

Hungry Cinderellas in Hong Kong

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After Sunday service, Eddy (whose name has been changed) came to meet me for a chat. Sunday is her only holiday. Actually, it is not just a holiday, but her only free day of the week. It is not even a full free day however; she has to go back to her employer's home by dinner time. Eddy is like Cinderella in the children's fairy tale who has to be home by midnight (as referred to by author Pei-Chia Lan in 'Global Cinderellas'). Eddy would get a warning letter from her employer if she was late, while Cinderella's magic would wear off.

On that rainy Sunday, Eddy looked tired but she smiled at me. She told me that on Sundays she has to go back to her employer's home before 9pm. As her employer's family was on holiday at present, one of her relatives had come to lock the door after Eddy left the house in the morning, and would return at night to let Eddy in. Once she is in the house, the door will be locked again. Even while on vacation, Eddy's employer does not give her the house keys.

It has been over 10 years since Eddy came to Hong Kong with only her passport in her hand and hope in her mind. She was well educated in her home country, and worked as a nurse in the Middle East before deciding to be a domestic worker in Hong Kong to make more money. She is certainly making more money than what she earned as a nurse, not because Hong Kong society is generous or even honest enough to offer reasonable payment to migrant workers, but simply due to the currency exchange rate. In return for this extra money, Eddy has had to sacrifice her dignity, freedom and pride.

Eddy's contract with her current employer began last year. Her previous employer paid her HKD 4,000 a month, together with a HKD 400 food allowance, while she is currently paid HKD 3,580 with free food at home. Her current salary is the minimum wage for foreign domestic workers announced by the Hong Kong government. According to government regulations, employers should either provide food to the workers or pay them a food allowance, which is also stated in their employment contracts. Over the 10 years she has been in Hong Kong, **Eddy notes that the minimum wage has never been raised; rather, it has been lowered.** Some employers pay more than this, others pay less. How the government defines 'minimum' is unknown, although HKD 3580 is seen more as the maximum wage the Hong Kong government and employers can accept to pay out and the minimum wage the foreign domestic workers can accept to earn.

The other official minimum in her life is the HKD 300, which the immigration department states the food allowance should not be less than. Others say that a new contract should include HKD 500 for food allowance.

I have lost weight since I came to Hong Kong. On Sundays I have to buy some snacks to fill my hungry stomach. I have some of these snacks as I feel hungry even after meals. I am given food at home after all family members finish their meal. My employer's mother in law gives me some food. One small piece of fish with rice if they had fish for meal, two or three pieces of chicken bone if they had chicken for meal... it is never enough. However, I have to eat what they give me without complaints. Sunday is the only day I can go out. I then buy snacks with money from my pocket. I cook for the family but never go for marketing. I cook things that my employer buys from the market. I am never allowed to go out alone during the week.

The food allowance has not been seriously considered by the government or the employers. As a result, the minimum allowance has not improved with the influx of foreign domestic workers. Although Eddy's employer decided to provide food for her at home, she does not consider either quality or quantity, giving her only a small portion of leftovers. How can anyone work all day long with a hungry stomach? How can you manage a month's supply of nutritious food with only HKD 300 in Hong Kong? The cooking facilities provided by the employer are of little use when there is not enough money to buy ingredients to cook.

Eddy is not a slave or servant in the Middle Ages, and nor is Hong Kong society living in the Middle Ages. The minimum wage standard should be a criterion of a reasonable and healthy society, not a means for exploitation and indifference. The HKD 300 food allowance for foreign domestic workers exposes the Hong Kong government's apathy on their food security.

A year ago, I met an 18-year-old girl at Manila's international airport. She looked excited as she said good bye to her friends. She spoke to me standing behind her in the check-in queue.

I have been dreaming to go to Hong Kong for years. I have saved and borrowed money to pay for the agency to obtain a two year-employment contract. I will work hard and make lots of money in Hong Kong. I am not afraid of anything. I have a dream in my life. You are my first Hong Kong friend, what is your name?

The dreaming young girl might be on her way to a society of the Middle Ages. She might become another hungry Cinderella. Eddy too at one time had a passport in her hand and dream in her mind, but her passport is kept by her employer, and her dream faded amidst the pangs of a hungry stomach. Eddy plans to leave Hong Kong for a better working environment. All she will remember of Hong Kong are hunger and locked doors.