

# Hidden from sight

## ***A documentary sheds light on the lives of Hong Kong's Indians***

**Yenni Kwok** in Hong Kong

Roshni came to Hong Kong from Bombay in 1993 to work as a domestic helper with an Indian family. Her day starts at six in the morning and can go on until two the next morning. She cooks four meals a day for the eight members of the family, with five or six dishes for lunch and dinner. She also prepares food for a relative living nearby. On top of this, she cleans the home and does the laundry (the ironing takes almost four hours a day). On special occasions such as festivals, she sometimes has to stay up through the night preparing sweets. Her greatest worry in life? That she will fall sick and lose her job. If she does, she will no longer be able to support her family back in India.

It was stories such as Roshni's (not her real name) that caught the attention of Hong Kong film lecturer Tammy Cheung Hung. The result: *Invisible Women*, a 30-minute film documentary that portrays the lives of three Indian women in Hong Kong. Preeti and Rekha are domestic workers from Bombay; Vandana Rajwani is a Hong Kong-born barrister. Together, their stories relate a schizophrenic tale of a community that suffers racism from Hong Kong Chinese and others while sometimes mistreating its own in a fashion bordering on cruelty.

*Invisible Women*, which received a US\$10,300 grant from the government's Home Affairs Bureau, started out as a racial-awareness project. Cheung, 41, wanted to show the neglect with which South Asians are treated in Hong Kong. "They walk in front of us, but we don't see them," she says. "When we talk about *yun doh yan* [Indians], for example, we mix them all together - the Sri Lankans, the Pakistanis, they are all 'Indians.' Most people don't care what they are and what they do. We ignore them."

Rajwani, 28, is sometimes treated this way, though her brown hair and light skin can lead to her being taken for Italian or Spanish. The barrister, who is a member of the Hong Kong Against Racial Discrimination organization, says: "When I tell people that I'm Indian, they ask questions like why don't I smell? They have these stereotypes that all [Indians] are of low education and unhygienic, and not people they would like to associate with."

When the camera turns to Preeti and Rekha, the focus of *Invisible Women* switches from race to class. Cheung's technique was to listen in to the two women as they and friends gathered in public parks on Sundays. Through casually told stories, peppered occasionally with jokes and laughter, a picture emerges of a group of people victimized by India's caste system. While many Indian employers treat their domestic staff with respect, Preeti, 22, is badly underpaid, receiving just over half the legal minimum monthly wage of \$495. She says she is not properly fed and is subject to intrusive discipline, including not being allowed to use the phone. Rekha, 23, is paid a little better, but still well short of what the law stipulates. Other helpers talk of working seven days a week, or being given only a few hours' break on Sunday. Some have their mail intercepted, or sleep on the floor in the kitchen or in a corridor. There are cases of workers being locked in the house while their employers are out of town. Says Cheung, who teaches film at the Hong Kong Arts Center: "These people are at the very bottom of the social hierarchy."

James Joseph Keezhangatte, a volunteer with the Indian Domestic Workers' Association, says the helpers are from an economically lower class and caste, making them vulnerable to exploitation. "Nearly all of them have no proficiency in English, the language in which all documents pertaining to their work are signed," he says. Keezhangatte talks of a "ring of isolation," where some Indian employers discourage their helpers from developing any kind of communication with other workers or support groups. This way, they never learn their rights. And even when they do, they may be reluctant to lodge a complaint for fear of being branded a trouble-maker and becoming unemployable in a community where many families know each other. "It is part of Indian culture that a servant has to be subservient to the master," Keezhangatte says.

The Indian consulate general agrees that the exploitation of domestic helpers is "very disturbing." But it says filmmaker Cheung's listening-in technique risked not giving the full picture. "To project a delicate issue like this would warrant detailed research," a spokesman says. "Without adequate research, [the film] could project a very negative, stereotyped image of the Indian community as a whole. This may be unfair as there are lots of Indian families which do treat their maids very well."

Cheung says she hopes *Invisible Women* will bring Hong Kong Chinese face

to face with the problems affecting the Indian community in general and its domestic helpers in particular. But she acknowledges that none of her friends understood why she chose the topic. Some told her she was wasting her time. And the Chinese press has shown little interest in her film.

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