

# Abused domestic helpers must wait months for action

HONG KONG STANDARD  
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PHYSICALLY assaulted, accused of stealing and dismissed by her employer, foreign domestic helper Jane Amigo (not her real name) has to wait more than six months before her case is brought before the Labour Tribunal.

In the meantime she has no money and is dependent on the Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers, a non-governmental organisation, to provide her food and board.

Current immigration policies prevent her from working, so Amigo, 29, has to survive on the \$20 a day spending money the mission lends her, which means she can't even afford to go out.

"It's a long time to be without a job," she said.

Amigo came to Hongkong from Singapore, where she had spent five years with one family working as a domestic helper.

"I was really happy there but I came here because the money was better. I am paying for my two younger brothers' education so I needed to earn more," she said.

Unhappy with the treatment by her Hongkong employers from the start, Amigo stuck at the job for financial reasons.

After an argument during which her female employer tried to strangle her and lock her in the bedroom, Amigo had finally had enough and called the police.

She first registered a complaint for physical assault (the case is due to be heard on 13 January) and then went to the Labour Department where she lodged a complaint for outright termination of her contract.

Her employer failed to turn up at the two labour conciliation meetings set up so Amigo now has to wait until July for her case even to be registered with the Labour Tribunal Court.

"I'm really worried as my father has fallen ill and I can't send him any money for medical expenses," she said.

"If I win my case I'm going to try to get another job. I'm scared of working as a domestic helper again but I have no choice as I really need the money."

Amigo's case is not unique. Manager of the Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers, Edwina Santoyo, said the refuge was supporting about 35 women, all of whom had lodged cases with the Labour Tribunal against their former employers.

Another Filipina domestic at the refuge, Lavinia Lopez, 21, (not her real name), is also having to wait six months before her case for outright termination can be heard.

"I was sacked because my employer's pet turtles died," Lopez, who was a domestic worker for just over three months, said.

"They also forced me to sign the termination contract so that they wouldn't have to pay me one month's pay in lieu of notice."

Lopez has approached the Labour Tribunal to try to claim back from her employer money for her air ticket, medical fees, annual leave, travelling allowance, arrears of wages and payment in lieu of notice, all of which, according to her contract, she is entitled to.

"My family had to mortgage their house for me to come here and now I can't make the monthly payments," she said. "They want me to go back home but I haven't got the money for the airfare."

Santoyo said the hardship these women suffered would be greatly reduced if the Labour Tribunal reviewed its guidelines and shortened the length of time for case registrations as well as the schedule for hearings.

"The law is really unfair. Domestic workers are not allowed to work while they're waiting for their cases to be heard but the employer is still allowed to hire another helper," she said.