Foreign worker curbs ‘to reduce income disparity’

Better pay for blue-collar jobs with fewer work-pass holders coming in to do construction, plumbing work, says Grace Fu

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SINGAPORE — The income disparity between blue-collar jobs and higher-paying ones will decrease in future with the tightening of Singapore’s foreign-worker policies, said Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office Grace Fu yesterday at a community dialogue.

Citing the example of Australia, where plumbers are the highest-paid workers over weekends, Ms Fu said Singapore is “going to be like that because we are not going to have so many non-pass holders coming in to do construction or plumbing jobs”.

She added: “So if you have skills like this, you’re going to demand better pay and that’s really the future of Singapore, where the disparity is not as great as now. What would be blue-collar jobs will get better pay.”

Ms Fu was speaking to residents and students while on a ministerial community visit to Tampines East.

During a 70-minute dialogue, questions about foreign labour, the integration of immigrants here and opportunities for Singaporeans dominated proceedings.

The starting point of Singapore’s policies on foreign labour is the interest and benefit of Singaporeans, said Ms Fu, who is Second Minister for the Environment and Water Resources as well as Foreign Affairs.

Singapore has to be economically attractive, remaining open, so companies will continue to invest here and provide jobs and options for locals, she noted.

While the Government is creating more education opportunities for Singaporeans — through the setting up of the Singapore University of Technology and Design as well as the Singapore Institute of Technology, for example — the bigger question is whether a university degree trains people appropriately for jobs here.

Through initiatives such as SkillsFuture, the Government is encouraging students to pick up skills that are relevant to the jobs out there and ensuring opportunities to upgrade as they go.

“(If) you deepen your skills, you can become an expert and there are very well-paying jobs waiting for us,” she said.

Two student participants noted that social tension and unhappiness could arise between Singaporeans and foreigners here, as shown by the outcry that followed a Filipino nurse’s recent online remarks calling Singaporeans “losers” (losers) in their country.

Ms Fu urged Singaporeans to take a firm stand against insensitive comments made by a minority, but remain calm, cool-headed and united.

There are black sheep among both Singaporeans and foreigners who make insensitive comments about others, she added.

However, other fault lines, such as those along race and religion, may also surface. “Our position is that we must, first of all, be sensitive to one another. There’s a certain limit when we talk about freedom of speech. You have to take into consideration the relationship among different races and religions in Singapore, so be careful when you make the remarks,” she said.

Asked whether there were people who had left after taking up Singapore citizenship, Ms Fu said the number is “very low” and has been stable for a long time.

New citizens may come to Singapore for economic opportunities — as did many immigrants in the early days — but many become “valuable, really good Singapore citizens who put their heart and soul in this place”, she said, urging Singaporeans to give them a chance.

The Government has also raised the requirements for one to be considered for citizenship, added Ms Fu.

Asked after the dialogue about issues being raised on foreigners, Ms Fu told reporters those are perennial issues that merit the reiteration of mutual respect when incidents arise and said she was glad the youth are taking interest in such issues.

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