

INSIGHT

Invisible workers

Sri Ranjini Mei Hua and Theresa W. Devasahayam say Asia's low-paid foreign domestic helpers deserve better job protection, not just because it is their right, but also because of their contribution to society

On International Women's Day, the world celebrates women's achievements both past and present. In Asia, we also need to ask ourselves what the future holds for our women, as gender inequalities persist despite some improvements, such as in education and health. In many parts of Asia, girls and women continue to be relegated to an inferior status. As a result, they are presented with fewer and more limited opportunities in life. As in the past, they play an important role in the private sphere and, as more and more women take up paid work, they are also key members of public life today.

In Asia, women have always played an integral role in the household social structure. But their labour has also been critical in other areas: subsistence farming, informal food selling, livestock rearing, and the gathering of fuel and water. Furthermore, girls have always taken care of younger siblings as a result of their mothers being away at work.

Many young girls in Asia are poor and have little access to opportunities for learning. They grow up with the dream of breaking this circle of poverty, and finding low-skilled work abroad is often viewed as a way to improve not only their lives but also their families' lives. In recent decades, increasing numbers of women have been migrating independently for economic and personal empowerment. In Asia, the bulk of these women come from the less affluent countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia.

The four East Asian "tiger economies" – Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea – have become important destinations for these migrant women. The shift from manufacturing to services in the 1980s in these economies has led to a surge in the female labour force. As a result, working women, especially those who are also mothers, have less time to manage the household. This has led to the outsourcing of domestic care.

These jobs have largely been filled by migrant women. Yet, migrant women's contribution to their host societies continues to be largely undervalued. This is because caregiving is often assumed to be women's work, traditionally done without being paid. Thus, in spite of the burgeoning care sector in affluent countries, the issue of care work is often sidelined in government policies, and women in such positions end up working long hours for low pay, as their work is seen as peripheral to the larger economy. Their low wages are also often linked to their national or ethnic origin.

It is often argued that foreign domestic helpers are needed to support the inclusion of local women in the labour market. But it is in fact not always the case. There is no correlation between female labour force participation and the import of foreign caregivers. For instance, some Gulf countries have very high recruitment

rates of foreign domestic workers despite very low rates of female labour force participation.

According to a 2008 report by the International Organisation for Migration, migrant women tend to be concentrated in occupations related to traditional gender roles, such as jobs in the service and care industries, regardless of their level of education. This is especially true in the developing countries of Asia where educated women continue to be over-represented in traditionally "female" jobs, such as secretaries, nurses and teachers, and under-represented in



Care work needs to be recognised as a responsibility that should be shared



jobs that demand greater responsibility and those in typically "male" domains such as computer science and engineering.

Hence, it is not uncommon for those in low-skilled work to have a post-secondary education. This trend cuts across Asia and is apparent in other parts of the world. In Chile, for example, research showed 70 per cent of Peruvian domestic workers had either a high school or university education. In fact, as more women migrate for work, it has been found that the single largest source of employment for them lies in low-skilled work such as domestic service.

While migrant women have enabled other women's entry into the labour force in great numbers, domestic care work has been fraught with problems over the protection of the workers and their employers. First, women deserve the right to choose whether they want to work as caregivers. If they do choose that path, they should be entitled to dignified working conditions. On the other side, families who hire

domestic help should have access to care as a basic need, regardless of their level of income. The needs of both employer and worker are not always met, and these problems are the result of poor co-ordination between government officials and the recruitment agents who are responsible for creating and managing the care labour market.

Care work needs to be recognised as a responsibility that should be shared, instead of being only a woman's concern. Ten years from now, let's hope that this "invisible" contribution of women to their family and society will be valued for what it's worth. Achieving gender equality is one thing; empowering women is a more substantive goal we should continue to work towards.

Sri Ranjini Mei Hua is research associate at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Theresa W. Devasahayam is fellow and gender studies programme co-ordinator at the institute

Status symbol

Su-Mei Thompson says, despite their advances in education, Hong Kong's women still earn less than the men, particularly those on a low income

As we mark International Women's Day and consider what progress has been made on the status of women in Hong Kong, the best that can be said, unfortunately, is that the picture is confounding and contradictory. At worst, stagnation and setbacks seem to be the order of the day.

First, Hong Kong's primary and secondary schools have even numbers of female and male students, with girls pulling ahead at university and outperforming boys in many subjects. What is frustrating is that the improvement in educational opportunities for women has not translated into economic outcomes. The labour force participation rate for women here is lower than that of other developed economies, especially for married and less educated women. Even for more educated women, enhanced educational credentials are not translating into senior positions.

In government, politics and business, the corridors of power are dominated by men. Men hold 82 per cent of the seats in the Legislative Council, make up 83 per cent of the judiciary and comprise 68 per cent of the top-ranked civil servants. In academia, women occupy only 14 per cent of senior positions, with not one female university chancellor. The gender gap is even wider in the boardroom and the executive suite.

Gender inequalities are also manifest in many other areas, often with tragic consequences. When it comes to low-income families, women are particularly vulnerable – especially marginalised groups like new migrants from the mainland, the elderly and single mothers: over 80 per cent of workers earning less than HK\$5,000 per month are female; 84 per cent of single mothers live below the poverty line; and more than 100,000 elderly women received Comprehensive Social Security Assistance in 2010, with that number set to rise sharply in future as women continue to outlive men.

So, why is progress so stagnant? The inadequacies of the social welfare system in Hong Kong have been well documented on this page. The answer, in part, also lies with the fact that we are not doing enough to raise our girls to be leaders.

The rise in recreational drug abuse rates and body-image-related illnesses reflects gaping holes in the education system and parental support. Persistent gender biases in the classroom and at home, and a highly sexist local media and advertising industry, discourage girls from assuming non-traditional roles and increase the pressure on young women to focus on externalities instead of authentic definitions of self-worth.

Equally, we are not doing a good enough job to teach our boys about gender norms and to perceive women as equal counterparts.

A recent study shows that women who earn substantially more than their working husbands are more vulnerable to violence because they pose a challenge to traditional gender roles. In the face of a global economic recession, health hazards and natural disasters, we need to groom both our boys and girls to achieve their full potential. Progress for women should not be a question of hope. The time of praying for change is over. We must act.

Su-Mei Thompson is chief executive of The Women's Foundation. This article is part of a monthly series on women and gender issues, developed in collaboration with the foundation

Complexities of hukou reform must not deter China from pressing ahead

Steps for the "proactive and stable" reform of China's household registration system had been eagerly awaited for years. So when they were finally published in a State Council notice late last month, they drew immediate attention and received generally positive comments on the internet.

On a closer read, the notice has laid out some notable criteria: it affirms that migrants in county-level cities could apply for a *hukou*, and extends the application to migrants in the bigger, prefecture-level cities; it says that all new employment, education and skills-training policies must not be linked to the *hukou*; it says farmers' land rights must be protected in the course of reform, specifically banning the practice of "exchanging land for *hukou*", in effect the confiscation of farmers' land.

The notice was made public only a year after it took effect, sooner than for other similar notices. This is an improvement in terms of government transparency, and suggests the political will to implement change.

But the measures still fall far short of the reform advocated by scholars and the wider public, and are less progressive than even some of the steps already taken by the bigger cities. Most glaringly, the notice makes clear that *hukou* reform must be carried out within each city's capacity. On this basis, cities are divided into three categories, and the high entry bars would remain for migrants in the biggest cities – the municipalities, the provincial capitals and other major cities where the greatest number of migrants gather and

Hu Shuli says recent improvements to household registration rules can be the foundation of a comprehensive plan to ensure equal treatment for all migrants



social disparities are most serious. This raises anxiety about the substance of reform.

China enacted the Household Registration Ordinance in 1958. Since then, the household registration system has bound people to a place and become the linchpin of a social welfare system tied to national identity. But 30 years of opening up have paved the way for massive internal migration, undermining the *hukou* controls. Today, hundreds of millions of rural migrants live and work in the city. Yet, their household registration – and, by extension, their social and welfare benefits – continues to be tied to their place of birth, or their parents' place of birth. This only widens the already considerable gap in wealth and well-being between city and village.

In today's China, the *hukou* system is not only morally indefensible, it also impedes economic growth and urbanisation.

Talk of reform began in the early 1990s. Even then, the rationale for change was clear: household registration should allow for freedom of movement and not be tied to other social policies. Yet, progress has been repeatedly blocked: first, there were fears of social chaos, then, worries about the reform burden. In 2009, *hukou* reform was tabled for action at the Central Economic Work Conference

but, again, progress has been slow.

The main reason is the concern about welfare spending. The growing middle class has higher expectations about employment prospects, education, health care, pension and housing, as well as the public service standards in the city. If the doors to the city were thrown open now, there would undoubtedly be a rush for residency, putting substantial strain on local government finances.

As a result, local governments have reacted in two extreme ways. At one end, authorities have tried to speed up urbanisation by taking land from farmers in exchange for granting a *hukou* in the city. This has caused resentment and more unrest. At the other end, officials have resisted reform, consolidating the rural-urban divide.

It bears repeating that every migrant should be granted the same treatment as urban residents. Otherwise, it would make a mockery of the goal to narrow the gap between city and village.

Concern for the welfare burden is valid, and makes clear household registration reform would have wide implications. Hence, updating China's *hukou* registration must be part of a broader plan for reform. In rural areas, household registration is linked to land reform. Thus, *hukou* reform should proceed alongside the reform of rules governing land

transfer and contract, in a way that protects farmers' interests. *Hukou* registration also has great bearing on government finances. Therefore, governments must push to set up transparent public accounts and clarify the roles of central and local governments, while ensuring equal access to basic services.

Beijing has the financial heft to undertake this huge task. That reform of the household registration system is tied to so many other areas of concern is no excuse for inaction. In fact, it holds the key.

Recent research by US scholar Kam Wing Chan has found that up to 206 million of China's 666 million people living in the cities do not have an urban *hukou*. This means they and their children receive no housing benefits or medical care, cannot attend school and have limited employment prospects. This runs counter to China's efforts to expand its domestic market.

Moreover, with a "middle-income trap" looming, the economy must work harder to develop hi-tech and high-value-added industries. For this, large numbers of skilled workers are needed. Reform of the *hukou* system would be a timely human capital investment, conducive to growth. There is a broad consensus on *hukou* reform, and the preparation for change has already taken years. With the publication of the notice, it's time for action.



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Waste can become the fuel for a greener Hong Kong

Douglas Woodring says we need creative management, not an incinerator

The large-scale incinerator planned for the island off southern Lantau, Shek Kwu Chau, has sparked strong debate about its practicality and, in many ways, the future of Hong Kong. This is not just a "not in my backyard" issue, it is about an ill-planned project that will affect the entire city and even those who might want to visit or live here in the future.

By holding the public hostage to a railroad approval process, forcing us all to accept outdated technology, poor planning and lack of foresight, the government is setting itself up for further alienation from a public it is trying to win over with "harmonious" activities.

Southern Lantau is valuable because it will increasingly be the "lungs and heart" of the city we live in, along with the coasts and islands within our reach. Once these assets are taken away, there will be nothing left in the bank for us to draw on.

It was not so many years ago that Hong Kong remained one of the few countries that did not classify waste as a renewable energy source. This hindered many potential waste-to-fuel technologies and innovations that could have been set up around the existing landfills, where our waste planning basically equates to digging bigger landfill holes.

When Beijing put some pressure on our city to have a higher renewable energy input, the government then realised it had to allow waste to be turned to fuel in order to achieve its goals, already

meagre when compared with the rest of our neighbours in the region.

So, we are now being told that waste can be valuable, and incineration can be the solution to our landfill issues, but we are being presented with an outdated way of thinking and planning that will greatly reduce the perceived benefits of such a plan. Why should our population, with a wealthy government, accept standard thinking and solutions, and environmental degradation all at the same time? This is like building a highway and ensuring that it is designed with large potholes.

Technologies today have shown that waste has value as secondary raw materials. It is something we want to preserve, re-use and extract value from, while maintaining the value of our assets in the "bank" – our environment. Incinerating waste is the lazy way out of a problem; it depletes the resources right under our noses.

By separating all plastic waste, for example, economies of scale can be created for proper, value-added recycling. This saves energy and creates material that leading brands of the world are starting to use. After all of the valuable plastic material is extracted, the remaining material can be turned into fuel, not via incineration, but via distillation, which turns it back to a liquid. Plastic is stored energy after all, derived from petroleum.

The huge benefit this now creates is that all of our food waste and organic material can be treated separately, using new composting

or other technologies. When all of these waste streams are separated, the creation of methane in landfills is avoided. Plastic can be harnessed as a fuel in a much bigger way. And, no incineration is needed.

An incinerator at Shek Kwu Chau will not only cause immeasurable long-term damage to the value of Hong Kong as a city by the sea, to the island it occupies, to the ocean it fills, and to the quality of life for tomorrow's generation – it will show the world that we lack the skills and planning to create a truly world-class city. The plan will also create carbon emissions from support transport, probably offsetting the "renewable" resources it is meant to create.

Instead, we could deploy new recycling, composting and specialised waste-to-fuel options which would maximise the value that this secondary raw material represents.

We are missing out on a huge job creation opportunity here, not to mention an impressive environmental leadership role to be proud of.

Do we have the ability to guide this project and planning in the direction that this city deserves?

Douglas Woodring is founder of the Ocean Recovery Alliance and a Clinton Global Initiative Commitment Maker

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