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State-sponsored stigma and discrimination: female Indonesian migrants in Hong Kong during the Pandemic

Irfan Wahyudi^a, Rachmah Ida^a, Panizza Allmark^{id}^b and Sri Endah Kinasih^a

^aFaculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia; ^bSchool of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 Pandemic has critically affected migrant workers' social wellbeing in host countries. In Hong Kong, migrant workers who work in domestic sectors are facing stricter rules that may be considered discriminatory, such as the Hong Kong government's claim that migrants are at 'high risk' for infection, because of their habit of 'mingling' with other migrant workers. The official messaging positions migrant workers as 'virus carriers', this further results in the increase of mental, physical and social exclusion for migrants, in particular female Indonesian domestic migrant workers, who are a vulnerable and marginalized group. This article focuses on how the COVID-19 messaging that came from the Hong Kong government increased the stigma and discrimination towards domestic migrant workers and to provide some examples of the activist responses to the stigmatization through the rise of non-state actors.

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Background

Hong Kong is considered one of the toughest cities in the world in applying COVID-19 restriction policies (Ng and Cheng 2023). In early 2020, the authorities were tightening restrictions and following Mainland China's policy in eliminating the virus rather than to live with it, referred to as the 'Zero COVID policy' which involves mass testing, quarantine, social distancing measures and border controls. Responding to the rules, Hong Kong residents enacted a 'dramatic exodus' during the first 2 years of the Pandemic (Guzman 2022). In October 2022, it was recorded that more than 100 thousand people left Hong Kong (Palmer 2022). The restrictive conditions were not only affecting Hong Kong residents but also affecting the many migrant workers in Hong Kong, who represent around 10% of the population (Leung 2019). Many migrant workers could not leave the country due to work commitments, financial constraints, or government restrictions. For example, with the commencement of the first COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the Indonesian Government called on their migrant workers (which are the second biggest group of domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong) 'not to return home, and to stay where they are' (Chew 2020). Moreover, on 30 January 2020, the Hong Kong Labour Department's press

release ‘appealed to foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) to stay home on their rest day in order to safeguard their personal health and to reduce the rise of the spread of the novel coronavirus in the community’. Many employers enforced this ‘appeal’ and restricted the mobility of their live-in migrant (foreign) domestic worker, whereas the employers and their families still had freedom of movement. Most of the migrant workers in Hong Kong are female and take on ‘traditional’ women’s role in the home such as cleaning and care-giving, which has freed Hong Kong women to enter the professional workplace. But, during the Pandemic, the female migrant domestic workers were isolated in the country and trapped in the homes where they lived and worked. This is despite the fact that Hong Kong had no city-wide official lockdowns. It seems that through the analysis of government policies, media reports and the voices of migrant workers advocates that in Hong Kong, COVID-19 exposed ‘the different treatments toward migrant workers regarding health protection, between essential and non-essential workers who work in dangerous, dirty, and demanding jobs’ (Iberahim and Abadi 2022, 150). Migrant workers became the targets of this strict policy and were positioned as ‘virus carriers’ (HRWG 2021), 37). Furthermore, as HRWG notes, ‘there has been a long-established discriminatory urban myth that migrant domestic workers are unhygienic, which has been amplified by the media coverage and the governments neglect to protect them’ (HRWG 2021, 27).

A key goal of this article is to draw attention to the stigmatization of female Indonesian migrant workers (FIMs) in Hong Kong during COVID-19 and to provide some examples of the activist responses to stigmatization through the rise of non-state actors. As Maulina and Abadi suggest ‘the role of non-state actors who collectively acted and formed social movements . . . is vital, especially in the context of humanitarian assistance, in responding to the growing needs of migrant workers.’ (2022, 174). In this study, in-depth interviews were performed through purposive sampling. The participants were chosen due to their activist roles for Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong. For this research, two Indonesian organization leaders in Hong Kong were interviewed, the chairperson of the International Migrant Alliance and the coordinator of the Indonesian Migrant Worker Union (IMWU). Furthermore, five FIMs were also interviewed. The interviews were conducted from May 2021 until October 2022, by voice and video calls.

The lives of female migrant workers in Hong Kong cannot be separated from the global discourse of female migrant labour (Piper, Rosewarne, and Withers 2017; Silvey and Parreñas 2020). There is a demand for female migrants from developing countries for care and domestic work, which adheres to the gendered and raced stereotypes of being subservient. Labour migration is exceedingly gendered; subsequently, there is gender inequality that leaves women open to exploitation not only by work agencies but also by government authorities and the laws they have produced.

Hong Kong’s competitive wages and supporting policies for migrant domestic workers are becoming reinforcing factors that attract migrant domestic workers (Briones 2009; Ignacio and Mejia 2009; Smales 2010). However, difficult policies regarding the obligation to live in and the two-week rule, in which FDWs need to leave Hong Kong after the end of a contract, are major concerns that place migrant domestic workers in vulnerable positions, especially when dealing with their employer and their work agency. Fortunately, in Hong Kong the right of migrants to unite is acknowledged, and migrant activism has become a common activity that is also used as a tool to advocate migrant rights. The use of communication facilities such as mobile phones is also recognized as the way in which

activism is carried out (Gillett 2003; Meikle 2002; Pickerill 2004), although not all employers permit their workers to use such devices. Furthermore, access to official information about COVID-19 virus from the Hong Kong government was limited. “Although the Labour Department has a dedicated website about foreign domestic workers, which can be translated into 12 languages, the information that is translated is not all up-to date” (HRWG 2021, 27). Many migrant domestic workers use social media for information and it seems that the Government did not translate COVID-19 information onto this platform (HRWG 2021, 28).

Migrant workers in Hong Kong, especially female domestic migrant workers, who make up the majority of migrant workers, were experiencing discrimination long before the pandemic (Blackburn 2004; Constable 2014; Hsia 2009; Killias 2009; Sim 2007; Wahyudi and Allmark 2020). Their existence in the host country was always problematic in various ways such as issues with work contracts, work agencies, low wage levels, poor employer treatment, etc. Many migrant workers were aware of the potential issues but still endure the conditions due to their strong financial needs. Eni Lestari, a migrant worker and activist, claims that:

We are amongst the most exploited and most abused workers. Like most of you, I also wanted education, prosperity and dignity. Similar to others, I quickly found that the promise of a better income and future were just fiction. Debt, exploitation and the denial of human rights are the realities of a system that promotes export and exploitation of migrant labour. (Lestari, pers. comm., 2015)

In February 2015, Eni Lestari delivered the above sentiments during her speech at the UN headquarters in New York, U.S.A. Lestari’s speech represents the voice of her colleagues: female Indonesian migrants in Hong Kong in search of justice and equitable lives. Notably, FIMs ‘are preferred by the majority Chinese population in Hong Kong because they are trained to speak Cantonese by recruitment agencies are considered submissive and are willing to work overtime’ (Allmark and Wahyudi 2016, 25). However, during the Pandemic they were exposed to harsher working conditions, when foreign domestic workers were labelled by the Government as a high-risk group. This has created a fear in the local population towards migrant domestic workers as potential disease transmitters.

Hong Kong is home for around 350 thousand foreign domestic workers (FDWs). The majority of these workers come from Indonesia and the Philippines. The Hong Kong policy forbids domestic workers referred to as ‘helpers’ staying outside their employer’s house (the live-in rule). The mandatory live-in rule for domestic workers has been highly criticized as a form of ‘segregation and social control’ (Kolo 2017). Domestic workers are generally forced to live in cramped conditions. The average flat for an entire family is around 43 square metres ‘which is half the average size of flats in American cities such as New York’ or the size of a large hotel room (Kolo 2017). ‘Many domestic workers don’t have a private room or reasonable space in their employers’ house’ (Agarwal 2022). Alongside the cramped conditions, under Hong Kong law, domestic workers are only allowed 1 day a week for leave. In a six-day working week and working from home, workers are also expected to be available to their employer on call, as such they have very little time (and space) on their own.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the live-in policy was used by employers to control domestic workers inside the house, this is despite the fact that in Hong Kong there has been

no official lock downs. Government officials, such as The Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Law Chi-Kwong, supported the notion that ‘foreign domestic workers are a highrisk group and even suggested that employers should keep their workers at home on their days off by paying them’ (Chan and Piper 2022, 279). As highlighted earlier, the Government recommended that FDWs should be encouraged to stay at home on their only rest day and many employers took this recommendation as law and forbade their FDW from leaving the house on their rest day (Lui et al. 2021, 4). For example:

Antonio Villa, an interior designer who lived in Hong Kong for ten years, had employed three FDWs during the lockdown. He said that he just allowed them to buy food but not to go out on Sundays because he thought they could potentially bring the virus home by gathering with other FDWs on the streets. (Guatri 2022)

Working hours for FDWs increased and are on average ‘14–19 [hours] per day because families and children are staying at home’ (Agarwal 2022). Employers considered their domestic worker to be dirty and vulnerable to spreading infection, and this view is supported by the Hong Kong government declaring foreign migrant workers as a high-risk group (Chan and Piper 2022; Wang 2021; Wong 2021). Domestic workers have a role in safeguarding and ensuring a sanitized home, yet they are stigmatized as possible carriers of COVID. They were deemed safe, if they did not venture outside the home. ‘Hong Kong employers generally held the idea that if workers attended gatherings, they were likely to contract the virus. Yet, the employers themselves went out for work five or six days a week, and also enjoyed meals at restaurants or invited friends home for fun’ (Chan and Piper 2022, 279). There was a double standard enacted based on class, race, and power. There was a freedom of movement for the local population and restricted mobility and interaction for foreign domestic workers. This double standard is an example of the segregation and social control of FDWs.

The Government COVID-19 messaging targeted migrant domestic workers as a high-risk group for spreading Covid-19. In early 2021, ‘the Hong Kong government ordered virtually all of the city’s 370,000 migrant domestic workers – mostly Southeast Asian women in an otherwise largely racially homogeneous city – to take corona virus tests and vaccines. Officials said they were “high risk” for infection, because of their habit of “mingling” with other migrant workers’ (Wang 2021). The ‘urban myth’ or false belief that migrant domestic workers are unhygienic was coming into play. ‘FDWs have repeatedly been urged by the government to comply with social distancing measures and stay home on their rest days, with no less than 15 press releases issued over the course of 2020 concerning the matter’ (Lui et al. 2021, 5). The repeated messaging and restrictions on migrant workers further sought to restrict the lives and well-being of these essential workers.

Many migrant domestic workers considered that they were stigmatized, during the Pandemic. The Asian Migrant Coordinating Body (AMCB) called the mandatory vaccine as a way to single out migrant workers and blame them for the spread of the COVID virus in Hong Kong (Syakriah 2021). Sringatin, the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) coordinator in Hong Kong said that she received reports that FIMs were stigmatized in public parks, while they were enjoying their rest days on Sunday. She said: ‘the [local] citizens were yelling at us while we are in parks. Confronting as we are the virus carrier. They get these ideas from the government. They stigmatized us’ (Sringatin, pers. comm., 2021).

The situation of domestic migrant workers was further worsened when infected workers were abandoned outside the homes they once worked in. Their job contracts were terminated immediately. They were left homeless and jobless during the crisis. Chan & Piper assert that 'infected workers were being treated like dirt' (2022, p. 277). Domestic workers were being made homeless, due to Covid fears, even though there are rules that dismissing a domestic worker for being sick could lead to prosecution and a fine up to HKD 100,000. Employers tended to disobey the rules. Migrant advocacy groups have been notifying the employer that termination of their employee, who has Covid-19, is an illegal act. The employer also has a moral duty to provide a home for their 'helpers', who have provided vital care for their families, and in some cases were even considered part of the family. Yet during the Pandemic they were being abandoned. The Mission for Migrant Workers, a charity which assists with finding free temporary accommodation, had said that demand for accommodation was 'spiking from those whose contracts have been terminated' (Knott 2020). The many welfare policies in Hong Kong 'omit migrant domestic workers' (Chau 2023). As such, the role of the advocacy community for FDWs is essential in the provision of assistance.

Pandemic migrant workers were not only faced with being homeless but their mobility was being controlled. Migrant workers faced steep fines for socially gathering during their rest days or for mask-wearing violations. The Hong Kong government applied the two-person gathering limit as a health protocol. The fines for violations can be as much as HKD 10,000 or USD \$1281. This is twice the number of domestic worker's wage per month, and it has the potential for severe financial impacts. This situation affected the well-being of domestic migrant workers, who were already vulnerable to exploitation and abuse prior to the Pandemic (Allmark and Wahyudi 2016). A key NGO in the region, The Human Rights Working Group (HRWG) asserts that the policies had a detrimental impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in Hong Kong (2020). They further claim that the appeals by the Government that single out migrant workers 'appear to be discriminatory' (HRWG 2021, 30). 'It is harmful to domestic workers', mental and physical health ...' (HRWG 20,220, 31).

Societal stigma

The COVID-19 stigma towards migrant workers has occurred in Hong Kong as well as in Indonesia. It has been reported that the 'Coronavirus stigma runs deep and dangerous in Indonesia' (Lamb and Widiyanto 2020). It seems that when the Indonesian migrant workers were allowed to return home, they were deemed a vulnerable group, re-entering their Country in a time where there were great fears of the spreading of COVID-19. In the first year of the Pandemic 'many of them had been accused of being diseased vectors, bringing the virus to their neighbourhoods' (Djafar 2023, 27). But, as Djafar asserts that due to government initiatives, 'the dominance of the local transmission of COVID-19 indicates that the stigma for the returning migrants as COVID-19 carriers was not necessarily true.' (2023, 5). The Indonesian government initiatives for returning migrant workers included:

innovative financial schemes, the Government's plan focused on reintegration of workers, as well as the mitigation of social exclusion pressures in both the upstream (return from abroad) and downstream (return to their respective villages) phases for returning migrants. These actions boosted implementation of Law No. 18 Year 2017 on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, enhancing the role of local governments, villages, and communities in their respective migration management roles. This made migration-related services more effective, and brought delivery of benefits closer to returned migrant workers. (Azis 2021, iv)

A possible impact of these implementations is, as Harjana et al state, that 'the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress among repatriated Indonesian migrant workers was relatively low compared to the general population'. (2021, 1)

In many parts of the world, 'the stigma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have become more terrible than the virus itself' (Sulistiadi, Slamet, and Harmani 2020, 70). There was a need for the Government to increase public understanding about the spread of the virus to reduce public angst. However, the fear and worry of contracting the virus has also resulted in stigmatization of community members, such as health workers and COVID-19 patients and their families. As Sulistiadi et al. have indicated "the level of stigma associated with COVID-19 is based on three main factors: 1) the disease is new and many factors remain unknown; 2) we are often afraid of the unknown; and 3) the fear of the unknown can easily be associated with 'others' (2020, 73–74). In Hong Kong, migrant workers are constructed as 'others'. Aside from being foreign born, FIMs are , generally, poorly educated with low wages, they practice a different religion (many Indonesian domestic workers are Muslim) and as such are socially and culturally othered. It seems from prevailing reports that in Hong Kong, the domestic migrant worker is positioned as an 'other'. Domestic migrant workers have testified that 'they are being subjected to racist attacks, shaming and consistent discrimination, not only in their employer's home but also in the City in general' (Ladegaard 2022, 97).

The stigma of a migrant-related disease

There is a correlation between health risks and stigma, particularly in those with high-risk illnesses. Stigma has been explored globally as a barrier to health-seeking behaviour, engagement in care, and observance of treatment across various ranges of health conditions (see Corrigan 2004; Link and Hatzenbuehler 2016; Link and Phelan 2001; Scott et al. 2015; Stangl et al. 2019). According to Ervin Goffman (1963) stigma is a labelled and distinguished difference that enables varieties of discrimination that reject or deny full social acceptance. Stigma can minimize individual's opportunities, and results in social inequalities in the community. 'As stigma encompasses devaluation, degradation, and discrimination it is intimately connected to processes of social inequality' (Link, Phelan, and Hatzenbuehler 2014, 49). Significantly, in times of crisis, there is a 'historical tendency to conflate the spread of infectious disease with the innate characteristics of foreigners and members of racial/ethnic minority groups' (McCauley, Minsky, and Viswanath 2013, 14).

Migrant work is perceived as one of high risk to infectious disease by the society not only by the State, and this also been a long-standing topic by the Indonesian media. 'Jobs such as truck drivers, sailors, soldiers, and migrant workers, those who frequently far away from home and stay for longer in other places are

a high-risk group' (Puspitasari 2012). A stigma is applied to people or groups according to specific health condition or other perceived differences such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and occupation. Thus, migrant workers, particularly women, are marked with multiple stigmas as a domestic worker, migrant, and women.

Migrant workers are a vulnerable community in host countries. The cost of COVID-19 care is not covered by the host country (Collins 2020; Vearey, Hui, and Wickramage 2020) and they face health barriers (ECDC 2020). According to Koh (2020), migrant workers in host countries are without access to COVID-19 health access services, including swab tests. The global lack of health responses and a low economic situation have resulted with a high proportion of migrants being disproportionately affected during the Pandemic (OECD 2022). Migrant workers are stigmatized as 'parameters' of the spread of infectious viruses (Banerjee, Kosagisharaf, and Rao 2021; Bhanot et al. 2021; Chopra and Arora 2020; Mukumbang 2021; Ransing et al. 2020; World Health Organization 2020; Xu et al. 2021). This stigma of migrant workers as disease 'carriers' has occurred to migrant workers in Asian countries, such as Nepali workers in India (Regmi et al. 2022); Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore (Anaf et al. 2022; Chan and Piper 2022); and Indonesian migrant workers in mainland China (Liem et al. 2021). This stigma, is not just associated with COVID-19, but has previously been related to other health-related outbreaks such as HIV, tuberculosis, and SARS (Iversen et al. 2020; Lyu and Quang 2022). As such, the COVID-19 stigma is an example of the latest form of stigmatization, but in this pandemic migrant workers have had much stricter controls and surveillance.

Social life, social media and discrimination

The pandemic has challenged FIMs' well-being in Hong Kong. Through unpopular policies in handling COVID-19, the Hong Kong government targeted migrant workers. Domestic migrant workers are placed under the spotlight as a group that the Hong Kong people need to be alarmed and aware of as potential virus carriers. The notion that domestic workers' are a high risk is one of the most criticized by migrant organizations in Hong Kong. The FIMs are among those who are calling for a full cancellation on the mandatory vaccination as migrant organization called it as a discriminatory act (Syakriah 2021). The policy announced on 9 May 2021, soon after one Philippines worker tested positive for a COVID a week earlier. The mandatory vaccination was supported by many employers but strongly opposed by workers. Dolores Baladares, an AMCB activist, said that government officials should set an example for the people about how to treat others with respect and dignity, and not to put any group of society in position where they are target of discrimination (Taylor 2022). Furthermore, Eni Lestari, chairperson of International Migrant Alliance said, the 'Hong Kong government unfairly blames migrant domestic workers for the spread of coronavirus and is fanning the negative sentiment against migrant domestic workers' (Lestari, pers. comm., 2021). In response to the policy and how the locals treat migrants during the pandemic, Sringatin said: 'stop stigmatizing and discriminating against migrant workers. During the pandemic, they suffered greatly were prohibited from taking holidays outside the home. On holidays they were accused of spreading the virus, were intimidated and discriminated against, and were not given any assistance during the Pandemic' (Sringatin, pers. comm., 2021).

As migrant domestic workers are obliged to live and work in the employer's home, FIMs time to socialize outside the workplace provide is necessary for their well-being. As FIMs are obliged to work a six-day working week, their day off is a time to relax, socialize and run personal errands. It also allows them to physically distance themselves from the employer's home and family. In Hong Kong, many FIMs share bedrooms with children or elderly members of the family. If they are fortunate to have their own room the FIMs space is usually very small, due to the relatively small dimensions in Hong Kong apartment living. The Pandemic has further enhanced and exposed many of these underlying human right conditions, such as 'job security, discrimination and abuse' (Lui et al. 2021, 5). The government messaging further deepened the physical and social isolations of FIMs.

Nevertheless, FIM's life in Hong Kong is dynamic and offers opportunity to engage in a lifestyle she may not encounter in her homeland. The FIMs' congregating in public areas has strengthened their visibility in the Hong Kong community and in turn has empowered their ability to meet with other FIMs on a weekly basis to overcome the feeling of isolation. Female migrant workers channel their sense of belonging and solidarity in the form of migrant activism and mobilization in street protests or weekly migrant domestic worker meetings. During the Pandemic, these actions have been restricted. However, FIMs can still channel their concerns through the use of the internet, if allowed. It has been reported that some employers curb access to smartphones and other Information Communication Technology (ICT) of their employee (Wahyudi and Allmark 2020).

Communication technologies are utilized by FIMs to communicate with their families in their homeland and also share their concerns with the public, especially regarding the nature of their rights as migrant workers. Smartphones are considered the ideal device for FIMs for keeping in contact via the Internet. Smartphones provide the opportunity for interaction with the outside world, self-empowerment, and engagement with the local community and interest groups. Communication technology is crucial for domestic workers who spend most of their time in a household with no direct access to the outside world, and this is especially significant during the Pandemic.

The use of smartphones and other devices has allowed FIMs to move further in communicating about relevant migrant causes and gaining support from other migrants. At the same time, communication technology offers personal relief and individual enjoyment for IMDWs who have limited time and access to the world outside their workplace. FIMs are capable of performing online activism despite their demanding work schedules. FIMs' online activities have brought significant results in the improvement of social interactions and, most importantly, in the acknowledgement of their rights as migrant workers. This is an opportunity for media activism to serve in advocacy movements for FIMs. The isolated condition of FIMs is not a barrier for them to be actively involved in migrant movements and to reject oppression in the workplace.

With communication technologies, FIMs are voicing their concerns. In May 2021, Sringatin, a FIM activist started an online campaign through her Facebook account to fight the COVID-19 stigma. She urged her friends and fellow migrants to wear a red symbol on Sunday, 16 May 2021 as a protest sign. She wrote: 'wear the red attribute. R E D: Resist, Exclusion, Discrimination. Wherever you are, to show our resistance and rejection to the policy that discriminates our migrant community' (Sring Atin 2021). She also uploaded a picture with a white background and a red colour ribbon with the words: 'let's fight COVID-19 together. We are not virus spreaders, stop stigmatizing migrant

domestic workers' (Sring Atin 2021). Her Facebook status was liked 333 times, with 65 comments and 41 shares. Moreover, Eni Lestari, International Migrant Alliance chairperson, organized a talk show with fellow organization members. The title was "Know Your Rights: What are our rights an obligation during the Pandemic. The talk show conducted on Thursday, 20 May 2022 through Zoom ran for 2 hours from 9.30 pm to 11.30 pm. These were ideal hours for migrants to access the show, as it is generally after they finish their daily work in their households. The talk show invited human rights attorneys and activists from Hong Kong. The talk show engaged with Hong Kong locals that had sympathy for their plight. Eni moderated the talk show in English and provided Indonesian language translators. This is an example of how FIMs were actively using ICTs not only to voice their concerns about the stigma they were forced to endure but also an opportunity to educate fellow migrants on their rights during the Pandemic.

Organisation and media activism

Organizations developed by migrant workers in Hong Kong are playing crucial roles in the negotiation process with the government during COVID-19. In fact, the organization's role in migrant life settings in Hong Kong is significant in the process of information dissemination and in the campaign management. Migrant workers' right to join unions is acknowledged in Hong Kong, where migrant activism is usually channelled through such organizations. As advised by Briones (2009), these organizations positioned as protectors of migrant workers, and aim to raise public awareness and influence government policy on the matter of labour rules. Furthermore, FIM organizations in Hong Kong not only facilitated migrant workers in achieving their rights; they also take on major roles in the activities of FIMs in Hong Kong by creating numerous events and meetings in Hong Kong's public places.

Organizations have performed their role as legal defenders and advocates for FIMs and have expanded their networks to include international NGOs. Cooperation with Filipino migrant workers is also a noteworthy part of their strong alliances. Further, activists have managed and created their own means of activism to create a sense of empowerment and protection for their fellow migrant workers. During the pandemic, organizations actively assist and help migrant domestic workers. The Indonesian Migrant Workers Network or JBMI, for example, is helping homeless migrants who lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Lestari said that since their employers refuse to let them inside the house, these migrants left stranded. She said: 'employers have many reasons to not let us in. for example they are afraid the workers carrying virus inside the house, or employer suspects worker to have COVID symptoms' (Lestari, pers. comm., 2022).

There was a lack of adequate support and protection provided for migrant domestic workers by the Hong Kong government. As Lui, et al. (2021, 4–5) argue, the Hong Kong government has not provided adequate quarantine sites for foreign domestic migrant workers, there is also the lack of health information provided alongside a lack of personal protective equipment for those that were quarantining. Furthermore, the government has endorsed the limiting of opportunities for social interaction outside the home, particularly for domestic migrant workers. As such, 'several NGOs in Hong Kong call for the government to implement measures to check and provide acceptable living standards of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) during the COVID-19 pandemic' (Guatri 2022).

Closing

During the beginning and height of the Pandemic migrant workers in Hong Kong faced numerous challenges, such as travel restrictions, quarantine measures, job insecurity and inadequate access to health care. It seemed they faced amplified forms of control and surveillance. The stigmatization of FDWs during the Pandemic has impacted the already precarious lives of this marginalized group. 'Staying at home means living at work', and as such for FDWs there is little opportunity to practice social distancing from their employer (Chan 2020). 'The ability to practice social distancing in your own space, without the presence of your boss, is no less important a privilege' (Chan 2020). However, for many FDWs and particularly FIMs who are perceived as subservient, their ability to access space outside their household is limited and as they remained in the home, some were expected to work on their rest day. As such, they were exposed to exploitation in the workplace and restricted freedom of movement. If they were permitted to venture out, they were often the targets of verbal abuse. The act of state-sponsored stigma and discrimination has been a result of the Hong Kong government's messaging that they were a high-risk group, as COVID-19 is perceived as a migrant related disease. The significance of grass-roots migrant organizations in helping the affected FIMs is important. Additionally, migrant activism in using social media is effective in campaign against discrimination and advocating the revision of the policy made by the Hong Kong government. This brings our recommendation for the Hong Kong government to include migrant organizations in making any policies that affect the migrant worker community in Hong Kong.

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ORCID

Panizza Allmark  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6910-6511>

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