



BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Many Indonesian women arriving in Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia to work as maids are facing not the well-paid jobs they were promised, but abuse and exploitation.

Words by **Joanna Tovia**

Like most women lured to work as domestic helpers in well-to-do Hong Kong households, Kartika Puspitasari had a dream: to get a good job so she could send money back home to Indonesia to support her family. That dream evaporated soon after she arrived in Hong Kong. The husband and wife she now answered to took her passport away and forbade her from leaving their apartment unless they were with her. But that was only the beginning.

Puspitasari endured conditions all too common in wealthy Asian and Gulf State countries, where Indonesian maids are favoured over those from other developing nations because they are reputed to be less educated, obedient and can be paid less.

During the two years she worked in Hong Kong, Puspitasari was locked in the apartment when her employers went out and was neither paid nor given a day off.

Not only was she beaten with a metal bike chain and scalded with a hot iron, she was forced to sleep on the floor of the kitchen with her arms and legs tied together to prevent her escaping. After being punished for scavenging food scraps, she resolved to run away and eventually escaped from the bathroom she was shut in.

Doctors later found scars and abrasions on Puspitasari's back, burn marks, and bruises to her face. In 2013, the abusive husband and wife were sentenced to three and five years in prison, respectively.

If only this case were a one-off. In January 2014, 23-year-old Erwiana Sulistyarningsih returned to Indonesia in a wheelchair after months of torture by her Hong Kong employer. The maid endured so much mistreatment that she couldn't walk, so her employer dropped her at the airport with the equivalent of \$8 and a ticket home to Indonesia – the only remuneration she'd received for seven months of work.

The employer was later charged with the assault of not just Sulistyarningsih, but also two other former Indonesian maids who had similar experiences.

A COMMON HORROR STORY

A recent Amnesty International (AI) report, *Exploited for Profit, Failed by Governments*, found two-thirds of the maids working in Hong Kong interviewed by AI have been subjected to physical or psychological abuse.

The slave-like conditions most endure begin before they've even left Indonesia, where government-licensed agencies recruit women from villages and send them to "training centres".

"As there is a growing demand for migrant domestic workers in the Gulf States and Asia, it is a tempting proposition for many Indonesian women, especially the rural poor where jobs are scarce," says AI Asia-Pacific migrant rights researcher Norma Kang Muico.

Recruited women spend several months in the training centres, where they are promised language lessons and classes on the customs of the country to which they are being sent. In reality, their passports are confiscated and what lessons they do get are substandard. Many women interviewed for AI's report say they were also forced to have a contraceptive injection.

If the women wanted to go home, they had to pay back thousands of dollars in fees to have their personal documents returned.

"In this way, recruitment agencies are able to coerce Indonesian women into accepting jobs with different terms and conditions of work to what they were originally promised," says Muico.

The debts continue upon arrival in Hong Kong, where they have to work to pay back the high recruitment fees paid by their employer. The report found maids worked, on average, 17 hours a day.

"Every day I worked from 5am to 2am – I never rested, never had free time and was only given breakfast and dinner," says a 25-year-old woman from Blitar who was interviewed for the report. "My employer criticised me about every aspect of my work. On top of all the domestic duties, my employer also made me work every day for two to three hours at their chicken shop."

Ninety-seven Indonesian migrant domestic workers were interviewed for

the report and the findings are supported by a survey of nearly 1000 women by the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union.

"What I came away with is their sense of survival," Muico says. "So many have endured difficult and humiliating work environments in order to pay off debts to their agency. The women know their families count on them and are determined to not let them down. This is a huge burden."

The many maids who tell their agencies about abuse are reportedly told to be patient and continue to work until they have paid back the agency fees, an all-too-often impossible task. Many never get paid at all, so the women are trapped. Maids who are sacked by their employers have to pay back an additional recruitment fee on top of the first when they secure another job.

As well as reports of beatings and sexual abuse, humiliation appears to be common. "The wife physically abused me on a regular basis," says one woman.

"Once she ordered her two dogs to bite me; I had about 10 bites on my body, which broke the skin and bled. She recorded it on her mobile phone, which she constantly played back laughing."

NO LIFELINE

Although authorities point to a raft of national laws supposed to protect these women, Muico says such laws are rarely enforced. "It is inexcusable that the Hong Kong and Indonesian governments turn a blind eye to the trafficking of thousands of vulnerable women for forced labour."

Of the more than 300,000 maids working in Hong Kong, about half are from Indonesia. Abuse is also rife in Saudi Arabia, where around 1.5 million domestic workers, many from Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, migrate for work. According to Human Rights Watch, it is the rule rather than the exception for maids to suffer verbal and physical abuse at the hands of their employers. Those who do report mistreatment have found themselves deported or, worse, risk their employers

IN HER WORDS

Lestari, 29, worked as a maid in Hong Kong from 2008 to 2012: "I was born into a very poor family. Back then, we had no income. I thought about our life and asked myself how I could change it. There was a broker who lived near me. One day, she told me there was work in Hong Kong, but only if I went quickly. She said, 'The recruitment fee will be deducted from your wages, but other than that, everything you need will be taken care of by your employer'.

"The broker promised me one million Indonesian rupiah (US\$100) as an incentive, but only gave 400,000 rupiah (US\$40) when I reached the training centre. I gave her my Indonesian ID and family certificate, which she passed on to the recruitment agency. I still haven't got them back.

"The centre was nine hours from my home. I was shocked when I got there. It was surrounded by high fences and the women had their hair cut short. They gave me a piece of paper with English writing on it. All I could read was 27 million. The staff told me, 'You have to sign this'. There were about 30 of us; we did as we were told. Afterwards, they said: 'What you have signed means if you decide to leave, then you have to pay us 27 million rupiah'.

"When I got to Hong Kong, I had problems with my first employer and was terminated within five months. I went to my agency. They told me, 'You can't go back to Indonesia because you still owe us two months' deductions'.

"My second employer lived with his extended family. The grandfather kept asking, 'Do you want to have sex with me?' At night, he would come to where I was sleeping and grope me. All I could do was keep telling him no. I just cried and cried.

"In Indonesia, migrant workers are called 'heroes'. In reality, we don't benefit from this. There is no state support for our families. The Indonesian government did not help me in Hong Kong. I was alone."



That maids are isolated in the homes of their employers makes it difficult to monitor the abuse going on.

making counter claims accusing them of witchcraft or adultery, both severely punishable in Saudi Arabia.

Indonesian domestic worker Satinah Binti Jumadi Ahmad narrowly escaped execution this year for killing her employer when the Indonesian government stepped in and helped pay US\$1.8 million in blood money to the dead woman's family.

Indonesian housemaid Darsem Binti Dawud Tawar avoided the same fate in 2011 for murdering a relative of her employer, who she says she killed in self defense when he tried to rape her, after the Indonesian government paid the required compensation.

Ruyati Binti Sapubi, also a maid who allegedly killed her employer, was not so lucky. She was beheaded in 2011. The Indonesian government later issued a moratorium on Indonesia sending domestic workers to the Gulf kingdom – a decision reversed this year in response to Saudi Arabia introducing a series of rules to better protect domestic workers. It's a small step, though – one of the new regulations says the maximum number of hours a

domestic helper can be made to work is now 15 hours a day, instead of the previous number: unlimited.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch has applauded a new treaty and recommendations that set the first global standards for the 50 million domestic workers around the world. Under the International Labour Organization's Domestic Workers' Convention (C189), domestic workers are entitled to the same basic rights as other workers, such as the right to weekly days off, overtime pay, minimum wages, social security and information on the terms and conditions of employment. Indonesia has promised to ratify the treaty, but there are no signs Hong Kong or Saudi Arabia will follow suit.  To help, donate to Amnesty International at amnesty.org.au



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