

Research Report on Hong Kong Migrant Domestic Worker

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Part I Introduction

I. Background

In light of observed human rights violations in Hong Kong, our research aims to conduct in-depth fieldwork in the region, focusing on the living conditions of migrant domestic workers (MDWs). By undertaking comprehensive interviews with active MDWs in Hong Kong, our objective is to grasp a clearer picture of their day-to-day lives and the challenges they face.

Our investigation categorizes their experiences into two main parts: their working conditions and personal lives. Within the domain of work, we aim to understand the array of issues they encounter. These include, but are not limited to, instances of discrimination, both physical and verbal mistreatment, abrupt termination of contracts, and incidents of sexual harassment. We're also interested in the coping mechanisms or responses MDWs employ when faced with these adversities.

On the personal front, the repercussions of being an MDW often extend beyond the workplace. Many MDWs have shared experiences of conflicts with family and friends due to their job commitments, feelings of homesickness, and struggles with mental and emotional well-being. These elements are crucial in painting a holistic image of their life.

Additionally, recognizing the pivotal role of policies and regulations, our research will further delve into how existing policies either support or exacerbate the challenges faced by MDWs. We aim to discern how these policies mold the relationship between employers and MDWs, influencing the power dynamics at play. In doing so, we hope to unveil the root causes behind the aforementioned issues and provide evidence-backed insights that could guide future policymaking and interventions in Hong Kong.

II. Acknowledgement

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all the domestic workers who participated in the interviews. Their generosity made this research possible. This publication is dedicated to them as it seeks to bring attention to the arduous working conditions faced by domestic workers. I hope that by highlighting their contributions, more people will become aware and show appreciation for their invaluable work.

Major thanks to the two principal Non-governmental organisations that assisted us in the progress of research — Mission for Migrant Worker and Federation of Asian Domestic Worker Union. May them continue their meaning and crucial contributions to advance and protect the basic human rights of Hong Kong migrant domestic workers.

III. Respondents Information

Our study engaged a diverse range of participants from Hong Kong. Eleven domestic workers were recruited directly from popular Sunday gathering spots, namely near footbridges in Central and areas around Victoria Park and Wai Chai District. Furthermore, by tapping into our personal networks, we secured interviews with three domestic worker employers. To broaden the perspective, two NGOs, the Mission for Migrant Women and the Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Unions, were also incorporated into the study, offering different perspectives on the domestic worker landscape in both regions.

Hong Kong Interviewees Information

| | Age Group | Education | Marital Status | Hong Kong Domestic Work Experience | Country of Origin |
|----|------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|---|--------------------------|
| #1 | 21 | Graduated from middle school | Married | 9 | Philippine |
| #2 | 25 | Graduated from middle school | Unmarried | 13 | Philippine |

| | | | | | |
|-----|----|------------------------------|-----------|----|------------|
| #3 | 41 | Graduated Primary School | Divorced | 4 | Philippine |
| #4 | 33 | Graduated from High School | Unmarried | 14 | Indonesia |
| #5 | 31 | No Schooling Experience | Unmarried | 2 | Philippine |
| #6 | 27 | Graduated Primary School | Unmarried | 5 | Philippine |
| #7 | 26 | Graduated Primary School | Divorced | 7 | Philippine |
| #8 | 31 | Graduated from middle school | Unmarried | 1 | Indonesia |
| #9 | 39 | Graduated from middle school | Divorced | 1 | Indonesia |
| #10 | 19 | Graduated Primary School | Divorced | 21 | Philippine |
| #11 | 42 | Graduated from middle school | Divorced | 17 | Philippine |
| #12 | 23 | Graduated from High School | Married | 11 | Philippine |
| #13 | 29 | Graduated Primary School | Married | 7 | Philippine |
| #14 | 20 | Graduated Primary School | Unmarried | 4 | Philippine |

Part II ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW RESPONSES

I. Migration Experience

Workers' Perception of Migration Experience

First arrivals have been challenging for many domestic workers, as they are exposed to an completely strange environment where they find themselves isolated from their support circle and have to tackle all difficulties often independently.

Homesickness is often the very first major obstacle domestic workers need to overcome. In our investigation, we discovered that most of our interviewees are suffering from homesickness, which often exaggerate the sense of isolation and helplessness felt by domestic workers.

#2 I felt homesick at first

#4 When I first arrived, I literally cried every night and prayed every night before I sleep. I didn't want to work in HK and wanted to go home.

#4 I didn't have phone during the first two months, so I can't talk to anyone, which made me felt so isolated and helpless.

#4 I was frustrated by the hardships as a migrant domestic worker, but my mom told me to stay and be obedient to my employers regardless of my tears.

#6 Although its much better now that people have cellphones to communicate, unlike old times when only letters were available, the sense of loneliness and homesickness still flood into my mind, especially during Christmas holidays.

#10 I do suffer from homesickness a lot, I miss my children back in Philippines.

#11 I was a bit nervous and afraid when first came to HK, since I hadn't have worked abroad before. I had no acquaintances here, no friends, no cousins, I was all alone.

Among domestic workers interviewed, many tell us their difficulties in contacting their family. Sometimes it is because their have to work till late night, when their family in Philippians are already asleep. While in other situations, domestic workers

might have their phones confiscated by employers. The separation is painful for them, that they had to miss a lot of important moments of their loved ones.

#5 I have to miss the graduation of my sister due to work

#4 I didn't have phone initially to contact my family initially

#6 Despite I begged my first employer, I didn't have chance to go back.

#9 contact with family is difficult because everyday after my work has ended my son is already asleep.

Coping with such homesickness is somehow a necessary part for almost all domestic workers, and this is often achieved through distracting themselves with other things in life, reaching out to friends, and even taking care of employer's children.

#2 I had to keep myself busy and try to concentrate on life in HK to overcome the homesickness

#10 I found taking care of my employer's child helpful to alleviate my homesickness. Engaging in activities with local friends also helps to ameliorate the situation.

#11 I have the habit of messaging with my family daily before sleep to alleviate my homesickness.

Separation is not only a challenge for migrant domestic workers, but also for their family members back in hometown. Marital relationships are often fragile in face of long time separations, that we're astonished by the proportion of single mothers among the workers we've interviewed. Nonetheless, these brave women still insisted to work overseas, regardless of their heartbreaking tragedies, to support their children / other family members.

#1 I'm a single mother who support my three kids alone, and that's hard for me.

#5 I work here still and support my mom and daughter. I'm a single mother

#6 Work as a migrant worker in HK meant separation, and this can bring a lot of struggles. My husband changed two years after I came to HK, and there was nothing I could do because I had to stay in HK to support my family, especially my daughter. Seeing her father leaving the family and formed a new family, my daughter experienced severe depression. I was desperate to help her, but due to my work, not much could be done.

#7 I'm the mother of 4 kids, and came to HK to support them

#8 I'm a single parent who came to HK to support my 1 years old kid

#11 Because my parents are separated, as the first child, I have to work to support my siblings.

Working overseas is undoubtedly heartbreaking for most domestic workers. As shown above, long time separation not only meant being absent in the growth of their own children, missing memorable instants in family members' lives, but may also potentially meant the breaking of a family. Regardless of all the hardships encountered, migrant domestic workers tend to insist their job in HK attributed to higher salary. Many of them grew up in extremely poor conditions, and they don't want the same to happen for their next generation. They are literally sacrificing themselves for the good of their family back in hometown.

Unfortunately, it is also attributed to such willingness to sacrifice their own interest for their family, that domestic workers facing unfair treatments like physical abuses, many domestic workers choose to tolerate for their family. One example is the considerable service fees charged by agencies, which domestic workers find very challenging to afford and had to borrow money from loan companies or deduct their salaries to cover up. This may potentially misguide domestic workers to engage in borrowing usury, which in turn turn their efforts in vain.

#4 A considerable amount of fee is needed to pay to our employers, that we have to borrow loans for this.

#4 Despite I didn't like the terms, it was hard initially to change agency, for the original agency deducted our salary as service fee. My salary was 3740, and they deduct 3000 out of it monthly.

#1 I needed financial support from my family to pay the agency fee

#10 When I first came to HK, the agency fee was high as something like 100,000 philippine money, which was unaffordable. So I had to borrow money from loan company.

Still, employment agencies appear to be the most popular way migrant domestic workers reach out to employers in HK, for the necessary assistance they provide including signing contracts, getting visas, and communicate with potential employers for the workers.

#1 Agencies help us to choose employers based on our demand as well. For instance we may choose families which kids are older than 6, which are generally easier to work for. Or otherwise we can choose not to work with another worker.

#2 We sign a contract with the agency first, and they process our immigration for us.

#2 We can tell the agency which type of employer we want, but have no idea who they actually are before we go to work.

#3 I provide agency with my documents, and they help me to apply as a domestic helper in HK.

#3 Agencies provide me with information about my potential employers. Like the number of family members, whether there is a pet or not. But I didn't rly choose my first employer for I wanted to grab the opportunity provided by the agency.

#8 My agency in Philippines helped me to get to HK

Unfortunately, services of employment agencies appear to be limited in bringing domestic workers to work, while the subsequent challenged workers encounter are often neglected. Many workers interviewed talked about the incompetence or inaction of agencies to offer help to them when they're in need. Agencies tend to be on the side of employers when there are disputes, and pay little attention to the grievances and demands of domestic workers.

#6 When I had to leave my employer's house due to dispute, my friend advised me to call my agency, but they were out of reach.

#8 When I'm involved in my legal case, my agency offered me no help at all.

Being asked about how they feel agencies can improve on their services, many domestic workers claimed that they would like agencies to provide more explanation/education concerning the terms of the contracts and their legal rights. Some even told us that their agency attempt to utilize domestic worker's ignorance about the terms to defraud them.

#7 I wish the agency can provide more education for us in terms of the contents in our contract and our legal rights, so that we can better protect ourselves.

#9 My agency provided wrong information about holiday terms, they defraud us that we don't have holidays, while that was indeed required by law.

#10 When buying insurance, the agency didn't explain the terms for us.

Overall, employment agencies serve as the irreplaceable bridge between employers and domestic workers. While the problems they have are also non negligible.

Agencies tend on a powerful position compare to domestic workers considering the asymmetry in information and financial strength. They in turn use such advantage to exploit domestic workers, leaving the latter not only often protectress when facing difficulties, but also ignorant of the terms of the contracts they sign that may potentially harm them. Changes are urged.

Employment Agency

Employment agencies appear to be the most popular way migrant domestic workers reach out to employers in HK. Generally speaking, they offer basic assistance signing contracts, getting visas, and communicate with potential employers for the workers.

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However, these services often charge considerable fees, that domestic workers find very challenging to afford and had to borrow money from loan companies or deduct their salaries to cover up. This may potentially misguide

domestic workers to engage in borrowing usury, which in turn turn their efforts in vain.

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What's also notable is the incompetence or inaction of agencies to offer help to migrant workers when they're in need. Agencies tend to be on the side of employers when there are disputes, and pay little attention to the grievances and demands of domestic workers.

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negligible. Agencies tend on a powerful position compare to domestic workers considering the asymmetry in information and financial strength. They in turn use such advantage to exploit domestic workers, leaving the latter not only often protectress when facing difficulties, but also ignorant of the terms of the contracts they sign that may potentially harm them. Changes are urged.

“Two-week rule”

The “two-week policy” is another contradictory policy in Hong Kong. Essentially, the policy states that, in the case where a foreign domestic worker terminates a contract before the expiration date, they only have 14 days to stay in Hong Kong. If they cannot manage to secure another job before the 14 days period, they will have to be sent back to their country and reapply for a working visa. They can ask for an extension, but an appropriate reason and explanation are needed for such an extension. If the domestic worker stays longer than two weeks after termination, they face the risk of legal punishment, as they are not allowed to do so by the Hong Kong laws.

The domestic workers we interviewed have different and limited understanding of the rules and regulations surrounding the two-week policy. Only 7 out of the 11 interviewees have heard of the regulation. The interviews show knowledge of when the policy is applied, its exceptions, and confusion about who enforces it. Some respondents are aware of specific cases, while others show uncertainty about the administrative authorities involved. The differing levels of understanding might indicate a need for clearer communication of the policy to those affected.

#1 “I know the two-week policy only applies when the contract is broken by the domestic worker. But if you finish your two years contract, you’ll be given a month to look for a new employer.”

#4 “The two-week policy really depends on the specific individual cases. It depends on how long you’ve worked here. If you have already worked for a long time, then you can stay here and wait for your visa. But if you haven’t worked for more than a year, like just a couple of months, you might have to go back to wait for your visa.”

#4 “I’m not entirely sure who decides whether we stay or go. Maybe the immigration bureau or the employment agency. I’m not sure.”

The interviewees also have diverse opinions on the two-week rules, showing different sentiments towards its establishment. Some see two weeks as an adequate amount of time, while others feel it puts too much pressure on the worker. These conflicting views may stem from individual experiences, preferences, or specific needs (such as caring for a particular age group). The variations in opinion highlight

the complexity of the policy's impact and suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach may not cater to the diverse needs of domestic workers. It is also common for domestic workers to express pressure and desperation when they feel like they're forced to return back home if they are unable to find a new job in Hong Kong within the two-week timeframe. The reality of returning home may mean financial hardship, leading some to explore alternatives like moving to other countries. This highlights the challenging decisions faced by domestic workers and the precariousness of their situations, emphasizing the need to consider how the policy affects not just their employment in Hong Kong but their broader life choices and well-being.

#1 "I think it gives plenty of time for the domestic helper to find another employer."

#1 "Whether this policy places much pressure on domestic workers really depends on the domestic worker themselves. Because some helpers are quite picky, they want to choose the jobs they take. For example, they want to take care of six years old. In such case, it can be difficult to find an ideal employer within two weeks, so they might be sent back to the Philippines easily."

#2 "I think that puts a lot of pressure on domestic workers to find a new employer. It's not a lot of time."

#2 "Yes, domestic workers have 14 days after the contract is terminated. But if in two weeks you cannot find a new job, you are really forced to go back to and Philippines. They might need to go back to the Philippines and apply for a visa again."

#3 "I have a friend who still cannot find a job after 14 days. But it is better for her to go to another country rather than just going back to the Philippines to wait for the visa, because there's no money in the Philippines. That's why she went to Macau, and other available options include Dubai, Singapore, and Taiwan."

#12 "My friend is sent back to Indonesia against her will. She initially thought of staying over the two-week period, but then, after realizing the legal punishments for it, she left."

Some domestic helpers went further in expressing their desire to see the abolishment or reform of the policy. They believe that the policy fails to protect domestic workers and may even facilitate abuse. It represents a voice advocating for policy change, focusing on the need for a more compassionate and fair approach that recognizes the rights and needs of domestic workers. It indicates dissatisfaction with the current system and a plea for more humane treatment and consideration.

#9 “I think the government should really abolish the two-week rules because it is really not helping the domestic workers here. People are forced to take jobs and not report abuses for fear of having their contracts terminated. It is really not good.”

#11 “It would be better if the policy has given us a month to find a new employer. I think that’s more reasonable.”

II. Workplace Issues

Work Routine

The overall well-being and work experiences of the domestic workers in Hong Kong largely depends on their work routines which filled up their daily lives. However, the work routines of these workers are often characterized by a blend of dedication and challenges, with diverse range of tasks, extreme workload and exhaustion. The role played by the employers is also significant, leading to huge individual differences among the workers in regards to their work routines.

The job contents of the domestic workers vary widely, including tasks like cooking, cleaning and housekeeping. It is noticeable that there are more than half of the workers being interviewed had the duty of childcare. In the following quotes, #1, #7 and #9 contain childcare as one of their duties. For these workers, jobs related to the children are often placed at the top.

#1 “most of my duties are cleaning the house laundry, cooking, taking care of the kids”

#2 “I wake up at six to prepare breakfast, and then start to wash the clothes swipe the floor, clean the bedroom and the toilet”

#7 “I took care of the baby when the employers were away because they’re a working couple”

#9 “First I have to wake up the boy, and fed him, then I wake up the little girl and prepare food for her”

#11 “My daily routine includes going to the market, doing the house chores and taking of the small dogs”

It is currently a common situation that domestic workers in Hong Kong are generally overworked. Some of them finish their work at late night, some even work round the clock. The workload of the domestic workers is highly dependent on their employers. Some employers are picky on the workers’ jobs, some are perfectionists, some require the workers to redo the jobs even though the jobs been done had already been satisfactory.

#2 “My sleeping time depends on what time they finish dinner, mostly nine or ten o’clock”

#3 “we should be working for 12 hours maximum, but some will say they work 24 hours a day”

#4 “some employers require the workers to mop the floor three times a day”

Due to the extreme workload, almost every worker being interviewed expressed the feeling of fatigue and exhaustion at work. More than half of the exhaustion appear to be due to long working hours, which contribute to both declining productivity and both mental and physical burden on the workers. It is noticeable that some of the exhaustion was seen correlated to the duty of childcare, especially when the kids are still adapting to the care from an unfamiliar worker.

#1 "I take care of a two year old newborn, which is a hard work”

#4 “I work since morning till evening, it’s very tired and I was’t happy. It’s like everyone doesn’t like me.”

#5 “Everyday, I finished my work by around 11 at night, so it’s really tired

Work Pressure

Aside from the extreme workload for HK domestic workers , they suffer from high level of work pressure both mentally and physically. Relationships with the other workers appeared to be one of the issues when more than one domestic workers are being hired by an employer. Physical disability and their family background also add on to the work pressure, making it even more difficult for the workers to survive.

Family issues are one of the main sources of work pressure for Hong Kong domestic workers. Many of them chose to become migrant domestic workers to support their families encountering financial difficulties back in Philippines or Indonesia, which exacerbated their mental burden and stress during work. Some of them even got no support from their families. Almost all of them experienced intense feelings of homesickness. Being separated from families and hometowns is a tough challenge for them.

#2 “my dad was sick, so I work here in Hong Kong to help him”

#2 “I need to fight the homesick”

#5 “None of my family support me, I was all by myself”

#1 “I don’t have a husband and I support my family alone, so everything is like a bit hard for me”

It was frequently mentioned by the workers that their work pressure was highly influenced by their relationships with others, no matter with the employers or another worker. The workers’ relationships with employers vary widely. Some of them were treated as a family member, which apparently alleviated their pressure at work, while some of them were facing blames and accusations from their employers, aggravating their stress and exhaustion. However, working with another domestic worker appeared to be always dissatisfactory.

#3 “for me, my employer treats me as a family member, I can share my problems with her”

#4 “the biggest trouble is that there are two helpers and I think the olde helper doesn’t like me”

“the first time I really want to go back it’s when I worked with another helper. I cried overnight”

#6 “When you were blamed on everything when you were already tired, it’s very stressful”

Beside mental burden, physical disability of domestic workers also create inconvenience for them at work, stressing their work pressure. The workers’ health issues are closely correlated to the quality of their jobs. A poorly performed job may result in dissatisfaction from the employers even if it is due to physical disability. These problems are usually accompanied by an enhanced feeling of frustration.

#10 “I need to make dumplings all by my self, from chopping the meat and vegetables to wrapping. My feet is really swollen and I cannot really stand”

“Live-in policy”

One of the most prominent features of domestic workers in Hong Kong is that they are often restricted to living with their employers. This is commonly known as the “live-in policy.” The rule was established in 2013 to prevent domestic workers from taking part-time jobs, which in turn created competition with other local Hong Kong workers. Even if they were granted to live alone against the requirement of the law, the skyrocketing rent prohibits migrant domestic helpers from finding a separate home. Consequently, all of the interviewees are live-in domestic workers who live with their employers.

Living conditions for domestic workers vary widely, and the experiences shared reflect this diversity. Some domestic workers have private rooms that provide comfort and privacy. Others must deal with rooms without windows, making the space feel cramped and depressing. Shared rooms are common, and while some workers have gotten used to this arrangement, others find it less satisfactory. In some extreme cases, the lack of available space forces workers to sleep in entirely inappropriate areas like toilets. The stories illustrate the broad range of living conditions provided to domestic workers, from acceptable and comfortable to inadequate and unsuitable.

#1 “I have a private room...But my friend isn’t that lucky. Her employer’s home only has two rooms, which are occupied by the employer and the kids, so the helper has to live in the living room.”

#2 “The room I stayed in for my first employer is really bad because there’s no window. It’s really depressing. But at least I have two fans, so I later get used to it. But I’m satisfied because, for other domestic workers, from what I’ve heard, it is mostly a shared room. Mostly shared room. Seldom do they have a private room in the home.”

#3 “I have a room with a toilet, but some of my friends have to live on the floor.”

#7 “I’m not sleeping with the baby. The employer doesn’t allow me to sleep with the baby inside her room, so I have to sleep in the toilet opposite the child’s room. I have to bring my bedding set to the toilet.”

#9 “I have a room. However, there are lots of belongings of the kids there and also belongings of my employer. So it is not necessarily my room.”

It is unfortunate that domestic workers are required to reside with their employers, which can potentially lead to a breach of their privacy. Being constantly interrupted during their downtime, as their employer has unrestricted access to their personal space, can lead to a lack of consideration and disregard for the domestic worker’s wellbeing. This largely depends on how respectful their employers are. While some

employers are considerate and honor their rights, others may not be as accommodating. Ultimately, it varies from employer to employer.

#1 “My employer is very kind and very; they are very good. Once I'm inside the room, they will not disturb me anymore. They will let me have my rest until morning.”

#3 “It really depends on the employer. Some of my friends say the employer will still knock on the door when it is 8 pm. Can they do this to us even if it is our rest time? No. But you can't say that to him because you're staying with them. That's your employer. So okay, no choice. It's your job.”

#4 “Of course, if we have our own room, it's better for us because it's like we have our own privacy we can sleep well, or we can we can we have our room.”

An additional problem that stems from the live-in policy is the blur between the line of work and rest. Because domestic workers have to reside in their employer's house, they are almost 24/7 on-call. Thus, the working hours are usually not guaranteed, and it fluctuates from one employer to another depending on their expectations and requirements.

#4 “The good thing about living out is that if we're not living with the employer, our work time is more fixed. It's like, maybe you can just work eight to ten, and you can rest. But if we are living with the employer, we need to stay with them 24 hours a day, and anytime they need us, we need to work. Even if it is late, we still need to work.”

#10 “It's really not free to live with your employer. It is like they are constantly watching you, watching what you are doing. It really limits your freedom. It also makes me wonder, what's the line between work and rest?”

Living Conditions

Due to the live-in policy in Hong Kong, living conditions of domestic workers in Hong Kong are determined by their employers to a very large extent. The passivity of the workers in deciding on their living conditions contributes to the existence of some serious issues including lack of food and sleep. These issues were specifically highlighted by the workers being interviewed as part of the most significant difficulties and hardships they are facing.

The uppermost problem stressed by almost every worker being interviewed was lack of food. Some employers do not provide food for the domestic

workers, even if they do, the food being given to the workers are often stale, expired or not enough. Although there is legal protection in the form of food allowance, it is often unfollowed by the employers. The food issue as the most apparent problem faced by the Hong Kong domestic workers revealed that the basic needs of the workers are yet to fulfilled.

#1 “domestic helper has a food allowance, but they are not given enough of it, the employer will just give you reheated food overnight and you will just heat it for lunch. Some of us are not receiving breakfast”

#2 “the Number one problem is food”

#3 “some employers in HK don’t give food to the workers so we just get our own money from our own pocket to buy things”

#3 “some workers are not treated as human, being given food that is not like food, like expired cookies with molds in it already”

#4 “they don’t give me breakfast, and then in the afternoon we just say leftovers”

#4 “we need more food”

Lack of sleep appeared to be another serious concern of domestic workers in Hong Kong. This is closely related to the “live-in policy” and the long working hours of the workers. The “live-in policy” which enforces the workers to live with their employers makes it unavoidable for the workers being asked to work by the employers at their rest time, mostly during late night. Their rest time was also cut by the extreme workload they had, forcing them to stay up late.

#3 “ Some of the employers still knock the door at 8 p.m. and you cannot say no even you are in your rest time because you’re stay with them and that’s your responsibility”

#3 “lack of sleep is also a problem, some workers just sleep for one or two hours because they are too busy”

#7 “I sleep around ten, but in the middle of the night the baby screams so my sleeping quality is very much affected”

Whether the workers are given a private room is also an important element affecting their living conditions. Private rooms ensure that the workers have privacy in the employers' houses, and they also reduce the chance of workers being disturbed during their rest time. With a private room, the workers can decide their own sleeping time and decide when to turn the light off, while sleeping with employers means all these are dominated by the employers.

#1 "I have a private room, once I'm inside the room, they will not disturb me anymore"

#1 "With my first employer, I don't have a private room. This causes inconvenience because you don't have privacy. You cannot sleep. You have to wait till the light is turned off, when they finished their work."

#1 "some of the employers doesn't have enough money to provide the helper with a house"

#2 "it's hard for me to live in the room I have with my first employer, because there's no window"

#3 "I do have a private room, with a toilet inside"

#3 " I knew someone who doesn't have a private room, so she sleeps in the living room. She will wait until the employer finish watching the TV."

Conflict with Employers

It is very common that disagreements and conflicts exist between employers and domestic workers in Hong Kong. However, what should be taken seriously is that the rights, security and dignity of the workers are sometimes being threatened when abuses occur. Other conflicts due to financial interaction also play a role in disharmony between domestic workers and their employers.

Verbal abuses are frequently emphasized by the domestic workers during the interview. In some cases, verbal abuses were due to employers' dissatisfaction towards the workers' jobs. However, at most of the circumstances, the workers were unreasonably scolded and blamed, especially when their employers did not have good tempers and were hard to communicate with.

Though verbal abuses will not result in physical injuries, they do impose additional pressure on the workers.

#1 “ce she’s tired, it seems that she’s getting angry with me”

#1 “she’s always shouting”

#1 “the grandmother is too active, she wants to manage everything”

#1 “we have communication problem”

#6 “my employer was a perfectionist, she wants everything in her control. But I cannot control the traffic, and every time I will be blamed so it’s very stressful”

#8 “the first argument we had is when my employer’s child get sick, and she alerts that her child’s tongue was burned because I gave her hot food. But later the doctor told her that she got a mouth disease”

#7 “she always have reasons to scold me”

In addition to verbal abuses, many domestic workers in Hong Kong also suffered from severe physical abuses. The workers experienced physical abuses in quite different ways, including being required to overwork, being punched, slapped, or kicked and fulfilling inhumane compulsion. A legal case reported in 2014 was mentioned in the quotes below, revealing an example of immoral abuse experienced by an Indonesian worker from her employer. These physical abuses often lead to unpleasant contract termination.

#2 “in 2014, the Indonesian worker was forced to drink the water in the toilet”

#3 “the employer is not satisfied with the learning of the worker, maybe that’s the reason why some employers will let them clean again and again. It really depends on the employer.”

#4 “the Indonesian worker Ariana, her employer always slap her and beat her. She wasn’t allowed to go out”

#9 “my employer’s wife punched me hardly”

#9 “my forehead is swollen, there there was a bruise”

#9 “I was hurt badly, she punched on my forehead twice”

#9 “when I wake the boy up, he hurts me, kick me and punch me”

#10 “I stole the key of the door, and that’s why I’ve got beaten up and kicked out”

#11 “they hit me every time they have a tantrum”

Financial interactions between the domestic workers and their employers also contribute to the conflicts between them. The quotes below are from different perspectives, one from the employer and the other from the domestic worker. The employer revealed that it was a commonplace that domestic workers borrow large amount of money from their employers, while the worker claimed that she was intentionally and falsely accused by her employer of stealing things.

#13 “Some of the domestic helpers may go back to their employers to borrow money because their families are relatively poor. Almost every employer will borrow money, just like us. For example, if they borrow 20000 or 30000 yuan, we will deduct 2000 or 3000 yuan per month.”

#8 “she called the police and claimed that I steal her clothes, but these are clothes that she gave me.”

Contract Termination

For the reasons mentioned above, including work pressure, poor living conditions and conflicts with employers, many Hong Kong domestic workers chose to terminate their contracts or being terminated by their employers. However, contract termination is accompanied by a cumbersome and complex procedure, among which new conflicts often arise between the employers and the workers. It was a worry for the workers if the employers refuse to follow the contract claims during termination process.

Reasons for termination are usually closely related to the workers’ work life with the employers. Many workers reveal their reasons for termination being the unbearable hardships at work, including suffering from physical abuse by

the employer. Others couldn't handle the intense work pressure and chose to terminate the contract. Due to the restriction of the "two-week policy", terminating the contract and becoming unemployed is a tough decision for the workers to make.

#4 "I left them because I felt very hard"

#7 "She begged me once to stay and promised me that she will try not to get angry with me, so I stayed until the day I was abused and had to call the police"

During the termination process, most of the conflicts between the domestic workers and their employers were due to disagreements in regards to contract claims. A significant proportion of employers in Hong Kong chose not to follow the contract claims including the "one month notice", resulting in conflicts with the workers which later become legal cases. This also create severe inconvenience and difficulties for the domestic workers, who often left unemployed without an accommodation.

#6 "Since my employer terminated the contract, we need to talk about my contract claims, like the air ticket, the annual leave and the traveling allowance"

#6 "I begged her to accept my one month notice and give me the ticket so I can go back, but she rejected it"

#7 "My employer just want to pay me the items that I felt so unreasonable, cause according to the contract, if she terminated the it, she needs to pay me the one month notice"

#7 "so since my employer was the one who decided to terminate the contract and with the reason that she already abused me, I did not accept the amount of money that they wanted to give me"

After contract termination, domestic workers in Hong Kong are faced with numerous challenges and pressure. This includes but not limited to the urgency to find another job in two weeks before being sent back to their own countries as specified by the "two-week policy". Termination at midnight is a specific hard time faced by some of the workers, when they couldn't find another accommodation immediately after being evicted from the employer's house.

#2 “they have 14 days after terminating the contract to find another employer”

#2 “we only have two weeks. But if in two weeks we cannot find another job, we are really forced to go back to Philippines”

#10 “termination in the middle of the night is one of the hardships faced by the domestic workers. No body can pick her up”

Personal Items Confiscation

Domestic workers in Hong Kong have also been grappling with another challenge—the confiscation of personal items. The narratives of personal belongings being withheld revealed the reality of the unbalanced status between the domestic workers and their employers or the agencies while casting a shadowy on the rights and dignity of these workers. With personal items being confiscated, their freedoms are restricted in a way.

Most narratives of confiscation of personal items were related to the employers. The items being taken away were the most necessary items or legal documents that the workers need to connect with others or to travel away, such as their phones and passports. The employers took these items mainly for ensuring that the workers were focusing doing their jobs, preventing the workers from leaving, or when the workers had loans. Some employers would ensure that the items being confiscated were under surveillance.

#9 “she took my mobile phone and also my passport. She put my phone in front of the CCTV, and I don’t know where she place my passport”

#10 “when I first came to their house, they took my phone”

#2 “the employers don’t want us to use the phone while working, that’s why they took away the phone”

#2 “Some of the helpers had their passport being taken because they had loans”

#7 “My passport is still with the employer now and I’m using a temporary travel document for now”

#10 “I told them that I want to go home for vacation, and they told me to leave all my important things in their house like the passport and some documents”

Some Hong Kong agencies also had experience of confiscating personal items from the domestic workers. In this way, the domestic workers were disconnected with their families back in their home countries. The mental pressure on the workers were further stressed when their personal items were being withheld with a feeling of uncertainty, especially at the time when they just arrived in an unfamiliar place.

#4 “The first time I came to Hong Kong, they did not allow me to take my mobile phone, so I could not contact my family”

#4 “Because the first month I didn’t have phone, I couldn’t talk to anyone”

#4 “My agency didn’t allow us to take our phones”

III. Social Life

Interaction with Friends

traveling overseas to work in Hong Kong, domestic workers form their own community by building friendships. During weekends, clusters of domestic workers who are enjoying their leisure time can often be seen in the streets of the city, churches, and gathering sites enveloped by the skyscrapers in central.

#2 I often hangout with my friends on Sunday, to church, to beach. But as we come here longer, we just want to relax on our leisure days.

#4 I made a lot of friends in the agency, and we go to Indonesian shops, and bar together.

#10 when I first came here, I stayed in the church because all my friends were all there

These communities not only enjoy their leisure time together, but also support each others to tackle with predicaments encountered in their life, including but not limited to mistreatment by employers, legal disputes, and even lack of food provision.

#4 One of my friend provided me some food because I don't have enough

#6 It was may friend who offered me help when I had a conflict with my employer and had to leave to house. She recommended me to seek help from Mission for Migrant Workers.

#8 It was my friend who recommended me to Mission for Migrant Workers

#11 Friend of my mom helped me to come to HK

In our conversations with the domestic workers, we learnt about many troubles faced by their friends, which helped to augment our understandings of their difficulties. Many domestic workers shared how their friends often work overtime, sleep late, or even have their phones confiscated with us.

#1 heard from friends that they're not provided with enough food / one friend is in jail for accused for stealing (authentic situation unknown yet).

#2 most of my friends sleep late

#3 Some of my friend often work overtime, and don't rest until very late.

#6 My employer had my phone confiscated to I rarely have chance to talk with my friends

These communities considerably ameliorated the situation of domestic workers in HongKong, as they offered necessary help for domestic workers who are unprotected comparatively to other workers in HK, or unaware of their legal rights. Many helpers were

Interaction with Family

In our investigation, we discovered that most of our interviewees are suffering from homesickness. Many of them are single mothers, as marriage appears to

be hard to maintain when separated by time and distances. Nonetheless, many of the workers still insisted to work in HK, for they have got kids in hometown to support. It is also due to this, that when facing unfair treatments like physical abuses, many domestic workers choose to tolerate for their family.

#6 After coming HK, I haven't seen my daughter for 5 years. Me and my husband separated 2 years after I came here. My daughter had a depression when she found out her father has a new family. I really want to be by her side when she needed me, but I can't

#1 I'm a single mother who support my three kids alone, and that's hard for me.

#7 I'm the mother of 4 kids, and came to HK to support them

#8 I'm a single parent who came to HK to support my 1 years old kid

#11 Because my parents are separated, as the first child, I have to work to support my siblings.

#9 I tried to tolerate all the physical abuses against me because I'm a single mother and have to support my son. Thankfully my family supported me.

Among domestic workers interviewed, many tell us their difficulties in contacting their family. Sometimes it is because their have to work till late night, when their family in Philippines are already asleep. While in other situations, domestic workers might have their phones confiscated by employers. The separation is painful for them, that they had to miss a lot of important moments of their loved ones.

#5 I have to miss the graduation of my sister due to work

#4 I didn't have phone initially to contact my family initially

#6 Despite I begged my first employer, I didn't have chance to go back.

#9 contact with family is difficult because everyday after my work has ended my son is already asleep.

The attitude of family members towards our interviewees' job in HK are complex, some are supportive, while some don't understand why they have to work in places so distant from home. We even learnt that some of our interviewees are being forced to work in HK by their family.

#1 My family members want me to go back to Philippines, and I have to explain to them.

#1 I have support from my siblings, especially financial support in the beginning

#4 My mom forced to work in HK, and she asked me to accommodate the environment here despite I felt very helpless and cried every night.

#5 My family is not very supportive for my job, nevertheless, I work here still and support my mom and daughter. I'm a single mother

Working overseas is undoubtedly heartbreaking for most domestic workers. As shown above, long time separation not only meant being absent in the growth of their own children, missing memorable instants in family members' lives, but may also meant the breaking of a family: we are astonished by the high proportion of single mother among our interviewees.

IV. Legal Protection

Government Protection

The government often plays an important role in shaping the lives of migrant domestic workers, which can both be in a positive way or in a negative way. In the interview, most respondents demonstrated a pervasive sentiment of neglect and lack of support from the government. There remains skepticism about whether the Hong Kong government has taken any meaningful at all to ensure the well-being of migrant domestic workers. The large discrepancy between the public narrative in which the government is portrayed as a saviour in aiding migrant domestic workers contrasts with the actual hardship encountered by this group of worker.

#1 "The government? I don't think they have made any moves. Or if they have, it's been a little to help."

#8 "What is the government doing to help migrant domestic worker? You hear it on the news all day. You hear about the government giving support to migrant domestic workers. But when you are desperately in need of help, there's no one to help you."

#9 "I reached out for the government's help. They just ask me some very useless questions, like 'Where are you,' or 'Are you okay?' They didn't say anything like, 'you go here, come here, and we will help you.'"

#11 "I have not received any help from the government. Actually, sometimes they are the ones who encouraged the worker not to file a case."

In the case where governments do establish policies to protect the welfare of migrant domestic workers, they are often ineffective as they are not enforced properly. A lot of the policies established is neglected by employers. Because

of the obscurity of migrant domestic workers' working condition, it is very hard to check whether employers are complying with governments policies.

#4 "Even though the Hong Kong government didn't allow us to clean outside the window, many employers just don't care."

#5 "I think a lot of the policies in Hong Kong set by the Hong Kong government is really not helping migrant domestic workers. The 'live-in' policy is really not good."

#7 "The government dictates the minimum food allowance for us. It is about 1100 HKD, but my employer doesn't give me that money."

Presenting such adversities, migrant domestic workers shared their perspectives on how the government can improve its policy implementation such that it is effective in protecting the rights of this group of labor.

#10 "I think the government should give more support to non-governmental organization like the Bethune House and Mission for Migrant Women that are actually doing things to help migrant domestic workers.

#11 "I hope that, before the government sends the Filipinos to other countries, they should educate them. Educate them about their rights and how they can protect themselves."

NGOs protection

Nongovernmental organizations play an important role in protecting the rights of domestic workers, through both educate the latter legal rights and offer substantial help when domestic workers face troubles. We are honored to cooperate with one of the non-government organizations called "Mission for Migrant Workers", and are granted to opportunity to interview four of their clients who were engaged in legal dispute. From these interviewees, we could sense their sense of appreciation for the generous aid by the organization, which included mental support, legal consultancy, temporary accommodation, etc.

#6 Mission for Migrant workers encouraged me to fight for our rights and informed me what are legally entitled to me. They give Philippines here the knowledge to protect ourselves.

#6 When I had to leave my employers house, it was my friend who recommended me to Mission for migrant workers

#7 I had an abusive employer, and before I was introduced to Mission for Migrant Workers., I didn't know how to fight for my rights. All I knew was I need a job to support my family.

#7 My friends here helped me to reach out to Mission for migrant workers and I really feel blessed. Since this organization open arms to all who are in need at no cost.

#7 Mission for Migrant Workers is very supportive, emotionally, spiritually, mentally. They teach us about the terms in our contract and help me to find out my legitimate claims.

#8 My friends recommended to me that Mission for Migrant workers is really trustworthy.

#9 When I came to Mission for Migrant Workers, I didn't have any thing. No clothes to wear, no place to live. It was the organization that offered me shelter.

In many situations, partially due to limitations in education and partially due to the urge for a job to support their family back in the Philippines, many domestic workers are neither unaware of the terms in their contract nor their rights granted by law. NGOs like Migrant for Domestic Workers offer essential knowledge for workers in need and considerably alleviate difficulties faced by migrant workers.

Insurance Policy

Insurance policy is another important aspect of domestic workers' lives. Often living under minimum wage, domestic workers lack the necessary fund to afford large scales operations. Consequently, their ability to combat great injuries is often very low, making insurance a suitable solution to prevent such dilemmas from occurring.

During our interview, we found that different sources and types of insurance are available to domestic workers, ranging from public insurance from their

home countries to policies provided by employers or agencies in Hong Kong. Domestic workers often have public insurance from the Philippines before arriving in Hong Kong, which is related to livelihood programs from the Philippines Consulate. The Philippines government requires this insurance, typically managed by sending agencies. In Hong Kong, local regulations mandate employers to insure their domestic workers, especially for work injuries.

#1 “Yes, I think we had public insurance before we came here. Before we signed the contract, we had been assured that there was insurance from the Philippines Consulate. These insurance are mostly livelihood programs that offer financial help when you decide to go back to the Philippines.”

#3 “It’s the rule in Hong Kong that every domestic worker needs to have insurance.”

#7 “Every worker need to have insurance here; it is mandatory. But it is also not rare for your employer to not buy it for you without telling you.”

#8 “The Philippines government imposes this mandatory insurance that the workers should get, and usually, it is taken by the agency from the sending countries.”

#8 “In Hong Kong, there is mandatory insurance. Because the labor department of Hong Kong states that the employer should get insurance for the worker.”

#9 “I have insurance in the Philippines. But the work injuries in Hong Kong are different. It is covered by the employer.”

#10 “No, we don't have private insurance. Because we still choose to have food on our table than to pay for the insurance.”

Though there are usually many different options available to domestic workers, many seem to have limited knowledge or awareness of the specifics of the insurance policies they are covered under. They may be aware of the existence of insurance but are not entirely sure about its details, including what it covers and the benefits it provides.

#1 “No, I’ve not brought any forms of private insurance. I don’t have the time to investigate such things.”

#2 “I’m not very sure what is covered in the insurance my employer brought for me. I never have to use the insurance.”

#3 “I don’t know about the insurance, but I think I have it. My employer didn’t give me the card yet.”

#10 “I don't really know what’s covered by the insurance because they didn't really explain in the agency. They just said to us that you just need to buy it.”

In addition, some express discontentment with the coverage of the insurance. Some common medical treatments or conditions might not be included, highlighting a potential area of concern for domestic workers. Other criticisms include the lack of transparency, limited utility, and the perception that these policies might be more for the benefit of the issuing bodies rather than the workers.

#1 “I think there is also insurance covering injuries and health issues. We do have to contribute a little bit of money every month for the insurance.”

#3 “One thing I heard from my employer is that I have to be very careful when eating crab because if my teeth is damaged, it’s not covered in the insurance.”

#8 “The medical part of the insurance is so limited. for example, if you have cancer, it is not part of the insurance. And then changing the denture is not part of it.”

#8 “The Philippines government imposes this mandatory insurance...They only get money. They call it an extraction from them, and then it is useless.”

#10 “And sometimes, even if we pay if we need them, we cannot really get them. Sometimes you need to do many processes before you can get support from the insurance.