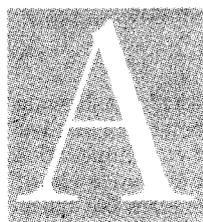


# OPINION

**South China Morning Post**

## Maids deserve their pay rise



A pay rise of 4.8 per cent in times of high inflation should not raise many eyebrows. But when hundreds of thousands of bosses are forced to pay more as a result, bitter sentiments are understandable. For the second year running, the government has decided to raise the minimum wage for

300,000 foreign domestic helpers. Although the rise translates into a modest HK\$180 extra per month, it does not stop families from hitting out at the government for ignoring their burden.

Whether the increase will weigh down employers is open to debate. Families that can afford domestic helpers are usually middle class. They are the ones who receive the least support in society. They pay taxes but do not get government handouts. But in times of inflation, they are forced to pay more. The adjustments over the past two years add up to 10 per cent. It is not surprising that many blame the government for being too generous.

That said, it would be wrong to deny what our maids deserve. Like the rest of the workforce, they are entitled to a wage adjustment in light of the prevailing economic situation. During the downturn in 2003, they suffered a major pay cut to help employers pay a new levy. Since then, they have had their wages increased or frozen, all based on a basket of factors carefully considered by the Executive Council. The latest rise to a monthly HK\$3,920 is no exception. But the level is just slightly higher than what they received 14 years ago.

Domestic helpers remain the lowest-paid in our workforce. But their working conditions are sometimes even harsher than those who are already protected by the minimum wage law. Many new arrivals struggle to pay off debts and commission fees in the first few months. Some have to put up with appalling living environments and all work long hours. Yet their contribution to our economy has often been overlooked. With their help taking care of our homes, elderly and children, adults can work and earn a better living for their families. They are one reason why we have a vibrant workforce and trouble-free families. There is no reason to treat them as an inferior group.

As we extend our care to protect low income earners with a statutory wage floor, the same spirit should apply to domestic helpers. It is simply unfair for local workers to keep fighting for better protection like standard working hours, but deny their foreign counterparts the same right to earn better wages. They, too, have the right to enjoy the fruits of economic development.