



Maids have dreams, don't destroy them

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Rebecca Bustamante was 19 when she came to Singapore. Her story started like those of the domestic helpers featured in The Sunday Times last week.

They worked as maids in Singapore, while taking up courses during their days off.

But she was exceptional. Today, turning 48 years old, she is the CEO of a multinational company based in Canada and Philippines, and her aim is to make life better for her people back home.

She had lived a life of poverty in Philippines.

As a child, she sold candies to make a living. Or fish in the market with her mother. She treasured those days.

For it was not long before her mother passed away. She had 11 siblings to feed. Her father never got a steady job.

Bustamante came to Singapore to be a domestic helper in 1986, mainly to support her siblings.

"I took an accounting course at the Open University of the Singapore Institute of Management.

"Among the maids at that time, I was the only one who chose to study on my day off. Most of my friends were having fun on their days off. They went dancing.

"But not me. I wanted to be successful, for my brothers and sisters in Philippines," she said.

"I told myself. How are we, Filipinos, going to compete with everyone else? I would always be like them [domestic helpers]. But I was determined to change things.

"So I studied at night when everyone went to sleep. I would get only one day off every month. On those days, I rushed to my university to submit a month's worth of homework."

She said her employers knew what she was doing. They tried talking her out at one point.

"My employers said to me, 'Rebecca, you don't need to do this. Just focus on yourself. You will be fine. Forget the past at home.'

"But they respected my choice eventually."

Bustamante stayed in Singapore for three years. She went on to finish her graduate study in Canada, while working as a nanny.

When she married Richard Mills in Canada, they returned to Philippines and set up her current company. Chalre Associates is a management recruitment firms that partners with multinational corporations throughout the Asia Pacific.

She said most world-class recruitment firms are not available in developing countries. Her goal is to provide such services in places like Philippines.

Bustamante said: "I always wanted to contribute to the Philippines...You know, I started with nothing and now I am able to develop my future. I want to give back to where I have come from.

"So with my firm, I hope to draw more foreign investment into my country. More investment, more jobs for Filipinos."

Like Bustamante, many Filipino maids in Singapore share a similar background and aspiration for a better life.

Ellen Vieres, 34, is a mother of two. "People laugh at you when you are poor. I want something better for my children than that, you know."

She takes a bookkeeping class offered by the Philippines embassy now. She wants to start a business when she gets home.

But Vieres said not all employers are receptive to a maid who also studies.

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"I have a lot of friends who study with me, but many of their employers have complained about them taking classes. My friends said their employers would like them home if there happens to be a party on those Sundays."

Her friend, Mila Diston, said most of the Filipinos taking up courses in Singapore pay their own fee.

Diston said: "Courses are not cheap. But I am saving up now. I want to be a caregiver in Canada, because I want to finance my children's education."

"My employers... they don't interfere with my days off. But then, many caregiving courses are not offered on Sundays. I am still looking around for other ways."


Will their dreams come true like that of Bustamante?

Bustamante commented: "Employers should be happy that their domestic helpers are increasing their skills. I think if the domestic helpers want to make a difference in their lives, give them the freedom to do so, as long as they complete their duties."

"Don't see them as competition. There is no one better than another. We learn so much from the Singaporeans."

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