



the bethune house migrant women's refuge

text: Edwina Antonio-Santoyo
 photographs: Carazon Amaya-Canete



...temporary shelter...counseling & legal assistance...cultural programs...training & education...financial & material assistance...



1. A resident of the shelter washes vegetables for their lunch.
2. Residents take their nap inside the shelter's bedroom.
3. Two assigned residents prepare dinner to be shared by all clients.
4. Clients residing in the shelter share their experiences and cases with their former employers.
5. Edwina Antonio-Santoyo assists one of the clients to write a statement about her case.
6. Residents of the Bethune House (BH) enjoy their Cantonese lesson with a volunteer teacher.
7. Carazon De Guzman (BH volunteer) assists newly arrived client to fill up the case work form.



WHO WE ARE

The Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge Ltd., is a registered charitable institution under the companies ordinance in Hong Kong. It was established in 1986 to provide charitable assistance to the Asian women migrant worker. As at April 30th, 2006, there were 226,649 foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, 223,995 of them were female and 3,554 of them were male. The nationality breakdown of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong is tabulated below:

Philippines 19,672 • Indonesia 99,155 • Thailand 4,446 • India 1,349 • Sri Lanka 875 • Nepal 1,291 • Pakistan 39 • Myanmar 27 • Malaysia 2 • Bangladesh 44 • Singapore 2 • Others 21

Bethune House serves as a temporary shelter for displaced and distressed domestic helpers of any nationality. It provides food and sleeping accommodations, paralegal assistance, counseling and skills training enhancement (e.g. handy craft making), computer and language lessons to its residents. Essentially, it looks after their welfare while in residence and while awaiting the resolution of their cases. Most of these workers have been unjustly terminated, sexually or physically abused, underpaid, forced to work under very harsh conditions and/or victimized by illegal recruiters. They are practically dependent on charities for food and accommodation because they are not allowed by the Immigration Department to take up any legal job while cases are on-going.

The refuge was featured in the August 2 Edition of the South China Morning Post in 2005, one of the leading English newspapers in Hong Kong, with an article outlining their plight. Each one of them has a

story to tell. They come to the shelter because they have nowhere else to go and in many cases, fail to get assistance from their own respective embassies or consulates.

Most are not even aware of their rights, have little or no knowledge as to what action they can take to remedy or address their situation. In civilized societies domestic helpers are not slaves, but many of them are treated as such, which explains the rise of complaints and cases being filed by the hundreds. There maybe no benchmarks or existing studies to assess their impact on their contribution to Hong Kong's society and its economy but clearly, these are the people that free their employers to be able to work by taking care of their children and doing a myriad of domestic chores to keep their households running smoothly.

WHAT WE DO

General Objectives of the Bethune House

- To provide temporary shelter to Asian women migrants, who have been discharged from or left employment due to various reasons such as long working hours, rape, sexual and physical harassment, underpayment/non-payment of wages, illegal work and illegal recruitment, maltreatment;
- To make available guidance and counseling, including legal advice to residents and drop-in clients;
- To provide a social center where present and past residents can interact and mutually support one another;

- To provide an opportunity for continuing education for residents enabling them to cope with problems that confront migrant workers, including Hong Kong Labor and Immigration laws, problem analysis, cultural differences and adjustments, women's issues, stress management, language lessons, cooking lessons, Bible studies, computer lessons and country situation updates.

Services provided by Bethune House

- Counseling and legal assistance, data gathering/monitoring of cases of violation, and accompanying of residents to Immigration and Labor Departments constitute the major tasks of the staff;
- Indoor games, music/documentary videos, cultural programs and one parties to celebrate birthdays are organized;
- Training for residents who may wish after the case are settled to serve later in a part-time volunteer capacity to Bethune House.

- In cases of visa and passport problems, serious illness, mental and physical disability or death of a domestic worker, Bethune House may extend financial and material assistance to the victims depending on the case and resources available;
- Residents whose cases take months to settle are encouraged to get involved in making handicrafts and Christmas decorations. This serves as a therapy for the residents to ease their minds off their problems. The Christmas decorations are then sold at a Charity Christmas Sale to raise additional funds for Bethune House.

Physical Base

The second floor (1,620 sq. ft.) of a large two-storey building owned by a Union Church (a Protestant Church) serves as the shelter. We pay rent at a rate around 50% lower than the market price.

Since the establishment of Bethune House in 1986, an average of 30 women a night have stayed in the shelter and on several occasions, the number has been as high as 35.

We have 11 bunk beds that can accommodate 22 people so others do not mind sleeping on the floor or on the sofa as long as they have a roof over their heads.

The flat has one living room, one bedroom for the residents and one small room for the staff who are on-call, 24 hours a day, a mini-office, a kitchen and one toilet and bathroom.

Daily Operations

The residents themselves share the household chores (marketing, cooking, cleaning and washing). A daily schedule and a set of house policies are provided to systematize the operation of the shelter. There are regular staff-residents meeting where cases and updates on them are discussed with the purpose of education and strengthening the resolve of the residents. There are also days devoted to Bible Studies, sharing of experiences (especially when visitors from the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal drop by), cultural interactions (rehearsals for performances, etc.) and celebrations of won court cases or birthdays. This way, the residents are made to feel very much



CASE MANAGEMENT

There are currently more than 30 residents in the shelter mostly of whom are Filipinos and Indonesians, and a few Sri Lankans, Indians, and Nepalis. All of them had their contracts terminated prematurely and have lodged cases in the court. Most of these women had not been paid wages in lieu of notice, neither salary, nor annual leave, airfare, and rest days. An Indonesian was raped and made to do oral sex almost everyday. Another Indonesian fell from a three-storey building and has now recovered from spinal injury. These cases are still on-going.

Bethune House residents are usually referred by the Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers (MFMW), Association of Sri Lankans (ASL), For East Overseas Nepalese Association (FEOANA), and the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers (AMIM). Even government offices like the Social Welfare Department, Immigration Department and the Police refer cases to Bethune House, a recognition of the valuable service to the migrants.

Once admitted, the new clients are given orientation on the house policies of the shelter. Relevant information are taken from the victim so as to get the full picture of the case. Letters are written to the different government agencies to facilitate extension of visitor's visa and to lodge complaints to get their monetary claims.

In the period of waiting for the settlement of their court cases, the residents are legally forbidden to work in Hong Kong. Hence, in addition to their stress in the labor dispute, they have financial difficulties in supporting themselves, not to mention the agony of the fact that they cannot send any financial contribution to their families back home. On an average, clients stay in Bethune House for 3 - 6 months and sometimes for more than one year especially in criminal cases.

The residents are divided into groups depending on the nature of the case. There are three types of cases:

1. Immigration (i.e. overstaying, illegal work, falsification of legal documents);
2. Labor (violation of the provisions in the employment contract - underpayment or non-payment of wages, insufficient food, long working hours, no accommodation, no rest days);
3. Police (i.e. sexual and physical harassment, theft, child abuse, white slavery);

Bethune House also advocates and campaigns for the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of the migrant workers overseas.



Edwina Antonio-Santoyo, Executive Director, Bethune House
 Our work entails resources that we secure through partnership with local churches, donations from advocates, concerned individuals and organizations as well as through our own fund raising efforts to keep this shelter open. We are now seeking for partners who can provide long time commitments so that we could plan and be secured for the next three years.
 Being a non-profit welfare organization, the Bethune House welcomes donations which are tax deductible. Your support is very much needed. For cash transfers or deposits, please kindly deposit/transfer to the following account.

The Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge, Limited
 Current Account number: 284 362340-001
 Bank Name and Address: Hang Seng Bank Limited
 Yaumatei Branch, 36 Nathan Road, Kowloon, HKSAR
 Bethune House is located at 1/F, # 2 Jordan Road, Kowloon, HKSAR

Cebu
 Photo: stories by and about Filipino workers, newsletter 02, 11/2006 featuring the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge.
 Photo: stories by and about Filipino workers, newsletter 02, 11/2006 featuring the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge.
 Many thanks to Edwina Antonio-Santoyo, Carazon Amaya-Canete, Davis Berger, Ian Canete, Kati Hunt, Liliana Guggenberger
 contact: info@moisaoil.com, links: www.kapagmata.com, www.migrants.net

This publication was made possible with the support of Büro für Frauenfragen und Chancengleichheit des Landes Salzburg.
 Photo: 11/2006. All rights reserved.
 Photographs © by Carazon Amaya-Canete