

The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Hong Kong's Domestic Helpers

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Abstract – January 23rd, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Hong Kong. By March 2020, more than 130,000 citizens were unemployed, which is an increase of over 12,000 from the previous month. This is a 9-year record high for Hong Kong's unemployment rate. The current situation in Hong Kong is putting much pressure on its citizens, but it brings even more pressure to the domestic helpers living in Hong Kong. They are migrant workers looking to be employed by local households to work as live-in maids. These “helpers” make up about 10% of Hong Kong's working population, and are easily the most detrimentally affected by this pandemic—both financially and mentally. However, the Hong Kong government has not done an adequate job alleviating the stress for these domestic workers, which makes it harder for them to survive this pandemic. This paper aims to study the socioeconomic impact of this pandemic on migrant workers in Hong Kong, specifically the domestic helpers. It will also explore some of the key issues that these workers face, and suggest the ways that the local government can alleviate those problems.

Key Words – COVID-19, Hong Kong, Domestic Helpers, Migrant Workers

INTRODUCTION

January 23rd, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Hong Kong. Hong Kong was one of the first countries to be hit by this global pandemic. By March 2020, more than 130,000 citizens were unemployed, which is an increase of over 12,000 from the previous month. This is a 9-year record high for Hong Kong's unemployment rate, and its financial secretary, Paul Chan, predicts that it will likely increase [6].

The current situation in Hong Kong is putting much pressure on its citizens, but it brings even more pressure to the domestic helpers living in Hong Kong. The 400,000 domestic helpers are composed of 45% Indonesian and 44% Filipino women [23]. They come to Hong Kong looking to be employed by local households to work as live-in maids. These “helpers” make up about 10% of Hong Kong's working population [7], and are easily the most detrimentally affected by this pandemic.

SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Helpers are an essential part of the Hong Kong lifestyle, as they fulfill many different roles for their employers. Depending on the household, they take care of the elderly or the children: they take the children to school, feed them, wash their clothes, spend time with them, and more. Although these helpers make up an integral part of Hong Kong's society and culture, they are not allowed to be a permanent resident of Hong Kong. This can bring many disadvantages, especially during a global pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the current situation in Hong Kong has made the lives of most domestic helpers worse—both financially and mentally.

The majority of domestic helpers in Hong Kong come to this city to support the big family they have back home. These helpers are aware that working in Hong Kong is a greater advantage for them, since if they worked in the Philippines, their minimum wage for working as a domestic helper would be around 800 HKD [19]. Whereas, if they were to work in Hong Kong, their minimum wage would be around 4,185 HKD. That is why so many Filipino women choose to work in Hong Kong, and send their money to their families back home. These helpers mostly get into Hong Kong through employment agencies, who can set them up with employers and give them basic training as a helper. These agencies help the women learn how to cook, speak English, do the laundry, and take care of different family members [9].

Domestic helpers are the backbone to the economy of Hong Kong. A study done by ENRICH, a charity promoting the economic empowerment of migrant domestic workers, and Experian, a global information services company, concluded that these migrant helpers had contributed about 12.6 billion USD to Hong Kong's GDP. However, this figure does not include the indirect impact these domestic helpers have had on Hong Kong's economy. The estimated true value of the work these helpers do for their employers amount up to 71.2 billion USD. Furthermore, helpers free up significant time for their employers, who, in turn, contribute up to 20.1 billion USD to Hong Kong's economy during those freed up time [7]. This means that, without these helpers, Hong Kong's economy and GDP would be at a much lesser value.

Domestic helpers have a significant impact on the women of Hong Kong, and their representation in the economy. By taking care of the children and the elderly of the household, the domestic helpers make it possible for many mothers to have their own careers. According to Lucinda

Pike, the director of ENRICH, “the dual income individual families are able to access has significant knock-on effects, and allows them to attain a higher socioeconomic status [15].” Thanks to the helpers, 110,000 mothers were able to rejoin the workforce in 2018, as they had their helper at home, looking after their children [7].

Helpers are also the backbone of the economy back in their home countries. The Philippines and Indonesia are especially reliant on helpers working in Hong Kong, because they, on average, send around 50-60% of their salary back to their home countries and support about 4 to 5 people in their households [8]. In 2018, around 33.7 billion USD were sent from overseas workers to the Philippines, and around 3% of the money was from domestic workers [7]. By sending much of their income back home, helpers are actually raising the GDP of their home countries, as the money they send over will be spent on goods and services in their country. Furthermore, they improve their household’s socioeconomic status in their home country: within 4 years of working in Hong Kong, helpers double the income of their households in the Philippines and Indonesia [7]. The employability of the helpers’ family members and people they interact closely with increases as well, as helpers learn new skills from their years abroad. These helpers acquire many new skills in Hong Kong: cooking, personal finance, communications, and other life skills. By sharing these newly acquired skills, helpers make their own communities more educated [7]. Clearly, these domestic helpers play important roles in both economic and social development of their communities.

HARDSHIPS HELPERS FACE

Surprisingly, when these domestic helpers first arrive in Hong Kong, many are already in debt. This is because domestic workers bear a large financial cost, around 1,135 USD, to get a job placement in Hong Kong, as they have to pay Filipino agencies for the transfer, and to become a worker in Hong Kong. These employment agencies also force domestic workers to undergo unnecessary training in order to increase their profits. The most surprising fact is that Filipino employment agencies are actually prohibited from charging placement fees [21]. Although most employment agencies charge workers a sizable illegal fee for the placement service, the helpers cannot really do anything about this, as there are plenty of helpers who are willing to go through this illegal process. And because most would-be helpers do not have enough money to pay this fee, the agencies connect them to lending companies. These companies give out loans in the Philippines, and collect the payments from Hong Kong. But the interest rate on these loans can get as high as 60% [18]. Many helpers get paid around 4600 HKD a month, just above the minimum wage of 4310 HKD. This means it takes them around 6 months just to pay this loan off [16]. However, if they were to switch employers in the middle of the 6 months paying period, the helpers would actually need to take out more loans, as they would have to pay more to the agencies for their transfer. Although this is a completely illegal

practice, it has been normalized in Hong Kong. The legally permitted placement fee employment agencies in Hong Kong can charge is 10% of their first month’s salary. However, the average loan that helpers have to pay back is around 11,321 HKD or 1,459 USD, which is 25 times greater than the legally permitted amount [21].

Even after the job payment the helpers also have to worry about unexpected expenses, as they remit around 2,119 HKD, or 46% of their monthly salary, to support around 3.6 individuals, which not only include their immediate family members but also their extended family members, such as uncle and aunts. Often, these remittances are used to invest in projects that the domestic helper’s family has started, such as a small company or a shop [16]. Although the helpers remit much of their salary back home to fund these projects, their families also rely on these helpers to pay for worst case scenarios, whether it be a natural disaster or family emergency. Therefore, many helpers are forced to take out loans to help out their families [16]. These women are often the primary breadwinner of the family, and they are pressured to send money back to their home country, even when they do not have enough money for themselves [16].

Unfortunately, around 36% of these helpers lack understanding in personal finance, so they routinely finance their investments through loans rather than their savings, which swallows these domestic helpers into further debt [7]. Around 46% reported in a survey that they had outstanding loans from a lender in Hong Kong, and pay around 60% of their salary in loan installments each month. 80% of these loans were taken out from money lending companies, which, on average, give out loans at 12 month duration of 25% per annum [16].

THE IMPACT OF COVID19 ON HELPERS

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation for helpers has gotten much worse—especially their habit of loaning from predatory loan sharks. Because of COVID-19, Hong Kong’s domestic workers were pushed into debt traps: as many families of the helpers had no income while being under lockdown in their home countries, most helpers were forced to borrow more money so that their families could stay afloat. This means that they are actually loaning much more than they can afford to, and after this pandemic, they would have to keep working to pay off the debts that they have incurred. However, the money lending companies are not taking their situations into account, and are demanding their money back: one helper even stated, “They send me more and more messages each day, I hope they understand the situation [4].”

With the start of the pandemic and quarantine, many helpers were immediately faced with hardships. The pandemic offered around 60% of Hong Kong workers to work from home as a result of the pandemic [10]. This means that the helpers are pressured to do more work, as they have more chores to tend to the family members who are now spending more time at home. A survey found that around half

of the helpers in Hong Kong actually had increased workload since the pandemic has started [22]. Not only do the helpers have more work to do, but they also do not get to rest. Normally, during the weekends and holidays, the helpers would go to Admiral or Central and spend time with their friends on makeshift cardboard carpets. They would chat, play games, eat food, and just relax. However, this weekly ritual has been taken away from them due to the pandemic, as residents of Hong Kong could only meet with 2 people, and were strongly recommended to stay inside.

For helpers who are living in the homes of their employers, their rest days do not feel like rest days, as they now have to “rest” in the same house as their employers, making it difficult for them to even relax. It is estimated that around 40% of helpers actually never left their residence since the pandemic has hit [22]. Many of them were strongly urged by their employers not to go outside, which the helpers themselves thought was too dangerous. Unfortunately, being confined to the same space with their employers for so long, with no way to truly relax, has only increased their stress. Sheila Tebia-Bonifacio, the chairwoman of Gabriela Hong Kong, an organisation that supports Filipinos in Hong Kong, has raised concerns about domestic helpers not getting an appropriate living space in their working household. Research done by an NGO found that 3 out of 5 domestic workers in Hong Kong either endure alternative accommodation arrangements or their designated bedroom serves other multiple functions in the household [22]. Tibia-Bonifacio stated that helpers should be allowed to go out of their employers’ homes on rest days or risk exhaustion. However, during this pandemic, many were mistreated, as around 20% of helpers did not receive their rest day, and one helper even claimed that she has not had a rest day for 9 weeks [22].

IMPACT OF COVID19 ON EMPLOYMENT STATUS

To make matters worse, some helpers were fired during this pandemic. There are different reasons why the helpers were fired during this pandemic: ranging from arguments over the time helpers were allowed to spend outside the house on their days off, to employers claiming they had lost their jobs or were leaving the city [2], as Hong Kong’s unemployment hit a nine-year high in February with 3.7% of the workforce unemployed [6]. Whatever the case, more helpers are getting fired. For example, just between February 9th and March 25th, the Philippine Consul General Raly Tejada reported that the consulate had assisted 70 displaced Filipino workers, 93% of whom were affected due to the relocation of their employers [24].

Getting fired is a horrible ordeal for many helpers, as they only have 2 weeks, according to the law, to either find a new job or go back to their home countries [13]). This 2 week rule, even without the restrictive conditions of a pandemic, is absurd. This is clear as even the immigration department of Hong Kong acknowledged in a letter to Amnesty International that processing an application for a change of

employer takes “about 4-6 weeks” once all necessary documents are received. This basically forces many workers to leave the territory until the government approves their paperwork [1]. Even if the helpers apply for a visa extension (costing 160HKD per fortnight), the helpers cannot work while they are waiting. Meanwhile, they have to pay for food and shelter, which would put them in debt. This explains why word of mouth from employer to employer is so important to the helpers: as it is virtually impossible to get a new employer through the government, their next employment can only be found through their current employer. This also is why it is very hard for helpers to file a complaint against their employers, as this would ruin their reputation and relationship with their employer, which in turn makes it extremely difficult for the helpers to find new jobs. And even if the helpers decided to seek justice through a labour tribunal case, it takes at least 2 months to get a case processed, which means that it is extremely difficult for helpers to seek justice [1].

Nevertheless, many helpers were usually not affected by this 2 week rule, as it is required by law for their employers to give a month’s notice before terminating any contract, giving them enough time to either look for a plane ticket back home or find new employers [11]. However, because of the pandemic, many helpers were fired due to sudden relocation of their employers: 93% of helpers who were fired between February and March were fired because of the relocation of their employers [24]. This means that it was difficult for the employers to give the legally-mandated one month’s notice. Without this buffer period, it’s almost impossible for the fired helpers to find new jobs, as they are only allowed to stay in Hong Kong for 2 weeks, which is not enough time to find a new employer or get their visa extensions approved [11]. Their only option is to go back to their home country before the 2 weeks period is over, or they will be fined. But finding a plane ticket back to their home country is harder now than before, even more so if their home country is severely affected by the COVID-19 [9].

On top of these problems, helpers also have to deal with their housing situation while unemployed. They either have an option to stay at a hotel, which is too expensive, or at the housing units offered by their agencies. However, the housing units offered by the agencies are often unethically overpriced. They are 80 HKD per night, which is around 10 USD, while they have to buy all their necessities such as food, clothes, toiletries etc. This actually puts a bigger burden on them as they often have to pull money from their savings [20].

The personal stories of how the lives of domestic helpers changed after getting fired displays how discrimination is taking place in Hong Kong. Under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, it is unlawful for employers to terminate contracts with their employees on the grounds of any disability, including infectious diseases. But unions stated they had received dozens of complaints from workers who had been fired after falling ill [14]. An example is of an Indonesian woman named Susanti, who arrived in Hong Kong in late February, but fell ill with stomach problems

soon after starting work in March. Susanti's employer took her to a hospital, where she was tested for the coronavirus. Her test came back negative the next day, but Susanti's employer insisted she be quarantined for two weeks with no pay, then terminated her contract three days later. The employer brought Susanti back to the agency, where she loudly insulted her and called her a pig. Susanti then had to fly back to Indonesia on March 25, with only 600 HKD in cash, as it was nearly impossible for her to find a new employer in 2 weeks, with the raging COVID-19 pandemic. This is just one example of dozens of similar cases that are happening in Hong Kong [17]. They were unjustly fired, and not given the right protections and treatment either. Mission For Migrant Workers—the longest standing charity for domestic helpers—found through a survey that 11-14% of helpers had not received masks or sanitizers from employers [22].

Even though many helpers are mistreated by their employers, they are hesitant to actually lodge a complaint with the Equal Opportunities Commission. Even before the pandemic, writing a complaint about their employers resulted in a very bad reputation for the helpers and made it hard for them to get another job in Hong Kong. This is because the helpers rely heavily on word of mouth to get new jobs. So, if their relationship or reputation is ruined with their employer they cannot find a new job, meaning they would have to go back to their home countries. 80% of people surveyed by the Helpers Union in Hong Kong stated that they have faced discrimination during the pandemic, but did not know that they could even file a complaint with the EOC [14]. Furthermore, amidst the pandemic, the EOC has announced that they will ban all their online complaint forms and only allow complaints filed in person [12]. This is because they realized that their online complaint form was just too confusing for both the helpers and the EOC to deal with. However, this is worse for the helpers, as physically going to the EOC to write their complaints is more time-consuming and inconvenient. On top of that, the limited manpower present at these offices during the pandemic has been an issue as well: 21 workers reported encountering difficulties with government services, such as being unable to file grievances due to limited services at the Labour Tribunal and Labour Department [22].

Because of the immense stress that these workers face, a majority of them will feel as if they are at their wit's end. Recently, a helper actually committed suicide due to the financial and mental stress of the pandemic. In an interview, Lucinda Pike, the executive director of ENRICH, told the story of how this helper felt trapped by this pandemic, and thought that the only way to escape was through suicide. The longer these helpers stay trapped in their employers' homes, barely getting any rest, they can start to have unhealthy thoughts. This can worsen as it seems like the whole society and the government are against them, not getting any help from Hong Kong's government and getting minimal help from the governments of their home countries [20]. Pike states that "when there's a crisis, a lot of people who have

low income get left behind the most." In the case of Hong Kong, that would be the domestic helpers.

RELIEF EFFORTS

Nevertheless, the Hong Kong government is not doing their best to alleviate the challenges that these helpers are facing. Domestic helpers are ineligible for permanent residency in Hong Kong, even after they have lived here for 7 years, which is the minimum someone has to stay to apply for a permanent residency [3]. This means that the helpers are also ineligible to receive the 10,000 HKD relief package that the permanent residents of Hong Kong can get. Many organizations have asked that domestic workers be included in the distribution of the relief packages, but the government refused. In response, the chairwoman of the International Migrants Alliance said, "the government keeps telling us to share the burden, to stay in the house—although that means more work for us—not to meet our friends, and keep Hong Kong safe ... but there are no relief measures that include us." A helper from the Philippines said: "when it comes to relief, we are not even considered as human beings in distress. Is it because in the eyes of the government we are 'not ordinarily residing' in Hong Kong? Will the virus not ordinarily affect us? Why are we being neglected in times of crisis [3]?" This reflects the anger these helpers must feel.

In the absence of governmental assistance, non-profit organizations, like ENRICH and Mission For Migrant Workers (MFMW), have stepped in to alleviate some of the stress that these helpers are feeling. For example, ENRICH has hosted mental awareness seminars through Zoom to help alleviate the anxiety and depression that many helpers are experiencing at the moment. ENRICH has also kept its 1:1 financial counseling sessions going online. Other NGOs in Hong Kong have also distributed masks and other personal protection equipment that have become a necessity for this pandemic. Through their quick actions, these organizations provided some much-needed relief to the helpers.

The Filipino and Indonesian government also provided some relief to these domestic helpers. The two governments have been distributing masks and other personal protective equipment to their citizens in Hong Kong. The Indonesian government has also given out 200 USD relief packages and distributed around 223,320 masks to their helpers as a way to lift some of their financial burdens [24]. The two governments are trying their best to help out the domestic workers, as they play a very vital role in their economies.

LIMITATIONS

Because COVID-19 is an ongoing pandemic, not much academic research has been done on its specific impact, let alone its impact on domestic helpers of Hong Kong. This limits the number of academic sources available. However, using previous research done before the pandemic on domestic helpers and socioeconomic issues that affect them, this paper aimed to analyze the impact of the pandemic and

the helpers' response. This is also why this paper relies heavily on sources from the media, as the stories of the helpers can be useful in providing context to what is happening to the helpers of Hong Kong.

CONCLUSION

To alleviate any unnecessary pain in the most vulnerable population of Hong Kong, the government should be more involved in the issues related to domestic helpers. However, the Hong Kong government has not done an adequate job. For example, the Labour Department, between 2014 and 2015, only secured 10 convictions for overcharging. This included agencies or unlicensed operations, and were fined 1,500 HKD to 45,000 HKD which is only 193 USD to 5,800 USD [21]. Considering there are thousands of unethical agencies in Hong Kong, taking down 10 and barely fining them shows how little the government is doing at the moment. Meanwhile, due to the pandemic, helpers are forced to take out more loans, mainly from unethical agencies. The government should use more of their power to bring down these illegal agencies and money lending companies so that they cannot operate again. This will encourage the domestic workers to choose the few ethical and legal agencies and money lending companies to take out loans. Although the process for lending would take longer, it will ultimately benefit the helpers and the community in the long run, even after the pandemic.

The government can also implement new laws in favor of domestic helpers: it can extend the 2-week time period for helpers to either find a new employer or move back to their home country, and provide shelters for those in between jobs. Extending the grace period to a month or two, and providing public shelters just for this situation, can make all the difference for these domestic workers. Given the longer transition period, the Immigration Department can have time to process these helpers to other employers. It also will allow more time for helpers who have faced discrimination to prepare for Labour Tribunal cases, which will punish those who have been unfair towards their employees, and make sure the same injustice never happens again. With the government funded shelters, they would have less financial stress. It'll also ensure that their shelters are free and clean, as most existing shelters in the city are run by churches and nonprofit groups that lack financial support [3].

The Hong Kong government should also provide private spaces for these helpers to rest on their days off, while socially distancing and abiding by the appropriate laws. To ensure that the helpers abide by the social distancing rules, the Hong Kong government can regulate the admitting process. This can be done as it is currently done in shopping malls, where hundreds of people wearing masks are together in confined places. The helpers would enter these facilities with their temperature checked, and then they would be divided in groups. The Hong Kong government can also benefit from this, as they can test the helpers with higher temperatures for COVID-19.

The NGOs should also continue doing their absolute best to help the lives of these domestic helpers. With the mental health awareness seminars and 1:1 financial counseling sessions, ENRICH not only boosts the morale of the helpers, but also encourages the workers to gain a new skill set. Other NGOs, such as MFMW, have distributed personal protection products to helpers. However, the most effective way to achieve progress is for the general public to have a different mindset towards the helpers. As Eman Villaneuva, a domestic worker and spokesperson for the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body, stated, "If you want to protect your family, you should include your domestic worker.... By leaving one unprotected, you are putting all your family at risk" [5].

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