

**EOC Files (June 2021)**

## **More than gratitude, Hong Kong's foreign domestic workers are due respect**

**By Mr Ricky CHU Man-kin, EOC Chairperson**

Today is International Domestic Workers Day. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted ILO Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers in 2011 and 16 June marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this convention.

It is an opportune time for us to show our gratitude to the foreign domestic workers for their immense contribution towards the well-being and prosperity of Hong Kong and its families. The more than 370,000 migrant domestic workers here contribute to Hong Kong directly and indirectly. An estimation in a 2019 report by Experian, a global information services company, in partnership with the charity Enrich, put their contribution to the city's economy at \$98.9 billion (US\$12.7 billion), or 3.6% of local GDP. It also inferred that only 49% of Hong Kong's mothers aged 25 to 54 could participate in the labour market if they did not employ migrant domestic workers as against 78% if they did.

This may also be a good time to remind ourselves of the working conditions to which these migrant workers are entitled. Domestic workers are employees, just like everyone else with a job. The law recognises this, with the Employment Ordinance and labour laws being fully applicable to foreign workers and their employers. By extension, their workplace is someone's home. Just as certain norms, such as privacy, defined working hours and time off, dictate the treatment of office staff, for example, the same norms must apply to those working in a home, no matter the nature of work.

Further, employers in any workplace bear responsibility for their employees, and it is no different with domestic work. It is the employer's responsibility to ensure the well-being of their domestic workers. Being away from family and loved ones is a sacrifice they make to have better prospects. Many are mothers who leave behind their young children. This can take a toll on their emotional well-being, especially now when travel is restricted. While most employers in Hong Kong are mindful of their obligations, the question is whether more needs to be done for these workers.

I worry most about the risk of stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice this group of workers faces. The vulnerability is on several levels – gender, race and perceived socio-economic status.

The nature of domestic work and the fact that their workplace is also their home makes domestic workers vulnerable to sexual harassment. In a 2014 Equal Opportunities Commission survey, 6.5% of the respondents reported that they had been sexually harassed at work or at a work-related event in the 12 months prior to the survey.

Discrimination arising from sickness is also seen among domestic workers. Having medical consultation in working days is always a struggle to some helpers, and termination of employment upon discovery of sickness is not uncommon. More than a few were fired after becoming sick with illness that were treatable in a reasonable length of time. It must be remembered that domestic workers are eligible for healthcare only as long as they have a valid work visa. Termination upon sickness leaves them without access to public health care.

Race combined with a perceived lower socio-economic status arising from society's diminished view of domestic work appears to be another common ground for casual discrimination and prejudice against domestic workers. We often hear of helpers not being allowed into certain venues or being subjected to additional scrutiny while shopping. Attitudinal shifts can only take place through education and awareness. It is important this begins in early life, before biases take root. We must instil in students the concepts of equality and inclusion which can then translate into thought, behaviour and action.

It is hard to fathom why those engaged in formally contracted domestic work are sometimes not accorded the same status as other workers. I would like to address those who have it in their hands to make things better for our domestic helpers - the employers. Let us show the world that Hong Kong is a fair and equal place with no room for discrimination. It is up to us to change the perception. A city that has come up through hard work and enterprise must exemplify its respect for all labour, no matter where that work is or who performs that work.

(Note: The article was published on [SCMP](#) and [The Sun](#) on 16 June 2021.)