

Facing many social issues, What is the real life of Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong?

<https://siyuanc214.wixsite.com/my-site-2>

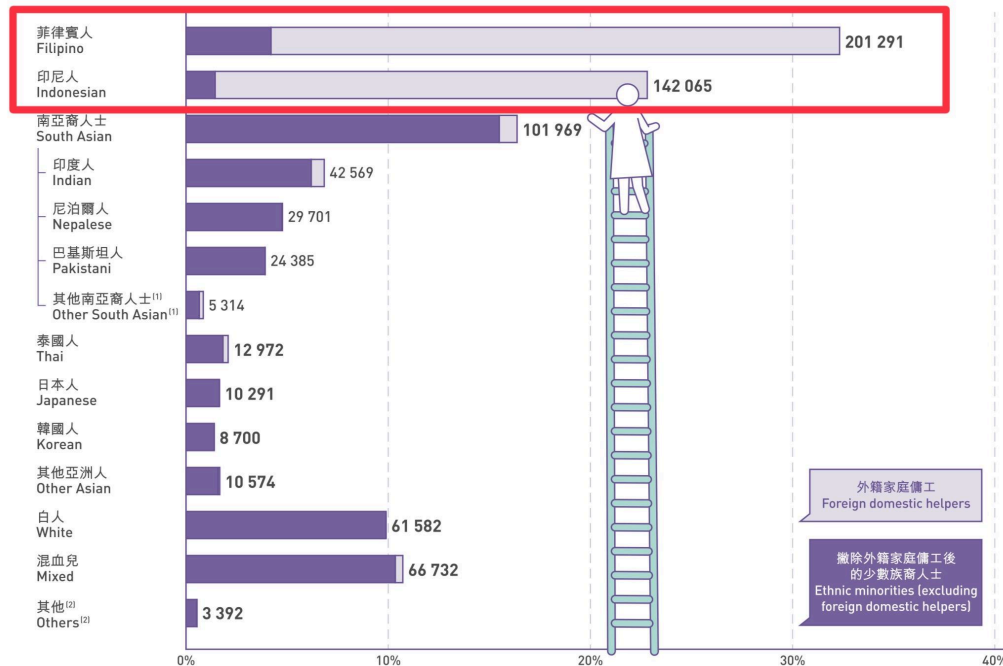


*Foreign domestic helpers on their day off in Mong Kok
Photo: Siyuan CAO (November 24, 2024)*

On September 27, 2024, the Government announced a 2.5% pay raise of the Minimum Allowable Wage for foreign domestic helpers. This raise shed light on the economic situation of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, already criticised by several Non governmental organisations.

Considering that, in 2021, ethnic minorities' population had increased by 37% since the past 10 years and that foreign domestic helpers make up for more than half of it , they are a non-negligible component of the society.

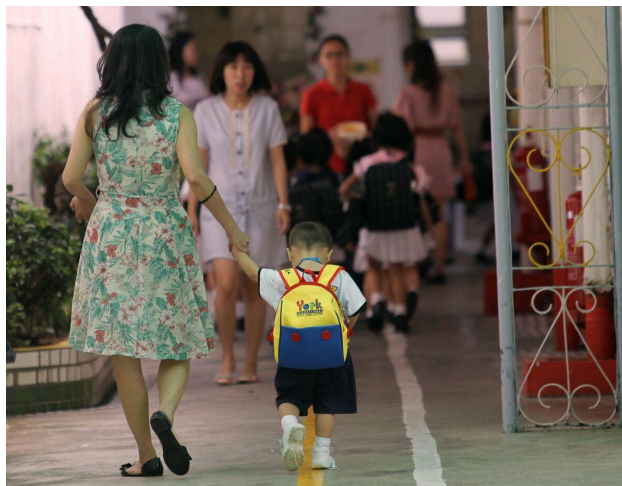
02 2021 年少數族裔人口 — 主要族羣 Population of ethnic minorities – the major ethnic groups, 2021



Source: https://www.census2021.gov.hk/doc/pub/21C_Articles_Ethnic_Minorities.pdf

Foreign domestic helpers are women coming from South East Asia, mainly from the Philippines and Indonesia (above graph). They came to Hong Kong bearing the hope for a better life. “I will get a life and get new knowledge because I meet many people, get a new culture and get a lot of experience,” says Ayu, a foreign domestic helper from Indonesia. They are usually employed by families so that they can take care of children and of household chores.

The need for foreign domestic helpers can be also linked today to the really tense network of kindergartens. Hong Kong has around 1009 kindergartens, with 88.4% of attendance rate for children between three and five years old (in 2021).



Source: Bloomberg

The price varies depending on the kindergarten and parents' revenue, but some kindergartens can be quite costly. As for the waiting list, some popular and international kindergartens can have very limited spots, even interviewing the child. This means that in addition to the costs, long waiting lists and selective kindergartens can make it difficult for parents to enroll their children in their place of preference.

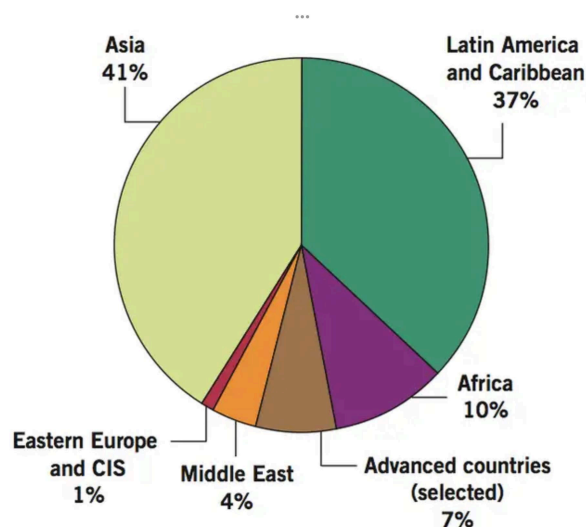
Helpers allow to balance work and family, not being restricted by the school's schedules. They are essential, however, their living and work conditions are a sensitive subject that can be quite concerning. Non Governmental organisations, such as “HELP for domestic workers” or “Justice Centre”, have worked to empower and support them how they could.

The History of Foreign Domestic Helpers Employment

The first domestic helpers came from the Philippines in the late 1970s and early 1980s. On one hand, the Philippines had a poor economy and the President Ferdinand Carlos encouraged the export of the labour force overseas. On the other hand, Hong Kong significantly developed economically, leading to a significant increase of female employment. Families needed help with taking care of children and the household, having now two working parents.

It was in the 1990s that domestic helpers came from Indonesia and Thailand. Since then, the number of foreign domestic helpers has significantly increased and it is now a common practice.

Hong Kong has a particularly high number of helpers, but it is not the only place. Singapore and Taiwan are also attractive destinations in Asia, while other regions, such as the Caribbean and Africa, are familiar with the practice as well.



Estimates of the world's distribution of domestic workers as of 2010.

Source: International Labour Organization

It is around the 2010s that human rights organisations started to pay attention to the situation in Hong Kong. Between 2013 and 2015, several cases focused the attention on the working conditions of the helpers, and the terms of “modern slavery” began to be used.

The case of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih exposed the many abuses happening in this working sphere. The death of Elis Kurniasih in 2015, waiting for her work visa, showed the limitations and issues of Hong Kong’s regulations. Today’ system has not been subject to many amendments, leaving those women in what have been defined as “systemic exploitation”.



Source: Agence France-Presse

The Life of A Foreign Domestic Helper in Hong Kong

Ayu, 24, is a member of the Southeast Asian community who came to Hong Kong to find a helper job.

“One of the reasons I became a migrant worker was the limited economic opportunities in my country, there were not many jobs available, making it difficult for me to help the family economy, I [wanted] to get rid of my troubles.” Ayu said with a sign.

Salary policy: how much is an helper paid for 6 days of work per week ?

Ayu's salary is stable at HK\$4,730. When mentioning the Minimum Allowable Wage rising policy, Ayu indicated that she thought the current salary increase really helps workers get more money to send to their families, because in Indonesia the raw materials are getting expensive.

“I feel that my salary is enough to help my daily needs, sometimes the employer gives me 200\$ per day overtime and that's very enough, because many of my friends get less than 200\$ and some even work overtime but are not paid by the employer.”

Ayu uses her salary to buy daily necessities such as snacks, shower gel, etc. She sends the remaining money back to her parents every month.

Daily life in Hong Kong, the unbalance of this work life

On weekdays she lives in a separate room set up for her by her employer. Outside of her room is a place to hang clothes, since the employer had a big family, 9 of them (excluding Ayu) living together. It is a bit difficult to walk into her room.

The bedroom is tiny, just a single size bed, a wardrobe and cabinet, and can only stand one or two people. No air conditioner but a fan, it's cool enough for the summer but too cold in the winter.



Ayu's bedroom

Source: Kwan Wai Ying (November 25, 2024)

On their day off, helpers are used to meeting with their friends and enjoy their day in public spaces. While walking the streets of Hong Kong on a Sunday, you will most probably see groups of women talking lively, playing cards, eating, putting makeup on... This is the one time of the week when they can completely rest and forget about work.



Foreign domestic helpers on their day off in Wanchai
Photo: Talilah Mimoun (November 24, 2024)

It was Ayu's first housekeeper job, and she used to be afraid of getting a fierce employer. Ayu recalled "Though I'm lacking in many things, they never get angry, berate, they never get tired of teaching many things."

It can be seen that even though her salary is not high and they live in a small room, for Ayu who came from Indonesia, such a life already makes her feel satisfied.

Challenges faced by foreign domestic helpers

According to a 2018 report, foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong have significantly contributed to the economy by creating a labor value of HKD 71.2 billion, while simultaneously freeing up HKD 20.1 billion in local female labor. Despite these contributions, a study by the Population Migration and Mobility Research Centre at The Chinese University of Hong Kong reveals that most foreign domestic workers work 13 to 16 hours a day without the benefit of annual leave.

Health issues, from the mind to the body

"I work for 6 days and 1 day when I'm off, I walk to rest, eat and meet friends." explained Ayu.

Dr. Chang, a psychologist, highlighted the mental health issues faced by many foreign domestic helpers. She explained that due to the lack of personal privacy and the intense pressure from long working hours, 13-16 hours of work already far exceeds normal human health loads, and many workers experience anxiety and depression. Unfortunately, these mental health challenges often go untreated, as foreign workers rarely seek therapy.



NGO “MSF” trains foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong for psychosocial support

Photo: <https://www.imi.com.hk/msf-trains-foreign-domestic-helpers-in-hk-psychosocial-support>

Language barriers, another struggle?

Dr. Chang also pointed out that language barriers and cultural differences make it difficult for many foreign domestic workers to access adequate social support, further exacerbating their mental health struggles.

In daily life, Ayu has some problems communicating as she has not had the opportunity to learn English and Cantonese.

“When communicating I sometimes still have to use the translate from the phone, in order to understand what is being talked about, even though sometimes there is a miscommunication.” Ayu shared her experiences in detail.

Same as Ayu, many of these domestic helpers who came to Hong Kong continue to face language barriers in their daily lives, they cannot speak fluent English and cannot understand the Cantonese spoken by the locals.

The language problem makes it more challenging for some of them to integrate into Hong Kong society.

The impact of these issues can, in some cases, affect their work performance, leading to dismissal. The situation underscores the need for better mental health support and labor protections for foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Hopefully, Ayu is the lucky one, even though there is sometimes a language barrier, her employers always communicate with her patiently and teach her how to do things.

Labor protection still needs to be strengthened

Although Hong Kong has some labor protections in place for foreign domestic workers, such as regulations on working hours and minimum wage, enforcement remains a challenge. Workers often face long working hours, low pay, and limited rest time. Policies like the "Two-Week Rule" (which requires workers to leave the country if they lose their job) can exacerbate their vulnerability, leaving them with fewer rights and options when they experience abuse or violations.

In cases where foreign domestic workers commit serious offenses, such as theft or negligence, employers can file complaints with the Immigration Department. However, Professor Chan Ka-lok from Hong Kong Baptist University suggests that when employers violate the rights of foreign domestic workers—such as withholding wages, forcing overtime, or engaging in sexual abuse—those incidents should also be documented. This helps prevent workers from being unknowingly employed under exploitative conditions.



Protest against racism and discrimination in Central (May 27, 2018)

Photo: Winson Wong, SCMP

The ambiguous position of the government and the engagement of NGOs

The Hong Kong Government passed several laws and regulations related to FDH. Employers must abide by the Employment Ordinance as well as the Employment Agency Regulations, make a standard contract of 2 years, and since 2003 the helper is required to be live-in.

The 2.5% raise, meaning going from a minimum wage of 4,870HKD to 4,990HKD monthly. This raise is in fact an adjustment due to the past years' general economic and labour market conditions and the near-term economic outlook.

Mr Godfrey Wong, commissioner for labour, explained by email to our reporter that “during the review, the Government consulted representatives from organisations representing FDHs and FDH employers, ensuring their perspectives were duly considered in the decision-making process.” This initiative would not increase the living conditions of helpers, but maintain it and anticipate higher living costs.

Several NGOs and organisations have denounced human rights issues and discrimination against foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong by employers and the government. The immigration ordinance refuses the access to permanent residency specifically for FDH, while the two-week rule is applicable only to them. Two committees of the United Nations have condemned this later rule.

Foreign domestic helpers are suffering from abuse and are faced with time-consuming and expensive procedures when trying to protect themselves. Amnesty International reported several times the concerning situation in Hong Kong for FDH. The issues highlighted are going from confiscation of travel documents to lack of privacy, underpayment, “on call” at all hours.

More than 25% of helpers have experienced physical or verbal abuse. 25% of them have experienced violations of their contract. It seems that the existing legislation is not enough to ensure the respect of foreign domestic helpers' human rights.



Program to support FDH by NGO “Help for domestic workers”

Photo: <https://helpfordomesticworkers.org/>

A demand for change

As it said, even if they are foreign domestic workers who come to Hong Kong, their needs also have to be recognized. There is a hope that in the future the Hong Kong government and NGOs can introduce more policies to help improve the quality of life in Hong Kong.

The 2.5% raise was better than nothing, however the international community, experts and some Hong Kongers are calling for change and for the government to be proactive in addressing the issue.

“Everyone is born equally. People of any race can thrive, shine and succeed.” a NGO named Christian Action, held these beliefs to help those ethnic minorities in Hong Kong.

Names and tasks:

21251967 CAO Siyuan:

- Build up the whole structure of the article
- Organize the information from Ayu's interview and Wrote the part of "The Life of A Foreign Domestic Helper in Hong Kong" and "*Language barriers*" Powerful quote
- Responsible for web design and web building
- Wrote down Podcast transcript for each person
- Edited podcast
- Search useful data and make charts
- Sending interview invitation email to the agencies and NGOs
- Take photos of domestic helper in Mong Kok

21251312 LI Yiyang:

- Interview two sociologists studying the subject of FDHs
- Interview a psychologist studying the subject of FDHs
- Wrote about the part of the story about the experts.
- Searched for data
- Email the interviewer

23224096 MIMOUN Talilah Rachel:

- Wrote the nut graf, historical background, Government and NGOs roles
- Took some photos of helpers in Central and Wan Chai and find other pictures from the internet
- Searched for some statistics and graphs
- Responsible for reaching out to government representatives
- Interview by email of Mr Godfrey Wong, commissioner for labour
- Sent email to agencies
- Helped organise the article parts

23202262 Kwan Wai Ying:

- Assists CAO Siyuan in writing part 'The Life of A Foreign Domestic Helper in Hong Kong'
- Interviewed the domestic helper on-site (Ayu)
- Recorded interview
- Edited interview video
- Took the picture of the interviewee
- Edited podcast
- Sent messages and calls to agencies requesting interviews
- Integrate data and make charts
- Assist web building