

Why domestic workers are the unsung heroes of Hong Kong's coronavirus crisis

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As the world is gripped by the COVID-19 outbreak, there is an outpouring of gratitude for frontline medical workers who risk their health and safety to treat patients. Overdue credit has also been given to truck drivers and grocery store workers who put in long hours to meet the increased demand for food and daily supplies.

In Hong Kong, the contribution of the roughly **400,000 foreign domestic workers, a vast majority of them from the Philippines and Indonesia, has gone largely unrecognised**. Their workload has surged since the outbreak began in January.

They care for **young children** when schools are closed, tend to the **elderly** who are most vulnerable to the disease, and protect the household by **sanitising and sterilising** every nook and cranny.

What's more, the growing list of duties must be performed **under the watchful eye of employers who are now working from home and can monitor your every move**. To get an idea of what that feels like, imagine your boss sitting next to you in your office cubicle, breathing down your neck and staring at your computer screen all day long.

The call for social distancing means domestic workers are increasingly expected or even ordered to forfeit their **Sundays**—the only day of the week when they are free from confinement and can stay in their room, if they have a room. Those who don't have the luxury of privacy and space must make do with their smartphones as the only window to the outside world.

Furthermore, the government's strict live-in rules, which require domestic workers to live in the same home as their employers, means workers have **nowhere to go if someone in the household falls sick or needs to be home-quarantined** after returning from abroad. The law compels them to bear the risk of infection.

To take a closer look at the many hardships endured by migrant workers during the pandemic, I spoke to a dozen Philippine domestic workers via Facebook video call last week.

Their responses, which have been edited for clarity, ranged from deep anxiety and mental exhaustion to quiet acceptance and heartfelt gratitude. Many are grateful that they and their employers still have a job, at least for the time being, so both can provide for their respective families.

Lhotzky

A native of the island province of Marinduque in the **Philippines**, Lhotzky has been in Hong Kong for 14 years working for the same local family. She and her employers live in Baguio Villas in Pokfulam, where there have been at least two confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Lhotzky's daily routine has changed significantly since the outbreak began.

"Sir and ma'am (male and female bosses) are home every day and their mere presence keeps me

busy. I'm constantly doing laundry and deep-cleaning the flat, especially after they come home from outside.

"I feel the pressure to work all the time because I'm being watched. I have less time to take breaks during the day or do my online learning at night."

Before the outbreak, Lhotzky used to take online courses to improve her computer literacy. She doesn't have time for that any more.

"But I consider myself fortunate. Sir and ma'am respect my private time on Sundays, which I spend in my room because I don't want to go out and risk my health. Some of my friends aren't as lucky—they have to work seven days a week.

"Their employers pay them an extra HK\$150 to HK\$200 [18 to 24 euros] each week to work on Sundays.

My friends take the money not because they want to work—most of them would rather have a day off. But knowing that they'll end up working anyway if they stay home, they may as well get paid for it."

Lhotzky said employers' behaviour and attitudes have also changed in the past months. *"I have nice bosses but that's not always the case for my friends. Since the outbreak began, some employers have become moody and irritable.*

"There're just too many people in a small space. They get upset over little things like how much bleach to use and how many times surfaces should be wiped down. A friend joked on WhatsApp that she'd die from the smell of chlorine before the virus kills her!"

Analyn

The same sentiment is shared by Analyn, who came to Hong Kong from Bulacan province **[Philippines]** eight years ago. For the past four years, she has been working on Lantau Island [Hong Kong] for an expat family from New Zealand.

"My employers are quite relaxed about the virus. But my friends who also live on Lantau told me their employers forbid them leaving the island."

Analyn went on to talk about an extreme case. *"My friend Net lives in Discovery Bay [Hong Kong] with a local family. Everyone wears face masks and gloves even at home. Net has to sterilise the entire house several times a day and wash her hands every 30 minutes because the couple has two young children.*

"Her hands are red and dry from all the washing. She suffers from a bad case of housewives' eczema—probably a reaction to all the bleach and other disinfectants. Also, her employers make her take a shower every time after she goes out.

"Since she has to walk the dog three times a day and do groceries, she ends up showering pretty much all day. Poor Net only gets three to four hours of sleep at night."

Sarah

Sarah, who comes from the island province of Bohol **[Philippines]**, has been in Hong Kong for ten years. She recently switched to a new employer: a local couple who live in upscale Ho Man Tin.

"My boss is a doctor and he taught me to properly dispose of my face masks by rolling them with the blue filter side facing in, like making dim sum," she said. "They are sensible people. They don't panic-buy or make me deep-clean the flat multiple times a day. They also encourage me to go out on Sundays as long as I practise social distancing."

On the topic of taking a day off, Sarah didn't mince words. *"I hear stories about friends who can't leave their flats on Sundays because their employers don't want them to bring germs home.*

"Where's the logic? Why is it okay to do groceries and walk the dog during the week, but it isn't okay

to go out on a Sunday? There's nothing wrong with hanging out as long as we follow the government's rules."

Since 29 March, the Hong Kong government has banned public gatherings of four or more people. The restriction also applies to foreign domestic workers who spend Sundays sharing meals, playing cards and practising dance routines, often in public parks and on pavements and footbridges. Both the Philippine and the Indonesian consulates have issued advisories urging domestic workers to stay home "whenever possible" and comply with the government's ban on large public gatherings.

"Some of my kababayan (countrymates) are to be blamed," Sarah conceded. "There are bad apples who ignore the government ban and make all of us look bad. The consulate has repeatedly warned us about the HK\$25,000 [3000 euros] maximum fine and six months imprisonment, but still I see many OFWs (overseas Filipino workers) gathering in big crowds on Sundays. "They are being irresponsible and selfish. If they really care about their kababayan, they should follow the law and not put everyone at risk!"

Like Lhotzky, Sarah prefers to stay home on her day off, keeping herself busy by writing a journal. Being cooped up in the maid's quarters, however, has taken an emotional toll.

"It's been tough not being able to see my friends," she confessed. "We are a very sociable culture and being together is a big part of our lives in Hong Kong. The virus has taken away the only thing we look forward to all week.

"Now I feel cut off and isolated. When I connect with my friends online, we scream 'I miss you so much!' to each other. Sometimes we cry in front of the phone camera."

Mary

Mary, a Cebu native **[Philippines]** and a 12-year veteran in Hong Kong, works for an expat family in Discovery Bay. The couple recently returned from Europe and have been in self-quarantine at home for the past week. Under the government's travel guidelines, all returnees must isolate themselves for 14 days and wear an electronic wristband.

"The police come unannounced to check on my bosses," said Mary, who is using a pseudonym. "Ma'am found me a serviced apartment and asked me not to go home until the quarantine is over. "She said it's for my safety. I've been bringing them groceries and leaving the bags outside the door. Their baby boy always cries and asks 'where's Mary?' but we can only see each other on video calls."

That arrangement, however temporary, is strictly speaking a breach of the live-in rules. The Secretary of Labour has indicated no intention to lift or loosen the policy, which means domestic workers like Mary face a dilemma: they can break the law or endanger themselves.

"I have a friend whose bosses are also in home-quarantine," Mary added. "The family doesn't want to pay for her housing—or perhaps the family doesn't want to break the law. In any case, my friend feels very unsafe with everyone crammed in a tiny flat. She stays away as much as she can by running errands and walking the dog."

Jeanie

Jeanie has been working in Hong Kong for 15 years and spent the last decade with the same British family in Clearwater Bay. When asked about the biggest challenge she had to face during the pandemic, the 40-something single mother of four said, *"I'm doing fine in Hong Kong. I worry most about my children in the Philippines."*

Jeanie comes from Alaminos City in the province of Pangasinan **[Philippines]**, which, like much of the country, has been placed under a mandatory lockdown.

"My barangay (district) has been sealed off," she explained. "Schools are closed and so are most

shops. Every household has been given a pass and only one family member at a time can leave the house to pick up supplies.

"I don't even know whether my four children, who live in different places, have enough to eat. The balikbayan boxes (care packages) I mailed from Hong Kong haven't yet arrived. The shipping company said that there are long delays from the lockdowns."

The sense of helplessness put a lump in Jeanie's throat. *"It's been tough trying to care for my children when I'm not around,"* she said. *"I can't fly back to see them because many flights have been canceled and I'll have to self-quarantine for 14 days over there and for another 14 days once I return to Hong Kong. That won't work with my job here. So there's nothing else I can do but pray for them."*

Like Jeanie, Sarah is anxious about the food supply back home. *"My son lives with my sister on an island, which means supplies are hard to come by,"* she said, putting herself on speakerphone while preparing lunch for her employer.

"Besides food, they have trouble getting money because ATM machines often run out of cash and the only Western Union in the city is closed most of the time."

To date, the Philippines has had 3,764 confirmed cases of Coronavirus infections and 177 deaths.

President Rodrigo Duterte has implemented strict anti-virus lockdowns and threatened to shoot citizens who violate them. Many believe that such draconian measures are necessary in light of the country's dilapidated healthcare system.

The situation was exacerbated by a 6.0-magnitude earthquake that hit the southern part of the country two weeks ago, a natural disaster that received close to no international coverage in the midst of a global pandemic.

To the hundreds of thousands of domestic workers in Hong Kong, the series of unfortunate events at home means they have to fight a two-front war: managing their increased workload here and monitoring the worsening situation in their home country.

There is a common refrain in all of our conversations: migrant workers always put their families first. That's why they made the difficult decision to leave home and work abroad in the first place. *"All I can think about is my family in Marinduque,"* Lhotzky said, fighting back tears. *"So many people are out of a job because of the lockdowns."*

"It's a 'no work, no pay' system. OFWs are now the only source of income and there's even more pressure on us to send money home."

"I've become so paranoid about getting sick," said Analyn, as she started to sob. *"Everytime someone on the ferry or at the supermarket sneezes or coughs near me, I shudder in fear. I'm not worried about myself—I'm worried about my family. Who'll look after them if I get sick and lose my job? What happens if my employers lose their jobs and have to lay me off? How am I supposed to find another employment contract in the middle of an outbreak?"*

Mary summed up the collective anxiety in the domestic worker community: *"We're nervous about our personal safety and our job security. We're nervous about ourselves and our employers. If something happens to us or our employers, what'll happen to the people back home who depend on our income? Everyone's scared."*

The columnist dedicates this article to Bernadita Catalla, former Philippine Consul General to Hong Kong, who died in Beirut of complications from Covid-19 on 2 April.

P.S.

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