



Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's economy relies on migrant domestic workers (MDWs). Just half of mothers aged 25 to 54 would be able to work if they did not employ domestic help. Most of these workers are women who come to Hong Kong under specific visa rules, looking to earn a better income than they can in their home countries. However, they often face tough conditions, including unfair treatment and limited rights, which make their work and lives challenging.



Leitner Center
for International Law
and Justice

Key numbers



339,451
MDWs in Hong
Kong



600,000
Expected MDW
population in 2047



US\$12.6 billion
Contributed by
MDWs to the
economy



98.5%
Of MDWs are women

Key concerns



1

Trafficking and forced labor

A 2016 study found that 17% of MDWs (one in six) experienced forced labor and 14% of these women had been trafficked.



2

Discriminatory practices

The minimum wage for MDWs is a quarter of other workers. Many are forced to work more than 16 hours a day, have no day off, and are not given a private room to stay in.



3

Systemic barriers

Systemic barriers prevent MDWs from reporting abuse due to fear of losing their jobs and residency rights, and government denial of trafficking makes advocating for their rights even harder.



Wattan's story'

Wattan*, a 20-year-old from the Philippines, moved to Hong Kong in 2022 to work for a wealthy family, hoping to support her family back home. Her duties included cooking, cleaning, and caring for the family's baby and older grandparents. Her living arrangements were tied to her employment. Wattan's workdays lasted up to 16 hours, often including her day off without extra pay.

On the Minimum Allowable Wage of HK\$4,730 a month, she struggled to make ends meet, sending half her earnings home and using the rest to repay the loan she took out to move to Hong Kong. Her financial woes were compounded by her inability to open a bank account due to her employer's refusal to provide necessary documentation and her insufficient funds to cover bank fees.

Despite knowing her treatment was at times unlawful, she complied to keep her job. Wattan's situation was made even more difficult by the conditions of her visa, which prevented her from changing employers without proof of abuse, effectively trapping her. If she left her employment, she would need to leave Hong Kong within two weeks, a daunting prospect given her family's reliance on her income and the lack of opportunities back in the Philippines. This left Wattan in a precarious position in which she was forced to endure her challenging circumstances out of necessity.

*This hypothetical case study is drawn from real-world examples.

Recommendations



**Combat
trafficking and
exploitation**



**Reform
employment
regulations**



**Keep pregnant
MDWs safe from
being fired or
treated unfairly**



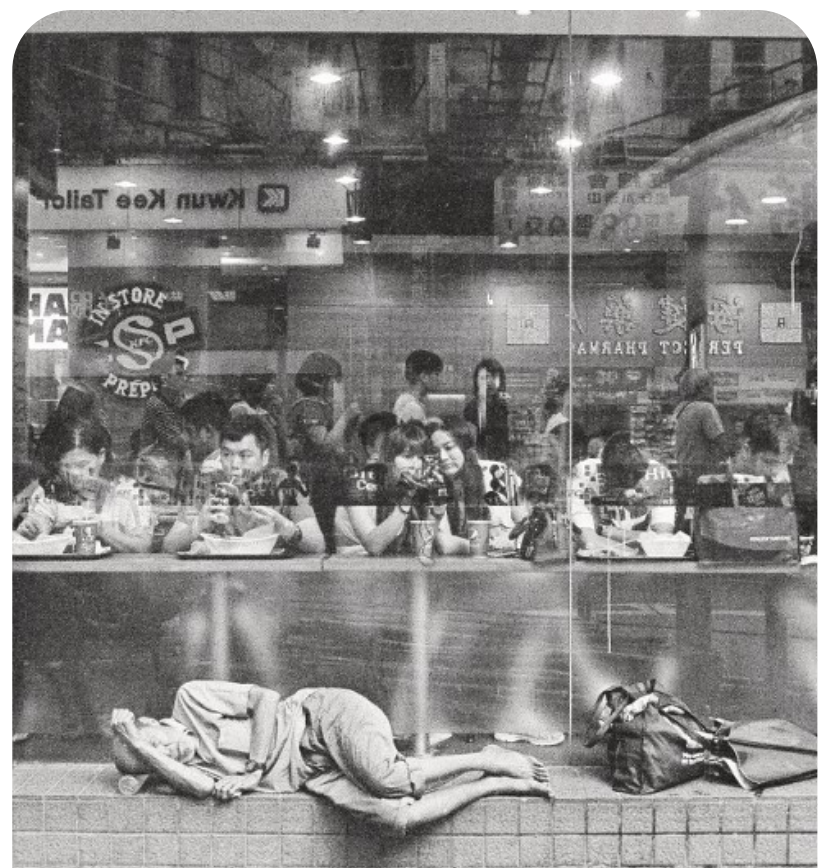
**Enhance financial
security and
prevent predatory
practices**

About the Leitner Center

This overview is based on a chapter from the Leitner Center's latest report "Unseen struggles: Addressing migrant rights in Hong Kong" and its submission to the UN's Universal Periodic Review. The Leitner Center for International Law and Justice at Fordham Law School trains law students to become international legal experts and impassioned human rights advocates through its pioneering human rights programs, clinics, and education initiatives; facilitates capacity building and advocacy with local social justice organizations and activists around the world; and contributes to critical research among scholars in international human rights.



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