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Perspektiven auf globale Politik

[CROSSPOST] "WE ARE HOSTAGES HERE IN HONG KONG"

7. Oktober 2015 · von tim rühlig · in *Debatte* · [Hinterlasse einen Kommentar](#)

In many European countries poverty migration and its impact on the European continent are currently widely discussed topics. Many seem to forget about grave migration problems taking place in Asia, where in Hong Kong, for example, the working and living conditions for approximately 320,000 foreign domestic workers (mostly women) are often intolerable.



A slightly different version of this post originally appeared at the [blog of the Swedish Institute of](#)

Fore than 300.000 migrant domestic workers live in Hong Kong. Sunday is their only day off. While the Indonesians mainly meet at Victoria Park...

[International Relations, ui.](#)

Eine deutsche Fassung dieses Textes ist auf "[Menschenhandel heute](#)" erschienen.

During my walk on a hot and humid Sunday I cannot help but noticing the thousands of Filipino and Indonesian women sitting outside in the streets of Central on cardboards and in Victoria Park, chatting, playing cards, eating and laughing. I heard before that foreign domestic workers meet outside every Sunday but I was unable to imagine it. During the week I have been around the city a lot carrying out interview after interview in Hong Kong's different neighborhoods because I do research on the pro-democratic umbrella movement last year. How can it be that I have not seen thousands and thousands of women remain who remain almost invisible weekdays?!

At Victoria Park, I meet Rendy, who is one of many in this crowd, and I find myself dismayed by her story.

Rendy works as a domestic worker in Hong Kong for the last 15 years. She works a lot for very little money. With a bright smile she explains that she is lucky because she has a good employer who allows her to also work for a community organization, the "Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong" when she has some time off. While many others have to fight for their right to take one single day off, Rendy is allowed to leave her employer's house if agreed on.

I am amazed over Rendy's cheerful spirit, despite the seriousness of her situation. But when she tells me that she has not been back home to Indonesia for many months, her optimistic face is overshadowed by sadness.

Two weeks later, I meet Rendy and her friend and colleague Eni Lestari again, this time at a shelter in the Jordan district on the Kowloon Peninsula, which provides domestic workers facing the risk of being deported back to Indonesia with the basic help.

Destination Hong Kong

About 320,000 foreign domestic workers live in Hong Kong, constituting almost 5% of the city's population. About half of them come from Indonesia, the other half from the Philippines, and some from Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Burma. The first came in the mid-1970s and early 1980s when Hong Kong's economy not only boomed but transformed itself to a service economy profiting from economic reforms in the neighboring People's Republic of China. Hong Kong's local women were encouraged to work and the question arose who would take care of the house and the children. Encouraged by the economic success many Hong Kong residents worked until late at night, thus hired foreign domestic workers willing to live in their household full-time and available twenty-four hours a day.



Crowded every Sunday: Victoria Park is the meeting point of Indonesian migrant workers on their only day off during the week.

International: Foreign domestic workers only receive two-year contracts (with the possibility of renewal), their visa expiring automatically two weeks after the end of their working relationship. Changing an employer is very difficult because the workers have to leave Hong Kong first and apply for a new visa and work permit. All this is very expensive and the domestic workers' wages, determined yearly by the city's labor department, is significantly below Hong Kong's minimum wage



...the Filipinos come to the streets of Central.

Although Hong Kong's economic boom is over, the demand for foreign domestic workers has not decreased. In recent years, the government of China's Special Administrative Zone has cut social spending effectively privatizing the city's welfare state. Elderly homes, for example, have become very expensive. Therefore, Hong Kong citizens still rely on the help of foreign domestic workers.

Human Rights

The working and living conditions of these workers have caught the attention of many human rights organizations, including Amnesty

(currently 500-600\$/month). Several times, the labor department has decided to lower the wages. Furthermore, Rendy's colleague Eni Lestari tells me that especially after the financial crisis in 2008 that hit Hong Kong's economy hard, many employers try to reduce the salary using cruel tactics:

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Employers accuse domestic workers of stealing whenever they don't want to pay the salary. They call the police and say they've lost something. The police then checks the closet of the domestic worker where the employer has put the missing item which was reported stolen. The problem is that in many cases the migrants cannot defend themselves. The employers can easily put something in the workers closet because they have the authority in their own house and usually the domestic workers don't have a lock to their room or to their closet. More and more employers use these tactics to either lower the domestic workers' wages or to kick them out.



Fighting for their rights: Eni (left) and Rendy (right) try to help migrant workers in Hong Kong for more than a decade.

Theoretically, the foreign domestic workers can make use of Hong Kong's labor ordinance and defend themselves. However, Eni explains that given their low salary, the domestic workers cannot pay a lawyer but have to rely on free legal assistance provided by the government, which often does not pay attention to the clients' vulnerability and needs:

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The problem is that their mindset is: Anyways it is only a migrant helper.

Since the women are only allowed in Hong Kong for two weeks without a working contract, they rely on licensed agencies that charge 1,500-3,000\$ per person to apply for a job. As the workers cannot pay the amount, the agencies confiscate their passports. Eni continues:

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This is why we all become hostages to the agency. There is no way out, especially during the first couple of months, most foreign domestic workers have to spend 70%-80% of their

income to repay the agency. If you are lucky enough to stay with the same employer for two years, you will be able to earn some money. But a lot of people lose their job within the first year especially now after the financial crisis. So they just come here to work and pay for the agency.



Admirable: Eni out in the streets of Hong Kong.

While these licensed agencies are supposed to help the domestic workers, they only take the trouble of the shoulders of the Indonesian government. Apart from collusion and corruption, this might be the major reason why the Indonesian government neither abandons these agencies nor licenses new ones which treat the Indonesian women fairly. (The Filipino government seems to have cared better for their fellow citizens abroad in this regard.)

Daily working conditions

The migrants work 17 hours daily by average. Many are denied any day off though this is their legal right. Furthermore, accommodation has become a serious problem as Eni describes:

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A lot of us have to sleep on the floor or share a bed either with the elderly or the family's teenagers. Legally, the employers must provide domestic workers with any place to sleep and that is all. And even if your contract entails a paragraph saying that the employer is supposed to give you a shared bed and you end up sleeping on the floor, there is nothing you can do.

Apart from exploitations and poor living conditions, many newspapers and human rights organizations report about physical and sexual abuse. Last February, the issue reached the news when the domestic worker Erwiana Sulistyarningsih won a trial against her employer who had abused her for months. But after having heard so much already I do not dare to ask Eni and Rendy for this anymore.

Migrants keep coming

Despite all these horrible conditions, thousands of Indonesians continue to come to Hong Kong; especially villagers migrate who cannot make their living anymore because there is almost no industry. Farming, which used to be the main source of income has turned to be unprofitable because of rising expenses (e.g. for seeds) and the growing presence of internationally financed agricultural mass production. Even in the country's capital, non-educated workers will usually not make more than 200-300\$ per month. The country's second most important source of national income is money transfers from Indonesians working abroad, illustrating why so many people continue to come to Hong Kong despite the hell awaiting them.

Although Rendy, Eni and their friends at "the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers" cannot change anything structurally, they do an incredible and admirable job supporting their fellow colleagues. They assist with information, especially about their rights. They also organize gatherings and events to create a sense of belonging and community. Their fellow Indonesians do not approach them only during the gathering on a Sunday, but they can call them anytime for support and encouragement. Eni continues:

”

Some women cannot talk too much because they take care of the elderly and they don't like to hear them talking on the phone. But they can reach us via WhatsApp.



Gathering of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong at a shelter in Jordan district.

After our conversation Eni and Rendy invite me over for dinner. “*You have to taste the great Indonesian food,*” Rendy tells me with the brightest smile. One hour later, around 100 Indonesian women are around me laughing, singing, and eating. They have made friends with each other and enjoy being in their community. Eni and Rendy introduce me to many people and standing next to them, I can only admire their optimism and dedication. How do they manage to handle all these adversities? How can they treat their surroundings with so much warmness, openness and cheerfulness?

My

thoughts go back home to Europe where more and more people are afraid to lose their comfort and wealth rejecting migrants, or even attacking them. I feel ashamed because we live in wealth while all these women around me have to work and struggle so hard. How can we not think about them? Why do we complain?

At one point during the evening, Rendy's eyes turn deeply sad:

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My mother keeps asking me when I come back home, get married and stay there again. But I must keep telling her that it is not the right time yet.



Eni (second from the left) with other Indonesian friends after the dinner.



Incredibly optimistic: Rendy who works in Hong Kong for about 15 years now.

In this very moment, I don't dare to ask Rendy what she is hoping and waiting for in order to identify “*the right time for return*” and whether anything will change to the better. But only after one minute, Rendy smiles again. I can only feel amazement and admiration for her and Eni.

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