

# Hongkongers' attitudes to domestic duties create conditions for helper abuse

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Julian Groves says a misguided sense of entitlement to cheap domestic labour lies at the heart of helper injustice in Hong Kong. It's time to rethink our outdated views of childcare and housework

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Last week was a marvellous week for foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. Paraded by human rights groups and various non-governmental organisations on radio, TV and at every possible media event, Erwiana Sulistyaningsih became the Rosa Parks of their struggle for justice against abusive employers.

As a result, the law requiring foreign domestic workers to live with their employers is under more scrutiny than ever before. Not only is the rule responsible for abuse against such workers, it is also ineffective in its intended purpose to prevent the workers "moonlighting" or taking additional jobs outside their regular contracts. Foreign domestic workers continue to live out and take part-time jobs regardless of the law, which is turning them and their "negligent" employers into outlaws to be hunted down in villages by immigration authorities.

But it also gives us cause for reflection on why the government maintains the rule, and what it tells us about ourselves. Secretary for Labour and Welfare Matthew Cheung Kin-chung along with Joseph Law Kwan-din, of the Hong Kong Employers of Overseas Domestic Helpers Association, want us to believe that the live-in requirement is protecting jobs for local cleaners and housing for low-income residents. But few local cleaners would be prepared to work under the same conditions as foreign domestic workers do,

which is precisely why we import workers from abroad. And not all 300,000 foreign domestic workers would choose the live-out option, if given the opportunity.

The real story, as I see it, has much more to do with our own misguided sense of entitlement, gender and power. Once upon a time, women in Hong Kong stayed at home to look after our children, serve us hot meals, clean our toilets and wash and iron our underwear for free. Inconveniently for men (most do not take up these responsibilities in equal measure), women have entered education with such success that they now make up a majority of our undergraduate population. No longer content with staying at home to look after men and their families, women now participate in the workforce in almost equal numbers to men.

Times have changed but our attitudes toward childcare and housework have not. Desperately clinging to the idea that domestic work should be performed by women for free (or almost for free), we now go abroad to find women with fewer opportunities than their Hong Kong counterparts with the hope that, out of sheer desperation, they will perform the work at low cost and without making too much fuss.

Fuelling this entitlement is a sentiment often heard - that we have no particular obligation to help these women, that they come of their own accord, and that we are in fact doing the workers a favour by allowing them to take jobs here at all, given the financial hardship of some of our own residents. But given that a full-time nanny in New York or London would cost the equivalent of at least HK\$13,000 to HK\$15,000 a month, I rather think the obligation goes the other way. These workers are not asking for "special treatment" or favours. They are asking for equal treatment because they contribute, too.

Where I do agree with Joseph Law, however, is that it is an unreasonable financial burden to place the true cost of childcare solely on working families. But that is precisely what a government should be doing: assisting our economic growth by allowing both men and women to enter the workforce.

Our government should be helping both helpers and their employers in the provision of affordable and high quality childcare and housework, as it does with education and health care. Where are the licensed day-care centres that are found in other successful capitalist economies? Where are the tax breaks for employers who hire domestic helpers for childcare and housework? Where are the carefully regulated recruitment agencies that ensure only the best and most qualified helpers are selected?

As we are seeing all over Europe, where economic downturn and the squeezing of the middle classes proliferate, the politics of envy has shifted to the bottom of the economic pyramid in Hong Kong. Instead of targeting our government with its surpluses, or the corporate monopolies and property developers that make almost all aspects of our lives unaffordable, we vent our woes on a 20-something dispossessed migrant woman, rising at six in the morning to work all hours of the day to eke out a few more dollars to pay for her mother's eye operation or her son's college fees.

I am delighted that Erwiana received the justice that she was owed. But real justice for our 300,000 migrant domestic workers will not be achieved until we carefully rethink how we can organise childcare and housework in a less gendered and class-based way, since it is our sense of entitlement to the cheap labour of poor women that has created the conditions for Erwiana's abuse, and many like her.

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