

## HUMAN RIGHTS

# Being informed, being the change

*S'poreans can push for change on foreign workers' rights, human-trafficking issues: Prof Tommy Koh*

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**SINGAPORE** – It is an issue she has seen for the last decade: Filipino domestic workers with standard contracts from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) are made to sign a different contract with less favourable terms when they arrive here.

Such “contract substitution” — an offence in the Philippines but not enforceable in Singapore — is something migrant-worker advocate Bridget Tan has observed with almost every foreign domestic worker that the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) has encountered.

To help the women seek redress back home, Ms Tan set up a non-profit organisation in the Philippines with funding from friends.

In the last two months, the organisation — Spirit of Home Scalabrini Inc — has helped about 30 women returning to the Philippines to secure over 1 million pesos (S\$29,800) from their agents via the POEA.

“If you believe in something, you

do it. You don't depend on the Government to do things for you,” Ms Tan, who is the President of HOME, said.

But citizens can push the Government for change when it comes to human trafficking and the rights of foreign workers, said Professor Tommy Koh, who is Rector of the National University of Singapore's Tembusu College and chairman of NUS' Centre for International Law.

On issues like the mandatory weekly day off for domestic workers, for instance, “in order to help the government to do the right thing, we, the public, can speak up”, he said.

Prof Koh and Ms Tan were among the speakers at yesterday's NUS symposium titled “Human Trafficking — Be Informed, Be the Change”.

HOME is among several NGOs calling for an anti-human trafficking law in the Republic. Ms Tan said such a law — if modelled after Taiwan's — would provide for a witness-protection programme for human-trafficking victims here.

The police received 43 reports of sex trafficking last year and 67 cases were found to have elements of labour trafficking, according to the Manpower Ministry. Globally, the United Nations estimates that 2.4 million people are trafficked at any one time and only one in 100 victims is ever rescued.

● HOME operates its own witness-protection service and a toll-free hotline, 1800 7 977 977.