

Domestic help

The tragic death of Vicky Flores spurred the community to take action in support of one woman — and by extension one of the most discriminated groups in Hong Kong. *Joan Gill* investigates

The tragic, untimely death of Vicenta “Vicky” Flores has created shockwaves throughout Discovery Bay (and beyond) in the last month. The mysterious circumstances surrounding her death have encouraged us to focus on the conditions in which some foreign domestic helpers are forced to live. While it’s reassuring that so many DB residents rallied in support of Vicky, others are not quite as lucky.

Perhaps the only good thing to come from this awful situation is the realisation that Vicky’s death will not be in vain. Friends, family members and concerned strangers have made sure of this; through protests, vigils and a mass, and by setting up an electronic petition and weblog. Due to demands from the DB community,



the Philippine Consulate, Vicky's family and others, the tragedy has attained substantial media coverage locally as well as abroad, although still not as much as desired, especially in the Philippines, Vicky's home country.

Calling for a "thorough and transparent investigation" into the death of Vicky Flores, a signed petition was submitted to the Hong Kong police department on April 27. The petition consisted of 5,780 signatures — 2,173 from Discovery Bay and the outlying islands and 3,607 from Hong Kong Island. Official investigations are still ongoing.

Knowing your rights

There are more than 220,000 domestic helpers living in Hong Kong, hailing from countries ranging from the Philippines and Indonesia to Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and despite the fact that there are many groups set up to combat abuses, too many still occur. According to Edwina Antonio, director of Bethune House, a shelter for domestic helpers of all nationalities, this is something that the Hong Kong government and immigration department need to address.

Bethune House works in conjunction with groups such as the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK), Help for Domestic Helpers (HDH) and the Mission for Migrant Workers (Hong Kong) Society. These groups provide mistreated employees with ongoing support and protection; typical claims filed concern lack of payment, long hours, insufficient food, poor housing, rape, and physical and mental abuse.

With a legal contract, a helper should receive at least HK\$3,480 month (the minimum wage), as well as free food, proper accommodation, and one rest day a week in addition to Hong Kong public holidays. Antonio says that Filipina helpers tend to know their rights, and that it is the Indonesian helpers, as well as some Sri Lankans, who are most often underpaid (sometimes earning less than HK\$2,000 a month). To say that domestic workers are at the mercy of their employers is not an understatement.

"Some helpers are not allowed to talk to other people or leave the house for the first three months of employment," says Antonio, "and after that they may only get one or two days off a month. Although by contract a helper is given 24 hours of rest on their day off, many have a curfew imposed on them." Due to immigration policies, domestic helpers must have a live-in arrangement, and Antonio adds that while helpers work an average of 18 hours a day, many are forced to work 24/7.



What a lot of people don't realise is how much a domestic helper is giving up by speaking out against maltreatment or abuse. They fear punishment or deportation, and under the law, they are not allowed to work while their case is ongoing

Antonio points out that it's often very difficult to prove a helper has been wronged. "How do you prove that you were only given one slice of bread in the morning? There was one case where an employer took photos of a full fridge and said, 'Look, how can she say we don't provide food?' But what he left out was that the helper wasn't allowed to touch that food." In some cases Antonio says that eggs and even grapes are numbered individually and if any are missing the helper is held responsible.

What a lot of people don't realise is how much a domestic helper is giving up by speaking out against maltreatment or abuse. They fear punishment or deportation, and under the law, they are not allowed to work while their case is ongoing. This means being without wages for at least three months, (criminal cases can last two years), and relying on charities in order to survive. ▶▶

- ▶ “Any helper will think 100 times before terminating a contract, unless the living conditions are really that horrible,” says Antonio. “Those who do terminate a contract are those who cannot tolerate the conditions any longer or are brave enough to face the consequences.”

Making a difference in Discovery Bay

Antonio believes that the difference with the Vicky Flores case is that employers came together with the helpers to rally. A number of DB residents were so outraged that they formed the Justice for Vicky Concern Group to help Vicky’s family and ensure a thorough investigation.

According to Mike Poole, one of the founders of the group, the decision to form was an easy one. “There were lots of people posting on the [online] forum and we said, ‘let’s meet at Pacific Coffee to see what we can do’, and it just went from there.” The organisation has an online weblog and is in the process of setting up a bank account to help not just Vicky’s family, but other helpers in need as well. The group has given money to Irene Flores, Vicky’s older sister, to assist with case-related costs and has been in constant contact with the police and coroner’s office.

Poole says, “We’re not unhappy with the police in terms of the investigation, what we’re unhappy with is their treatment of the community and of migrant workers.”

Right now the group is focused on getting Vicky’s case solved, but in the future it hopes to continue supporting domestic helpers. “On a personal note, my wife and I are trying to help people in our own building with troubles,” Poole explains. “But in the future we’d [the Justice for Vicky Concern Group] like to work with migrant groups so that people can come to DB and have meetings and be educated on certain things. By launching the blog we realised that there are a lot of helpers who don’t know how to use the internet, so maybe we can teach them and then set up certain sites dedicated to knowing your rights or following different issues about abuse or termination.”

The group has been working hard but the toughest part is yet to come. As Poole says, “It’s very difficult to get people to stay aware and to care enough.” Antonio agrees, “All migrant groups in Hong Kong are very thankful to the DB community for joining together to raise awareness about the troubles some helpers face. But people need to continue working together to make sure this awareness never fades away.” **IDB**



IF YOU NEED HELP OR WANT TO GIVE IT

- + Log onto government site, www.gov.hk/en/residents/employment/recruitment/domestic/helper.htm for a sample employment contract detailing employees rights
- + Log onto the online weblog, <http://adeathinhongkong.wordpress.com> for the latest information on Vicky’s case
- + Call DB resident Mike Poole on 9244 9007 or email aidamike@netvigator.com to join The Justice for Vicky Concern Group
- + Read *Take Your Rights Seriously*, a legal rights handbook for migrant workers by DB resident James Rice, at www.hkhrm.org.hk/english/booklets/eng_bk3.html
- + Contact Edwina Antonio, director of Bethune House on 9488 9044 or edwina_antonio@yahoo.com. Donations of rice, coffee, cooking oil, cash and other basic necessities are always welcome, as is your time
- + Get in touch with the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (www.unifil.org.hk); the Mission for Migrant Workers (Hong Kong) Society (www.migrants.net); or Help for Domestic Helpers (www.stjohnscathedral.org.hk/domestic.html)
- + Call the Philippine Consulate switchboard on 2823 8501 or call the police at 999 (in an emergency) if you are being mistreated or if you know someone who is

The easiest way to help is to remember the golden rule — treat people the way you want to be treated. Never tolerate the mistreatment of any person and speak out about injustices occurring in front of you. Stand for something or you’ll fall for anything.