

Written Submission to the Minimum Wage Committee of the Legislative Council

7 October 2009

Families for Domestic Workers

I am speaking today as a member of a network of employers and supporters of domestic workers, called Families for Domestic Workers.

We would like to share some points, in our position as employers, specifically about the question of inclusion of live-in domestic workers, over 99% of whom are foreign.

Our group, Families for Domestic Workers, supports the implementation of a minimum wage in Hong Kong, as an overdue measure to reduce inequality and poverty in this society. Recently a survey showed that up to 17.9% of Hong Kong people are living under the poverty line. A large number of these are children and youth. We are mostly families with children and we believe it is not making a better future for our children if almost one-fifth of our present society is living in hunger and poverty.

As a group of employers – employers of domestic workers, we want to express our view that we believe all who are working in our society and contributing to national prosperity should be able to earn a living, a decent living, in this society. This includes our own domestic workers who work for us, even though it does mean we directly may need to pay more to achieve this.

Therefore, we also support the inclusion of foreign domestic workers and of course local live-in workers, to also be beneficiaries of the statutory minimum wage. We would like the workers who make our home lives run smoothly, to be able to enjoy a decent life in Hong Kong and also support their families who depend on them. How can we set a minimum wage in Hong Kong on the basis, that this the minimum level a human being needs to live in Hong Kong for a certain number of hours worked, and then go ahead to let other workers do unlimited hours of work, for an even lower amount of total pay? There is no way we can call this a society that cares about equality, even with laws that ban discrimination by race or sex, if we allow this slave-like work to continue.

We say this as fellow human beings who ourselves would like to enjoy a decent standard of living if we are working full time, and would like each hour of our labour to be valued.

We sympathize with workers who leave their countries and families, and believe that just like many expats in this country get compensated with housing allowance or other benefits, for their hardship in living in a foreign country, we also should provide housing and food for the domestic workers, while also giving them at least a minimum wage per hour.

There is no money that can compensate for the years spent away from one's husband and children, which many domestic workers are not asking compensation for in their salary. The least that employers can do is to not exploit their need, but show respect for their work.

We believe that most employers of domestic workers are families, especially families with working mothers and with children. In these homes, the domestic workers are doing far more than cooking and cleaning. They care for our children while we are away, helping to raise them. They protect their health, and help us manage the ever-increasing demands and hours of our own jobs and of children's schoolwork.

How can we raise our children well, if we do not treat well the ones who look after them all day long? We must treat them as equal workers to other Hong Kong workers, and guarantee that they have a minimum wage per hour the same as other workers. Otherwise, just as customers eat until

bursting, if they pay a fixed price for all you can eat buffet – employers will make workers work unlimited and unhealthy and unfair hours, for paying a single flat monthly amount. There is no use expecting individual employers to 'offer reasonable hours'. We know, just like with the failed voluntary 'wage protection' movement, employers rarely police themselves well, if they think they can save some money and labour by taking advantage of other's poverty and desperation for the work.

Now tragedies have taken place in the Philippines, with massive floods, and Indonesia, with the earthquake. What will be our response? Will we lower the domestic workers wages even more, since we know it would 'still be better' than the tragic chaos they would face at home? Shall we bring out the threat of introducing thousands of cheap and willing mainland domestic workers?

We have to try not to count a woman worker's hours of work like an unlimited eating hotel buffet. Rather we should count them like pieces of precious sushi – by the piece. Let each hour have its value, and this will ensure gender equality and worker equality better than any government poster.

We know that there more and more demand in Hong Kong for domestic workers. But we should not make some women in need into slaves that work non-stop without time limit and without just value for their work time – to 'save the time' of others.