

191 *Working conditions and health among foreign domestic workers in Taiwan*

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Since Taiwan legalized the employment of foreign domestic workers in 1992, the number of these workers has grown substantially. Currently, Taiwan hosts up to 139,000 female foreign domestic workers, most of them are from Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Living and working in individual households, these women are away from public oversight and not protected by labor laws, placing them in an extremely vulnerable position.

This study was designed to explore the working conditions and self-reported health status among foreign domestic workers. In the first part of this study, we conducted qualitative interviews with 12 workers, who were recruited through personal networks. The second part was a survey with a standardized questionnaire. Researchers approached foreign workers at social events organized by non-governmental organizations, and invited them to participate in an anonymous survey. A total of 231 women (107 Filipinos, 83 Vietnamese, and 41 Indonesians) agreed to participate and returned completed questionnaires. Information obtained by the questionnaire included averaged working hours per day, days or hours of rest time per month, mental health status, status of burnout, psychosomatic complaints, language ability, perceived employers' attitudes, job satisfaction, and social and demographic characteristics. This study was conducted during the period from February to October in 2005.

We found that women from the three countries had dramatic different cultural and social backgrounds. Interestingly, their health status as assessed by the questionnaire also varied substantially by nationalities. Some women view their work more like a responsibility as a family member and less like paid work, and many of them found it difficult to draw a line between work and their private life. The averaged working hours were 13 hours per day. The perceived attitudes and behaviors of members of hiring families were closely linked to their working conditions, job satisfaction, and health status. The current policies give hiring families an absolute power to determine how to use domestic workers, leaving room for potential abuse. To enhance work and health welfare of foreign workers in Taiwan, we made specific recommendations based on the findings.