

Coronavirus outbreak fuels rise in Hong Kong domestic worker sackings

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- **Dozens of domestic workers in Hong Kong have been fired amid the Covid-19 crisis, say migrants and advocates**
- **The time they are allowed to spend outside their employers' houses on their days off has been the most contentious issue cited for dismissal**

Jennifer, a domestic worker from the Philippines, avoided going out too much after Hong Kong recorded its first coronavirus case on January 22 and fears began to grow about the outbreak. But in early February, she decided to attend a mass in Fortress Hill.

"I was staying mostly at home because I was afraid," she said. "But I wanted to go to a church service on February 1, which was my day off, so I told my employers that I would be gone for only a couple of hours."

Jennifer, who gave only her first name, said she was away from her employers' home in Sai Kung from 10.30am to about 12.30pm. "When I returned, they asked for my smart card [to enter the flat] and told me to pack my things right away."

She did not have a place to go. But "luckily I had friends who were off that day too and they helped me", said the migrant, 46, who is now living in a church-run shelter.

In some cases, workers were required to self-isolate in boarding houses, which goes against the mandatory living-in rule.

Manisha Wijesinghe, HELP for Domestic Workers

Jennifer is among dozens of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong who have been fired in recent weeks amid the coronavirus outbreak gripping the city, based on accounts from more than five migrants and advocates.

Reasons cited for their dismissal ranged from arguments over the time they were allowed to spend outside the house on their days off, to employers claiming they had lost their jobs or were leaving the city.

Migrants who have been sacked say they are now struggling to find new jobs in Hong Kong, which has seen two deaths from more than 90 coronavirus cases – including two domestic workers from the Philippines who tested positive for the virus, which causes a disease known as Covid-19 – in February.

Hong Kong is home to some 400,000 foreign domestic workers, mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia. According to a recent study, they contributed US\$12.6 billion to the city's economy in 2018, providing child and elderly care and allowing thousands of mothers to return to work.

Jennifer said she had worked for her employers – three generations of one family who live in a large flat – for a year and nine months. She sometimes struggled to cope with the workload, she said, but relations really became strained only after fears of the outbreak, which began in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December, started looming over Hong Kong.

“They became more demanding, which I understand. I told them not to worry, because I would be careful,” she said. “But they started preventing me from going out on my day off, although I was still asked to go to the wet market to do the shopping for the house every day. And they were also out very often. So why forbid me to go out by myself?”

Jennifer was fired just two days after the city’s Labour Department had urged domestic workers not to leave their employers’ homes on their rest days, saying that could reduce the risk of virus transmission.

Manisha Wijesinghe, director of case management at the non-profit group HELP for Domestic Workers, said that some employers seemed to have misinterpreted the government’s controversial declaration, taking it as a mandatory requirement, instead of as a recommendation.

“The more contentious issue we have seen so far is of workers who left the house on their days off and then they were fired,” she said.

The advocate said that one of the cases she encountered involved a worker who was dismissed after attending a medical appointment on her rest day.

“In some cases, workers were required to self-isolate in boarding houses, which goes against the mandatory living-in rule ... And we are also aware of a few cases where employers left the city.”

In the past two weeks alone, she has personally handled eight sacked domestic workers’ cases. Wijesinghe said many migrants faced hurdles in seeking compensation because the Labour Department and several support services had been closed.

This means that domestic workers “have been unable to file claims after [having their services] terminated, cases are being postponed and special requests have been made for visa extension, but some workers are unable to get supporting documents ... They are in a Catch-22 situation”.

After having their contracts terminated, foreign domestic workers are usually allowed to remain in Hong Kong for only 10 days. But since the outbreak, many have sought to extend their visas in order to file labour claims, while some could not return to the Philippines after Manila on February 2 issued a temporary ban on travel from China, including Hong Kong and Macau.

This ban was partially lifted on February 18, but migrants say it has still been challenging to return home, as both Philippine Airlines and Cebu Pacific have cancelled all flights to the city until the end of March, and some workers cannot afford more expensive options.

Jennifer, who first arrived in Hong Kong in 2003, said she had been to several job interviews over the past four weeks but her recent dismissal seemed to be an obstacle in getting hired and she was now waiting to fly home.

“Finding another employer seems more difficult now than before. An agency told me that I should not share the real reason, because it looks like I was being selfish and disobedient. They will judge me right away,” she said.

On a recent visit to an agency, she said she was among 23 domestic workers, almost all of whom had

been fired “and there were no employers going to the agency because people have avoided going out”.

The married mother of an eight-year-old daughter said that if she was unable to find an employer before returning to the Philippines, she would apply again from there.

“I need a job. Hong Kong is the only foreign place I have been to, and I like it here,” she said. “My salary has made a big difference. I sent three siblings to college and they are nurses now.”

Fellow Filipino Normelinda, 34, was also fired after the coronavirus outbreak, forcing her to find a charity-run shelter.

On January 29, “my employer told me she lost her job. She said she does not have money to pay me ... I am not sure if it is true, but that’s what she said”, Normelinda recalled.

“She did not pay me the full month’s notice, giving me only half a month.”

Even before firing her, Normelinda said her employer had refused to provide her with masks or hand sanitisers. “She told me to buy it myself ... but I used to send every month about HK\$3,500 to my family and kept only about HK\$1,000 for myself.”

Normelinda, who is married and has two children in the Philippines, is now struggling to find another employer – she had gone to four agencies and had five interviews, but received no job offers, she said.

Though Hong Kong is experiencing an economic slump after months of civil unrest and virus anxiety, Normelinda said she feared her lack of experience and her dismissal just four months into her last job might work against her.

“I have been trying every day, going to agencies, trying to find employers online,” she said. “But the situation is not good and many employers are on holiday in other countries. I keep on praying to find one.”

Teresa Liu Tsui-lan, managing director of the Technic Employment Service Centre, said that although some employers had fired their domestic workers amid the crisis, the demand remained.

“There are still many employers looking, who are having a baby soon or whose maids finished their contracts,” she said.

A recent paper published in The Lancet Psychiatry medical journal highlighted the impact the coronavirus crisis could have on domestic workers’ mental health, with issues such as lost income a major contributing factor.

Cynthia Abdon-Tellez, head of the Mission for Migrant Workers and co-founder of the two shelters run by Bethune House, said her non-profit group received about two calls a day from domestic workers who found themselves in an uncertain situation, and that their shelters were full.

She urged employers to allow domestic workers to enjoy their days off. “For many, the accommodation provided by their employers is not good and staying at home means to be working,” she said. “We call on Hong Kong to be more sensitive because migrant domestic workers live in the place where they work.”

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