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Helping pregnant migrants find the right path

By Sarayna Ubongen

Eight months after Mary boarded a return flight to her hometown in the Philippines, she and her son are doing well. A course on introductory catering that she took months before she left Hong Kong paved the way for her to continue further studies. Her two-year-old son is healthy and happy.

But the return path to home was not easy.

Mary first came to Hong Kong in July 2006 to work as a domestic helper. Soon after, she got involved with a tall and handsome African man, who got her pregnant. After giving birth in early 2007, Mary chose to overstay her visa and stay illegally in Hong Kong. She was picked up by the police in December 2007.

Her boyfriend also overstayed his visa and tried to apply for asylum, but his application was rejected and he now faces an uncertain future.

For a while, Mary and her boyfriend lived together and, not being allowed to take up jobs, lived on handouts from the International Social Service Hong Kong. But this afforded them no luxuries, and life in a 220-square foot apartment without electricity was hardly a place to raise a growing baby boy.

Still, Mary considered herself lucky. She had a boyfriend who truly loved her, and they had a roof over their heads.

Although Mary and her boyfriend explored the option of returning to the Philippines together, her family did not want her back with him, and live off their meager earnings. Besides, having an African in their home could create a stir in their small village. It was hard enough to care for and help raise a mixed-race grandson; it would be worse if his father-- unemployed and conspicuous because of his looks-- went to live with them.

Not knowing what do to, Mary and her boyfriend reached out to PathFinders in July 2008.

Pathfinders is a concern group which helps domestic helpers who are pregnant or who have given birth to children in Hong Kong to return to a place where they can work and enjoy life. Although many of their clients have overstayed their visas as a result of becoming pregnant, the group also works with women who are still employed and have valid working visas but have difficulty juggling work and looking after a child.

According to Kylie Uebergang, co-founder of PathFinders, her group help migrant women make informed decisions that affect their welfare and that of their child.

"It is critical that the children born in Hong Kong obtain documents to prove their identity and this is often the beginning in helping mothers think about their long-term future and that of their children", Uebergang said.

Luna Chan, PathFinders case manager, assists women to understand and find solutions to their problems.

"Overstayers need to start with voluntarily turning themselves in to immigration while others need to prepare for the birth of their child that involves bookings and meetings with hospitals and the Social Welfare Department", Chan said.

Through its connections at ISS-HK, Christian Action and Mother's Choice, Chan is able to help clients to access various services which they will need when they give birth and need to stay temporarily in HK, or find new contracts and communicate with family members abroad. But her group also helps clients return home with their child, or give up their child for adoption in HK.

"For overstayers who do not want to go home initially, a lot of them will start to think more seriously about returning home when their child gets older and need to attend school as they cannot do so in

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Hong Kong. PathFinders assist them in the transition too," said Chan.

Whatever is the ultimate decision of mothers like Mary, or however hard and painful it may be, PathFinders is there to help them. Pathfinders can be reached at tel. no. 5190 4886.

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