

Where Are You, Mum?

by Winsome Tse and Herman Wong

For every Hong Kong family employing a foreign domestic helper, there is a family in a foreign country left behind.

“Every time when I called my son, I would say to him ‘I miss you a lot,’” said Donna A. Grecia, a 38-year-old Filipino maid, who has been working in Hong Kong for 14 years.

“My family needs me to work abroad to support them with money. That is the only reason why I came and stayed here for such a long time,” added Ms Grecia, “Women are less likely to have a job back in the Philippines.”

Ms Grecia came to Hong Kong because she can earn much more money here than in the Philippines. She came so she could support her family financially, especially to pay the tuition fees of her brothers and her son.

Like many other domestic helpers, Ms Grecia could only get to go home for around two weeks every two years because of the terms of her contract. She finds there is not enough time to maintain good family ties.

“I call my son every day. This may not be the best way of communication, but this is the only way I can keep contact with my son and family,” said Ms Grecia.

By the end of April 2007, there were 237,538 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, according to the Immigration Department. Half of them are Filipinos, and another 45 per cent of them are Indonesians.

Rina H. Suharto is a 32-year-old Indonesian divorcee who works in Hong Kong. She has a son who is still studying in secondary school and needs her support.



She has remarried, but has so far rejected her new husband's plea to return home and have babies with him.

"What you earn here in a day equals what you earn in Indonesia for three days," she said.

After working in Hong Kong for six years, she owns a house and a car in her native country.

But there is a downside to the financial rewards. As domestic helpers are away from their homes all the time, they could find it hard to bond with their children.

"It's hard. But you know, you've got to sacrifice; you should have known it before you leave."

"For the first week, their children may not recognise them. They may call them 'Dida' (which means 'Auntie' in Filipino). For the second week, their relationship starts to get closer. The children are willing to hug them, call them mum, but by that time, they have to leave the country again," said Edwina A. Antonio, the executive director of Bethune House, an organisation that provides emergency relief for distressed Asian migrants.

Miss Antonio said it is easy for the children of foreign domestic workers to go off the rails due to a lack of parental guidance. When maids go home, they may find their children involved in drugs or kicked out of school. Seeing the changes that have taken place while maids are away could be the hardest pill to swallow when they are home.

Maids also have to deal with huge strains on their marriages. Ms Grecia was actually one of the cases. She has a broken marriage to show for it. Her husband found another woman after she came to Hong Kong. Still, she is stoical.

"It's hard. But you know, you've got to sacrifice; you should have known it before you leave," she said.

According to the Hong Kong 2006 Population By-census, 94.5 per cent of the Filipino nationals in Hong Kong are female. For Indonesians, the figure is 87 per cent. In both cases, the majority of them work as domestic helpers in Hong Kong.

The figures also show that the divorce and separation rates among Filipinos and Indonesians in Hong Kong shoot up as they stay longer in the city. For instance, the divorce and separation rate for Filipinas who have been staying in Hong Kong for less than one year is 2.42 per cent. But for those who have been staying here for more than 10 years, the divorce and separation rate jumps to 4.42 per cent.

Similarly, Indonesians who have been staying in Hong Kong for more than 10 years are around three times more likely to be divorced or separated than those who have been here for less than one year.

Miss Antonio said it is important to educate both maids and their families. Children and husbands should be helped to understand that maids working overseas do not have an easy time, and that maids were doing so in order to provide money for their families. She thinks this could motivate their children to perform better in school and persuade their husbands to take more responsibility in caring for the children at home.

"Maids in Hong Kong have to be educated as well. They have to know what is happening in their own country so that when they go back, they will know the condition of their country and adapt better to the changes," added Miss Antonio.

Despite the sacrifices they make, not all foreign domestic helpers can buy houses and cars in their home countries after working in Hong Kong for a few years. Some even find themselves in deep financial trouble.

"Every time when he owes people money, he turns to me... I'm used to it already, I'm numbed."

Manila C. Puti, a 43-year-old Filipino maid, found herself in debt because of her husband's gambling habit in the Philippines.

"He thinks that I must help him, so he keeps gambling again and again. Every time when he owes people money, he turns to me," Mrs Puti said, "I am used to it already, I'm numbed."

She ended up borrowing HK\$100,000 from moneylenders in Hong Kong. Recently, they threatened to contact her employer unless she paid off her debts. She is now living in fear as she thinks it may cause her boss trouble, ruining their relationship. Then, she would have to return to the Philippines.

"Some husbands find it easy to ask for money from their wives. But she gave them every penny she has earned already. If the family still asks

for further financial aid, the women have no choice but to turn to lenders," said Cynthia Ca Abdon-Tellez, the director of Mission for Migrant Workers Hong Kong.

And there is no shortage of lenders. Miss Tellez said that the third and fourth floor of the World Wide Plaza in Central were full of them. "If you walk into that place, I am sure more than half of the domestic helpers there have debt on them," she said.

Professor Chang Chak-yan, an adjunct professor at the Department of Government and Public Administration in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who specialises in the politics of Southeast Asia, said the Philippines government needs to do more to address the social problems arising from exporting citizens as migrant labour – a policy pursued by Manila.

"They have a policy to send them out but they don't have anything assuring the appropriate rights and treatments for them. It is actually an international problem as Filipinos work in many places.

The government should pay more attention to it," he said.

Professor Chang said foreign domestic helpers often feel helpless and have to deal with red tape and fees and charges from the migrant agencies that process their applications.

In order to relieve the maids' stress, Miss Antonio, the executive director of Bethune House, has some suggestions for their employers. "Firstly, (have) good communication between employers and employees; secondly, respect the rights of the employees based on the contract, and lastly treat them as human beings rather than slaves." ▽



Many maids come to Hong Kong to earn a better living. Rina H. Suharto uses her money earned in Hong Kong to buy a car in her home country.

COURTESY OF RINA H. SUHARTO

For those who come to Hong Kong for less than a year:

	The Philippines	Indonesia
Number of females who are divorced	278	240
Number of females who are separated	50	60
Total number of females	13573	16202
Divorce and Separation Rate	2.42%	1.85%

For those who come to Hong Kong for more than 10 years:

	The Philippines	Indonesia
Number of females who are divorced	989	1616
Number of females who are separated	521	198
Total number of females	34137	29877
Divorce and Separation Rate	4.42%	6.07%

Total Divorce and Separation Rates of Females in Hong Kong in 2006 (The Philippines and Indonesia)

	The Philippines	Indonesia
Divorce and Separation Rate	3.56%	3.60%

Source: Hong Kong 2006 Population By-census, Census and Statistics Department



Donna A. Grecia keeps a family picture in her wallet so that she can always "be with her family".

COURTESY OF DONNA A. GRECIA