



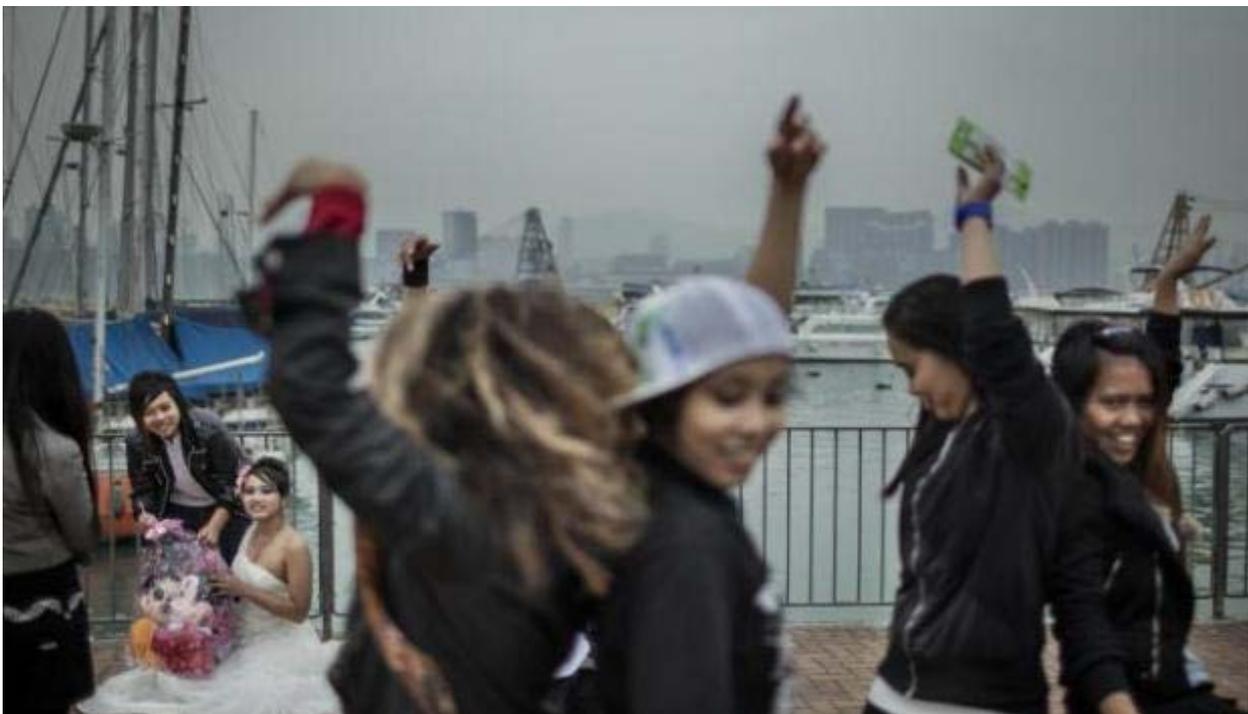
PostMagazine

Sunday girls

<http://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1217312/sunday-girls>

Many domestic helpers in Hong Kong find strength in numbers - and some, solace in the arms of another woman - writes Hedy Ting Bok. Pictures by Thomas Lee

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Abellya (in white) and Yoean pose for their "wedding" pictures with dolls, their symbolic children, in January last year.

Of Hong Kong's 313,306 (as of last month) domestic helpers almost all are women from Indonesia or the Philippines. And among the former - who number 149,220 - most are in their 20s.

Given the distance from home and the demographics, it is not surprising that strong bonds and high degrees of intimacy develop among couples. Other helpers find comradeship in discrete, female-only social groups.

These migrant workers answer Hong Kong's unrelenting demand for live-in help around the home and they can make up to four times the salary here that they would back home. The price, though, is prolonged separation from family and members of the opposite sex from their own country or religion. Many experience depression as a result, aggravated by racial discrimination inside and outside of their employers' homes.

In Victoria Park, where tens of thousands of foreign helpers - predominantly Indonesians; Filipinas tend to congregate in Statue Square, in Central, in Sai Kung and elsewhere - gather every Sunday, female couples openly display affection for each other and, in some cases, symbolic children: dolls.



Working abroad affords helpers the social freedom to explore and express their personal style and sexual orientation. Some of their behaviour and modes of dress would be unthinkable in the more conservative corners of Muslim Indonesia and the predominantly Catholic Philippines. Having a confidante or, in some cases, a female partner in the city helps mitigate loneliness and fend off sexual predation by Hong Kong or expatriate men.

These choices are not always without consequences, however. Apart from running the risk of dismissal by conservative employers, "unacceptable" behaviour among helpers has attracted negative media attention in their home countries. Indonesian consular staff gave a five-hour "briefing" in Victoria Park, in 2006, urging changes in behaviour that was causing an outcry at home. An Indonesian journalist, Rita Budiarti, who had been in Hong Kong, said at the time: "I heard from people who came to one nightclub that they would be killed by their mom if she knew her daughters acted like that."

In 2010, visits to the park by preachers were endorsed by Jakarta.

In reaction to the unwanted attention, some helpers have held public "same-sex weddings" in the guise of birthday parties and recreational dance groups have emerged as outlets for personal expression.

As scores of helpers file into MTR stations on Sunday evenings, couples hold each other in tight embraces, savouring their last minutes of freedom before returning to a week of grinding chores. As it does for many in hectic Hong Kong, the helper's clock is ticking - but for her it's counting down to the day when she will have to leave her friend, protector - or perhaps lover - and go home.