

Unauthorised

Mr White, the newly arrived expatriate was whistling to himself, "What a wonderful life, a life worth living..." And why not, the climate was warm, the pay heavenly and the social status tops. As he was about to enter the lift of his condo, his attention was drawn to a notice displayed prominently on the notice board next to it. He stopped whistling.

The notice read:

"TO ALL RESIDENTS – EMERGENCY MEETING AT THE FOYER 8 PM, FRIDAY. AGENDA: UNAUTHORISED PREGNANCIES OF TENANTS."

He was surprised and confused by the notice because his wife was pregnant. He didn't understand what it was all about. Do people here need a permit to have babies? Before he came, he had been told that this place is extremely legalistic – obtaining permission is a way of life for its residents. However, he thought it was a small price to pay in order to be well organised and efficient. He, coming from a permissive and as a result rather chaotic society, could appreciate the advantage. He was mentally prepared, but approval for pregnancy was something he never imagined. Anyway, how did they know that his wife was pregnant? Her pregnancy wasn't apparent yet. So, it was a somewhat shaken Mr White who was greeted by his wife.

"My dear," his wife said, "You look a bit off colour. The tropical heat perhaps? Take off your shoes and loosen your collar. I'll make tea."

"Sweetheart, I am alright but I need to sort out something. I have to find out whether it is authorised or unauthorised. I'll be in the study."

Mr White took out the tenancy agreement from his drawer. There was nothing in it that forbids occupancy by pregnant women. There was a clause stating that tenants are allowed to keep only one dog but no restriction on the number of children. He went over his Professional Pass. There was no mention that procreation is prohibited. Next, he read his employment contract and found nothing relating to the subject.

He called his colleague John Minor, another expatriate, and was greeted by a loud cackle, "Unauthorised pregnancy, you say. An unwanted pregnancy you mean, you red-haired devil¹, fooling around right under the nose of your wife and so soon after your arrival. Those SPGs² are exotic, attractive and willing, but for goodness sake, be careful and take precautions. Luckily, you asked the right person. I'll give you the address of a doctor who will do the necessary. Very discreet." Mr White hung up but not before finding out the meaning of "red-haired devil" and "SPGs".

UNWANTED PREGNANCIES

Mr White and his wife went to the meeting on Friday night, feeling anxious but also very curious.

The Chairman of the Management Committee called the meeting to order. "Ladies and gentlemen, we will get straight to the heart of the matter. There is an outbreak in our condo. Don't panic, it is not SARS but nevertheless, it is very serious. I am referring to the discovery of at least six confirmed cases of unauthorised pregnancies among our tenants recently. Considering that we have only 64 units, we have to treat it as an epidemic as the incidence rate is statistically much higher than SARS....."

Mr White could not restrain himself any longer. He put up his hand and interrupted, "Sir, my wife is pregnant. How did you find out? But I have to tell you this, we, meaning my wife and I, decided on this thing together, two consenting adults. We authorised the event ourselves. I am deeply disturbed. Can you kindly explain?"

The Chairman asked, "Is your wife a maid?"

"Sir, I believe she was a maiden," Mr White said with a noticeable blush but clearly, he was upset. "But if you wish to know, she worked as a part-time barmaid once during the summer vacation when she was in the university. We have nothing to hide."

The Chairman could not suppress a giggle, "Mr White, on behalf of everyone here, I would like to congratulate you on the coming addition to your family. Sorry for the misunderstanding. Let me explain."

"When we say maids, we are actually referring to FDWs, meaning Foreign Domestic Workers, or domestic servants if you like. The problem we are facing in our condo is that a number of our tenants' FDWs have been discovered to be pregnant. Their contracts stipulate that they are here to do the C's, that is to clean, cook and care for the kids, and not to c-³ and start families. They are guilty of breaching their contracts by engaging in a non-approved activity, and the outcome is therefore unauthorised. This has given a big headache for the tenants involved. The meeting tonight is to exchange views and see what measures we can take to contain the problem.

"For example, we can take a leaf from the management of the SARS outbreak and consider adopting strategies like fencing-in, quarantine, triage of visitors, keeping an eye on suspect cases and improving our security. There are many things we can do, but they need your approval and cooperation.

First, I would like to ask the tenants whose maids are involved to share their experiences with us. We would like to learn from them. Mrs Lim, would you like to start please?"

THE TENANTS' STORIES

"Good evening, fellow tenants. I must say this happened because I was really stupid. I found a pair of men's slippers in her room and I did not suspect. My husband said that a pair of briefs in the drawer was not his and I did not suspect.

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For three months, she did not ask for her supply of sanitary pads and I did not suspect. It is my fault because I was too trusting. She looked so innocent. I have learnt my lesson. We cannot trust them completely. Be vigilant, and don't depend on the six-monthly check-ups alone."

Next was Mrs Tan. "Don't employ young ones, especially if they are good-looking. If they are attractive, men will look for them. When my maid dressed up and put on make-up, she looked like a model. My previous maids, all three of them, worked a total of 15 years for me. No trouble at all. Why is it so? They looked like me. (*Laughter from the audience.*) Maids are not meant to be decorative items. People are attracted to decorations. My pregnant maid, unfortunately, looked 100 times better than her photograph that I saw at the agent's office."

It was Mrs Lee's turn. "In my case, it was money. My maid confessed that behind our backs she had been moonlighting as a sex worker. Believe me, I did not pay her below market rate but she needed the extra money. She owed agent's fees, her husband had run off with another woman, and she had to send money home to her three children and sick parents. Some of her clients insisted on unprotected sex and what happened next we all know now."

Mrs Ho spoke next. "I think my maid misbehaved because I was too liberal with her. I gave her too much freedom and therefore the opportunity. Both my husband and I are working and are out for long hours. We cannot lock her up in the flat while we are away. What if there is a fire or an accident? We also need to let the deliverymen, the pest controllers, and sometimes our friends and relatives in. Maids are not slaves or prisoners. We don't believe in treating them like caged animals. We also let her off during the weekends. Anyway, we like to have the flat to ourselves sometimes. Ironically, we paid a price for being fair employers. You may like to know that one of her boyfriends was a security guard working in our condo. He had since been dismissed."

"I think my maid did it because she was unhappy," said Mrs Chow, the youngest of the employers. "I am speaking from personal experience." The audience pricked up their ears. "When I am unhappy and frustrated, I tend to fool around and do a lot of silly things that I would regret afterwards. I noticed that my maid is not happy, although I treated her well. I tried talking to her but could not get anything out of her. Recently, she was even more moody. I was afraid she might even run away. In a way, thank goodness it is only this."

The last one who spoke was Mrs Kok, an elderly lady in her seventies. She said, "I simply don't understand. She is treated like a member of our family. It is so surprising."

PROBABLE, SUSPECT AND OBSERVATION CASES

The discussion was then thrown open to the house. It was agreed that prevention is the key. There were several suggestions. One was to classify the maids into three categories:

(A) Probable case

- Those with signs and symptoms suggestive of pregnancy, e.g. putting on weight, nausea and vomiting, easily tired, etc. They were to be sent for screening irrespective of whether they were due for their six-monthly medical examinations.

(B) Suspect case

- Those whose behaviour was questionable, e.g. coquettish and likely to have contacts. They might have to be quarantined.

(C) Observation case

- It was agreed that maids that did not fall into categories A or B were to be placed in C.

An additional measure was the daily compulsory filling in of the PDF⁴. The maid was to submit her PDF before she retired for the night. She had to answer three questions:

- Where had she been today?
- Who were her contacts?
- Days of her menstrual cycle.

Employers should keep the forms until the start of the maid's new period.

The suggestion for the management to keep a register of all widowers, bachelors, retirees and those recently retrenched living in the condo was voted down. They were quite a large group. It was agreed to monitor the movements of all contract workers, gardeners, repairmen, pest controllers, cleaners and deliverymen, etc. Also the security guards were not to enter any apartment unless accompanied by family members. Security is to report to the Management Committee if any worker from nearby construction sites loitered around or tried to befriend the maids in the condo.

The overall strategy was to prevent undesirable contact, similar to the measures for controlling SARS.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Mr White, who had been listening intently to the proceedings, put up his hand a second time, "Sir, may I make a comment? I know you people are rather sensitive when foreigners comment on domestic issues, but what I am going to say is not political, racial, religious or about anybody.

"I like to look at this so-called problem from a different angle. Incidentally, I am employed by my company to look at problems from different angles. It appears to me that the problem is really one that is related to human sexuality. Let me ask a question: can one suppress the sexuality of 150,000 females, between the ages of 20 and 40 with hormones raging through their systems, many of whom are also extremely bored with their lives and craving for excitement?"

"The measures suggested are all directed to enforcing celibacy. In my opinion, it does not work. They are not nuns. Even the statutory pregnancy screening, I suspect, is meant primarily to seek out the pregnant maid for repatriation and not really a serious deterrent for sexual activities. Sex is a basic

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instinct, a primordial urge. Ask Adam and Eve. It is recreation with procreation as a side effect. I believe the answer to the problem is not to compel sexual abstinence thus defying nature, but to institute compulsory sex education instead. In the end, all parties, including the employers, the maids and the country, will benefit.”

The audience was really surprised by Mr White’s proposal, all except Mrs Chow who threw knowing glances all around. They had never thought of it this way.

“Perhaps, Dr Quek, my neighbour and medical doctor, would like to share with us his views. Thank you.” Mr White said.

“Hi, I am Dr Quek, good evening. Personally I think pregnant maids are really no big deal – just send them home. I agree with Mr White’s observation that it is not merely a social issue but a biological one as well, and that maids should be educated. I even go further to suggest that those willing ones be given contraceptive injections.

“I will however, comment on the pregnancy screening examination. I can tell you from personal experience, that it is not so straightforward. It is fraught with danger for us doctors. If a maid suspects that she may be pregnant, she has a bagful of tricks to conceal her pregnancy, and woe betide the doctor who missed the diagnosis, because he would have a lot to explain. The authorities often charge him for negligence and mete out punishment. Doctors are given the role like that of a criminal investigator and are not expected to let any “criminals” escape.

“By the way, we all know that pregnancies cannot be hidden in the end. Pregnant maids can only defer the inevitable discovery. It is an initial reaction to cover up a wrongdoing for fear of punishment.

“Honestly, I don’t think it is quite right to put the sole responsibility of detecting pregnancy on the medical profession. On the other hand, the doctors stand to gain, our pocket that is, quite substantially at that. Consider this: 150,000 maids having six-monthly examinations equals 300,000 visits a year to the clinics. At say S\$25 a visit, it comes up to a cool S\$7,500,000 a year worth of business for us. I say, bring in the maids.”

Mr White wanted to make another comment, but on second thoughts, he raised his eyebrows instead of his hand. The bottom line here, he discovered once again, is almost always about money, no matter what the issue. It is almost a state religion. There is no point in saying anything more. Nevertheless, he was pleasantly surprised that contrary to popular belief, people here can be quite vocal and candid when given the chance to voice their opinions. He left the meeting with his pregnant wife, quite happy to have gained an insight into another facet of life on this island. ■

Notes:

1. *In Hokkien, ‘Ang Mo Quee’, either an honorific or derogatory term referring to Caucasians here*
2. *Sarong Party Girls*
3. *Copulate*
4. *Personal Declaration Form*