

A fair deal for our household servants^{15/6}

IN a family oriented place like Hongkong, it is hard to understand why so many people seem mean spirited to house servants. With growing prosperity, few Hongkong Chinese want to enter domestic service — nor do they have to with so many other jobs around. This same prosperity has brought a strong demand for maid servants, particularly for households in which both husband and wife have full time jobs.

So, a powerful economic rationale exists for the large number of Filipinas who come here on work contracts with Hongkong employers. A depressed Philippines economy has led to about 2.5 million workers going overseas to make a living for their families. About half are women, according to one estimate. They leave their children and husbands to make money in places like Hongkong. These funds are remitted home to pay for college educations, buy land or build up capital for a small family business. This should not be an unfamiliar motivation to Hongkong Chinese.

The Cantonese men who went by the tens of thousands in the last century to work on the American railroads or in the gold fields of Australia suffered terrible exploitation and racial prejudice. Yet they endured, because they had to. The money they saved or sent home eventually brought a better life for their families.

In this context, the motivations and deprivations of the 35,000 or so Filipino women working in Hongkong should not be so hard for local people to understand. Yet, these women are subject to racial stereotyping; accusations of laziness, dishonesty or worse; criticised for cluttering up Statue Square on weekends, and too frequently are ill-treated and abused.

Hongkong has a surfeit of male chauvinism; some of it striking a demeaning note for such an advanced place, even allowing for the cultural imperatives of this unique city. Chinese women, unlike conventional western stereotypes, wield a great deal more power and authority, in many

instances, than their liberated sisters in New York. But few families in today's Hongkong have the treasured "black and white" amahs of the old days. Not every servant in contemporary Hongkong is treated like a member of the family.

Perhaps it is not that shocking to realise that with all the Filipino servants in Hongkong this past decade, there has been only one successful prosecution for rape by an employer. Government officials, social workers, and the servants themselves all refer to various forms of sexual harassment. However, this is still hard to prove in the US, which has a growing number of laws governing this malpractice, and almost impossible to prove in Hongkong. The convicted employer was "given a severe reprimand" by the Court, hardly much of a disincentive to others.

In the United States, Filipinas have a long and honourable tradition of serving in the White House, Congress, and in the messes of admirals, generals and other senior military personnel. They are cherished for their courtesy, efficiency and loyalty.

Those same qualities are demonstrated by the Filipino maid servants of Hongkong, if they are treated decently. Of course, there are bad apples in every barrel. But just as one dishonest Chinese in a California gold mining camp of 1849 was no excuse for an anti-Chinese riot killing hundreds, there is no reason to stereotype the Filipino servants in Hongkong because of a few troublemakers.

Essentially, as one cannot legislate people's good behaviour, one must, to a degree, regulate their misbehaviour. The Hongkong Government has an obligation to the Philippine Government to enforce minimum standards of treatment for Filipino housemaids coming here. The people of Hongkong better than most should know what hard, menial work for the family means. They should not think less of Filipino women because they have come here as household servants. They are in Hongkong, after all, to work for the betterment of their families.