

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Global Health Security

Migrant Domestic Workers: Their COVID-19 Burdens

By Margareth Sembiring

SYNOPSIS

Migrant workers, especially those doing domestic work, cannot be ignored in the fight against COVID-19. The measures taken to contain the virus spread have left them even more vulnerable. But this may be an opportunity for a fresh look at providing for their protection.

COMMENTARY

COVID-19 HAS hit many countries and affected many different communities. Migrant workers have suffered considerable adversity from this pandemic. They are [not paid](#) for work done or they have lost their jobs without compensation. Many have been “locked out” as they could not return home when travel restrictions kicked in. Domestic workers have been particularly hard hit due to the nature of their work that often requires them to live in with their employers.

The focus of governments on containment of COVID-19 has left migrant domestic workers largely unprotected from the adverse effects of the various measures introduced to safeguard the native population. The first relates to work environment and entitlements, and the second pertains to the loss of livelihood. Considering their human dignity and significant contribution to host and home countries' economies, it is important for governments to create balanced policies to ensure their protection while addressing public health concerns.

Work Environment and Entitlements

[A recent survey in Hong Kong](#) reports that up to 14 percent, or an estimate of more than 50,000 domestic workers, had not been equipped with adequate protective items like masks or hand sanitisers by their employers. This has raised concern given that domestic workers are often tasked to go out of the employers' homes to do grocery shopping and other errands.

Thousands of free masks were eventually provided to the domestic workers by their [respective countries' consular offices](#) in Hong Kong. The same survey also found that more than 50 percent of respondents had borne increased cleaning chore and childcare workload as schools had been closed.

Their health was further at risk since gloves or masks were not always provided for cleaning work. A breach of once-a-week rest-day entitlement was also reported with about 20 percent of respondents not given an off-day for a month. The Hong Kong Labour Department issued an [appeal to foreign domestic workers](#) to stay at home during their off-days to reduce the risk of transmission. Stressing that employers should not ask their domestic workers to work even if they are at home, the government essentially left it to both parties to reach mutual agreement.

Balancing Entitlement & Transmission Concerns

In its recent advisory to employers of foreign domestic workers in [Singapore](#), the Ministry of Manpower has also recommended a stay-home arrangement for the off-days of the domestic workers.

In Hong Kong, the migrant worker communities [felt strongly](#) that their entitlement was being violated. Although it is not strictly mandatory, the stay-home advice has created tension between employers and domestic workers. Employers fear that their domestic workers might contract the disease while going out on their rest days.

This has led to cases of [job termination](#) to those who chose to exercise their off-day entitlement. Conversely, domestic workers were concerned about their own health when their employers were serving [stay-home notice](#).

Balancing domestic workers' needs to rest and mutual concerns over transmission risk is critical to ensure safe working and living environments for both employers and domestic workers. In this situation, employers need to consider arranging for alternative rest days if their workers must stay home on off-days and equip them with masks and hand sanitisers as and when necessary.

Employment Loss

Tension over off-day entitlement is not the only cause of job termination. The demand for domestic workers has shrunk either because employers were compelled to move out of the country or because the employers have lost their own jobs.

The threat of unemployment due to decreasing demand is further exacerbated by travel restrictions. When [the Philippines](#) first imposed a travel ban to China that included Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan in February 2020, new and returning Filipino migrant workers who were in the country [protested](#) against the policy. Similar concerns

have again arisen when the Philippine government placed the entire [Luzon Island](#) on “enhanced community quarantine” in mid-March.

Around the same period, [Indonesia](#) temporarily suspended sending of migrant workers overseas. In these cases, migrant workers were left with little choice but to postpone or abandon their travel plans to commence or resume employment abroad. They face a real risk of losing their job opportunities.

Now that COVID-19 has spread far and wide, more countries have tightened their borders, especially on incoming foreigners that include migrant workers. [Singapore](#) recently requires employers and employment agencies to get government approval before they can bring in either new or returning migrant domestic workers. [Taiwan](#) took a very similar measure, and Hong Kong has also started to [bar entry to foreigners](#).

The rapidly changing travel restrictions were often not communicated to migrant domestic workers in a [timely manner](#), thus creating confusion and tension at borders. Travel restrictions have direct implications on migrant workers’ economic security, threaten their livelihood, and risk them falling into poverty. The current experience shows an urgent need for policies that accommodate the concerns of migrant workers in times of crisis.

Opportunity for Decent Package

The scale of disruptions that the current public health crisis has brought to the world is unprecedented. It has sent governments scrambling for the most effective measures to contain the spread of the virus in their respective societies.

In most cases, domestic workers have been affected disproportionately because of their more vulnerable position in the labour market. As the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has often emphasised in its reports, domestic work remains informal, performed outside of labour and social protection regulations. The domestic workers are least protected and they suffer from poor monitoring and implementation of existing laws.

The situation may be temporary but affected migrant workers may not have enough resources to sustain themselves and their family members during this period. They seem to have to fend for themselves as the economic stimuli in host or home countries may not reach them either. There is an urgent need for governments and the ILO to seize the occasion to re-examine plans to integrate the migrant workers into the respective national policies.

The evidence shows that migrant workers contribute [instrumentally](#) to home and host countries’ economies. Domestic work is important as it provides for care of the elderly and the young while upholding family life conducive for the professional income earners. Human society wherever it exists will benefit from the productivity derived from the migrant workers.

In this regard, giving the migrant workers the necessary protection in terms of access to a minimum level of health care, conducive work environment, and the prevailing

national laws must be the decent package. It needs to be considered and addressed carefully for the long term as the battle against COVID-19 continues.

Margareth Sembiring is an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of a series.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg