



## SSIIM UNESCO CHAIR

On Social and Spatial Inclusion of International Migrants – Urban Policies and Practice

The right to adequate housing of migrants factsheets

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MIGRANTS' ACCESS TO HOUSING IN SINGAPORE

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## The right to adequate housing for migrants - factsheets

*The right to adequate housing for migrants* is a series of thematic factsheets on migrants' level of access to adequate shelter in different urban contexts. Written by academic researchers and experts solicited by SSIIM UNESCO Chair, the factsheets were aimed at providing background information for the 2010 Report of UN-Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing Dr. Raquel Rolnik.

Besides presenting the picture of the overall housing situation of migrants in the concerned contexts, authors were asked to highlight what the conditions of international migrants (regular and undocumented) are with respect to

- access to public housing and/or government subsidies
- access to housing loans
- access to the private housing market (discriminatory attitudes)
- inclusion into regularization and land tenure policies (if any, highlighting whether it is a local or a central government policy)

Authors were also invited to underline whether differences in policies/attitudes between local (poor) population (including rural-urban migrants) and international migrants are put in place and if any particularly interesting policy is being implemented that could be pointed out as innovative example.

Through the network of the partner universities, research centres and other relevant actors, SSIIM UNESCO Chair on Social and Spatial Inclusion of International Migrants - Urban Policies and Practices aims at:

- Identifying policies and practices that promote the urban inclusion of international migrants
- Supporting local governments in shaping adequate actions to foster effective urban governance and the social/spatial integration of international migrants
- Disseminating the experiences that can provide ground for effective policy exchange (good practices)
- Raising the awareness of policy-makers and the civil society at large, on the importance of international migrants' urban social and spatial inclusion

A basic starting point in Singapore is that migrant workers are regarded as a temporary presence. The intention is that they should all return to their home countries, and so the question of long term provision for any single worker appears irrelevant. Workers are not permitted to bring their families over or to start new families; there are medical checkups for domestic workers every six months, and they will be sent home if found to be pregnant. The Employment of Foreign Manpower Act and the work permit regulations issued under it determine this. I am writing here of low paid migrants regarded as unskilled or semi-skilled workers; there are highly paid recruits for posts high up in companies who are in little need of anyone else's concern, and who I don't cover below.

1. Migrants are not eligible to live in public housing; those who rent public housing are not supposed to rent it out to foreign workers. They are not eligible for government subsidies or housing loans. They are unlikely to have the money to buy a private home, though I don't know of any legal barrier to them doing so; male workers are generally paid less than \$1000 Singapore a month, and they're not likely to get anything for under \$300,000.

As to renting property: well, they can do that if they can afford it. Sometimes workers get together to rent a room in one of the old shophouses or another place. These are usually quite crowded, but they allow the workers a sense of independence. This would usually only happen with workers who are in dispute with their original employers and who are staying on Special Passes while their cases are resolved through litigation or mediation; they don't want to stay in company-provided accommodation or are afraid to do so, in case of intimidation by their employers. Normally, employers are responsible for providing accommodation for the foreign workers they employ: it is part of the work permit conditions. Domestic workers must be accommodated on the premises where they are employed; they can't live out. Employers of male workers in sectors such as construction or shipyards usually pay a company that runs dormitory accommodation to house them. This is of variable quality, and during the recent recession, some employers tried to save money by turning to cheaper, inferior dormitories, some of which have only one exit and poor sanitation levels. Some workers in construction are housed on site, normally in converted containers. These are very hot once the sun comes up and facilities are rudimentary.

2. We don't know. From the numbers who come to our free food programme and are without shelter, we think the number is probably in the thousands, but not tens of thousands. Much of the old dormitory accommodation is substandard, but the government has had a drive in the past couple of years to shut down hazardous and unhealthy dormitories and encourage employers to house workers in dormitories that conform to minimum standards of health and safety. A number of new dorms have been built and they are up to standard and, in addition, provide space for socialising and recreation. However, one motivation for creating the new dorms was to keep migrant workers away from Singaporean residential areas, so they are typically located in relatively isolated locations, where workers would need to take a bus to reach a shopping centre, for example. There are no squatter settlements.

Most domestic workers are housed in very small rooms within their employers' homes. They may be purpose-built 'maid's rooms', or the room that can be used as a bomb shelter that Singaporean houses were supposed to have after a certain date, but some are expected to sleep in the room of a family's children, or an old person in their care. We run across cases of domestic workers who sleep in a corridor of their employers' flat or on the kitchen floor.

3. It is a subject of justifiable pride that Singapore went from being a country with a lot of poor accommodation at independence to becoming one with near universal housing of reasonable quality, at a minimum. There are homeless people, who have generally become homeless through not being able to keep up with rents after losing jobs or gambling money away, but efforts are made to locate them and house them.

There is not the same level of concern about migrant workers, except in so far as they might cause complaints from citizens by sleeping on pavements (usually these would be workers on Special Passes) or littering public spaces. However, efforts have been made, as mentioned above, to raise the standard of dormitory accommodation and to shut down the worst substandard dorms.

4. Well, it may be worth your while to look up something like 'dormitories, Singapore' on the internet and see what you get. To us, the changes in this area are a mixed blessing - a definite plus for conditions inside the dorms, but we are unhappy about them being used as part of a policy of separating migrant workers from locals, when we think the approach should be one of integration, while taking on board legitimate complaints by locals over issues such as untidiness and noise.