

Mobilizing Care Work Amid Uncertain and Unequal Times: The Linked Lives of Filipino Domestic Workers in Hong Kong

Cheryll Alipio, PhD (Stanford University)
calipio@stanford.edu

As a top migration destination, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China has long relied upon the care work of overseas Filipino workers with one in seven households employing what is commonly known as domestic helpers (Kok 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has led Hong Kong to institute some of the world's most stringent government responses, including school closures, travel restrictions, bans on public gatherings, emergency investments in healthcare facilities, new forms of social welfare provision, contact tracing, and lengthy compulsory quarantine (Hale et al. 2021).

Despite little evidence suggesting these workers are responsible for virus transmission within the household (Cruz et al. 2020), they are at high risk of infection by SARS-CoV-2 due to the international mobility required by their occupation (Yu et al. 2022) and the childcare, eldercare, and diverse household tasks they perform for Hong Kong families (Wang 2021). As a result, domestic workers face intense health surveillance and infectious disease control, which has deepened their experiences of discrimination and vulnerability. Existing social and structural inequalities, such as a mandatory policy requiring domestic workers to live-in with their employers, has led to some involuntary immobility and of increased workloads and childcare burdens as children stay at home and parents telework.

For example, during Hong Kong's fourth COVID-19 wave that started in November 2020 and resulted in the extended closure of all kindergartens and primary and secondary schools, some working parents leaned more on domestic workers to share parenting responsibilities and to supervise and monitor schoolwork as they juggled working from home or going into the office. Shiela Tebia-Bonifacio, the chairwoman of Gabriela Hong Kong, an organization that supports Filipinas in Hong Kong, found that on top of their household chores, many domestic workers looked after children, even finding ways "to keep the children busy, such as doing artwork, baking, anything to keep them occupied so they don't bug their parents who are working" (Westbrook 2020). In the effort to create a stable structure that would otherwise be provided by parents or the school environment, domestic workers have the added burden of ensuring the emotional well-being of children and youth, who may variously feel isolated, frustrated, stressed, or overwhelmed by the challenges of online learning and being confined to their homes.

Consequently, not only do we witness how the restrictions placed on young people's physical mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic impacts personal wellness, but we also see how the movements of migrant workers are being curtailed and policed to the detriment of their health and human rights (Yu and Keralis 2020). Due to the integral and indispensable nature of domestic workers in Hong Kong households, their social and economic mobility in navigating work and living conditions is often stymied and tempered by the needs of the children and families they take care of. Arguably, these experiences are not limited to Filipino domestic workers or even international migrants. Indeed, as described above, the pandemic has engendered physical, psychological, and emotional distress and socioeconomic strain that Hong Kong citizens also have to contend with.

On the one hand, the "linked lives" connecting domestic workers both to their left-behind families and children in the Philippines and to the young and elderly household members they care for in Hong Kong is palpable (Mulder 2018). We see the reciprocal relationship of the linked lives of domestic workers and families in Hong Kong through Hongkongers' desperation to bring in new workers for their families, their concern over delays due to COVID-19 restrictions, their anxiety in securing quarantine spots for hired workers, and their frustration with flight suspensions and vaccine documentation (Magramo 2021; Yeo 2020). On the other hand, the stress on family resources and of maintaining job security in Hong Kong and the Philippines demonstrates the intricate and intimate nature of these interdependent and intergenerational, linked lives. With their families' well-being and quality of life contingent on each other's mobility, the lives of domestic workers and their Hong Kong employers are seemingly lived in "someone else's hands" (Alipio 2019).

Governance around public health and the migrant labor market during COVID-19 is therefore tightly interlinked. Given this coupled system, greater public awareness of worker rights and employer responsibilities, notably that of rest days and healthcare, is imperative, alongside recognition and inclusion of their changing and dual needs in policies and measures that impact mobile populations who play an essential and critical role in the care work of children and families, particularly in uncertain and unequal times.

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Author Biography

Cheryll Alipio is Associate Director for Program and Policy at Stanford University's Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center. An economic and medical anthropologist, her work spans children and youth, migration and development, labor and governance, and care work and health. Cheryll is co-editor of *Money and Moralities in Contemporary Asia* (Amsterdam University Press), *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science's* special issue on "Transitioning to Adulthood in Asia," *Children's Geographies's* special section on "Asian Children and Transnational Migration," and *Journal of Modern Slavery's* special edition on "New Approaches to Understand and Address Contemporary Forms of Slavery."

Author contact: Cheryll Alipio, PhD (Stanford University), calipio@stanford.edu

To cite this article: Alipio, Cheryll. 2022. "Mobilizing Care Work Amid Uncertain and Unequal Times: The Linked Lives of Filipino Domestic Workers in Hong Kong." *NEOS* 14 (2).

To link to this article: <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol14iss2fall22/alipio>