



MIGRANT FOCUS

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“WE ARE WORKERS,

WE ARE NOT SLAVES”

An Immersion Experience

Cristina Hing

May 5, 2009, I arrived in Hong Kong to fulfill a commitment I made to honor an invitation extended by Cynthia Abdon- Tellez, Director of Mission to Migrant Workers (HK) Society.

Having been cleared by Hong Kong Immigration, and the screening for the H1N1 virus, I headed towards the exit with anxious anticipation. I was thinking, “What if there was no one to meet me? Ah, how could I ever have doubted. Among the throng of expectants, there stood a woman holding up a piece of paper with my name in big letters. “Welcome, I’m Sol, I will be taking you to Bethune House.” Her words were music to my ears! We walk towards the bus that would take us to Kowloon, Hong Kong. Right away, we chattered in Tagalog. She is a domestic worker who volunteer at Bethune House during her free time, a temporary refuge for migrant women workers who have encountered difficulties in connection with their employment. After an hour on the bus, we get off right in front of Bethune House. We clambered up a steep stairway to a crowd of women in a small living room. This place was meant for 20 persons, but at this time there were 56 women living here. As we walked in, some of the women were practicing a dance number they were going to perform on Mother’s Day, while others watched them.

Bethune House Migrant Women’s Refuge was founded in 1986 by the Mission for Migrant Workers Ltd. , an ecumenical non-governmental institution established in

Hong Kong in 1981. It provides temporary shelter, counseling, legal and mediation services to foreign women domestic workers in crisis.

The Mission to Migrant Workers Ltd. Walk-in Center is located at the Anglican Cathedral of St. Johns’, Hong Kong. It was originally set up to assist and advocate for Filipino migrant workers. It has expanded its work to include the welfare and concern for all foreign migrant workers, specially the women. It has a Board of Directors that include persons from various church denominations, business, law, and academia in Hong Kong.

The Mission has a very lean staff - a priest, two social workers, and an administrative assistant. They are supported by a very savvy cadre of dedicated, seasoned, competent and compassionate volunteers who spend hours at the mission office at St. John’s Cathedral or at Bethune House. They call themselves “Movers”. Many of them have, in the past, been helped by the Mission. Friends of Bethune House are organizations and individuals who donate money, food stuff , household supplies and time. Individual friends drop in to help in any way. Among these friends, I met a university student doing social work internship, a university professor doing research.

I came to Bethune House for an “Emersion Experience”. I lived among the residents for a week.

My space was the lower bunk bed pushed against a wall in one of two small rooms. There were several bunk beds. In my room that first night, I counted 17 women who slept three each on the upper and lower two bunk beds pushed together. Women slept on top of wooden trunks, benches, and on the floor on plastic covered thin mattresses in between the bunk beds. One had to be mindful not to step on a sleeping form at night. The living room also doubled as another bedroom at night.

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An Immersion Experience pls. go to page 2

The place was run like a well ordered dormitory that reminded me of the girl's school I lived in while going to high school. Everyone was assigned to a group that did chores from cooking to cleaning up the bathroom. The place is overcrowded, but clean. On Friday, everyone was up early, packing and repacking personal belongings in bulging suitcases that were brought downstairs out of the house in an enclosed space. Most of the women seemed to own a lot of stuff. I was informed that every month, Bethune House was fumigated to get rid of bugs of all kinds. Everyone was out of the place after breakfast until 3:00 PM when the place was deemed habitable again.

Breakfast was on your own. Everyone contributed 5 Hong Kong dollars for lunch and dinner. Early one morning, I accompanied the "cooks" to shop for the meals of the day. With shopping carts, we walked to a fresh food market a few streets away. There were plentiful varieties of vegetables, fruits, spices, meats and fish to be bought. Meals were portioned in individual plates. Food was saved for the women who were out.

There are about 250,000 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong (Mission to Migrant workers (HK) Society). According to a university researcher, there are about 125,000 Indonesians. The rest are mostly Filipinos with a few other nationals representing almost all developing countries in Asia.

Foreign domestic workers sign a contract for two years, renewable many times by mutual agreement between employer and the worker. The majority of migrant workers and their employers are pleased with their mutual dependencies. Many domestic workers work for one employer for many years. Some workers say that they are treated like members of the family.

However, the overcrowding by women migrant workers at Bethune House attest to the fact that too many experience exploitation and human rights abuses—from verbal and or physical abuse to rape, withholding of food or pay to out right non-payment of earned salary. Some are unjustly dismissed by their employers and others choose to leave due to unbearable conditions.



An Unforgettable Experience. Cristina Hing (far right) immersed with the migrant workers staying at the Bethune House for a week. In this picture, she is with (from left to right) Amy Sim, Sol Pillas and Cynthia Abdon-Tellez.

The night before I left, two migrant women showed up at Bethune House seeking temporary shelter.

Here are a few examples that I have gathered during my short stay.

Nina, 47 years old Filipina, a single mother of a son in his senior year at engineering school, fell from a bunk bed at work and broke her skull. She is unable to work since she has physical symptoms from this event. She is awaiting a court date with her employer with the help of pro-bono lawyers recommended by Mission for Migrant Workers. Nina had worked in Israel for sixteen years until she was deported as an illegal alien. She hopes to get medical treatment and a settlement from her former employer.

Ester, 38 years old Filipina with 4 children, voluntarily quit her work. Her employer was a stay-at-home mom who made her work long hours while continuously berating her and calling her names. She did not get any breaks and was given to eat only a bowl of noodles late in the day after working continuously for hours. On top of all these, she was expected to sleep with a kennel of dogs. She got burned by this experience and wants to go home to do something else.

Finally, there is Lourdes, a single 24 years old, who came to Hong Kong to be with her mother. I accompanied Lourdes once to visit her mother, a 64 year old petite

woman who is a domestic worker who suffered a stroke and is in a rehabilitation hospital. She was expected to be out in a month. Her mother's employer, with whom she had worked for 10 years, was paying her hospital bills. Lourdes will be taking her mother home to the Philippines upon her discharge.

Foreign domestic workers who do not complete at least a year of employment end up owing a lot of money to the recruitment agencies and lending companies that usually work with the recruitment agencies. These are funds they have borrowed to pay for government documentation and fees, and the many fees that recruitment agencies charge them. Consequently, many of them are worse off when they return back to their home countries.

The women reacted to their situation in different ways. One stayed in bed for long hours sleeping. Every morning at about 6:00AM, an Indonesian woman donned her blue burqa and bowing prostrate several times as she knelt on a tiny rug for about 30 minutes. A physical fight almost broke out twice between two groups. One group sympathized with a woman who bitterly complained she was being picked on. The staff and some seasoned volunteers spent lengthy sessions with each group and then with both groups to defuse the tension. I was told that as court cases for some residents are eminent, tensions build up. Physical

fights could result even from very minor incidents.

The resilience and practical attitude of most of the women is remarkable. They spoke about their predicament as a matter of fact, without any tinge of self pity. There was a lot of networking, cell phones were busily ringing. Foreign domestic workers who separate from their employers are to leave Hong Kong within two weeks, otherwise, they will be penalized for overstaying.

Unfortunately, I could not connect very well with the Indonesian women who were 34 out of the 56 residents. Most of them could not speak English. Fatma, an 18 year old from Java spoke English fairly. She spoke Cantonese more since Indonesian women preparing to go to Hong Kong have to take lessons in Cantonese for 6 months before leaving Indonesia. She was dismissed by her employer after three months. She did not know what to do when she gets home.

One Indonesian stood out. Everyone called her "Joker" because she looked like the joker in a deck of cards. This tall thin middleaged woman seemed to command respect from the other Indonesians. When I was introduced to the residents on my first day, she spoke in their behalf. After I said that I respected them all for daring to leave children and husbands for a foreign land simply to earn money to feed their children and give them a chance to go to school. She said, "I do not hate men, but I do not wait for a man to tell me what I need to do. I enjoy my freedom as a woman."

Joker stayed up several late nights sewing red and white skirts to be worn by 19 women who would be performing at the "Palarong Pilipino" celebration of Mother's Day the following Sunday. All week, she also directed the practice sessions of dance and precision movements the women would be doing. May 10, 2009, Mother's Day Sunday, at Chater Road, in the center of Hong Kong that was closed to vehicular traffic, decked out in their red and white attire, the Bethune House performers proudly did their dance and precision calisthenics with Bethune House spelled out when they lined up.

At intervals, they yelled out in unison:

"We are workers! We are not slaves."

OUR FAITH,
OUR
STRUGGLE

LOVE and PROTEST

The 1987 Philippine constitution is one of the legacies of the Aquino administration. Among other things, the 1987 Constitution limits the term of office of the President and other officials to six years without immediate reelection.

Article XII, Section 1 of the same Constitution provides that "Any amendment to, or revision of, this Constitution may be proposed by: (1) The Congress, upon a vote of three-fourths of all its Members; or (2) A constitutional convention."

Succeeding presidents Ramos and Estrada tried to tamper with it. Mrs. Arroyo wants it changed also; all in the name of, or in the pretext of, economic development. For them, the constitution is the culprit for the Philippines' backward and sluggish economy. Nobody among them ever talked of amending the term of office of the President. Even if that were so, the fear of the people is any constitutional amendment will eventually be if not actually be about extending the president's term of office.


The House of Representatives cunningly passed on June 2, 2009, House Resolution 1109, RESOLUTION CALLING UPON THE MEMBERS OF CONGRESS TO CONVENE FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONSIDERING PROPOSALS TO AMEND OR REVISE THE CONSTITUTION, UPON A VOTE OF THREE-FOURTHS OF ALL MEMBERS OF CONGRESS. That it was passed the way it was passed led one member of the House to say, "This is the worst congress in the annals of Philippine history." Another said, "There are very few dissenting voices here...all we can hear are the croaking

of the chorus frogs." Apparently, as one member of the House alleged, it did not go through the proper procedures. During the debate, only a few members of the House were present but as the voting time drew nearer, more and more representatives trooped in prompting Rep. Ocampo to ask if they have received their "marching order"? Raul del Mar called for viva voce vote on the Resolution which was duly approved. As expected it the AYES had it. It was a simple case of the tyranny of the majority.

The Resolution was aimed at forcing the Judiciary to rule on the apparent ambiguity of Article XII, Section 1: whether said section be understood as both houses voting separately or both houses voting jointly which is the interpretation of the majority of the House.

But will the Filipino people go for a charter change at this point in time? No! Will the Filipino people go for the extension of the term of Mrs. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo? No! Will the people go for the removal of nationalist provisions protecting our national sovereignty and patrimony? No!

The massive, unorganized and spontaneous outpouring of people braving the inclement weather lining the funeral route of President Aquino was as much as a show of respect and love for the dead president as it was a show of protest against the incumbent who is generally perceived to be the exact opposite of Cory.

Gloria and her minions may well have to take their cue from that. 

HERS KORY

Putting a Face to the Case

Stories of Suffering, Struggle and Success

The Story of Eva Wulandari

She is Eva Wulandari. She is single and has one older sister and two younger brothers. She came to Hong Kong because she wanted to earn money for the family and help support her brothers' schooling.

Eva arrived in Hong Kong on June 2, 2009 through her agency the Overseas Employment Center Ltd. Since she could


not speak Cantonese or English, her agency provided Cantonese training lessons. However, she only managed to understand simple Cantonese but still could not express her own thoughts. This situation made the communication between her and her employer very difficult, especially with the older sister of her employer, Ah Yi*.

Ah Yi treated her badly. One day, Ah Yi approached Eva who was ironing clothes. Since Eva was not ironing properly, Ah Yi put the flat iron on Eva's arm. She felt excruciating pain but kept quiet. After Ah Yi left, Eva went to throw away the garbage and met an Indonesian domestic helper who saw her burned arm. The domestic helper assisted Eva to report both to the police and Eva's agency.

The police accompanied Eva back to her

employer's home to get her clothes. She then went to the hospital to treat the wound. Eva was thankful to the domestic helper who stayed with her the whole time. She was then brought by the police to a shelter until her agency's staff picked her up.

Staying in the agency's office for a week, Eva had to live on HK\$50 the agency gave her for three days to spend. When she asked for more, the agency loaned her HK\$60. Eva finally met Atki in the agency. Atki became her friend and brought her to the Bethune House on June 21.

Eva went to the Kwun Tong Magistrate Court to give evidence on behalf of the prosecution on July 20, 2009. She did not say anything as the defendant pleaded guilty. Eva wanted her to go to prison but felt sorry for Ah Yi as the latter would not have a good life in prison. Eva expressed happiness and relief after the whole trial was over. She said it was painful to go through the experience over and over but was happy in the end that justice was served. She was also happy to be in Bethune House and have met many friends. 

* not her real name



A Painful Reminder.

This was the fresh wound that Eva Wulandari carried with her through the course of the trial. It has completely healed.



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