of its founding members, 'but it's very effective. Workers pass our

telephone numbers to one another and word gets out to the people in need that we're here to help.'

The society's work is in the news regularly, most recently in March, when a fire at a makeshift labour camp left nearly 300 people homeless and robbed of their precious few possessions. The MWPS, along with several other groups, distributed clothes, blankets and other essentials. 'We have generous donors,' says Dias. 'We especially get a lot of help from people in the winter, when they donate blankets and warm clothes.'

Established as an independent organisation in 2005, at a time when Bahrain was undergoing major development, the MWPS has had its work cut out for it from the start. 'We had no idea we'd get so busy,' recalls Dias. 'But we never refuse anyone who calls for help, which often takes us out to police stations or labour camps in the middle of the night.' It's not all stealthy night-time

action, though; often it's simply a case of lending an ear and giving advice along with the mundane but critical task of completing paperwork, and doing time in the immigration department.

MWPS also help out financially where possible, drawing on generous donations to the group to cover things like immigration fines for workers whose sponsors have never legalised their status or

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those who have overstayed their visas, as well as airfares to send workers back home. 'Most sponsors won't provide an airfare when there's a problem with a domestic worker,' explains Dias. 'We're usually happy if they just give us the worker's passport back.'

Among the society's most notable achievements is the establishment of a shelter for abused domestic workers in the form of a rented three-bedroom apartment, which has helped 350 women since it opened its doors in 2005. 'When a domestic worker leaves her sponsor's household, she is automatically deemed a runaway and can be arrested and jailed,' says Dias. 'Often, nobody bothers to investigate why they ran off in the first place and whether they have been abused. The detention centre is full of girls that nobody seems to care about.'

That said, Dias is quick to add that the labour laws in Bahrain are actually very good. 'Since moving here, I've seen a number of positive changes in the way Bahrain deals with workers,' she says, 'and today Bahrain is at the forefront of migrant workers' rights in the region, with regulations for everything, right down to the size of rooms in labour camps and the number of air-conditioning units required.' The problem lies in the implementation and enforcement of these laws. 'There need to be more inspections to check that safety standards, sanitary criteria and other regulations are adhered to.'

The government is also actively working to stamp out human trafficking and has set up a national committee to address this, of which the MWPS is a part. Dias believes that the society's involvement in such initiatives is an indication that the government respects and recognises the MWPS. 'We are frequently approached by police stations and the labour ministry to assist in cases they are dealing with,' she adds.

To help them in their varied and ever-expanding activities, the MWPS is in need of help, and would love to hear from readers interested in contributing. 'We only have two paid employees – a driver and a housekeeper for our shelter – and we're always looking for volunteers who are willing to work whole-heartedly, all the time,' says Dias. 'It doesn't matter what your specific background is; more than anything, you need to have a natural feel for this kind of work.' Based on her tales of midnight runs and rants in the immigration office, it sounds like hard work, but making a real difference to people's lives is, Dias says, ultimately very rewarding.

To volunteer or make a donation to the Migrant Workers Protection Society, call Marietta Dias on 39 452 470 or 17 827 895. More info at www.mwpsbahrain.com