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Coronavirus outbreak: Hong Kong domestic workers fight for day off amid infection fears

Monday 10 February 2020, by [BEATTIE Elizabeth](#) (Date first published: 10 February 2020).

Hong Kong's domestic workers struggle to defend already meagre rights as virus triggers calls for them to stay at home.

Hong Kong, China - Domestic workers in Hong Kong typically only have one day off each week - Sunday.

On this contractually-stipulated rest day, the city's large parks and roads are transformed into hives of activity, alive with dance routines, karaoke, games, video calls and prayers.

As the women's government-mandated contracts require they live with their employer, the city's public spaces provide them with important leisure areas that they do not have at home.

But as the coronavirus spreads, their right to a day spent beyond the confines of their workplace is being challenged.

Last week the Hong Kong Labour Department issued a statement calling for foreign domestic workers to "stay home on their rest day" to minimise the virus spread. The statement, along with Chief Executive Carrie Lam's comments in its support, has been criticised by advocacy groups who say the guidance is discriminatory and unfairly targets domestic workers.

In a statement provided to Al Jazeera, the International Migrants Alliance said they received reports last Sunday that many employers had denied workers their rest day and "some were even threatened with contract termination" if they insisted on going out on their only day off.

'Extra hygiene measures'

"Some FDWs (foreign domestic workers) were required by their employers to immediately take a bath, hand-wash their clothes and use alcohol all over their bodies for sanitation immediately after they arrived in the house from taking their rest day," the IMA said, adding that some workers were also required to clean more often "as part of extra hygiene measures".

Government data shows there were 386,075 domestic workers in Hong Kong in 2018, the most recent data available, with nearly 211,000 from the Philippines. The next biggest group comes from Indonesia.

While Central's Chater Road and Victoria Park showed slight decreases in the numbers of domestic workers outside on Sunday, the most visible effect of the coronavirus outbreak was the ubiquitous face mask.

At Victoria Park, it was business as usual with many defying the Labour Department's guidance.

A large grass field at the park's centre was filled with domestic workers who had pitched tents and were practising dance routines to loud music, creating a festival atmosphere.

Nearby, an expansive football pitch, which previously held hundreds of thousands of protesters and was left with scorch marks from tear gas canisters, was heaving. Women took selfies, removing their face masks to reveal otherwise hidden smiles. The surrounding streets were also packed, lined with workers picnicking on the pavement.

Away from the action, in a leafy, concreted area with views of Victoria Harbour, a group of four domestic workers and friends from the Philippines were playing cards on their day off.

'Precious time'

They had chosen the area because it was away from the crowds, and they all declined to be named or photographed because they had defied their employers by meeting up.

"They asked me not to go out, but it's so boring at home," one said, her friends echoing her in agreement. One of the women told Al Jazeera that she was not personally fearful of the virus, but her employer had asked her to wear a mask. Her friend brandished a bottle of Dettol, an antiseptic, she, like many Hong Kong residents, always carries with her.

Friends have also been affected, they explained. Some are spending their day off at home "because their employer doesn't allow them [to leave]," one woman said. Another adds that they know a fellow worker who is stranded in the Philippines as a result of a recent two-way ban implemented by their government.

Others declined to speak. A few individuals wearing face masks said they did not know much about the virus and did not want to discuss it.

Over in Central's Chater Road, ad hoc markets were in full swing with friends hanging out together in the city's financial district.

Shiela Tebia, who is vice chairperson of the group United Filipinos in Hong Kong, was taking part in a protest dance, joined by about 40 others. In order to minimise crowd numbers in light of the coronavirus outbreak, the protest had been spread out around the city, with dance groups found in other districts in support of the global One Billion Rising campaign to stop violence against women.

It is a message that is especially close to Shiela's heart. After arriving from the Philippines in Hong Kong in 2007, she experienced violence from her first employer. More recently, she joined those speaking out about the Labor Department's directive.

"We use Sunday to make money, to meet our relatives, things like that. So instead of taking that precious time of migrant domestic workers, why don't they ask the Hong Kong society to look after [domestic workers] as well," said Shiela, who calls her friends her 'Hong Kong family'. "What we need right now is to take care of each other. Because the health of one member of the family, including the domestic worker, is important for the whole family."

She adds that in her advocacy role, she often hears of cases of domestic workers buying their own masks and hand sanitiser when their employer fails to provide them.

No privacy, space

"One of our members [lives next door to another] helper who is crying because she uses one mask a

day, and needs to keep it and use it again tomorrow. It's not really hygienic, so the Labour Department needs to understand that scenario."

Shiela believes that those who have their day off on Sunday but are compelled to stay home are unlikely to actually enjoy time off.

"Many of us don't have a private room to take our rest, so when the department encourages employers not to let their helper go out during their day off, they're also saying that their helper will stay working. They're only sleeping on the sofa in the living room, or sleeping with the kids, so what are they going to do on their holiday? Are they going to stand in the kitchen the whole day, or are they going to sit down in the living room with the whole family? They're going to work."

But the Labour Department's statements are just one aspect of the problem facing domestic workers.

The Philippines's travel ban has also had dire consequences for those who are stranded after the Lunar New Year holidays and risk losing their jobs when they are not able to return to work in Hong Kong, according to advocacy groups.

"Those workers are the breadwinners for their family," said Shiela, she says. "How can we continue to support our siblings that are in school, how can we continue supporting our sick parents or sick husband. Not only that, how are we going to buy food for our family?"

"Maybe we're free from the coronavirus outbreak in Hong Kong, but we're going to die of hunger."

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P.S.

• AL JAZEERA NEWS. 10 FEBRUARY 2020:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/hong-kong-domestic-workers-fight-day-infection-fears-200210012724831.html>