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Pregnant with disaster

By Li Yao



Ikah, an Indonesian domestic helper, was fired by her employer after becoming pregnant.



Luna Chan (right), Pathfinders' chief operations officer, and Cathlyn McNabb, a case manager. Pathfinders has helped about 1,500 domestic helpers in similar situations like Ikah since 2007.

The problem of pregnancies among female domestic helpers in Hong Kong is growing and each of these cases bears the seeds of terrible trials and potential tragedy, yet few mechanisms exist to help resolve the issue. Li Yao reports.

Ikah, 31, was demonstrating how she met her boyfriend – the first time she set eyes on him — at a McDonald's restaurant: she lowered her eyes, mischievously stuck out her tongue, and showed a bashful smile. The reflection of that happy memory revealed by her smile, quickly vanished. Life's changed a lot since then, she muses, her countenance becoming somber, dignified.

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The Indonesian domestic helper is nine months pregnant. Her baby is expected on August 1. She got fired in April — now she lives with her boyfriend, who has an apartment in Kowloon. He's a Hong Kong permanent resident, married — is in the midst of divorcing his wife and has promised Ikahe'll marry her and put his name on her baby's birth certificate.

Ikahe came to Hong Kong in May 2002. She's never been back home or seen her family since. During that time span, she worked for three families, sent home HK\$150,000 and built a two-story house in her village. She has spoken not a word of her pregnancy to her mother, older brother or two younger sisters.

It was Christmas Eve when she checked into a hospital for a blood test because of chicken pox. Along with the diagnosis by the resident physician came the startling revelation that Ikahe was seven weeks pregnant.

There and then, she and her boyfriend determined to see the pregnancy through to full term. The chicken pox became incidental — though it meant two weeks in hospital. After her discharge, she returned to duty and told her employer she was pregnant.

"My employer didn't show much reaction at the time. She only asked whether my boyfriend knew," Ikahe said.

Months passed without further discussion of the matter. On April 2, the madam paid Ikahe HK\$1,800 and asked her to sign a document. It was the flight ticket money to which Ikahe became entitled after completing her first two-year contract with the family late last year. The following morning, Ikahe's employer handed her another HK\$6,000 and asked that Ikahe sign a second document. Ikahe complied — learning only after she had done so, she was signing her letter of dismissal from employment. One of the family daughters asked: "Mom, where can she go after you kick her out"?

"She is going back to Indonesia," Ikahe recalled hearing the woman's answer.

Nowhere to turn

The sudden termination of her contract plunged Ikahe into despair. She was jobless, unmarried, pregnant and deeply humiliated. She was terrified of the ridicule and discrimination that surely would ensue from her own folks at home, and stricken at her ruined hope of staying in Hong Kong, one day to marry her boyfriend.

With help from Christian Action, a group that supports foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, she filed a claim against her former employer. The employer denied having prior knowledge of her pregnancy when terminating the contract and refused to pay the HK\$22,000 Ikahe sought in compensation.

In the meantime, a friend recommended that she contact Pathfinders, a charitable organization in Hong Kong that serves migrant mothers and their children. Pathfinders estimates that 6,000 foreign domestic helpers are pregnant or have given birth to children in Hong Kong. The organization has received about 1,500 clients since 2008, mostly Indonesian helpers.

Ikahe's case against her former employer came up for adjudication on June 11. She was awarded HK\$15,000 from her former employer, roughly two-thirds of what she had sought. But, at best, it was a Pyrrhic victory for Ikahe. Thinly veiled insults were directed at her in a setting she described as prejudiced against her. The adjudicator belittled her and said she had been irresponsible for indulging in "casual sex." "You come here to serve your employer's family, not the other way around," Ikahe recalls the judge's stern admonition.

Ikahe is now preoccupied with the impending childbirth. She relied on doctors' notices to report to the Immigration Department and extend her visitor's visa. She cannot be put on a plane to be repatriated to Indonesia because her pregnancy is too far advanced.

She can't afford the HK\$39,000 advance payment required of a pregnant woman on visitor visa to book a bed and other routine check-ups at a Hong Kong hospital. Her last hospital visit was in June.

"Ikahe may be rushed to an emergency room, or she will give birth at home," said Kelly Ooi, Ikahe's case manager at Pathfinders. Ooi is from Malaysia and a registered social worker.

After having the baby, Ikahe counts on her visa expiry date giving her a few extra weeks to find a new employer in Hong Kong, Ooi said.

Ikahe has one lesson to share. "Women should be careful when they go out with a man," alluding to contraceptives. She took birth control pills, but not consistently. She and her boyfriend did not use condoms.

Lost in the world

Luna Chan, Pathfinders' chief operations officer, said many helpers come to Hong Kong during child-bearing years but have no access to family planning facilities. Local services are closed on Sundays when most helpers have the day off. Many helpers come from conservative backgrounds and are mortally ignorant about how to protect themselves.

Ooi is sympathetic to the loneliness and need for emotional support from foreign domestic helpers. "A

lot could happen in her hometown. Her husband might have a mistress. The helper may have had a boyfriend in Hong Kong who abandoned her when she got pregnant," Ooi said.

She said Pathfinders' services are vital because no other organization targets the same group.

"Many people think these women are unworthy of assistance. But the helpers and their children desperately need guidance and counseling. They may easily get frustrated and forfeit the child's birth certificate because of language barrier. They may know friends who went into hiding and live in poor conditions. They think the situation is ok for them," Ooi explained her clients' typical mental state.

She said one helper did not show up twice for flights the Immigration Department arranged for her to go back home. The client's Pakistani boyfriend was denied refugee status in Hong Kong and himself faced repatriation. The couple wanted to be sent back on the same day, though to widely separated destinations.

"Their wish is simple. My client wanted her baby to stay with the father a bit longer. It is understandable but unrealistic," Ooi said.

Finding the way

Among Pathfinders' caseload, more than 25 percent of the children born to foreign domestic helpers do not have their father's name on their birth certificates, said Chan. Many of the fathers are of Pakistani or African origins.

Since 2008, 83 of these babies have become Hong Kong residents, usually through the father's permanent resident's status, according to Pathfinders' statistics. More than half of the babies were sent back to the mothers' homelands and placed in the care of their grandparents.

"Even in conservative Indonesia, if the family embraces the child, it is easier for the community to accept. If the child returns at 4 or 5, speaking a different language or looking different, it would be difficult for the child to re-integrate," Chan said.

Chan's team has recommended 36 mothers who consider putting up their children for adoption. The Adoption Unit under the Social Welfare Department then took over the cases to look for adoptive families.

"All we do is based on the children's best interests. We hope children born in Hong Kong all have a fair start and proper medical care," said Cathlyn McNabb, 28, a Pathfinders case manager from Australia.

McNabb stressed that Pathfinders' goal is to ensure the mothers be aware of their options, and find a stable future with legal standing.

Chan said the organization encourages helpers to disclose their pregnancies to the employers. Sometimes, the employer will grant the helper the maternity leave. The helper can settle her baby with her own family and come back to Hong Kong to continue work and support her baby. Chan holds that this can be a highly satisfactory solution for the helper and the employer.



Domestic helpers can get basic supplies such as babies' clothes at Pathfinders' office on Tung Chau Street.



The beneficiaries at Pathfinders learn skills, such as jewellery making and design, hairdressing and sewing, that can be developed into income-generating opportunities in their home countries.

Policy contentions

In Singapore, the Ministry of Manpower stipulates that a female foreign helper must not become pregnant or deliver a child in Singapore during the course of her work permit, or thereafter, unless she is married to a Singapore permanent resident.

News media have reported that Singapore returns 100 pregnant helpers to their homelands every year.

Pathfinders' chief operations officer Luna Chan said she doubted Hong Kong would consider a similar policy.

"If the Hong Kong government makes it a law, there would be challenges. The Singaporean government has taken hands-on measures to control not only the helpers' conduct, but also trained the employers to ensure both parties know their rights and liabilities," Chan said.

In comparison, the Hong Kong authorities have adopted a laissez-faire approach that lets domestic helpers and their employers sort things out for themselves. Chan said she couldn't imagine Hong Kong making the effort to train some 300,000 families that employ domestic helpers, concerning their rights and obligations.

On the other hand, cases involving pregnant helpers continue to multiply in Hong Kong, but their numbers are not tracked by hospitals and the impact on Hong Kong's healthcare and child welfare system have been neglected by scholars and policy-makers.

Expectant mothers not entitled to regular hospital care may swarm emergency wards at the last minute, Chan said.

Although Pathfinders has expanded its capacity, Chan said the organization does not have an active outreach. "Our wish is that one day, society will know these people, and through advocacy, the helpers will have no service barriers in Hong Kong," she said.

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