

Discriminations: 'It's chaos': Hong Kong's domestic workers call for help amid coronavirus outbreak

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- **Many are growing anxious as they are unable to get masks and hand sanitiser, while some are being fired as their employers leave the city as the crisis grows**
- **Rights groups are calling for donations, as the Philippine and Indonesian consulates are expected to distribute thousands of masks to migrant workers**

There are 400,000 domestic workers in Hong Kong, most of whom hail from the Philippines and Indonesia. Photo: Bloomberg
There are 400,000 domestic workers in Hong Kong, most of whom hail from the Philippines and Indonesia.

Hong Kong's foreign domestic workers are growing anxious over their inability to find protective items such as face masks and hand sanitisers as the city grapples with the coronavirus outbreak. On top of this, some are being fired by employers who decided to leave Hong Kong, while others are being told to return to their home countries until the current public health crisis has been contained.

To make up the shortfall, the Mission for Migrant Workers and Bethune House have launched a campaign calling for donations of masks, hand sanitisers and money to help the 400,000 domestic workers in Hong Kong - most of whom hail from the Philippines and Indonesia.

Those countries' consulates are also expected to hand out thousands of masks to the city's migrant workers, but supplies are limited and methods of distribution are still being discussed.

"Workers are very worried because they can't find face masks, and some are saying they are not given regular access to sanitisers and antibacterial hand wash," said Eman Villanueva, a domestic worker and spokesman for the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body.

He argued that employers should offer the same level of protection to their workers that they give to relatives. "If you want to protect your family, you should include your domestic worker ... By leaving one unprotected, you are putting all your family at risk."

Queues have become a common sight around the city as Hong Kong residents hoping to buy protective supplies wait for several hours at retailers and pharmacies, with some companies selling such items at much higher prices due to the scarcity and upswing in demand.

Cynthia Abdon-Tellez, head of the Mission for Migrant Workers and co-founder of the Bethune House, argued that "masks and hand sanitisers should be provided not only to domestic workers but also to everyone in need ... If it's too much for employers, they should demand the government effectively monitor prices and help distribution".

She said it had been particularly challenging to meet the needs of women at the two shelters run by Bethune House, which provides lodging, food, welfare, case guidance and training for vulnerable migrants. The Mission for Migrant Workers and the Bethune House started calling for donations last week.

"We received one litre of sanitiser and some people donated a small amount of money. But it's not sufficient," Abdon-Tellez said. "We have about 30 women who spent most of their time in the same space and we also provide daily meals to 15 other women."

Some workers are also being fired as an increasing number of employers are choosing to leave the city amid the current crisis.

"In recent days, we have received several queries from people who are having their contracts terminated because their employers are leaving Hong Kong," Abdon-Tellez said. "Other employers staying here are telling them to go back to their countries until the crisis is resolved. Workers are concerned because they don't know what to do and if they will have a job later on."

Recent statements from the Hong Kong government have also fuelled frustration among foreign domestic workers in the city. On Thursday, the government urged them not to leave their employers' homes on their rest day in a bid to safeguard their health and reduce the risk of virus transmission.

"Many are not being allowed to take their day off. Some are being paid, others aren't ... this is adding to the stress," said Eni Lestari, chairperson of the International Migrants Alliance. "If we are not allowed to go out on our day off, we should not go out to the market [to buy groceries for the house] either."

Beijing on high alert as coronavirus spreading through the country

Some domestic workers are also spending a significant part of their only day off each week looking for face masks and other protective items.

An Indonesian migrant, who has been in Hong Kong for four years, spent three hours on Sunday queuing at Causeway Bay to collect masks her friends had ordered from her home country. "My employer also asked me to help him buy six boxes. So I did it, because I'm also in the queue. It's a small thing," said the woman in her 30s.

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Eni Lestari, International Migrants Alliance

Lestari, who is also a domestic worker from Indonesia, said the lack of such items, longer working hours, little rest and inappropriate accommodation - with some not having a private room - are putting migrant women at further risk of falling sick.

"It's chaos. There is a lot of anxiety, and workers are fearing for their safety," she said.

The recent travel ban announced by the Philippine government has put further pressure on domestic workers in the city. Manila on Sunday issued a temporary ban on travel from China, including Hong Kong and Macau, to safeguard against the coronavirus epidemic.

Filipino nationals are allowed to return home, but they will be subjected to a 14-day quarantine. A few hundred domestic workers were also left stranded at the Manila airport after flights were cancelled.

"It's very concerning and alarming," advocate Abdon-Tellez said. "Some employers have set their

days to take annual leave. Some [domestic workers] are only allowed to take two weeks per year. If they are quarantined upon arrival in the Philippines, they will have no time left for holidays. ”

Lestari said she hoped the Indonesian government would not take such measures.

Domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia have also complained about a lack of reliable information on what to do to protect themselves and on the evolution of the crisis.

Erwin Akbar, the Indonesian consul for protocol and consular services, told the Post that efforts were being made to meet some of the domestic workers’ most basic needs.

Kong as well as with our airline Garuda Indonesia,” he said. “We have secured 25,000 face masks so far, but we will try to get as many as we can.”

Akbar said the distribution of free masks for domestic workers from Indonesia began on Sunday. “We opened a desk in our lobby and they can come. We provide five to six pieces per person, and then they can return later depending on their needs and on our stock.”

He acknowledged that not all may have the chance to go to the consulate office in Causeway Bay.

“We will try to be as efficient as we can, but it’s impossible to reach out to everyone,” Akbar said. “We have also talked to employment agencies to be in touch with employers and help tackle the issue.”

Questions sent to the Philippine consulate in the city went unanswered, but the Post has learned that the consulate ordered about 100,000 masks from the Philippines. Union leaders said a date of arrival had not been confirmed yet and the distribution plan was still under discussion.

The consulate also invited rights groups’ leaders to attend an information session on Sunday with staff from Hong Kong’s Centre for Health Protection, who offered updates on the current health crisis and shared protection tips.

There have been 15 confirmed cases of the virus in Hong Kong, while a 39-year-old man on Tuesday became the first person in the city to die from it. The coronavirus has infected more than 20,000 people around the world, claiming the lives of more than 420 people.

Those who want to donate items or money to domestic workers can contact the Mission for Migrant Workers at migrants.net

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<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3048893/its-chaos-hong-kongs-domestic-workers-call-help-amid>

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