

They go on their knees for you

More men hired as part-time helpers, despite some initial worries about decency and security. -TNP

Tue, Feb 22, 2011
The New Paper

By Maureen Koh

THE chime of the doorbell each Thursday morning prompts a smile from Mrs Adeline Sng. It means that professional help has arrived.

But at the door is not the "regular cleaning aunty" one would expect.

The housewife's part-time cleaner is, instead, a tall, strapping man.

Yes, a man-maid.

The domestic cleaning services business is seeing more men being maids for hire, say 26 operators interviewed.

But they concede that the concept is rather new and "needs some time getting used to", especially among Asian households.

Could men fill the shoes of foreign domestic workers, especially with the shortage of foreign maids and their demands for higher pay?

Mrs Sng, 50, who has two teenage boys, took some time before she became comfortable with the idea of a male helper.

She told The New Paper on Sunday: "I was worried about what our neighbours would say when they saw a man coming into my home.

"I was also uncertain if he would do a proper job."

Eight months on, Mrs Sng is pleased.

"He is meticulous and very detailed. What I liked best is that he could do the heavier stuff such as carpet shampooing and cleaning the ceilings."

She laughed, then added: "My husband and sons often tease me, saying that I seem to be happier to see (helper) Gary than them."

Mr Gary Fletcher, 40, turned down our request for an interview, citing shyness.

But 18 out of the 26 operators confirmed that they have included men in their cleaning teams.

These housekeeping businesses are also reporting a spike in demand for part-time maids, particularly with the shrinking supply of foreign domestic workers in the past year.

Ms Wong Khai Linn, 39, who runs Temphelp with three partners, has four men in her pool of about 16 cleaners. The men are locals.

She said: "We've got feedback from our clients that our male cleaners can be more detailed.

"We had a customer telling us how pleased she was to note that the man actually used a toothbrush to clean the grout between the floor tiles."

Ms Liew Seow Ling, 42, operations manager at Housekeepers Management Services, finds that her clients become more receptive to the idea of male cleaners when they are sent out in pairs or a specialised team, such as for spring cleaning.

Ms Liew said: "We have one (cleaner) who pairs off with his wife. Generally, while the idea is catching on, we still have to break that barrier with our clients.

"They're usually hesitant and may agree to give the men a go but in the end, they'd still opt for women cleaners."

Ms Cheryl Chan, 31, who runs Home Cleanz Cleaning Services, sends the man-maids for tougher tasks such as carpet shampooing, or pressure jetting on landed properties.

"It's usually the manual stuff or when they have to operate machinery (especially for landed properties).

"Most Asian clients are still not that comfortable with the idea of letting a man into their homes, unlike expatriates or Caucasians."

Expatriate housewife Agnes McGinlay is one who does not mind the gender of her domestic helper. She followed her husband when his company sent him here. The Scottish couple have three children, aged five, eight and 11.

Mrs McGinlay, 40, said: "In fact, I'm quite happy because my helper does a decent job of keeping the home spick and span."

But it took Mrs Wendi Ho, a sales manager, some months before she could convince her husband to let her keep her "man".

Mrs Ho, 33, said: "My (businessman) husband has to travel regularly and he didn't like the idea of a 'strange' man coming into our home."

"But after some time, he realised that our helper was a no-nonsense man who just came, did his job and went off without wasting time on making small talk."

And getting the job done is the priority for part-time man-maids Danial Ferris and Anthony Goh, both of whom are Singaporeans.

Mr Ferris, 47, attributes his "worth" to the experience of working in the housekeeping department of various hotels for 25 years.

He quit two years ago to pursue "other personal interests" and decided to work as a part-time cleaner after noting the demand last December.

Mr Ferris, who now has three regular household cleaning jobs a week said: "I enjoy the flexi-hours."

Mr Goh, 35, has a full-time job in the IT industry during the week, but transforms into a man-maid during the weekends.

He said: "I have a lot of free time and thought I might as well take the chance to earn some money. "It's a good way, too, of doing something I enjoy. I'm by nature quite particular about cleanliness and tidiness."

There is definitely a potential for the growth of man-maids, said Mr Jason Ong, 39, Temphelp's marketing director.

"The gender roles in various industries - for example, nursing - are no longer that distinct. "While it's not like the men will take over at once, but definitely and gradually, more people will be open to the concept."



Photo: TNP, Gavin Foo

Mr Anthony Goh (left) works as a man-maid during weekends while Mr Danial Ferris, who has three regular jobs a week, enjoys the flexible hours.

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Small families prefer part-time helper

IT USED to be just young working professionals and newly-weds who hired part-time maids.

Now, small families or those with older children are doing so too.

Ms Wong Khai Linn, 39, has about 30 regular clients a month other than the ad-hoc requests that Temphelp gets.

This, even though the company that she runs with three partners have been around for only about a year.

Ms Wong, who quit her job in a bank shortly after her son was born in 2009, said: "Other than the issue of privacy and personal space, some of our clients prefer not to deal with foreign maid issues."

When Mrs Kathleen Sng's maid returned to Indonesia after her two-year contract was up, the housewife had problems finding a suitable replacement.

After nearly five months of ploughing through stacks of biodata from maid employment agencies, she opted for a part-time cleaner.

Mrs Sng and those like her account for the 30 per cent spike in business for some housekeeping services companies.

Housekeepers Management Services' operations manager Liew Seow Ling, confirmed that 80 per cent of its 100-odd regular cleaning contracts are for homes.

The rest are corporate clients who run hostels for their employees.

The demand has not dwindled despite the hike in rates - from the average \$10 an hour to easily double that.

Ms Cheryl Chan, 31, who runs Home Cleanz Cleaning Services, said: "True, it's not really cheap when compared to hiring a live-in domestic helper, whom you can optimise fully."

"But many of our clients have indicated that they prefer this trouble-free option."

Madam Ang Leng Leng, 40, who has a 20-month-old son and a three-year-old daughter, is one such customer.

The housewife had to contend with several maid issues in the past.

"One of my maids tried to run away with her boyfriend after working here for only six months.

"Another was homesick and kept crying at night."

Madam Ang added: "Seriously, having a part-time has reduced my stress tremendously."

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Rare to have full-time man-maids

FOREIGN man-maids to ease the shortage of foreign domestic workers? Don't hold your breath.

First, there is the lack of demand, in stark contrast to rising need for part-time local male cleaners.

A check with 15 maid agencies reveals that special requests from Singaporean employers for foreign male domestic workers are rare.

Indeed, only Advance Link International, which has been in the business for nearly 30 years, has had one such request.

And that was 10 years ago, said its overseas recruitment consultant, Mrs Winnie Wang.

But even then, the agency only had to handle the paperwork for the client.

Mrs Wang told The New Paper on Sunday: "We also helped the client, who had wanted to hire the worker as a caregiver for her ageing and ill father, to appeal to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM)."

While they managed to obtain approval, she said: "As far as I know, it's on a case-by-case basis.

"I believe there are various reasons why the option is not readily offered, such as concern for security.

"Also, unless it's a men-only household, or if they employ a couple-team, it's unlikely the average family would be comfortable with the idea of a live-in man-maid."

MOM was unable to reply to our queries by press time.

There are some families, however, who are keen to explore the viability of such an option. Madam Ho Zhiwei, 34, has a bedridden father and an amputee father-in-law, both of whom live with her in her executive maisonette.

The restaurant manager, who has two boys, aged 2 and 4, has two Indonesian maids.

The maids take turns caring for the elderly men.

Madam Ho said: "But it's not easy for the maids to take care of two male invalids.

"Sometimes, you can tell they are physically exhausted but they keep trying.

"If I could hire either maid's husband instead, the situation may be more manageable for everyone.

"Now sometimes we have to wait for my husband to return home to help take over."

This article was first published in [The New Paper](#).



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