

Working blues

by Amelia Loi, Cecilia Chan and Tanna Chong

Despite having an unfavourable nickname, “*Ab-cha*”, Maggie Cheung, a student from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, regards herself as a “Hong Konger”.

Cheung’s biological parents are Pakistanis, but they left Hong Kong just after her birth due to the mother’s illegal residence status in Hong Kong. She was then sent to the Social Welfare Department, and was later adopted and raised by a local family.

Growing up in Hong Kong, she wondered why others always teased her. “Even my mum told me that I belong to Hong Kong,” said Cheung.

“*Ab-cha*” is a nickname referring to people with South Asian origins and having darker complexion.

“When people call me *‘Ab-cha’*, they may not consider that offensive, as everyone uses this term,” said Cheung. She recalled that once her secondary school classmates associated her with Osama Bin Laden. “I was really hurt. At that time, I tried hard to be friends with them and to stop them from using these mean words,” she said.

Speaking fluent Chinese, Cheung, however, was favourable when applying for a sales position in a retail clothing chain, although many of her friends could not find a job mainly because of their poor spoken Chinese. Her attempt in the summer holiday after Form Seven failed because of her Pakistani appearance, she said.

“He (the interviewer) did not bring up the matter directly himself,” she said. “He just told me that even he thought of speaking English to me when he first saw me.” The interviewer then asked if she had confidence in convincing the customers that they do not need to speak English with her.

Though she had told him that she could take the initiative by speaking Cantonese first, the interviewer did not seem satisfied. He eventually rejected Cheung’s application as he thought that it was impossible to explain her proficiency in Chinese to every customers.

“It is discouraging,” the sports science and physical education major added, “as this was just a summer job. What would happen when I want to get a permanent job after graduation?”



DAPHNEY TAI

Josefina Garcia has been working as a domestic helper in Hong Kong for over 18 years.

Bothered by similar problems, Eric Lal Rajesh, 28, has been asking his colleagues to call him by his name instead of the annoying nickname.

“But they just like to call me ‘*Abcha*,’” he said. He said the people he comes across every day often turned a deaf ear to him even when he talked to them in Cantonese.

As the only breadwinner in the family, the Indian-born construction worker said that he often experienced unfair treatment because he was not Chinese. However, Lal Rajesh only wants to get on with his current job.

His supervisor gave all the tough work to him and another three Pakistani co-workers, while easier jobs go to the locals. “They even order us non-locals to do harsh jobs like drilling even though Hong Kong workers possess the same skill,” he said, “They would swear at us and even threaten to fire us if we complain.”

Since his two brothers had died, he could not afford to lose the job as he is the only man in the family to take over the responsibility of raising five children.

Leodegaria Garcia Jumarang, a 56-year-old domestic helper in a family in Ma On Shan, said many of her friends are ill-treated by their employers. She knew an Indonesian maid, who was once working in her neighborhood, was not given food sometimes and was forced to sleep in the kitchen.

“She did not complain, she just would not renew the contract with the employer,” she said. Even so, the Indonesian maid had worked for the employer for two years and remained silent, according to Mrs Jumarang.

However, this case is just the tip of the iceberg. Throughout her seventeen years in Hong Kong, Mrs Jumarang said that many of her friends were hurt by their employers. “Maybe

the employers have had an unhappy time at work and then release their anger on their domestic helpers,” she explained. Eventually, many helpers just left and worked in other cities.

Still, many of them who remain in Hong Kong suffer from discrimination by their employers. She said: “I always advised my friends that ‘as long as you are in the right, don’t be afraid of them.’”

For those who were discriminated against, she would advise them to fight so as to defend for themselves. “That’s why some people do not like (to hire) Filipinas,” she said. “Because we know how to fight for our rights.”

However, Mrs Jumarang has also suffered from discrimination.

The daily routines of domestic helpers include buying food and groceries for the family. Mrs Jumarang said when she was new to Hong Kong, hawkers in the market did not like her to be picky when buying vegetables, though it is natural for customers to choose better ones to buy.

“They get angry with us easily,” she said. Despite the fact that she was not treated well, she still needed to buy vegetables from the market.

Mrs Jumarang’s younger sister, Josefina Garcia, was once scolded for no reason when buying food at a market in Kowloon. “They (hawkers) asked me to go away from the stall and they shouted ‘Go back to the Philippines!’ at me,” the 50-year-old domestic helper recalled something that happened almost 18 years ago, when she had just started to work in Hong Kong.

There was another time when she was queuing to the cashier at a supermarket and a woman behind her pushed her trolley onto her ankle three times without reason. “I asked her why (she did that), she said (that was) because I am a Filipina,” said Ms Garcia. “I guess she didn’t want me

to queue in front of her,” she added. “Filipinas are also human beings!” she retorted and the middle-aged woman just stared at her angrily.

Compared to 18 years ago, she felt less discrimination these days. “I haven’t experienced any discrimination in the past few years,” she said. “Though others still prefer not to sit beside us on the bus.”

In spite of what the sisters had gone through, both of them like Hong Kong. “It is like my second home,” said the elder sister and she is now a friend of all hawkers in the market of her neighbourhood.

Sam Chan Wai-yip, the owner of Kam Kiu Medicine Company, which is situated in Kwai Hing and at least one in 10 pedestrians there is South Asian, agreed that the problem of discrimination has been improving even without the implementation of the Racial Discrimination Bill.

Echoing with the Filipinas’ opinion, he said that the ethnic minorities have been blending into our community. “None of my colleagues would view them differently. We take those Pakistanis and Nepalese as friends, let alone providing service for them,” with about 20 to 30 per cent of his customers belonging to the minor ethnic groups, Mr Chan added.

“I don’t think race discrimination in Hong Kong is severe. Most of the people here hold open attitudes towards non-Chinese. It’s nothing special about ethnic minorities,” sitting in the playground of CNEC Tai Tung School after sending her primary one daughter to class, Yip Lai-wa, a housewife, told *Varsity* reporter her opinion.

Ms Yip said: “I have never taught my little daughter on how to get along with people of different races. But even a six-year-old kid like her knows how to respect them.”