Original Research

Abuse and depression among Filipino foreign domestic helpers. A cross-sectional survey in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The objectives of this study are to (1) explore physical and verbal abuse experience, perpetrators of abuse and abuse reporting behaviours of Filipino foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong and (2) examine associations between their abuse experience and depression level.

Study design: A cross-sectional survey

Methods: We purposively sampled participants at the Statue Square of Hong Kong on three Sunday afternoons between June and August 2017. Using a self-administered questionnaire, measures include sociodemographic and housing environment variables, physical and verbal abuse experience and depression level measured using the Depression Subscale of Depression Anxiety Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21-D). Multiple linear regression was performed to identify factors associated with the DASS-21-D score.

Results: The response rate was 86.1% and 105 participants completed the questionnaire. Overall, 20.5% and 34.4% had experienced physical and verbal abuse, respectively, in the past 12 months. Majority of perpetrators were female employers and children. Meanwhile, 16.7% of the abuse victims did not report their cases. Among those who reported, only a few (19.4%) reported their cases to formal organizations (agency and police). Factors significantly associated with the DASS-21-D score include physical abuse (unstandardized beta coefficient [B] = 1.68, 95% confidence interval [95% CI] = 0.12–3.34), verbal abuse (B = 1.58, 95% CI = 0.16–3.00), non-disclosure of physical abuse experience (B = 5.68, 95% CI = 0.18–11.18) and living space satisfaction (B = −1.50, 95% CI = −2.12 to −0.88).

Conclusions: Physical and verbal abuse among foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong were underreported to formal organizations and were associated with depression. Legislative enforcement of a comprehensive abuse reporting mechanism and mental health service should be considered.

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Introduction

Foreign domestic helpers (or migrant domestic workers) refer to international migrants who take up household duties,[1] such as housecleaning, cooking and providing care to the elderly and children. Apart from working, similar to other migrants, they have to accommodate new values, norms and language.[2] According to the International Labour Office, as of 2015, there were 11.5 million foreign domestic helpers worldwide, and 73.4% were women.[1]

Hong Kong recruits one of the highest numbers of foreign domestic helpers.[3] In the 1970s, a rapid economic growth of Hong Kong began with industrialization.[4] Moreover, in 1974, the Republic of the Philippines implemented a labour code to facilitate its labour export,[5] which coincided with the economic growth of Hong Kong. To release married females for productive work in the economy, Hong Kong households started hiring foreign domestic helpers, especially those from the Philippines, to perform household duties.[6] According to official statistics of the Hong Kong government, the foreign domestic helpers comprised approximately 10% of the local workforce in 2015.[7] Almost all (99%) were women, and the majority (54%) were Filipinos.[6]

Nevertheless, foreign domestic helpers are vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination. They usually work long and erratic hours (averaging 17 h per day with one day off)[8] for a low salary (minimum allowable wage set at HKD 4310 or around USD 553 per month).[6] More importantly, abuse of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong is not uncommon and may be increasing in prevalence. A survey in 2014 conducted by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) targeting migrant workers found that 18% and 58% of the domestic helpers have experienced verbal abuse and physical abuse, respectively,[9] compared with 1.5% and 6.8% previously found in 1997 by Bagley et al.[10] Ullah revealed that forms of physical abuse can be pulling hair, pushing, beating, kicking and slapping, whereas forms of verbal abuse may include intimidation, insult and slanderous statement.[3] However, the foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong tended to endure the abusive behaviours of employers and employers' family members.[3] The United Nation Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women suggested a local immigration law named the 'two-week' rule as an underlying reason. The helpers abide to find a new contract within two weeks or pay for visa extension if they are unemployed.[11] At the same time, a change of employment application usually takes four—six weeks to process.[10] The rule may thus force the foreign domestic helpers, who usually have low income and financial difficulties, to endure the abusive behaviours for securing their jobs. Furthermore, their silence can result in underreporting of abuse cases.

Depression and other mental health symptoms have been found in some Filipino foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong. Bagley et al. (1997) estimated that 10.3% of the helpers had clinical depression.[10] Conflict with and abuse by employers were some of the major factors associated with their depression level.[10] A possible explanation for the association is that multiple or ongoing abuse behaviours by employers increase helpers' vulnerability to depression.[12] Alternatively, depression in foreign domestic helpers increases their exposure to violence and abuse.[12] In addition, length of time spent in Hong Kong and family problems in the Philippines were also the determinants of depression among the Filipino foreign domestic helpers.[10] As the majority of them visited their family less than once a year, they might worry about their families and feel lonely, contributing to a higher depression level.[10]

There are knowledge gaps regarding abuse and depression among foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong. First, studies exploring their abuse experience were limited,[3,10] and they have not explored the major perpetrators of abuse and reporting behaviours of the helpers. Second, the only local study (Bagley et al.[10]) examining severity and determinants of depression level was conducted 20 years ago. Recognizing the dearth of up-to-date research, we conducted this cross-sectional study on Filipino foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong to (1) explore their physical and verbal abuse experience, perpetrators of abuse and abuse reporting behaviours, and to (2) examine severity and determinants of their depression level.

Methods

Design and sampling

This is a cross-sectional survey. Eligible participants were Filipino foreign domestic helpers, who constituted more than half (54%) of all domestic workers in Hong Kong. Using a self-administered questionnaire written in English and Tagalog for data collection, those who could not read and understand both languages were excluded. Owing to the fact that it was not practical to survey the domestic helpers in the households where they work, purposive sampling was used to approach the participants at the Statue Square of Hong Kong on three Sunday afternoons between June and August 2017, where and when foreign domestic helpers were likely to gather. A pilot test was also conducted on five Filipino foreign domestic helpers, based on which the questionnaire was further refined.

Measures

We first collected sociodemographic and housing environment variables. Nominal and ordinal variables included gender, age (20—29, 30—39 and 40+ years), marital status, housing type (public housing, private housing, subsidized housing and village), and satisfaction of living space (measured on a five-point Likert scale). Continuous variables included year of work experience (as foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong) and household size (number of persons living in the employers' house excluding the respondents' themselves).

Physical and verbal abuse experience of the respondents in the past 12 months were recorded, with the question 'How often do your employers or employers' household members hit, punch or kick you?' and 'How often do your employers and employers' household members yell and scream at you, or use degrading language (such as stupid, lazy and pig)?', respectively. Both physical and verbal abuses were measured on a

six-point Likert scale (from 'always' to 'never'). Respondents who gave answers other than 'never' were further asked by whom they were abused (perpetrator of abuse) and to whom they had reported the abuse cases (reporting behaviour).

A validated Depression Subscale of Depression Anxiety Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21-D) was adopted to assess depression level of the respondents.[13] The subscale consisted of seven items, which were scored on a four-point scale ranging from 0 ('did not apply to me at all') to 3 ('applied to me very much'). The higher the score, the more severe the depression was. Previous study demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha of 0.87) and convergent validity (significant correlation of 0.76 with the Beck Depression Inventory — II).

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics regarding physical and verbal abuse experience of the respondents were calculated. Respondents were divided into two groups: (1) have been abused and (2) never been abused. Scores measured on the DASS-21-D (range: 0—21) were multiplied by two to generate comparable scores on the DASS-42-D (range: 0—42), to classify depression level as normal (0—9), mild (10—13), moderate (14—20), severe (21—27) or extremely severe (28+).[14] In addition, we used multiple linear regression to identify covariates significantly associated with the DASS-21-D score. Dummy variables of ordinal and nominal covariates containing more than two subgroups were created for the regression test. A P-value < 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. All statistical analyses were performed by SPSS Statistics 23.

Ethical approval

Eligible participants were informed about the research objectives and were invited to participate. Informed consent was obtained from all individual respondents included in the study. Ethical approval was granted by the Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Results

Table 1 summarizes sociodemographic and housing and living environment characteristics of 105 Filipino foreign domestic workers surveyed. Response rate was 86.1%. All of them were women. They were more likely to be aged 30—39 years (59.6%), married (51.5%), worked and lived in private houses (38.7%). They had an average of 4.18 years of work experience, worked in households with 4.19 persons on average and were generally satisfied with their living space.

Fig. 1 is the reporting flowchart of the sampled foreign domestic helper regarding their abuse experience, perpetrators of abuse and reporting behaviours of abuse victims in Hong Kong. Among the foreign domestic helpers surveyed, 20.5% and 34.4% had experienced physical and verbal abuse, respectively, in the past 12 months. Majority of the abusers

Table 1 — Sociodemographic and housing and living environment characteristics of the study population (n = 105).

Characteristics	N (%)	Mean (SD)
Gender		
Female	105 (100.0)	
Male	0 (0)	
Age (years)[a]		
20—29	26 (25.0)	
30—39	62 (59.6)	
40+	16 (15.4)	
Marital status[a]		
Single	43 (41.7)	
Married	53 (51.5)	
Widowed/divorced/separated	7 (6.8)	
Years of work experience[a]		4.18 (4.06)
Housing type[a]		
Public housing	16 (17.2)	
Private housing	36 (38.7)	
Subsidized housing	26 (28.0)	
Village	15 (16.1)	
Household size[b]		4.19 (1.46)
Living space satisfaction[c]		3.97 (0.98)

SD = standard deviation.
[a] These items did not total 105 because of missing values.
[b] Household size refers to the number of persons living in the employers' house excluding the respondents' themselves.
[c] Living space satisfaction was measured on a five-point Likert scale: 1 (very dissatisfied)—5 (very satisfied).

were female employers and children. However, 16.7% of the abuse victims did not report their cases to any individuals or organizations. Among those who reported, only a few (19.4%) reported their cases to formal organizations including the agency and police.

Fig. 2 presents the depression level of the foreign domestic helpers, as measured using the DASS-21-D. Although the majority of our respondents showed no depression, 25.2% had mild-to-extremely-severe depression level.

Table 2 shows the results of multiple linear regression of the DASS-21-D score on physical and verbal abuse, housing and living environment and sociodemographic variables. Physical abuse experience (unstandardized beta coefficient [B] = 1.68, 95% confidence interval [95% CI] = 0.12—3.34), verbal abuse experience (B = 1.58, 95% CI = 0.16—3.00) and non-disclosure of physical abuse experience (B = 5.68, 95% CI = 0.18—11.18) were positively associated with the DASS-21-D score. Conversely, living space satisfaction was negatively associated with the DASS-21-D score (B = −1.50, 95% CI = −2.12 to −0.88). The regression model overall explained 42.1% of variance in the DASS-21-D score.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to describe abuse reporting behaviours of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, and their depression level. As employment of foreign
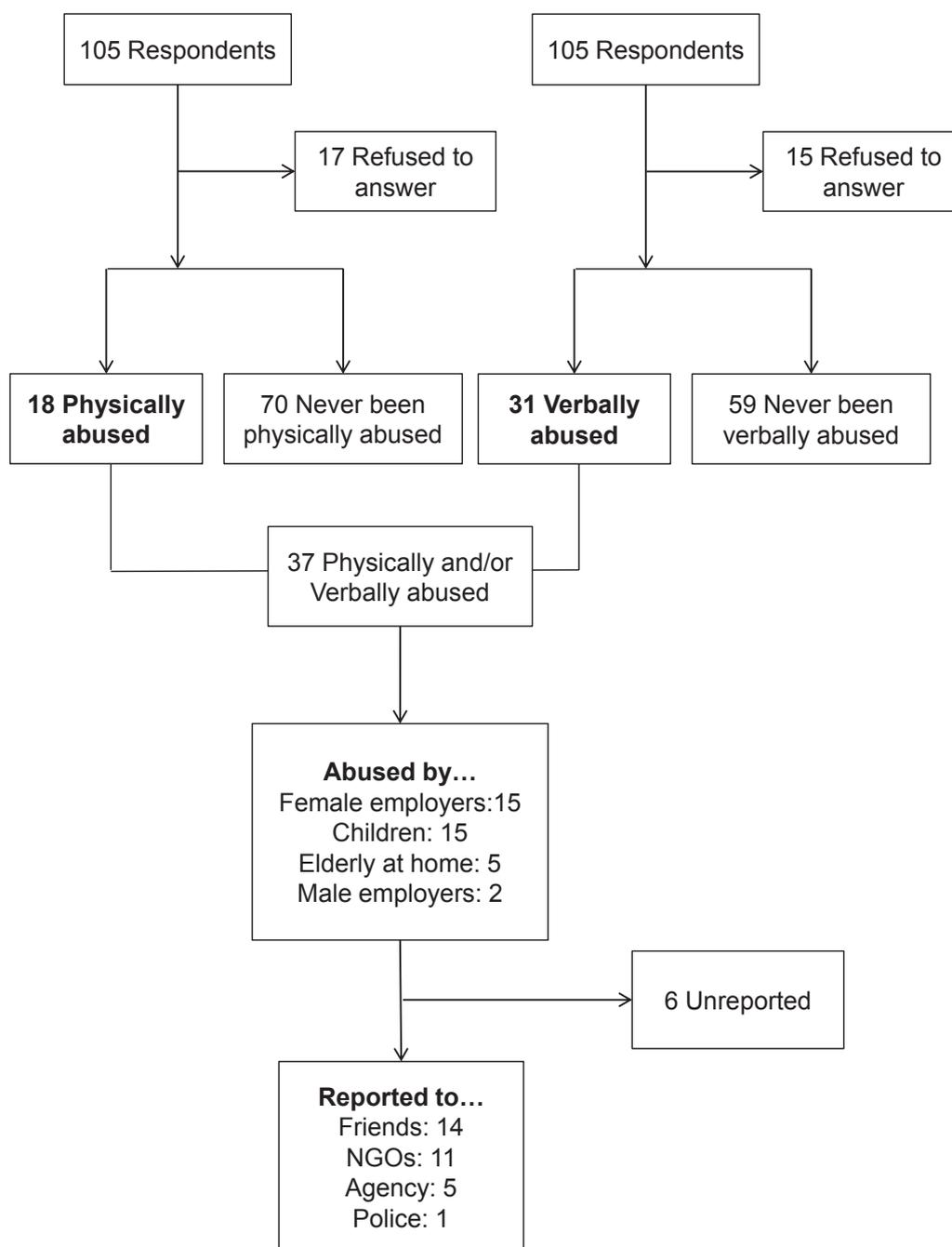
Fig. 1 — **A flowchart of Filipino foreign domestic helper abuse experience, perpetrators of abuse and reporting behaviours of abuse victims. NGO, Non-governmental organization.**

domestic helpers is common in many other countries,[15] this local study deserves a wide international attention.

Foreign domestic helper abuse experience, perpetrators of abuse and reporting behaviours of abuse victims

The present study estimated that 20.5% and 34.4% of the Filipino foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong had experienced physical and verbal abuse, respectively, in the past 12 months. The reported percentage of domestic helpers being physically abused was relatively high, compared with the Mission for Migrant Workers of Hong Kong survey in 2012

(18%)[9] and Bagley et al., in 1997 (1.5%),[10] while the reported percentage of those being verbally abused lied between the two studies (58% and 6.8%).[9,10] Given different definitions of abuse and single-point measurement, it is difficult to conclude the direction of the trend across time. However, our results confirmed the presence of foreign domestic helper abuse in Hong Kong.

More importantly, 16.7% of the abuse victims did not report their cases to any individuals or organizations (Fig. 1). Among those who reported, only 19.4% reported their cases to formal organizations including the agency and police, whereas 80.6% reported the cases informally to their friends and NGOs. On
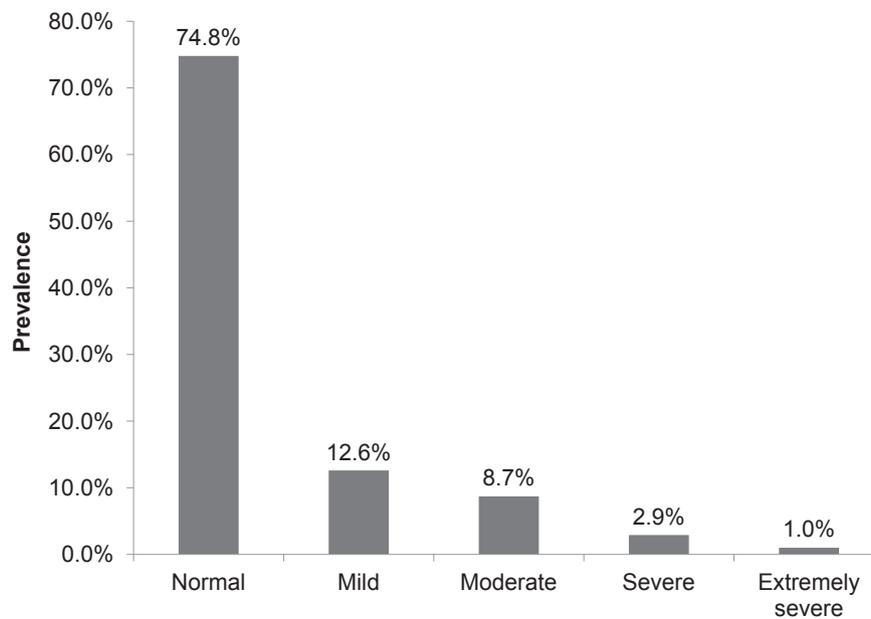
Fig. 2 — Depression level of Filipino foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, measured using the DASS-21-D (n = 105). DASS-21-D, Depression Subscale of Depression Anxiety Stress Scale 21.

one hand, Filipino women have a strong sense of sharing their depressive problems with others to receive support and encouragement,[16] possibly leading to their informal reporting behaviour. Moreover, under the regulation of a local immigration law named the "two-week" rule, the helpers abide to find a new contract within two weeks or pay for visa extension if they are unemployed,[11] whereas a change of employment application usually takes four to six weeks to process.[10] Therefore, even if there were abusive behaviours by their employers, the domestic workers might not choose to report the abuse cases to formal organizations but their friends or NGOs, fearing of losing their jobs.

Table 2 — Multiple linear regression of the DASS-21-D score on physical and verbal abuse, housing and living environment and sociodemographic variables of Filipino foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong.

Variable	B (95% CI)	β	P-value
Age (years)			
20-29	Referent	—	—
30-39	−0.74 (−2.19−0.72)	−0.11	0.318
40+	−1.73 (−3.80−0.35)	−0.19	0.101
Marital Status			
Single/widowed/divorced/separated	Referent	—	—
Married	−0.48 (−1.79−0.84)	−0.07	0.474
Years of work experience	0.11 (−0.03−0.26)	0.15	0.120
Housing type			
Public housing/subsidized housing/village	Referent	—	—
Private housing	0.42 (−0.84−1.67)	0.06	0.512
Household size[a]	0.18 (−0.22−0.58)	0.08	0.374
Living space satisfaction[b]	−1.50 (−2.12 to − 0.88)[c]	−0.45	< 0.001
Physical abuse			
Never been abused	Referent	—	—
Have been abused	1.68 (0.12−3.34)[c]	0.20	0.048
Refused to answer	5.68 (0.18−11.18)[c]	0.66	0.043
Verbal abuse			
Never been abused	Referent	—	—
Have been abused	1.58 (0.16−3.00)[c]	0.23	0.032
Refused to answer	−4.73 (−10.39−0.93)	−0.54	0.100

DASS-21-D = Depression Subscale of Depression Anxiety Stress Scale 21; B = unstandardized beta coefficient; 95% CI = 95% confidence Interval; β = standardized beta coefficient.
42.1% of the variance in the DASS-21-D was explained in the regression model.
[a] Household size refers to the number of persons living in the employers' house excluding the respondents' themselves.
[b] Living space satisfaction was measured on a five-point Likert scale: 1 (very dissatisfied)−5 (very satisfied).
[c] $p < 0.05$.

Female employers and children were the most common perpetrators reported in the present study. Under the influence of traditional Chinese culture and ideology, women in Hong Kong may still believe that they have a prominent role in managing home affairs, despite their increasing labour participation.[17] Role replacement by the domestic workers may result in female employers' low self-esteem and jealousy (over workers' relationships with their children or husbands).[18] A perceived status loss at home may then drive the female employers to abuse the foreign domestic helpers.[18] In addition, one-third of Hong Kong households with children employ foreign domestic helpers.[19] Children usually spend most of the time with the domestic helpers and may become the major abusers. Moreover, role modelling from parents may influence the children to imitate their parents' abusive behaviours.[20]

Foreign domestic helper depression and its association with abuse and living space

In our study, 25.2% of Filipino foreign domestic helpers had a mild-to-extremely-severe depression level, compared with only 2.9% of Hong Kong general population having a depressive episode in 2015.[21] Although direct comparison between these two percentages determined by different measurement tools may not be practical, higher prevalence of mental disorders among migrants[22] and employed housemaids[23] were supported by previous studies.

As expected, physical abuse and verbal abuse among our foreign domestic helpers were positively associated with the DASS-21-D score. The Women's Health Initiative Observational Study, a population-based and multicenter study in the United States of America, demonstrated similar results that women reporting exposure to physical abuse and/or verbal abuse had a greater increase in the number of depressive symptoms.[24] One explanation for the association is that multiple or ongoing victimizations increase women's vulnerability to depression.[12] Alternatively, women who are depressed and have low self-esteem are less likely to be able to escape the violence and abuse.[12]

Interestingly, those who refused to disclose 12-month physical abuse experience had a significantly higher DASS-21-D score (Table 2). The association ($\beta = 0.64$) was even stronger than that in those explicitly expressed that they have been physically abused ($\beta = 0.21$). In response to the results, we have the following interpretations. First, many of those who refused to disclose their physical abuse experience in this anonymous survey might actually have experienced severe abuse. Second, they might be less likely to report the cases, seek help from their counterparts and receive support and encouragement, contributing to the higher depression level.[10]

In addition, Filipino foreign domestic helpers less satisfied with their living space were more likely to have a higher depression level (Table 2). Restricted by the immigration live-in law, foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong could not live outside of their employers' homes. Nonetheless, Hong Kong is a densely populated city with generally small living space.[25] The foreign domestic helpers might be forced to live and sleep in an unsatisfactory environment, such as kitchens and corridors.[9] The poor living space could, in turn, impair their mental well-being.[26]

Limitations and further study

First, our respondents were recruited purposively through social gatherings of the domestic helpers, which might serve as important channels for the helpers to seek social support. By contrast, those who were depressed and abused by their employers might be less likely to join the gatherings and therefore underrepresented in our study. At the same time, given limited financial resources, purposive sampling is a cost-efficient way to reach the minority group by approaching groups of the domestic helpers in the sample location one by one.[27] Our sample description also suggests a fairly wide range of foreign domestic helpers surveyed. Second, non-response bias might arise because more than 10% of our respondents refused to report their 12-month abuse experience in this study. Meanwhile, instead of treating non-responses as missing data, we included them as subgroups in the regression model to examine their associations with depression level (Table 2). Third, the power of the prevalence and regression analyses was limited by small sample size. However, the present study may serve as the first step to test the hypotheses and warrant further investigations to look deeper into the issue in future studies. Fourth, our cross-sectional study design cannot confirm temporality and causation between the covariates and depression level. Future studies should adopt a longitudinal study design, qualitative study methods for in-depth exploration, include larger samples and examine other determinants of depression, such as social capital, lifestyle factors and language barrier.

Conclusion

The present study confirms the presence of physical and verbal abuse among Filipino foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong and suggests that many abuse cases were unreported or reported to informal parties. To protect the victims of abuse cases, the local government should establish a comprehensive abuse reporting mechanism that encourage the participations of the NGOs, police and work agencies. In addition, our study demonstrates associations of physical and verbal abuse as well as living space satisfaction with depression level among the foreign domestic helpers. Aside from delivering mental health service to the abuse victims, the government can make reference to the guidelines developed by the International Labour Organization for ensuring the compliance with accommodation and workplace standards. In light of similar work-related health and safety problems faced by foreign domestic helpers around the world,[15] our local findings and implications may also be applicable to other contexts.

Author statements

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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