

## Domestic Workers: The Faces of Modern-Day Slavery

By: Kiana Hobbs

Last Sunday, I set out on a quest to understand more about domestic workers' experiences in Hong Kong. Geared with a pen and paper, I headed to a nearby park prepared to hear tiny tales of frustrations or complaints. But instead, I heard slavery and the stories about forms of enslavement.

The word slavery presented itself more than once when domestic workers spoke about their experiences. Slavery, but with a modern twist where there are no longer chains and whips, but instead, visas and paychecks. Through listening to domestic workers' stories and paralleling them with the definition of slavery, it is evident that the treatment of domestic workers is modern-day slavery.

Due to unemployment, low salaries, and a lack of opportunities, many Filipinos migrate to Hong Kong to work as domestic workers. Charged with responsibilities dictated by their employers ranging from cleaning to childcare to cooking, domestic workers live in their employers' home and maintain order and cleanliness. Just like a live-in nanny, right? Well, yes (sometimes). Some domestic workers are "lucky". Their employers treat them with dignity and respect and the workers have few to little unpleasant experiences. Beautifully so, one domestic worker reported that in her 3 years as a worker, she has never had a negative experience, nor does she feel restricted by her employer.

Unfortunately, that is not the case for all domestic workers; actually, according to Sherly, a domestic worker for 21 years, it's more of a 30% - 50% likelihood that you would have a "good" employer. For those with a "bad" employer, it means possible hungry nights, sleeping on the floor, unreasonable work hours, and feeling like you have no voice or rights. In speaking about the subject, Moon, a Filipina domestic worker, stated, "...some go without foods, sometimes not enough. And, not enough sleep, and, on the holiday, they ask them to work first before they go out and they have the time to go home, as well. If you were late, the employer would not like that." Enforcing a curfew is one thing, but the act of denying a domestic worker the ability to fulfill their basic needs like eating or sleeping goes beyond just having a terrible boss, it instead, enters the realm of dictating ownership over someone's life, like slavery.

However, I soon learned that the characteristics of enslavement do not stop there. Domestic workers are constantly at the mercy of their employers. They have minimum input in determining the fate of their employment. Employers can use any reason or minor infraction to



Figure 1: from left to right: Raquel, Lenie, Kiana, Sherly, Ah'Sayiah, Moon

cause workers to be stripped of their work visa and deported back to their homeland. Raquel, who initiated the use of the term modern slavery in our conversation, summed up this policy as, “Just one click of our employer’s hands and we can just say bye.” It’s imperative to know that most domestic workers do not choose to enroll in labor migration for fun; they sacrifice time with their families and homeland to provide for their loved ones and fight against poverty. That Sunday, I gave some domestic workers the option to write down any reactions they had to their situation and one domestic worker wrote, “I came here to support my family and save a bit of money. It’s so hard to leave our family. Sometimes, we feel bad about why we do this. But this is for our future.” Hence, the power that employers have make the threat of being sent back even more terrifying and malicious. By dangling this threat over the heads of domestic workers, employers maintain control over their helper’s life entangling them a web of enslavement.

The acts of degradation and restriction described above puts domestic workers in a constant state of uncertainty. Uncertainty about whether it would be a good or bad workday, or about if they would be employed next week or, even, tomorrow. To this, Raquel stated, “Here in Hong Kong we don’t know what will happen next.” This uncertainty forces domestic workers to obey all their employers’ commands out of fear of repercussions. As these accounts make clear, the experiences of domestic workers parallel those present within slavery.

Slavery is identified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as “an element of ownership or control over another’s life, coercion and the restriction of movement and by the fact that someone is not free to leave or to change an employer.” Modern slavery takes on the same elements of past slavery, but with variations.

The correlation between the first part of the definition “an element of ownership or control over another’s life” and the conditions of domestic workers is clear. Like slave owners, employers dictate when and what domestic workers eat, sleep, and more. Hence, taking ownership over a domestic workers ability to even fulfill basic needs, and likely more. Moreover, the “coercion” element of the slavery definition is apparent in how employers manipulate the vulnerable position of domestic workers to dictate their lives. Regarding restricted movement, 6 days out of the week, domestic workers in Hong Kong are under the surveillance of the employers. Their movement and freedoms are confined to only their employers’ allowance. While domestic workers are not physically in chains, the demands and restrictions of their employers bind them.

The slavery definition concludes with the line “someone is not free to leave or to change an employer”. With little ability to influence their circumstance, attempting to change an employer generally leads to unemployment for domestic workers. And what does it really mean for a domestic worker to leave? The Philippines economy makes leaving an employer more of a decision to either endure working conditions or possibly hurt one’s family. As written by one Filipina worker, “Our family needs us to help them.” The decision to stay is not made from joy or willingness, but instead, out of necessity. Consequently, with so much pressure mounting behind such a decision, it is easy to see what little choice domestic workers have in the matter.

Beyond the definition of slavery, one key parallel between slaves and domestic workers is their societal position. Glecil, a domestic worker of 9 years, shared, “Being a domestic worker is

being at the lowest level of society.” Like slaves, governments and employers reduce domestic workers to simply their services. In Hong Kong, they are not even deemed worthy of citizenship by the government on the basis that they are only present to work. In response to this policy, Sherly noted how she has been working for about 21 years, yet her visa still reads “domestic worker”. “Ordinary citizens” can apply to be a permanent resident of Hong Kong after seven years of residency, but domestic workers cannot. And this characteristic of “other” within a society is a prominent identity of slaves.

Now that we know that the treatment of domestic workers is a form of modern-day slavery, what needs to change for this system to not be considered as slavery? A shift in the mindsets of those involved. A shift that could occur through the implementation of governmental protections for domestic workers, which would show to those involved in the labor migration process that domestic workers are valued and cared for. If domestic workers were not perceived nor treated as being less than, we would not see the issue of a casual system of labor migration turning into a slavery chain. This shift in mindset will lead to better working conditions, fairer treatment, residency policy changes, and the recognition of domestic workers as human beings. Glecil referred to her situation with, “Don’t have the right to be human.” And this should not be the case! Recognition of domestic workers as humans, before workers is key to ending the system of modern slavery.