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Hidden HK moms face daily pain of confinement

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For many mothers, yesterday was a day of love and happiness spent with their children, but for Lora it was just another day in hell where she has spent the past four years.

An Indonesian with two children born out of wedlock, Lora, 32, lived in hiding for three years until last July when a concern group contacted her and persuaded her to turn herself in to the Immigration Department. Since then, life has been a little better, but she still faces an uncertain future.

One of her children is now three years old and in need of schooling. But as a non-resident, the child does not qualify for any subsidy. The second child is just eight months old.

With little to look forward to in Hong Kong, Lora, which is not her real name, has decided to go home to Indonesia.

She arrived in Hong Kong in 2001 to work as a domestic helper and all went well until January 2005 when she became pregnant and lost her job. Then she was dumped by her Pakistani boyfriend.

Jobless, pregnant and an illegal immigrant, she went into hiding, living in a 500-square-foot apartment in Chungking Mansions with three other families with similar backgrounds.

After her child was born, she met an African with whom she had her second baby. He dumped her in January but, unlike her first boyfriend, he keeps in touch and sends her money.

As an illegal, she dared not leave the apartment, but living in isolation with two growing children was also no picnic.

Last July, she was reached by Pathfinders, a group which helps overstayers. Since then, she's been on a month-to-month extension of stay.

Lora considers herself lucky because she can go out from time to time, but for the children's sake she will return to Indonesia.

"They need to go to school and I cannot keep them at home all day," she said.

Under the current policy, children of non-Chinese origin born in Hong Kong are not granted permanent residency.

Lora is one of hundreds of women who have overstayed their visas and given give birth here, according to Kylie Uebergang, a co-founder of PathFinders, which was set up in October 2007 and has so far reached around 50 mothers.

It is the only group which targets ethnic minorities who overstay and have babies out of wedlock.

Uebergang believes there are hundreds of women in hiding and desperate for help. The Immigration Department said 5,735 people were prosecuted for breach of stay last year.

"These women and children are stuck in the middle. The children are not Hong Kong residents and some were not even born in hospital. which means they are undocumented. It is difficult for their mothers to take them back to their home countries as some are of mixed race and their families may not accept them," Uebergang said.

"They have to hide themselves and their children all day. But it is difficult to lock up children all day."

Some mothers simply abandon their babies. PathFinders does not want to see the women becoming prostitutes in

order to feed themselves and their children.

"We want these women to know they have choices in their lives - going home with their children, giving their children up for adoption or staying with them in Hong Kong and looking for a new job to start a new life. We will contact their families and persuade them to accept those women and their children."