

Low-Wage Workers in Hong Kong

Final Report

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Preface

Background and Objective of the Study

This study was commissioned by the Central Policy Unit (CPU) of the Hong Kong SAR Government. The objective of the study is to advise CPU on policy recommendations to support low-wage workers in Hong Kong through an in-depth study of the following aspects:

- a. household strategies for coping with poverty
- b. how the young generation of workers might be affected by their engagement in low-wage work;
- c. workers' experiences in relation to firm level practices; and
- d. low-wage workers' perceptions on a range of social and political issues

Methodology

This research used both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, we constructed a general profile of low-wage workers through examining data collected from the General Household Survey. Second, we conducted 50 in-depth interviews to investigate the subjective accounts of low-wage workers in Hong Kong.

Research Team Members

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Central Policy Unit of the HKSAR Government in the context of growing concerns over the quality of employment in Hong Kong. The focus is on low-wage workers, often referred to as the ‘working poor’, whose wages from work are insufficient to enable them to support themselves and their families. After reviewing the local and overseas literature, we define low-wage employees as those (excluding foreign domestic helpers) who earn less than half of the median monthly employment earnings, working 35 hours or more during the seven days before enumeration or those who were classified as underemployed. As of Q1 2008, the median employment earnings was HK\$ 11,000, and half of that was HK\$5,500. It is necessary to understand the phenomenon of low-wage employment so that ‘support and assistance are so structured as to help the low-income employees move out of poverty while minimizing the risk of work incentives erosion and reliance on the welfare net’ (Commission on Poverty 2006: p.1).

2. Research Objectives

The project seeks to deepen our understanding of current low-wage workers in Hong Kong by

- a. deepening our understanding of various household strategies for coping with poverty
- b. clarifying how the young generation of workers might be affected by their engagement in low-wage work;
- c. investigating workers’ experiences in relation to firm level practices;

and

- d. delineating low-wage workers' perceptions on a range of social and political issues, so as to better understand their roles in achieving social harmony.

3. Method and Data

This research used both quantitative and qualitative methods.

- Quantitative Method: We constructed a general profile of low-wage workers through examining data collected from the General Household Survey. We analyse and compare the data relevant to the situation of low-wage workers at three points in time --- 1995, 2006 and 2007. The comparison between 1995 and 2006 enables an assessment of the effects of the process of deindustrialisation of the local economy and also the Asian Financial Crisis and its aftermath. The comparison between 2006 and 2007 gave us further information about how the economic upturn during these two years affected the low-wage workers' composition and situations. This also provided us good contextual information for interpreting subjective accounts investigated via qualitative research methods.
- Qualitative Method: we interviewed two groups of low-wage workers. The first group comprises 25 individuals who are 30 years of age or older. They are mostly married and are cleaners by occupation. The second group is made up of 19 persons between 15 and 29 years of age and working in fast-food chains or other chain stores. All of them are single. In order to obtain an overview of the industrial contexts and existing government policies influencing low-wage workers, we have also interviewed four

officials from the Labour Department, two trade union officials, two social workers, one proprietor of a cleaning company, and a human resource director from a local fast-food chain. The latter two were referred to us by the Labour Department for their good business practices in their respective industries.

4. Major Findings

Major findings from the quantitative profile and subjective accounts of low-wage workers are summarised below.

4.1. A Quantitative Profile

The number of low-wage workers in general fluctuates with the overall performance of the Hong Kong economy.

- The absolute number of low-income employees surged from 129,800 in Q3 1995 to 222,000 in Q3 2007, a rise of 71 per cent.
- The share of low-wage employees in the total employed (excluding foreign domestic helpers) was 6.8 per cent in Q3 of 2007.
- The economic revival from Q3 of 2006 through 2007 reversed the upward trend as the number of low wage workers fell by 30,000 or 11.9 per cent within a year.

The benefits of the economic growth have been unevenly distributed as certain groups in terms of age, gender, education levels, occupation, and industry were found to be relatively disadvantaged.

- The share of females among low-wage workers continued to grow from 1995 to 2007 despite the economic recovery between Q3 2006

to Q3 2007.

- Middle-aged groups, namely, those aged 40-49 and 50-59, accounted for larger shares of the low-waged in Q3 2006 than in Q3 1995; this trend was not reversed despite economic growth between Q3 2006 and Q3 2007.
- The 15-19, 50-59 and those 60 and older were all over-represented among the low-wage workers relative to their overall shares in the total number of workers.
- Individuals with upper secondary, lower secondary, sixth form and post-secondary non-degree qualifications were more likely to be low-waged employees in 2007 than in 1995. Those with upper secondary schooling suffered most seriously as their numbers practically tripled between Q3 1995 and Q3 2007 while their share among the low-income employees rose from 15.6 per cent to 27.3 per cent. Their situation did not improve between 2006 and 2007 despite the improved performance of the economy.

The composition of low-income employees has remained relatively stable over the period of the economic recovery, indicating that low-wage work may be structural in nature.

- As could be expected from Hong Kong's current economic structure, service and shop sales workers and employees in elementary occupations constitute the two main occupational groupings of the low-waged. They accounted for 72 per cent of the total in Q3 of 2007.
- Their substantial share in the composition of the low-waged is

structural in nature as indicated by the fact that little change occurred as Hong Kong's economic performance improved during 2006 and 2007. However, between 1995 and 2007, low-wage employees were increasingly drawn from white collar workers (including clerks and associate professionals), and service and shop sales workers.

- The three main employers of low-wage workers in Q3 2007 were producers of consumer or producer services. They were the wholesale, retail, trades, restaurants and hotels industries; community, social and personal services industries; and financing, insurance, real estate and business services industries. Their dominance in employing low-wage workers reflects the expansion of service industries and the shrinking of manufacturing between 1995 and 2007.

Low-income employees are becoming more likely to be living in low-income households.

- The trend between 1995 and 2007 was for more low-income individuals to live in low-income households defined as those earning less than the average CSSA payment. The proportion living in such households rose from 7.3 per cent in 1995 to 14 per cent in Q3 2007.
- In 2007, low-wage earners were more likely to have come from smaller households of 3 or 4 members (accounting for 57 per cent of the total) rather than from households with four or more members as in 1995.

4.2. Determinants of pathways to low-wage work

Our in-depth interviews of the two major groups of low-wage workers found that there are actually different pathways to low-wage employment for the middle-aged people and the young. Our analysis also differentiates among low-wage workers by types of family units. This helps to illuminate the nature of the household circumstances under which low-wage workers take up their jobs.

The gender of a worker and the family unit he or she forms makes a difference in the way the worker enters low-wage employments.

- Fathers, regardless of whether they have dependent children, usually enter into full-time low-wage employment after experiencing periods of unemployment; by contrast, it is usually only mothers without dependent children who enter into low-wage work full-time.
- Childcare and the domestic workload fall predominantly on mothers; it has the strongest effect on lone-mothers who sometimes cannot take up higher paid full-time jobs because of their domestic commitments.

Low-wage work involvement of the parents is a major factor in determining young people's pathway to low-wage work.

- One important research finding is the way young people with single-earner parents who are engaged in low-wage work are likely to enter full-time low-wage work after Secondary Five despite the presence of other wage earning siblings.

- Hence, it is not surprising that when both parents are absent or are retired, young people are led to take up full-time low-wage work after Secondary Five or Secondary Three irrespective of how many wage earning siblings are already present in the household. This has implications for understanding how inter-generational poverty is transmitted.

The specific generation that the individual belongs to also determines the work involvement of fathers and mothers.

- Low-wage fathers in their 50s and 60s often have non-working wives who appear to follow a more traditional work trajectory for women – namely, no paid work after marriage or having children. Even when these older low-wage fathers became unemployed, their wives did not enter the labour market.
- The generation effect is associated with the migration effect in the cases of low-wage mothers. Some mothers who migrated to Hong Kong in the 1990s had husbands who were unable to earn a breadwinner's income so that they therefore had to assume full-time low-wage work despite the lack of childcare support.
- Women who migrated to Hong Kong earlier and had children in the late 1980s and early 1990s were more able to opt out of the job market while their children were still young. When they re-entered the labour market in the 2000s, they worked only part-time in low-wage work.

4.3. Household strategies and low-wage work

We next delineate low-wage work and its interaction with different household strategies.

Older low-wage earners tend to depend on their adult children for support.

Older low-wage fathers and low-wage lone-mothers who have non-dependent children usually cope by living with these children under one roof, intensifying self-provisioning of food and childcare and pooling their market income. However, these are short-term measures because as young people get married, they want to establish a separate household. How to achieve better allocation of labour and intergenerational reciprocity across households in these circumstances becomes an important and an urgent issue.

In such households usually the old parents or parent engaged in low-wage work want to provide their married children with useful services such as childcare and food provision in return for some money so that they can withdraw from the low-wage workforce and have a reliable source of income in the future. However, such reciprocity often depends on the employability of the children, the individual mobilisation strategy of the children, and also whether they live close to their parents.

All these situations often have adverse effects on the older low-wage parents because their children are likely to have low-qualifications; it is

also not uncommon for the female children to become lone-mothers depending on CSSA. The present public housing policy also does not always enable young families to live close to their parents. More childcare provision, training programmes and job matching programmes for young lone-mothers to encourage them to stay in work, and a housing policy that takes into account the needs of the elderly, may facilitate a more effective division of labour among related households and prevent long-term dependence on welfare.

Dual-earner households are more likely than single-earner households to support their children's training and education

The comparison of dual-earner parents and lone-earner parents shows that a coping strategy involving teenage children is often deployed in households with lone-earner parents, that is, where mothers are not engaged in paid work while the father earns an average income or a low-income. Households which encourage the traditional work trajectory for women – that is, married women are discouraged from working – might coax or compel their teenage children to pay for their own outlays and education. This deployment or allocation of labour has the effect of delaying the pursuit of an academic career by young people who have the ability to obtain higher qualifications. Such a delay can be viewed as contributing to the misuse of talent since Hong Kong's increasingly knowledge-based economy requires individuals with higher qualifications to advance the process of restructuring.

Dual-earner parents with mothers engaged in low-wage work are less

likely to require young children to work too early as part of a household coping strategy but instead often support children's pursuit of post-secondary education. However, the current work conditions for low-wage workers often frustrate and discourage women assuming full-time low-wage work not only because of the shortage in childcare facilities but also because of the low pay, perceived lack of fairness in the workplace and lack of effective regulation of the employers. This results in working mothers assuming unstable work or part-time work that is insufficient to cover their household expenses so that they often look to the government to ease their difficulties.

Many low-waged workers are self-motivated people who regard public assistance and low-wage part-time work as transitional measures.

Various kinds of public assistance have contributed much to the improvement of the lives of many low-income workers and their households. Many of them consider being able to live in public housing and to study in subsidised training programmes to be a blessing. While welfare dependency should not be encouraged and, more importantly, not preferred by the low-wage workers themselves, the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme has been effective in most cases in alleviating absolute poverty and, more importantly, in enabling some families to stay afloat while their members pursue training and education opportunities. However, the stigma associated with CSSA often pushes certain vulnerable households such as those with many members who are recent migrants, to discontinue the CSSA too soon, thus preventing their children from

benefiting from assistance in pursuing further education. This has the effect of pushing young people from such households to take up full-time low-wage work so that they miss out on opportunities to receive further training opportunities, thus passing on poverty to the next generation.

Our research suggests that part-time work is often taken up by young people as a transitional measure before they find satisfactory full-time positions. But before attaining the latter, they almost always need to obtain further qualifications. This greatly disadvantages young people who are required as part of a household coping strategy to work full-time after Secondary Five or Secondary Three to generate market income. But it is noteworthy that certain industries such as the catering industry generate more higher paid part-time job opportunities such as chefs for young people who want to combine study with work. Other 'creative industries' such as advertising and graphics design appear to lack such opportunities.

4.4. Enterprise strategies

We studied two industries, each subject to different pressures which shape the employment conditions of low-wage labour.

The cleaning industries

The cleaning industries have been the focus of attention since the government outsourced its cleaning services to private contractors in 1999. This marked the beginning of demands from labour groups for

more regulation of private contractors awarded public contracts. Subsequently, the private sector of the cleaning industry has been placed under the government-initiated Wage Protection Movement as a way to increase wages for the low-paid workers. Despite such initiatives, cleaning workers still face many employment-related problems such as having to long hours with low wages, pay arrears, unfair remuneration and stringent management control.

Chain stores

The main strategy of corporate chain stores for competing in a mature market is by casualisation of jobs. Most chain stores are now staffed by a majority of part-timers and a minority of full-timers. Those in full-time positions have to work long hours with a low hourly pay rate; upward job mobility is highly competitive and not very attractive for part-timers. Their only way to achieve social mobility is to prepare themselves to climb alternative job ladders by pursuing further education.

4.5. Social and Political Sentiments

Low-wage workers have very diverse social and political sentiments.

- Low-wage fathers are in general disgruntled or distrust the government. But those with stronger roots in mainland China support pro-government parties.
- Low-wage mothers express dissatisfaction with the stringent requirements for entitlement to some government measures, such as rent reduction and student loans, that could help relieve their

financial difficulties. Those who work full-time but still have children in school also complain about the lack of childcare assistance. Those with a migration background thought that tutorial programmes for newly arrived children are not working effectively to integrate their children into the mainstream. They think that creating more jobs will help ease much of their difficulties. Local-born respondents in this group generally support the Democratic Party; those who are recent migrants are usually more indifferent towards political parties.

- Some low-wage lone-mothers have a very strong work ethic and those who have claimed CSSA were grateful to the government for this support. Since this is a group either with migration background (those claiming CSSA) or holding multiple jobs to support the household, they are normally not actively engaged with politics.
- Low-wage single people with low-wage or average-earning fathers or lone-mothers, usually have stronger opinions about the government. Not all of them would vote in an election, but some were quite careful in deciding whom to vote for, particularly in district level elections. Those who are unable to create prospects for themselves in their work or studies and who fail to rise above their circumstances despite government programmes to help them, are more likely to become more radicalised and join social movements or become active in political forums on the internet.
- Low-wage single people with mothers in low-wage jobs are generally milder in outlook and pursue individualised paths of

advancement through training and education or through reliance on further assistance from their households to create a better future for themselves.

5. Recommendations

We turn to our policy recommendations:

5.1. Promote economic growth in order to reduce the number of low-wage workers

Our quantitative analysis has highlighted the steady reduction in the number of low-wage workers since the turnaround in the economy in the last few years. This suggests that macro-economic performance is important in shaping the living standards of low-wage workers. The current financial turbulence in the global economy and the slowing down of the growth rate of the Chinese economy may, however, cause the number of low-wage workers to increase again in the coming years. A macro-economic strategy to promote Hong Kong's long-term economic growth is of course crucial to prevent this from happening but how this could best be achieved is obviously beyond the scope of this study.

5.2. Curb Inflation in order to ease the financial burden on low-wage workers

Another aspect of the macro-economic environment that could impinge on the livelihood of the low-income working population is looming inflation. This is an emergent trend that is not reflected adequately in

our interviews but a high inflation environment is definitely detrimental to the interests of low-income employees whose wages may not be able to keep pace with rising price levels. How to tackle an inflationary spiral is an issue that falls outside our research but it is gratifying to observe that the government has recently announced a host of short-term relief measures to alleviate the inflationary pressure undermining the living standards of the grassroots and the middle-class. Fare concessions for students, assistance for the new school year, payment of public housing rent, an increase of the CSSA allowance, electricity subsidy and price survey are all appropriate measures to help grassroots households which are already struggling to cope by self-provisioning, economising, and claiming benefits from the state.

5.3. Enforce a reasonable minimum wage level and maximum work hours

A minimum wage which is set at a level relative to the median wage for all workers can help ensure workers receive fair remuneration for their efforts (Lloyd et al., 2008). Our study shows that government regulation of the cleaning industry serving the public sector effectively raises workers' wages to the median market rate. Similar government-led measures in other types of industry which are organised in corporate chains could also be effective. However, it is important to note the occasional malpractices, mentioned by our respondents, by contractors of cleaning services for the public sector. Effective enforcement measures must be put in place to give confidence to

employers that a level-playing field is created for those abiding by the regulations so that they will not be disadvantaged by paying higher wages or providing better protection to their workers. Subcontracting of services should be discouraged or penalised as much as possible in the private sector as in the public sector. Trade union involvement in the process of monitoring and revealing ‘black sheep’ cases can greatly facilitate enforcement (Lloyd et al., 2008). The concern that introducing a minimum wage will create job losses is now contradicted by evidence from Britain where job losses have been shown to be insignificant to date (Metcalf, 2006). It has also been reported that the British case shows the minimum wage legislation did not lower company profits (Mingpao, 2008)

More regulation of the maximum number of work hours will help immensely in creating a more balanced work environment. Such a measure is especially important for young low-wage workers in full-time positions who want to pursue further studies or training. A more positive work experience can also result when work hours are limited to a certain level as low-wage work often involves physically demanding tasks.

5.4. Improve the provision of childcare services

Our study finds that having working mothers often expands the opportunity for young people to take up further studies, thus delaying children’s entry into low-wage work. However, the traditional gender division of labour in the family often discourages women to return to

paid work after they have children. Studies have found that women are disadvantaged by the loss of their employment network and contacts when they return to work after many years (Morris, 1991); it also involves a downward move in the job ladder (Lloyd, 2008). Young lone-mothers also run the risk of long-term reliance on welfare which makes their return to the labour market especially difficult. Affordable, convenient childcare that is available at suitable hours can enable women to work full-time and encourage women to keep the habit of working even after having children (Yoshikawa et al., 2006). This will also give young single mothers a chance to develop their social contacts and become more socially integrated while minimising the need to seek support from their low-wage parents.

To encourage mothers to work, the provision of childcare should be expanded to include support for low-wage women who work full-time. Assistance in parenting skills (especially for lone-parents), communication with teenagers, and self-improvement courses such as English and Cantonese language courses for mothers who want to better prepare themselves for the world of work should be offered to create opportunities for upward mobility and forge more positive work experience.

5.5. Special provision for CSSA households

Given the importance of education and training for the young low-wage workers to land a satisfactory full-time job, more sympathetic consideration should be given to young people who have a recent record

of receiving CSSA in terms of waiving of tuition fees for their post-secondary studies. This will allow them to transcend their household disadvantages. It is necessary to ensure that the children of low-wage working parents who leave the CSSA scheme will not be penalised by having their tuition fee waiver or allowance taken away. Failing to ensure this will create a major disincentive for low-wage parents to continue to work and may help perpetuate intergenerational poverty.

5.6. Special provision for new migrant households

As low-wage workers are often concentrated in households which have other disadvantages such as low educational levels due to their migration background, which in turn contributes to their low-skill levels, it is important to make better provisions for newly arrived children and adults so that they can adapt and integrate into the community as soon as possible. Some measures are already in place. For instance the Induction Programme and the School-based Support Scheme are catered to meet the needs of newly arrived children. Whereas the former specifies a class size between 10 to 15, the latter, which is much more important in terms of designing suitable academic content for the newly arrived, has no such specification. If small class size can be required so that individual differences can be catered for and the ability of the newly arrived children can be effectively developed in the school context irrespective of their household circumstances, the newly arrived children will soon become part of the mainstream school system.

Given the important role of dual-earner parents for the working poor, it is important to facilitate newly arrived mothers to take up paid work so that a more secure financial base could be achieved in such households. It can also help them to integrate into the society.

5.7. Strengthen the current YPTP and YWETS schemes

In view of the fact that young school leavers at Secondary Three and Secondary Five often land low-wage jobs that lack promotion opportunities, the present YPTP and YWETS should be strengthened to provide young people an opportunity to experience alternatives which may allow them to build up a future career. Job placement opportunities of the scheme must match with the self-selected training module in the course so that young people can get real hands-on work experience or industry-recognised qualifications. The schemes should also remain fully-funded so that they can provide genuine opportunities for underprivileged youth to lift themselves out of low-wage work.

5.8. Higher level of subsidy from the Transport Support Scheme

Household coping strategies of the poor are greatly constrained by the economic cycles and the local structure of job opportunities (Roberts, 1989). The sub-prime crisis is going to have a knock-on effect on the local economic conditions and job opportunities for the poor. It is therefore urgent and important to facilitate workers to transcend the constraints of the local labour market structure. The implementation of the Transport Support Scheme is a big step in the right direction. The recent relaxation of the eligibility criteria such as increasing the income

ceiling, extending the subsidy period, and allowing people working and living in the same district to claim the funding will definitely help the needy. Yet the funding at a current rate of 600 dollars a month for the on-the-job allowance may be too low in view of the fact that most better-paid jobs are concentrated on Hong Kong Island. The monthly allowance should be raised to 1,000 dollars to attract people living in more distant districts to work in job-rich areas.

5.9. Housing policies and self-subsistent community development to address the needs of the older low-wage workers

Most low-wage workers who are in their 60s want enhanced opportunities for intergenerational reciprocity by living closer to their married children. For this reason, the current ‘Special Scheme for Families with Elderly Persons’ should be beefed up. At present, the Scheme only allows young families to apply together with elderly parents or relatives for two separate flats located *outside* urban districts. Though this facilitates closer proximity between the two generations, it might not necessarily help the wage earners from young families to find jobs that are often located in urban areas. In order to create a real self-supporting community, and to correct the lopsided local labour market structure, more investment is urgently needed to create job opportunities in the non-urban districts. Recent suggestions to create an outlet market for brand name goods in Tin Shui Wai will definitely contribute towards achieving that goal. An open-air market that allows licensed hawkers to sell Hong Kong-style food will also bring in tourists or other urbanites and create job opportunities for low-skilled

workers.

摘要

一) 引言

本研究計劃承香港中央政策組委托，旨在探討本港「低收入工人」的處境。「低收入工人」又稱「在職貧窮」，一般指收入不足以養家的一群工人。本研究參考本地和海外的文獻，界定「低收入工人」為收入不足本地入息中位數之半的工人。以 2008 年第一季本地入息中位數\$11,000 計，一半即為\$5,500。本研究的重要性，在於政府要先了解「低收入工人」之處境，方可適切地支援他們，而又不致令他們形成對福利的依賴。

二) 研究目標

本研究主要範圍如下：

1. 探討低收入工人所屬的住戶如何應付貧窮生活
2. 探討從事低收入工作的青年，在階級流動方面所面對的
助力和阻力
3. 探討私營企業的人事政策如何影響低收入工人的處境
4. 探討低收入工人對各項社會政治議題的意見

3. 研究方法

本研究採用了量性及質性兩種研究方法

量性方法

本研究整理香港統計處「綜合住戶統計調查」(General Household Survey) 資料，以 1995、2006、2007 等三年的第三季數據作比較，以分析低收入工作人口的總體特徵，包括本地低收入工作人口在工業北移及「亞洲金融風暴」後的變化，以及在 2006，2007 兩年半經濟情況好轉下，本地低收入工人分佈的變化。這些資料也有助分析以質性方法採集有關低收入工人的主觀描述。

質性方法

本研究透過深入訪談，以探討兩大類別低收入工人的處境：

1. 第一組有 25 名受訪者，皆為 30 歲以上的已婚人士，主要從事清潔工。
2. 第二組有 19 名受訪者，年齡介乎 15 至 29 歲的未婚人士，主要從事大型連鎖店（以快餐業為主）工作。除此以外，本研究也探訪了勞工處的四位官員、兩位工會幹

事、兩位社工、一位清潔公司東主，以及一位本地快餐集團的人力資源部主管。

4. 主要發現

本研究的主要發現如下：

4.1. 量性分析

低收入工人的數目與本土總體經濟狀況掛鉤

- 低收入工人的數目，由 1995 年第三季的 129,800 人，增加至 2007 年第三季的 222,000 人，增幅為 71%
- 低收入工人佔 2007 年第三季總就業人口 6.8%
- 2006 年第三季至 2007 年第三季這一年間，低收入工人減少了 30,000 人，即 11.9% 的減幅，可見經濟好轉對低收入工人的正面作用。

經濟增長並未能全面解決低收入工人的問題，某部份弱勢社

群的處境未見明顯改善

- 女性低收入工人的比例在 1995 至 2007 年間持續上升，並未因 2006 年至 2007 年的經濟復蘇而改變這趨勢

- 中年低收入工人（即 40-49 歲，及 50-59 歲）的比例也在 1995 至 2006 年間顯著上升，這趨勢也未因 2006 年至 2007 年的經濟復蘇而改變
- 其中 15-19 歲，50-59 歲，和 60 歲以上的工作人口，從事低收入工作的比率明顯高於其他的年齡組別
- 愈來愈多較高學歷的人從事低收入工作，其中在 1995 年至 2007 年間，高中畢業的人從事低收入工作的百分比增加了 11.7%

低收入工人的分佈大致不變，顯示出低收入工種可以已經成為一個結構性的問題

- 經濟轉型後，服務業和零售業僱員，加上基層職位僱員，構成了低收入工人的大多數，至 2007 年第三季多達 72%
- 愈來愈多的低收入工人，是來自「白領工人」（即文員和轉助性專業人員），以及服務業和零售業僱員
- 在 2007 年第三季，僱用最多低收入工人的行業是：1) 批發，零售，進出口貿易，飲食及酒店等；2) 社區、社會及個人服務業；3) 金融、保險、地產及商用服務業。

這顯示 1995 年至 2007 年間製造業的重要性日趨下降
愈來愈多低收入工人屬於低收入住戶

- 由 1995 年至 2007 年間，低收入工人住戶佔整體低收入住戶的比率亦顯著上升。以住戶收入低於綜援金額計算，低收入工人住戶的比率，由 1995 年的 7% 上升至 2007 年第三季的 14%。
- 至 2007 年，低收入工人住戶多數為三至四人的家庭（佔 57%）。在 1995 年，低收入工人住戶則較多是四人以上的家庭。

4.2. 從事低收入工作的成因

從深入訪談中，中年與青年這兩個組別的低收入工人，進入低收入工作的過程各有不同。透過分析低收入工人的家庭狀況，本研究探討了他們投身低收入工作的處境。其重要性在於，每人由於家庭背景和家庭負擔的不同，投身低收入工作的原因也各有不同。

性別角色是分析低收入工人的一個重要因素

- 中年男性一般都在失業一段時間之後，才投身低收入工作；中年女性，則一般都是待子女成年她才投身全職

的低收入工作

- 性別角色是分析中年低收入工人的處境的重要概念。傳統上女性照顧子女的角色，令中年女性與中年男性面對的處境不同。其中，單親母親的處境尤其值得關注。因照顧子女的緣故，單親母親較難從事全職工作，因而削弱她們增加收入的能力。

父母從事低收入工，增加了下一代從事低收入工作的機會

- 從受訪的青年的處境可見，低收入單職家庭（一般是父親為低收入工人，母親則為家庭主婦）出身的青年，較傾向中五畢業以後全職工作。
- 如父母已退休或失業，青年中五畢業後投入低收入工作的機會則更高。

世代因素影響了中年人的工作意欲

- 50 至 60 歲的一代，較服傳統「男主外，女主內」的兩性分工所影響。因此，如丈夫中年失業，妻子基本上無法投入勞動市場
- 世代因素在新移民家庭也有明顯分別，在 1990 年代來港的新移民婦女，如丈夫的收入不足以養家，她們較傾

向全職加入低收入工種

- 至於在 1980 年代或 1990 年代初來港的新移民婦女，一般較傾向全職照顧子女。到子女長大後，她們也較傾向兼職，而非全職工作。

4.3. 低收入工人的生活策略

低收入工人不同的生活策略，也令他們的實際處境各有不同：

年長的低收入工人較依賴其成年子女供養

- 年長的低收入工人，傾向與成年子女同住，以減低生活成本。可是，這個基本上是「治標不治本」的。當子女結婚後，多不會再和父母同住，令父母未必再得到子女供養。
- 因此，年長的低收入工人，一般都會向已婚子女提供某種服務（例如照顧孫兒、煮食等），而子女也會給予一些金錢回饋父母。可是，這種互惠關係的前題是已婚子女要有穩定的收入，而且居住父母附近。換句話說，年長低收入工人的處境並不樂觀，因為低收入工人的下一

代較少有高學歷，他們的收入亦相對不穩定。此外，現有的公屋編配政策，也未必能令子女居住父母附近。

雙職家庭與單職家庭相比，前者較傾向鼓勵下一代進修

- 在受訪低收入青年工人裡發現，來自單職家庭的青年，較易投身低收入工作。這情況，源於當中年父親本身收入不高時，每每會期望子女在中學畢業後全職工作，以幫補家計。
- 因此，來自低收入單職家庭的青年，進修的意欲相對較低，投身低收入工作的機會相對較高。隨著香港向知識型經濟轉型，這群來自低收入單職家庭的青年，似乎將易走上投身低收入工作這條路。
- 反之，雙職家庭較支持下一代進修。換句話說，在職母親對她們的子女會否進修有正面作用。

不少低收入工人都有上進心，視公共援助和兼職工作為應急方案

- 對於很多低收入工人來說，公共援助讓他們有機會改善自身的生活。其中公共房屋及政府支助進修課程對低收入住戶尤其重要。綜援更讓不少家庭在財政不受影響下，讓子女持續進修，而得以脫離貧窮。
- 至於兼職工作，往往是年青工人在找到一份滿意的全職

工作前，一種過渡性的安排。這是由於他們需要在抽空進修，所以較傾向兼職工作。

4.4. 企業策略

本研究探討了兩個行業，以了解企業策略如何導致低收入工種的結構化

清潔服務業

- 自 1999 年政府外判清潔服務後，清潔工成了其中一個主要的低收入工種。隨著近年對外判商的監管增加，政府外判清潔工的待遇有明顯改善。不過，政府的「工資保障運動」則未見得令私人清潔服務公司大規模去改善工人待遇。

連鎖店

- 連鎖店的一個重要企業策略，就是透過僱用大量的兼職工和長散工，去加強企業彈性，以增加企業的競爭力。因此，連鎖店的長工空缺不多，而且待遇和晉升機會也不見得特別優厚，對青年低收入工作來說，與其努力嘗試由「長散工」轉成長工，倒不如透過持續進修，以轉

職來爭取更佳的前途。

4.5. 對社會和政治的意見

低收入工人對社會和政治的意見其實並不一致：

- 低收入中年男性，對政府的不滿意一般較高，但新移民則傾向支持建制派政黨
- 低收入中年女性，最關注的其實是各種公共援助措施，包括學生貸款，公屋減租等，她們一般都不滿托兒服務不足；新移民婦女則特別關注學童融入主流社會的安排。在這個組別中，本土出生的人較支持民主黨，新移民則對本地政黨不太注意
- 低收入的單親母親，較多曾申領綜援。這批人對政府的態度較正面，對政黨政治則不太注意。

5. 政策建議

本研究提出政策建議如下：

5.1 發展經濟以減少低收入工人的數目

本研究分析所得，隨著經濟好轉，低收入工人的數目有明顯減少。2008年中經濟的負面因素增加，低收入工人的處境

也未許樂觀。當然，要規劃出一個具前瞻性的刺激經濟方案已超出本研究的範圍。

5.2. 遏止通脹加劇以紓解低收入工人的財政困難

通脹加劇對低收入工人的負面影響不小。政府近期提出的多項紓解民困的措施，可謂對症下藥。政府可因應未來的通脹情況，考慮再提供這類紓解民困的措施。

5.3. 為最低工資及標準工時規劃一個可行方案

最低工資制度有助保障低收入工人獲得合理收入。政府現時規管公營機構外判清潔服務合約，就有效令這類清潔工的薪酬提升至市場中位數。故此，政府可以考慮將類似措施擴大至私營清潔工和連鎖店等行業。配以有效的監管制度，例如，嚴格懲處違規的僱主，減少「判上判」的合約，引入工會協助檢舉違規僱主等。

雖然社會上有意見，擔心引入最低工資會導致失業人數上升，但是從英國的經驗可見，最低工資制度對失業人數的影響並不明顯，對企業營利的影響也不大。

至於標準工時，就能令工人的生活平衡，包括可以令年青人有更充裕的晴間作工餘進修。

5.4. 加強托兒服務

本研究發現，雙職家庭較鼓勵子女持續進修，有助子女脫離低收入工作的行列。不過，在傳統「男主外，女主內」的兩性分工影響下，女性往往在生育後放棄工作。至於單親母親就更傾向放棄工作，依靠綜援金生活。故此，加強托兒服務對支援女性全職工作有明顯助力。

5.5. 加強支援出身綜援戶的青年

進修是青年上進的重要途徑。不過，有部份綜援戶在子女成年後，便鼓勵子女全職工作，停止申領綜援以擺脫「綜援戶」的標籤。可惜這卻無助綜援戶下一代脫貧。因此，政府可考慮放寬青年進修的學費減免，以幫助某些非綜援戶的低收入家庭的成年子女持續進修。

5.6. 加強支援新移民家庭

新移民家庭往往是低收入家庭。政府應加強對新移民學童的支援，以協助他們盡快適應本地課程和社區生活。政府可以考慮優化現有的措施，如「新移民融入課程」、「校本支援計劃」等，以求令新來港學童盡快適應本港的教育制度。

5.7 強化青少年見習就業計劃及展翅計劃

有見於中三畢業和中五畢業的青年，都較易從事低收入工種，政府可研究加強「青見計劃」和「展翅計劃」，讓青年可有較佳的上進機會。

雙職家庭對增加下一代教育機會的正面影響，政府可考慮加強新移民婦女的就業支援，一方面可以增加低收入家庭的收入，另一方面可以幫助她們更快更好地融入本土社會。

5.8. 提高跨區交通津貼

由於低收入家庭主要透過工作以提升生活水平，政府可考慮提高跨區工作交通津貼，以增加偏遠地區住戶的工作機會。最近，該計劃將申領人的條件放寬，就是其中一個有效的方

法，如果能將金額由 600 元提升至 1000 元，則該計劃的效果將更顯著。

5.9. 調整房屋編配政策以強化社區互助

公屋編配政策可考慮長者的需要，讓成年子女能在同區居住。現在的「天倫樂優先配屋計劃」可加以強化，將涵蓋範圍由非市區公屋增加至市區公屋，讓兩代互助的可能性增加。此外，一些令社區互助的計劃，例如特買區等，都有助社區內提供更多的就業機會。

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

The global restructuring of the economy and labour market in recent years has given rise to renewed concerns over the quality of employment. Since the 1990s, unemployment has stayed low, or experienced a downward trend, in many industrial market economies. Linked to this trend is the growth of so-called nonstandard employment relations in the form of temporary employment, part-time jobs, self-employment, or jobs with fixed-term contracts as a result of globalisation and deregulation. The result is a widespread perception that much of employment growth since the late 1990s is invariably 'bad' in nature since it is characterised by low paid jobs with few benefits, little or no security, and lack of much career prospects. In the developing world, employment growth has been the norm especially in the dynamic economies such as China and India, but there too the quality of the jobs created has triggered much public concern and indeed controversies. It has given rise to political debates between governments, much lobbying by nongovernmental organisations, and consumer campaigns against the allegedly appalling working conditions found in many fast growing developing economies.

The benchmark for this line of discussion can be found in the International Labour Office's discussion of 'decent work'. The original principles and values of the ILO have actually embodied the idea of decent work, namely, the promotion of social justice and humane conditions of work. In 1999, decent work became the focus of the

Report of the Director-General to the 87th Session of the International Labour Conference in which he sought to restate the purpose and objectives of the ILO in securing decent and productive work for women and men everywhere.¹ Previously the ILO had campaigned against the most blatant forms of bad jobs unacceptable to most societies, for instance, forced labour and child labour. Through the decent work agenda, the ILO basically seeks to return to the original principles enshrined in the ILO conventions regarding fundamental rights, employment opportunities, social protection and social dialogues.

As many people work primarily to earn a subsistence income, the concern about employment quality often centres on wage levels. In particular, the concern is with low-income workers, often referred to as the ‘working poor’, whose wages from work do not enable them to support themselves and their families. They are to be distinguished as a group from those who do not work and depend entirely on welfare provision for subsistence as well as from those able to earn enough from work to support a decent standard of living for their families. Low income employment is important because if the level of income one can expect to earn from working is too low, the incentives for participating in gainful employment will be weakened and the risk of unemployment and further dependence on welfare accentuated. To live in poverty nowadays does not mean that one shrinks from working but rather that one often continues to work without being able to lift oneself from poverty. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the phenomenon of low-wage employment so that ‘support and assistance are so structured as to help the low-income employees move out of poverty while minimizing the

¹ ILO. 2001 *Reducing the Decent Work Deficit: A Global Challenge*. International Labour Conference, 89th Session. Report of the Director-General. Geneva.

risk of work incentives erosion and reliance on the welfare net' (Commission on Poverty 2006, p. 1).

The overseas literature

Kalleberg and his associates (2000) focus on the Anglo-American experience of rapid growth of nonstandard employment, defined as 'employment other than standard, full-time jobs, including part-time employment in an otherwise standard work arrangement, day labor and on-call work, temporary-help agency and contract-company employment, independent contracting, and other self-employment' (Kalleberg et al, 2000, p.258).² They were especially interested in the relationship between non-standard forms of employment and bad jobs which they defined as those with low pay and without access to health insurance and pension benefits. They found about one in seven jobs in the United States to be bad on these three dimensions. A significant association was found between nonstandard employment and bad job characteristics. The former strongly increases workers' exposure to bad jobs even after controlling for a host of workers' personal characteristics, family status, occupations, and industries.

McGovern, Smeaton and Hill (2004) replicated the study by Kalleberg

² Two subcategories of non-standard employment were further distinguished by Kalleberg et al. Employments that result in fewer bad job characteristics include independent contractors, other self-employed, and contract-company employees. These are contrasted with temporary employees, on-call workers, and part-time workers that are exposed to more bad job features in their work.

et al. in Britain but defined bad jobs as jobs with low pay, no sick pay, and no pension beyond the basic state scheme, and without a recognised promotion ladder. They found that between one-quarter and half of the working population in Britain are in jobs that have at least one bad characteristic. They also found empirical support for the hypothesis that nonstandard employment, which they defined as either not permanent or not full-time (McGovern et al 2004, p. 231), increases workers' risk of exposure to bad jobs.

Supplementing these largely quantitative approaches are the few qualitative studies that focus on bad jobs. Newman and Lennon (2004) studied the work trajectories of those at the bottom of the American labour market. After reviewing a few quantitative studies and highlighting their inadequacies, they move on to argue for the relevance of qualitative methods as follows: 'Qualitative research illuminates underlying questions that are often hard to access through other means: How households work in concert; how the interests of individuals within them may be subordinated (and possibly damaged) by the needs of the collective; how the shifting prospects of one person (e.g. welfare recipients) are shaped by those of others in his or her network.' (Newman and Lennon 2004: 122)

They interviewed a group of 200 workers who were rejected by fast food restaurants in Harlem, New York, twice, with 18 months in between. They examined the career trajectories of the working poor, especially those who managed to escape from poverty. Working in growth industries and the presence of a union were found to be correlated with the more successful career trajectories. They also asked their

interviewees questions about their cultural perspectives on employment, in particular their perceptions of the openness of the social structure and the availability of opportunities for upward mobility through employment. Elaborating on the narratives of the low-wage workers from the same sample, Newman (2006) explores whether the low-wage workers and their families have benefited from the economic boom in the late 1990s. Having support from one's family and persistence in accumulating human capital were found to divide the 'high flyers' from the 'low riders'.

Various studies explore the relationship between low-income workers and their families or households. Acs et al (2001) investigated Americans in low-income working families. Their research highlights the fact that the situation of a low-income worker is often better illustrated by taking into account the income of a worker's family rather than only the worker's income. For instance, the US Bureau of Labour Statistics (BLS) defines the working poor as 'a worker whose family's income falls below the federal poverty level; an adult is a worker if he or she worked or looked for work in at least 27 weeks over the past calendar year' (p.22). Similarly, Acs et al. (2001) did not conceptualise low-income workers as such but instead defined the low-income population as 'the share of persons living in families with incomes below twice the poverty level and whose average hours worked per adult is at least 1,000' (p.25). Using the same approach they define a low-income working family as a family whose 'income falls below twice the federal poverty level and if the average annual hours worked by all adult family members is at least 1,000 hours (approximately one person working half-time)' (p.22).³

³ They found that one in six non-elderly Americans lived in families that are defined as low-income working families in 1996. Slightly more than half (52 per

While Acs and his colleagues did not elaborate much on how individual workers relate with other members within low-income families, Gardiner and Millar (2006) explore in more depth how low-paid employees avoid poverty through relationships with other households and family members in Britain. They defined family units within a household not only by blood ties but also according to whether the unit is eligible for particular state benefits such as tax benefits for working parents or state pensions for the elderly. A family unit is 'defined as a single person, a single person with dependent children, a childless couple or a couple with dependent children' (p.354). As the family unit is defined not only by blood ties but also by actual state provisions, the exact role of the state in alleviating poverty in family units or households can be discovered. Hence when evaluating poverty within a household, they reckon that it is reasonable to add all the sources of income from the individual's own family unit first (both self's and the partner's) before including income from another family unit. For example, in a household where a couple lives with one of their mothers, the couple would be considered a unit and their incomes and state transfers would be added up first; the mother will belong to another family unit and her pension from the state will be added to the

cent) of the low-income people lived in families where at least one member worked. It was also discovered that low-income working families are more likely to have children. 'More than 80 per cent of the working low-income population live in families with children as compared with less than two-thirds of other families' (p.27). Demographic factors that contributed to low-income working families included abundance of children, unmarried primary earners and low-level of education attainment for primary earners. The employment characteristics of the primary earners in low-income working families also showed the following disadvantages: long work hours with low hourly pay, unstable work, often needed to work night shifts, and non-coverage of health insurance.

household income later⁴.

Gardiner and Millar (2006) found that low-wage workers – defined as employees earning less than two-thirds of the median hourly wage – largely rely on sharing households with others to avoid poverty. For instance, single people without dependent children, the largest single group among the low paid, account for 45 per cent of all low-paid persons. Their likelihood of living in a poor household is lower if they live with others (12 per cent) than if they live alone (35 per cent). Couples with dependent children also face a higher rate of poverty if they live alone (20%) than if they live with others (16%). This is attributed to the likely presence of grown-up children in the latter who either bring in income themselves or facilitate others in the household to work. For couples without dependent children, the household poverty rate is higher if they live with other adults (15%) than if they live alone (8%). The authors suggest that this could be due to the fact that they are subsidising their grown-up children's living standards.

In delineating the household and recognising the differential potentials of each household member to earn a market income, claim state's benefits or gain from sharing with partners' incomes, this approach greatly facilitates the understanding of strategies that a household can

⁴ Gardiner and Millar (2006) explicitly assume that there is income-sharing within the whole household, and not just within the family unit so that poverty and income should be measured at the household level. A poor household is defined as one that has 'a total household income below 60 per cent of median equivalised disposable income, before housing costs' (p.353).

deploy in the face of poverty. Though the use of concept of household strategy to understand social changes has been very controversial, it is still considered a very useful and powerful concept, despite its disadvantages, for understanding how poor people survive poverty (Wallace, 2002). Roberts (1991) for instance argues that 'household strategies have acquired new salience with the economic and political restructuring of the years since the early 1970s' which 'expose individuals more sharply to market forces' (p.137). He defines household strategies as 'a set of activities consciously undertaken by one or more members of a household over a period of time, directed toward ensuring the longer term survival of the household unit' (p.139).

According to Roberts (1991), household strategies are thought to be determined by factors such as the housing market which affects the likelihood of the formation of neighbourhood communities, welfare policies which promote certain forms of family or household organisation, and locations of labour markets. Reviewing previous studies on household strategies found in the urban context, Roberts identifies four main types of strategies. The economising strategy involves cutting household expenditure or expelling non-productive members. The intensifying strategy involves more methodical use of internal household resources by cooking one's own food or resorting to unpaid childcare. The market strategy entails pushing more household members to seek market incomes. The state strategy involves households seeking help from the state. Roberts stresses that different household members may resort to different strategies to ensure

household survival and that such strategies are not necessarily mutually consistent or in coordination with one another.

Another way of differentiating household strategies is by time span (Schmink, 1984). Coping strategies can be defined as organising the household to get by in the short and medium term, while social mobility strategies involve allocative decisions, such as expenditure on children's education, the purchase of a house, or improvement in job qualifications, that will have a longer term payoff.

On the basis of their survey results, Gardiner and Millar (2006) also delineated three strategies a low-paid worker can use to avoid poverty. They are 1) by the worker working long hours or working in a second job; 2) by pooling resources from people living in the same household; and 3) by means of in-work state transfers and tax benefits. Income sources that are most likely to lift low-income workers from household poverty include partners' income, income from other adults in the household excluding parents, state transfers, and one's own income.

Another approach to understanding low-wage work takes into account the employer or firm perspective. Appelbaum, Bernhardt and Murnane (2003) conducted a series of case studies, sponsored by the Russell Sage and Rockefeller Foundations, of occupations and industries in which workers 'do not earn enough to support themselves and their families'. Their overall aim is to 'try to come to an understanding of how firms have responded to increased economic pressures and how frontline workers have been affected by these responses'. Thus, in contrast to many studies that focus exclusively on workers, these studies take a

firm-based approach and look at how firms' responses to economic pressures have affected working conditions. Variations in firm strategies therefore are singled out as a major determinant of variations in employment conditions among different groups of workers in the same industry.

Another example of a firm-based approach is the investigation of workplace education investment and strategies for lower-wage earners. Using information provided by the American Society for Training and Development in 1998, Ahlstrand et al. (2001) surveyed a sample of 1021 employers about training given to their workers. Of the forty-seven per cent who responded, 10 per cent reported spending 15 per cent of their total training expenditures or more on such less educated workers; while 47 per cent reported spending nothing. Identifying those who were willing to spend 15 per cent or more of their total training costs on lower-wage workers as 'friendly' employers, they found that these were usually smaller companies than the non-friendly ones. The training content was mainly related to basic corporate information and safety standards rather than the more expensive training needed for higher-wage workers.

In a follow-up telephone survey of 40 friendly employers, they also found that in the service industry (tourism and restaurants), team building and customer services are key components of a successful training curriculum. Training for low-wage workers was found to improve the retention rate, work quality, recruitment, and safety and error records.

Local literature

Two local studies conducted by Wong Hung and Lee Kim Ming (2000,

2001) focus on the situations of so-called “marginal workers” in Hong Kong. Wong and Lee (2000) used data from the General Household Surveys (GHS) from 1996 to 1999 to obtain a profile of these marginal workers in Hong Kong who they defined as employees marginalised from the mainstream labour market and comprised of three categories: unemployed, underemployed, and the working poor⁵. In practice, however, they still used income below half of the median salary and location in the bottom deciles as the operational definition of marginal workers in their analysis. They found a significant increase in the number of these marginal workers from 440,000 in 1996 to 640,000 in 1999.

In a follow-up study, the same authors use the in-depth interviews to study the life histories of a sample of 39 marginal workers. Their findings emphasise the plights and vulnerability of these workers in such forms as long working hours, low wages, unpaid overtime work, and a host of other bad working conditions. They attributed their plights to a host of policy failures and the dualistic mode of economic growth that exacerbated labour market polarisation. The marginal workers also suffered from various forms of social exclusion based on their gender, immigrant and ethnic minority status.

The Commission on Poverty (CoP) also conducted a similar secondary analysis of the GHS data, focusing on the ‘working poor’, again defined as employees earning 50% of less of the median employment earnings:⁶

‘In Q3 2005, there were 267 000 employees earning less than \$5,000 per month, but only 140 000 of them were full-time

⁵ Working poor are defined as those falling in the bottom income deciles, excluding the underemployed.

⁶ Excluding those working part-time voluntarily.

workers, representing 5.0% of the total employees. This represented a drop from the corresponding figures of 150 000 and 5.8% in Q3 2003. Meanwhile, the number of full-time employees earning \$5,000 - 7,999 per month increased by 71 000 between Q3 2003 and Q3 2005, suggesting that some of the low-income workers might have moved up the income ladder during the period. Of the 127 000 part-time workers in Q3 2005, 61% of them were voluntary in nature, while the remaining 39% were involuntary or being classified as underemployed persons. Even taking into account the underemployed persons, the number and share of low-income workers also shrank between Q3 2003 and Q3 2005' (CoP 2006, p.2).

The contrasting finding between Wong and Lee and the CoP's study regarding the numbers of, and trends in, the working poor can be attributed to the upturn in the economy and labour market in the 2003-2005 period.

Cheung and Tam (2002) focus specifically on the employment conditions of the security and cleaning occupations in public estates. They point out in particular a number of problems caused by the subcontracting of management services in the public housing estates. The key problem relates to the tendering process and the principle of awarding a contract to the bidder with the lowest tender price. After winning the contract, the bidder would extract profits by lowering workers' wages, forcing them to work without rest days, refusing to give paid statutory holidays or intensifying their workload. Although the Housing Authority implemented a 'point-deduction system' to stamp out such malpractices, the result was not altogether satisfactory as the major concern of the Housing Authority remained the 'quality of the services' rather than the 'welfare of the workers' (p. 14). It was found that as many as half of the officially recognised cleaning contractors eligible to work for the Housing Authority had been convicted of violating provisions of labour legislation

during the three years before the enumeration (p.14).

In their survey of 127 randomly sampled cleaning workers carried out in 2002, they found slightly over three quarters (78 per cent) were women. Over 70 per cent were between the ages of 35 to 53 and 88 per cent had been married. Forty-four per cent of them were new immigrants who had settled in Hong Kong for less than 7 years.

The relationship of the workers with their employers was not very stable and long-term. Some 42 per cent of the workers had worked in the current housing estate for one year or less. A further 23 per cent had worked for 1 to 2 years; only 35 per cent had worked for more than 2 years. It is thus not surprising that 61 per cent admitted that they did not understand the management system and changes that were affecting them.

The employment relationship was also nonstandard (Kalleberg et al., 2000), with only 55 per cent of the sampled working full-time, 28 per cent part-time and 17 per cent temporarily. Just over half (52 per cent) had one paid rest day a week. The others either had no paid rest day or did not know about such a requirement.

Cheung and Tam (2002) investigated the relationship between the working poor and low-income households. The working poor were defined as employees being paid half or less of the median employment earnings, while the low-income households were those with monthly income less than the median household income. Of the 125 respondents, 40 per cent were low-paid earners coming from low-income households; 16 per cent were low-waged but their households were not low-income; 20 per cent were not low-paid themselves but their households could be

defined as having incomes below the median level. Slightly less than a quarter (24 per cent) were neither low-paid themselves nor were they from households with less than half of the median household earnings.

Research objectives

The above literature review reveals four gaps in our knowledge about workers in low-wage employment. First, most of the local studies focus on the macro-level socio-economic conditions that contribute to generating bad jobs but fail to consider firm-level differences and how employer practices could help address some of the problems arising from non-standard employment.

Second, local research gives insufficient attention to the younger generation of low-wage workers. Their single marital status might have considerable impact on their overall well-being if they live alone; but if they live with their parents, they might pose an economic burden to their households (Gardiner and Miller, 2006). There is very little information about how such a situation might impact on their aspirations and work trajectories.

A third gap is that current local research typically focuses on workers as individuals without putting them into the context of their households. As noted above, low-income workers rely heavily on living with others to avoid poverty. It is not clear whether a low-wage worker is necessarily a marginalised worker if he or she is a secondary income

earner. In other words, the differences between low-wage primary income earners, secondary income earners and dual income earners deserve more careful study. The relationship between low-wage workers and low-income households also requires more detailed study.

A fourth gap is the lack of an updated study that would reveal how exactly these low-wage workers have fared when the economy has supposedly recovered.

The project's purpose is thus to deepen our understanding of current low-wage workers in Hong Kong by a) investigating workers' experiences in relation to firm level practices; b) clarifying more how the young generation of workers might be affected by their engagement in low-wage work; c) deepening our understanding of the role of the household in low-wage workers' strategies for coping with poverty; and d) delineating low-wage workers' perception on a range of social and political issues in order to better understand their roles in achieving social harmony.

Research methods

Our research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. First we constructed a general profile of low-wage workers through examining the data collected from the General Household Survey (GHS). With the kind assistance of the Census and Statistics Department, we obtained unpublished tabulations of the GHS conducted in the 3rd quarter of the years 1995, 2006 and 2007. The statistics thus enable us to compare the

situation of low-wage workers in three time points. The years 1995 and 2006 are chosen to show how the process of deindustrialisation of the local economy and also the Asian Financial Crisis and its aftermath affected low wage workers. The comparison 2006 and 2007 is intended to show how the economic upturn during these two years affected the composition and situations of low wage workers. This quantitative information provides useful contextual information for understanding the subjective accounts investigated by using qualitative research methods.

Our qualitative method involves interviews with two groups of low-wage workers. We operationalise low-wage employees as all those who earn less than 26.4 dollars⁷ an hour. The first group comprises 25 individuals who are 30 years of age and older. They are mostly married and are cleaners by occupation. The second group includes 19 persons between ages 15-29 who work in fast-food chains or other chain stores. All are single people. In order to gain a better understanding of how industrial contexts and existing government policies influence low-wage workers, we have also interviewed four officials from the Labour Department, two trade union officials, two social workers, one proprietor of a cleaning company, and a human resource director from a local fast-food chain. The latter two were referred to us by the Labour Department for their good business practices in their respective industries.

The next chapter presents the quantitative profile of low wage workers.

⁷ As the median employment earnings was 11000 dollars in Q1 2008, half of that is 5500 dollars. Assuming that someone working full-time will be working 8 hours a day 6 days a week, the average hourly rate would have to be at least 26.4 dollars to fall outside our definition of low-wage workers.

Qualitative data are used in subsequent chapters to flesh out our account of the situation of low wage workers.

Chapter 2

A Quantitative Profile of Low Wage Workers and their Households

This chapter presents a general profile of low-wage workers through the use of the latest available data collected from the General Household Surveys. Adopting the CoP's definition of the working poor, we shall report the size and background characteristics of the low-wage employees in the third quarter of 2007. For the purpose of identifying trends, we compare this information with similar data for Q3 of 1995 and 2006.

Table 1 Number of low-wage employees (excluding foreign domestic helpers) by sex, Q3 of 1995, 2006 & 2007 and the number and share of the sex group in the total employed in Q3 of 2007*

	Period							
	Q3 1995		Q3 2006		Q3 2007			The share of the sex group in the total employed
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%	Total employed persons ('000)	
Male	56.3	43.4	100.8	40.0	84.6	38.1	1871.4	57.1
Female	73.4	56.5	151.1	60.0	137.3	61.8	1406.2	42.9
Total	129.8	100.0	252.0	100.0	222.0	100.0	3277.6	100.0

*Figures are taken and calculated from Census and Statistics Department (2007a) *Quarterly Report on General Household Survey Q3 2007*. Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department. Figures may not add up to totals owing to rounding

Low-wage employees are defined here as those – excluding foreign

domestic helpers - who earn less than half of the median monthly employment earnings⁸, working 35 hours or more during the seven days before enumeration or those who were classified as underemployed. As shown in Table 1, the absolute number of low-income earners according to this definition surged from 129,800 in Q3 1995 to 222,000 in Q3 2007, an increase of 71 per cent. However, as would be expected, during the period of economic revival between Q3 of 2006 and 2007, the number of low-wage workers declined by 30,000, and their share among the total employed also fell from 7.7 per cent in Q3 2006 to 6.8 per cent in Q3 2007.

The share of women among low-income earners increased from 56.5 per cent in Q3 1995 to 60.0 per cent in 2006. Even amidst Hong Kong's good economic performance between 2006 and 2007, women's share among the low-income earners continued to rise, from 60.0 to 61.8 per cent. The relatively disadvantaged position of female employees is also reflected in their overrepresentation among the low-waged. Females accounted for 42.9 per cent of all the employed persons in Q3 2007, but female low-wage workers were 61.8 per cent of all the low-wage employees.

Table 2 shows trends in the distribution of low-wage workers by age groups. The proportion of those aged 50-59 among the low-waged increased from 17.3 per cent to 26.4 per cent between 1995 and 2007. The proportion aged 40-49 increased from 23.4 per cent in Q3 1995 to

⁸ The median employment earnings for Q3 1995, Q3 2006 and Q3 2007 were 9000 HK dollars, 10500 HK dollars and 11000 HK dollars respectively.

28.5 per cent in Q3 2007, and accounted for the largest share of low-wage workers, among all age groups, in 2007.

Table 2 Number of low-income employees (excluding foreign domestic helpers) by age groups, Q3 of 1995, 2006 & 2007 and the number and share of the age group in the total employed in Q3 2007*

Age groups	Period							
	Q3 1995		Q3 2006		Q3 2007			
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%	Total employed persons ('000)	The share of the age group in the total employed %
15 - 19	9.6	7.4	20.6	8.2	17.3	7.8	53.7	1.6
20 - 29	18.8	14.5	51.3	20.4	40.1	18.1	660.1	20.1
30 - 39	26.9	20.7	32.8	13.0	27.5	12.4	840.5	25.6
40 - 49	30.4	23.4	67.2	26.7	63.3	28.5	977.8	29.8
50 - 59	22.5	17.3	60.9	24.2	58.6	26.4	618.5	18.9
60+	21.6	16.6	19.2	7.6	15.2	6.8	127.1	3.9
Total	129.8	100.0	252.0	100.0	222.0	100.0	3277.6	100.0

*Figures are taken and calculated from Census and Statistics Department (2007a) *Quarterly Report on General Household Survey July to September 2007*. Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department. Figures may not add up to totals owing to rounding.

Despite the economic recovery during 2006 and 2007, the share of those aged 40 - 49 and 50 – 59 among all the low-waged continued to grow.

Another finding that could become a matter of public concern, is that the young aged 15-19 and the older groups namely those aged 50-59 and 60 or above were overrepresented among the low-waged in Q3 2007.

They accounted for 1.6 per cent, 18.9 per cent and 3.9 per cent of the total employed respectively but accounted for 7.8 per cent, 26.4 per cent and 6.8 per cent of the low-wage employees.

Table 3 Number of low-income employees (excluding foreign domestic helpers) by educational attainment, Q3 of 1995, 2006 & 2007 and the number and share by level of education attainment in the total employed in Q3 2007 #

Education attainment	Period							
	Q3 1995		Q3 2006		Q3 2007#			The share of educational attainment in the total employed %
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%	Total employed persons ('000)	
No schooling / Kindergarten	19.1	14.7	10.3	4.1	8.8	4.0	446.6	12.8
Primary	60.1	46.3	76.6	30.4	69.4	31.3		
Lower secondary	25.0	19.3	68.2	27.1	58.2	26.2	575.4	16.4
Upper secondary	20.3	15.6	68.6	27.2	60.6	27.3	1421.0	40.6
Sixth form	*		7.8	3.1	8.7	3.9		
Post-secondary: non-degree	2.2	1.7	11.5	4.6	9.5	4.3	333.0	9.5
Post-secondary : degree	*		8.9	3.5	6.7	3.1	762.0	20.7
Total	129.8	100.0	252.0	100.0	222.0	100.0	3502.2	100.0

Figures may not add up to totals owing to rounding

Figures taken and calculated from Census and Statistics Department (2007a) *Quarterly Report on General Household Survey July to September 2007*. Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department. There are no figures net of foreign domestic helpers available. The number and shares of total employed persons therefore include foreign domestic helpers.

*Figures are compiled based on a small number of observations and are not released owing to sampling error.

As expected, Table 3 shows that the group with only a primary education accounted for the largest share of the low-waged from 1995 to 2007, but their share was declining. This is mostly due to the increasing number of low-wage workers with higher qualifications. In 1995, 14.7 per cent of low-waged employees had no schooling or kindergarten education and 46.3 per cent had primary education. The corresponding shares fell to 4 per cent and 31.2 per cent in 2007. This shrinkage in the proportion of the low-waged with no or minimal qualification reflects the trend that higher qualified individuals were more likely to become low-wage employees between 1995 and 2007.

Those with upper secondary schooling suffered most seriously as their numbers practically tripled between Q3 1995 and Q3 2007 while their share among the low-income employees rose from 15.6 per cent to 27.3 per cent. Those who attained sixth form status and degree level qualification were numerically insignificant among the low-waged in 1995. But 12 years later, their proportions had risen to 3.9 per cent and 3.1 per cent respectively. Even those with a post-secondary non-degree qualification experienced a small increase of 2.6 per cent between 1995 and 2007.

The economic recovery between Q3 2006 and Q3 2007 did not benefit all groups to the same extent. The proportion of low-wage workers with primary school education or upper secondary schooling did not fall as happened for other groups with different education attainments.

Table 4 Number of low-income employees (excluding foreign domestic helpers) by occupation, Q3 of 1995, 2006 & 2007 and number and share of the occupational group among all the employed in Q3 2007 #

Occupation	Period							
	Q3 1995		Q3 2006		Q3 2007			Share of the occupational group among all the employed (%)
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%	Total employed persons ('000)	
Managers and administrators	*	*	*	*	*	*	347.9	10.6
Professionals	*	*	*	*	*	*	240.8	7.3
Associate professionals	2.1	1.6	13.9	5.5	10.1	4.5	673.2	20.5
Clerks	6.8	5.2	27.4	10.9	23.6	10.6	556.7	17.0
Service workers and shop sales workers	13.7	10.6	59.6	23.7	54.1	24.4	528.8	16.1
Craft and related workers	17.7	13.6	20.4	8.1	16.4	7.4	262.8	8.0
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	20.0	15.4	12.9	5.1	9.9	4.5	216.6	6.6
Elementary occupations	68.4	52.7	115.6	45.9	106.2	47.8	446.2	13.6
Others	*	*	*	*	*	*	4.6	0.1
Total	129.8	100.0	252.0	100.0	222.0	100.0	3277.6	100.0

Notes : * Figures are compiled based on a small number of observations and not be released owing to large sampling error.

Figures are taken and calculated from Census and Statistics Department (2007a) *Quarterly Report on General Household Survey July to September 2007*. Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department. Figures may not add up to the totals owing to rounding.

As seen in Table 4, service workers and shop sales workers, and workers in elementary occupation were the biggest occupational groups

of the low-waged in Q3 2007, accounting for 24.4 per cent and 47.8 per cent of low-wage employees respectively. These two occupational groupings were also greatly overrepresented among the low-waged when compared with their share in the total employed.

The share of craft and related workers, and plant and machine operators and assemblers among low-waged workers fell between 1995 and 2007. The 20,000 plant and machine operators and assemblers who were low-wage workers in Q3 1995 accounted for 15.4 per cent of all low wage workers. In Q3 2007, their number had fallen to 9,900 and they accounted for only 4.5 per cent of low wage workers..

Table 5 illustrates that in Q3 2007, the bulk of low-wage workers were in three main industries: wholesale, retail, trades, restaurants and hotels (36.6 per cent), community, social and personal services (29.4 per cent) and surprisingly, financing, insurance, real estate and business services (9.5 per cent). In the past, low-wage workers were most often manufacturing workers. As manufacturing ceased to be the main employer of low-wage workers as a result of deindustrialisation, the three major employers of low-waged employees are now providers of services.

Table 5 Number of low-income employees (excluding foreign domestic helpers) by industry, Q3 of 1995, 2006 & 2007 and share of the industry belonged among all the employed in Q3 2007 **

Industry	Period							
	Q3 1995		Q3 2006		Q3 2007			Share of the industry belonged among all the employed %
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%	Total employed persons ('000)	
Manufacturing	38.9	30	21.4	8.5	18.9	8.5	197.2	6.0
Construction	15.4	11.9	25.6	10.2	20.5	9.2	284.8	8.7
Wholesale, retail and import/export trades, restaurants and hotels	27.5	21.2	91.7	36.4	81.2	36.6	1159.6	35.4
Transport, storage and communications	6.2	4.8	15.9	6.3	13.6	6.1	376.7	11.5
Financing, insurance, real estate and business services	7.5	5.8	25.1	10.0	21.0	9.5	553.4	16.9
Community, social and personal services	33.1	25.5	71.2	28.3	65.3	29.4	683.5	20.9
Others	*	*	*	*	*	*	22.4	0.7
Total	129.8	100.0	252.0	100.0	222.0	100.0	3277.6	100.0

Notes : * Figures are compiled based on a small number of observations and not be released owing to large sampling error.

**Figures are taken and calculated from Census and Statistics Department (2007) *Quarterly Report on General Household Survey July to September 2007*. Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department. Figures may not add up to the totals owing to rounding.

Nevertheless, low wage employees in manufacturing, construction, wholesale, retail and related sectors, and in community and related services were all overrepresented among the low-waged relative to their overall shares in the total number of workers in Q3 2007. The greatest overrepresentation occurred in community, social and personal

services, since these industries accounted for 20.9 per cent of the total employed yet accounted for 29.4 per cent of the low-waged workers.

One can see from Table 6 that low-wage earners were most likely to have come from households with three or four people in Q3 2007; slightly over one third (34.3 per cent) of them were from households with four members while close to a quarter were in households of three people. The proportion of low-waged individuals in households of five or more people fell from 1995 and 2007.

Table 6 Number of low-income employees (excluding foreign domestic helpers) living in domestic households by household size, Q3 of 1995, 2006 & 2007

Household size	Period					
	Q3 1995		Q3 2006		Q3 2007	
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%
1	9.4	7.3	13.3	5.3	12.4	5.6
2	19.4	15.1	35.9	14.3	32.9	15.0
3	23.1	18.0	62.4	24.9	50.7	23.1
4	32.1	25.0	86.0	34.4	75.6	34.4
5	27.5	21.4	35.4	14.1	34.8	15.8
6+	17.0	13.2	17.3	6.9	13.3	6.1
Total	128.5	100.0	250.3	100.0	219.6	100.0

Notes : Figures may not add up to the totals owing to rounding.

By type of housing, it is not surprising that the highest numbers and proportion of low income earners resided in public rental housing in 1995, 2006 or 2007 (see Table 7), accounting for between 51 to 54 per cent of the low-waged. Private permanent housing was the second most common type of housing where low-income earners resided in Q3

2007. The rise in the proportion of low-wage earners coming from subsidised sale flats is worth more attention. From a relative small share (8.4 per cent) in Q3 1995, the proportion of low-waged individuals living in subsidised sales flats rose to 17.5 per cent in Q3 2007 (17.5 per cent), or more than tripling in absolute numbers and more than doubling as a proportion between 1995 and 2007.

Table 7 Number of low-income employees (excluding foreign domestic helpers) living in domestic households by type of housing, Q3 of 1995, 2006 & 2007

Type of housing	Period					
	Q3 1995		Q3 2006		Q3 2007	
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%
Public rental housing	69.4	54.0	125.2	50.0	113.6	51.7
Subsidized sale flats	10.8	8.4	46.1	18.4	38.5	17.5
Private permanent housing	40.8	31.8	75.8	30.3	65.7	29.9
Temporary housing	7.4	5.8	3.2	1.3	*	*
Total	128.5	100.0	250.3	100.0	219.6	100.0

Notes : * Figures are compiled based on a small number of observations and not be released owing to large sampling error.

Figures may not add up to the totals owing to rounding.

If we define a low-income household as one earning less than the average CSSA payment, then the share of low-income employees living in such households increased quite sharply from 7.3 per cent of the total in Q3 1995 to 14.0 per cent of the total in Q3, 2007 as shown in Table 8.

Table 8 Number of low-income employees (excluding foreign domestic helpers) living in domestic households by whether living in low-income households with monthly household income less than average CSSA payment, Q3 of 1995, 2006 & 2007

Lives in low-income household?	Period					
	Q3 1995		Q3 2006		Q3 2007	
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%
Yes	9.4	7.3	35.4	14.1	30.7	14.0
No	119.1	92.7	215.0	85.9	188.9	86.0
Total	128.5	100.0	250.3	100.0	219.6	100.0

Notes: Average CSSA payment is calculated according to household size. Households with income below the average CSSA payment has been used as the criterion by the Commission on Poverty in their construction of the Poverty Indicators for identifying children/youths and adults living in low-income households under Indicators 2, 3 and 10, as well as for identifying the low-income households under Indicator 20 in Commission on Poverty Paper 26/2005. Similar calculations can be found in Subcommittee to Study the Subject of Combating Poverty. Hong Kong Legislative Council. 2006. Report on Working Poverty p. 16 Table 5 LC Paper No. CB(2) 1002/05-06
 Figures may not add up to the totals owing to rounding.

Even though most low-wage individuals are not necessarily poor when the income of their household members is taken into consideration, the increase of such individuals from 9,400 in 1995 to 30,700 in 2007 is a cause for concern. However, economy recovery seems to have arrested the growth of low-income individuals living in low-income households since the number of such individuals dropped from 35,400 in Q3 2006 to 30,700 in Q3 2007.

As indicated in Table 9, a substantial minority (31.4 per cent) of low-income individuals were not living with employed persons who

earned at a level equivalent to or greater than the low-income level. In other words, the low-income earners themselves were primary earners in these households. Compared with the figure of 30 per cent of low-income employees who earned the highest income within their households in 1995, the comparable figure in Q3 2007 was slightly higher at 31.4 per cent.

Table 9 Number of low-income employees (excluding foreign domestic helpers) living in domestic households by whether having employed persons with monthly employment earnings higher than the threshold in the same household, Q3 of 1995, 2006 & 2007

Whether having employed persons with monthly employment earnings \geq half of median monthly employment earnings of all employed persons (excluding domestic helpers) in the same household	Period					
	Q3 1995		Q3 2006		Q3 2007	
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%
Yes	126.2	70.0	115.2	68.8	95.5	68.6
No	54.1	30.0	52.2	31.2	43.7	31.4
Total	180.3	100.0	167.4	100.0	139.3	100.0

Figures may not add up to the totals owing to rounding.

Summary and implications

The number of low-income employees surged from 129,800 in Q3 1995 to 222,000 in Q3 2007, a rise of 71 per cent. The share of low-wage employees in the total employed (excluding foreign domestic helpers) was 6.8 per cent in Q3 of 2007. The economic revival between Q3 of 2006 and 2007 reversed the upward trend as the number of low-wage workers fell by 30,000 during this period. The finding corroborates

previous findings by the Commission on Poverty showing that the number and share of low-wage workers among the total employed was already noticeably declining between 2003 and 2005. The growth in the number of low-wage employees apparently peaked in 2003 and then started to fall.

While there has been a general decline in the size of this group and its overall weight in the employed population, this study also suggests that the benefits of the economic growth between Q3 2006 and Q3 2007 have been unevenly distributed across different groups of low-wage workers. A detailed analysis of the structure of the low-income working population shows that the share of female low-wage workers continued to grow from 1995 to 2007 despite the economic recovery between Q3 2006 to Q3 2007. The middle-aged groups, namely those aged 40-49 and 50-59, accounted for a larger share of the low-waged in Q3 2006 compared to Q3 1995 and this trend was not reversed by the economic growth between Q3 2006 and Q3 2007. Furthermore, the 15-19, 50- 59 and 60 or above age groups were all overrepresented in the low-waged relative to their overall shares in the total number of workers. There was a clear trend for individuals with upper secondary, lower secondary, sixth form and post-secondary non-degree qualifications to be more likely to become low-waged employees between 1995 and 2007. Those with upper secondary schooling suffered most seriously, with their share of low income workers rising from 15.6 per cent to 27.3 per cent between 1995 and 2007. Moreover, their situation was not improved by the better economic performance

between 2006 and 2007. As could be expected from the current economic structure, service and shop sales workers and employees in elementary occupations were the two main occupational groupings of the low-waged, together accounting for 72 per cent of the total. Their large shares in the composition of the low-waged are structural in nature since better economic performance during 2006 and 2007 had no effect on their shares. However, between 1995 and 2007, low-wage employees have been increasingly drawn from white collar workers (including clerks and associate professionals), and service and shop sales workers.

The three main employers of low-wage workers in Q3 2007 were producers of consumer or producer services. They were wholesale, retail, trades, restaurants and hotels industries; community, social and personal services industries; and financing, insurance, real estate and business services industries. Their dominance in producing low-wage workers reflect the expansion in service industries and the shrinking of manufacturing from 1995 to 2007.

Low-wage earners were more likely in 2007 to have come from smaller households of 3 or 4 members (accounting for 57 per cent of the total) rather than from larger households with four or more members as was the case in 1995. At least half of low-wage earners were living in public rental housing in both 1995 and 2007, but the share of those living in subsidised sale flats climbed considerably from 8.4 per cent to 17.5 per cent of low income employees during this period.

The trend between 1995 and 2007 was for low-income individuals to be more likely to live in low-income households defined as those earning less than the average CSSA payment. The proportion living in such households increased from 7.3 per cent in Q3 1995 to 14 per cent in Q3 2007.

The above profile highlights that the low-income working population continued to be disproportionately comprised of those from certain disadvantaged groupings in terms of age, gender, education levels, occupation, and industry, and that the composition of the low-income employees has remained relatively stable over the period of the economic recovery. The findings suggest that while economic recovery has reduced the overall likelihood of an employee falling into the low-income category, the risk for specific groups to become low-waged has not abated. The findings also indicate that the strategy of obtaining higher qualifications to safeguard against the likelihood of becoming low-wage did not always work as those with some relatively high qualifications (i.e. upper secondary) were substantially represented among the low-waged even when the economy was growing.

Chapter 3

Pathways to Low-wage Work and Family Types

As discussed Chapter 1, the overseas literature has shown that low-wage workers often live with other earners in a household to avoid falling into poverty, especially single people without children and couples with dependent children. In Hong Kong, the combined effects of deindustrialisation since the 1990s and the economic downturn since 1997 depleted jobs for low-skilled and uneducated workers. Low-wage individuals would be expected to have directly experienced such changes or to have been indirectly influenced by these shifts via declining incomes brought in by primary income earners in their households. In the following, we provide the social background contexts of the low-wage workers in Hong Kong by examining how they ended up in the low-wage path. We differentiate the low-wage workers by the different family types or units⁹ they form if they are parents themselves. If they are single, we distinguish them by the family type their parents fit and whether or not their parents are involved in low-wage work. The assumption is that low-wage workers will experience different financial burdens, economic endowments, and

⁹ A family type or unit is defined as a unit eligible for tax and social benefits, hence they can be single, single with dependent children, single with dependent elderly, couple, couple with dependent children and couple with dependent elderly (Millar and Gardiner, 2004). Dependent children are all those aged 21 or under who are in full-time education. Dependent parents are all those aged 65 or older who are not engaged in work.

may be eligible for different types of government benefits within the household¹⁰ depending on the nature of their own family unit or whether their parents are part of different family units and are involved in low-wage work. This should provide a better understanding of the household circumstances under which low-wage workers take up their jobs.

Our sample consists of two groups of low-wage employees. The first group consists of 25 individuals who are 30 years of age and older. They are mostly married and are cleaners by profession. The second group is comprised of 19 persons between 15 and 29 years of age. All are single. They usually work in fast-food chains or other chain stores. Table 10 shows the demographic information and family types formed by the older cohort of low-wage workers. Among the 25, 4 are fathers, 1 is with dependent children and 3 are without dependent children. There are 11 mothers also, including 8 with dependent children, 2 without and 1 without dependent children but with dependent parents. Of the six lone-mothers, 3 have dependent offspring and 3 have no dependent offspring. The rest are single persons comprising 2 with dependent parents and 2 single persons without dependent parents or children¹¹.

¹⁰ The household is defined as consisting of people in living in one or more family units, sharing the same residence and meals.

¹¹ The four single persons are not examined in the following as each of their experiences has some idiosyncratic features that makes them reluctant to provide details. For instance one of them had a criminal record and two of them left their children and wives without giving very clear details. One was a single woman who did not want to talk about her past. They are more akin to outlier cases because of their special experiences..

Table 10: Demographic information and family types of older cohort of respondents in 2008

Name	Types of family units formed	Occupation	Age	Years in HK	Edu. Attainment	Sex	Type of housing	Spouse's age	Spouse's occupation
Mr Dong	father with dependent children	FT street cleaner	60	20	P.3	M	Public rental housing	60	Housewife
Mr Ip	father without dependent children	FT cleaner	58	29	P.2	M	Public rental housing	49	Cleaner
Mr Yang	father without dependent children	FT cleaner	65	50	None	M	Public rental housing	61	Housewife
Mr Chan	father without dependent children	FT cleaner	63	58	P.4	M	Public rental housing	60	Housewife
Ms Dang	mother with dependent children	PT cleaner	34	3	P.3	F	Subsidised private housing	54	Mini-van driver
Ms Chu	mother with dependent children	FT cleaner	45	10	P.5	F	Public rental housing	49	Construction worker
Ms Hong	mother with dependent children	PT cleaner	47	25	F.2	F	Public rental housing	47	Construction worker
Ms Ma	mother with dependent children	PT cleaner	46	20	P.6	F	Public rental housing	49	Construction worker
Ms Lo	mother with dependent children	PT kitchen helper	44	44	P.3	F	Public rental housing	45	Cab Driver
Ms Chow	mother with dependent children	FT cleaner + PT waitress	50	7	P.6	F	Private rental housing	70	Chronically ill
Ms Lau	mother with dependent children	PT cleaner+CSSA	45	45	P.6	F	Public rental housing	41	Construction worker
Lily	mother with dependent children	PT cleaner	43	43	P.6	F	Public rental housing	55	security guard
Ms Fang	mother without dependent children but with dependent parents	FT cleaner	49	45	None	F	Public rental housing	50	Transportation worker
Ms Chan	mother without dependent children	FT cleaner	51	14	P.4	F	Public rental housing	60	Cleaner
Ms Ching	mother without dependent children	FT cleaner	63	20	None	F	Subsidised private housing	63	Retired civil servant
Ms Li	lone-mother with dependent children	PT cleaner +PT cashier	54	54	F.3	F	Subsidised private housing	Divorced	Divorced
Yan	lone-mother with dependent children	FT security guard +PT salesperson	45	45	P.2	F	Private rental housing	Divorced	Divorced
Ms Tan	lone-mother with dependent children	PT cleaner +CSSA	41	10	None	F	Public rental housing	Deceased	Deceased
Ms Wang	lone-mother without dependent children	PT waitress	54	18	F.7	F	Public rental housing	Divorced	Divorced
May	lone-mother without dependent children	FT cleaner	54	54	P.3	F	Public rental housing	Divorced	Divorced
Sue	Lone-mother without dependent children	PT cleaner cum OA	55	53	F.3	F	Subsidised private housing	Divorced	Divorced
Shum	single person with dependent parents	FT cleaner	54	54	F.3	F	Public rental housing	-	-
Kei	single person with dependent parents	FT cleaner + PT waiter	36	36	F.2	M	Subsidised private housing	-	-
Mr Mak	single person without dependent children	FT cleaner	70	68	P.6	M	Public rental housing	Divorced	Divorced
Ming	single person without dependent children	FT security guard	51	51	F.2	M	private rental housing	-	-

Note: PT=part-time, working regularly less than eight hours a day.

Fathers who entered low-wage jobs

Of the four fathers who entered low-wage employments, two had dependent children and the other two did not have dependent offspring at the time they first entered low-wage employment. Three of the low-wage fathers were aged 60 or over. They all worked as full-time cleaners. Three of them landed the job after a short period of unemployment and the fourth switched to the job after he had fallen ill.

A typical case of a father with dependent children is Mr Dong who has two dependent children and a non-working wife. He was married in his late 40s in the mainland and is now the sole income-earner in his four-member household. He had worked as a skilled plasterer on construction sites for over 17 years before he became unemployed two years ago when he was 58. For more than one year, he had to use his savings to sustain his household's livelihood. Then, a friend who worked as a cleaner asked him to take up his post temporarily so that this friend could return to the mainland. Mr Wong thus began the life of a cleaner on a busy road in Yuen Long where big cross-border trucks and lorries pass daily. Mr Dong could not take advantage of the construction boom in Macau, he said, because he could not leave his family behind to work there since his 61-year-old wife had been ill so he needs to be around to take care of her and the family.

Now it is very different from when I worked on construction sites. I used to earn double what I do now, I could make over 10000 dollars a month.

He lives with his family in a Tuen Mun public housing estate. He knows there are better paid opportunities in Mongkok but he would

rather not take them.

(Have you thought about working in places further away? Don't they pay higher wages there?) It is all very similar. Yesterday, someone called me to clean a toilet in Mongkok, paying 6000 dollars for 11 hours. (So they pay 1000 dollars more in Mongkok.) One thousand more, but what about the traveling time? And the traveling cost? Wouldn't it be the same? They need to work 11 hours there... (Yes you are only working 9 hours here.) They need you there from 11a.m. to 10 p.m.

Mr Dong is now paid 4950 dollars per month working 9 hours a day and a 6-day week. He is earning between 20.4 to 21.5 dollars per hour, depending on whether he works 26 or 27 days a month. If he works in Mongkok, he would be earning between 20.2 dollars and 21.0 dollars an hour without even taking into consideration the higher travelling costs involved.

In the case of fathers without any dependent children, their children have usually grown up and formed their own self-sufficient family units.

For instance, Mr Chan's four-member household was composed of three family units at the time he commenced low-wage job. Mr Chan's 29-year-old son became deaf after having a high fever four years earlier when Mr Chan was 59 and working in a meat store delivering goods. He had held this job for over 30 years. Then the meat store closed down because of worsening business in the wet market, a result of the 'aging population'. He was unemployed for half a year. His youngest daughter, then 24, had been working since leaving school after Secondary Five and was a clerk. She was able to pull the family through that period. Then Mr Chan found his present cleaner's job and

could make 4,200 dollars a month (before deducting the MPF contribution). It was a far cry from the 7500 dollars he used to earn per month from his earlier job. So, to economise, he had to give up most of his previous hobbies.

Now I do not do anything in my spare time. I used to play Mahjong and bet at the horse races. Now that my situation is not so good, where do I get money for that? You can do nothing about it, your circumstances force you [not] to do that.

Fathers in their late 50s and 60s usually entered low-wage jobs after they were made redundant by the economic downturn, or by restructuring in their original occupations or personal illness. From being able to earn breadwinner wages, they now struggled to support the household. While they were unemployed, they usually relied on their older working children for supplemental financial support. It is significant that their wives are usually housewives and were unable to help out by taking up paid work while they were unemployed¹². Research in the West suggests that women who have been out of paid work for a long time would have more difficulties in returning to work because of the loss of employment contacts and lack of employment experience (Morris, 1995; Lloyd, 2008). It appears that this older cohort of male workers has wives who follow the traditional female work trajectory of quitting work after marriage and never returning to full-time work. More evidence of this will be provided in the later sections. But it is clear here that when low-wage fathers with

¹² Mr Ip's case is an exception because he fell ill and had to exit from his previous job while in his early 50s rather than much later as was the experience of other men in this group. His eldest child was still in secondary school when he could not work.

dependent children lost their jobs, the household economy faced a crisis because of insufficient wage earners in the household. Low-wage workers living in the more outlying areas such as Tuen Mun, Tin Shui Wai or Yuen Long suffer from a lack of well-paid job opportunities in their local labour markets (Roberts, 1991). Long work hours and costly transport fees make working in more distant locations uneconomical even when the pay is higher.

Mothers who entered low-wage jobs

There are 11 mothers among our older workers who took up employment in a low wage job. In a majority of cases, their partners' financial contributions were unstable or irregular since their partners usually work in construction or transportation, in occupations which reportedly suffer from serious pay arrears or fluctuating income (more about this later). All 11 mothers entered low-wage jobs at the time when they had dependent children.

Ms Dang is a new migrant who has been living in Hong Kong for three years. Her husband owns a hired van and is paying off the mortgage for their private-ownership home in Tin Shui Wai. But his hired van business was not doing well. Increased competition, higher fuel cost, and rising parking fees appear to be eroding her husband's earnings.

For a hired van, you only earn money when you have business. Otherwise, you are only sitting there, waiting for a client, wasting your time. It is like driving a taxi, if you do not have a passenger, you have no work. Nowadays many people cannot find work, so many of them have joined the ranks of driving hired vans, so he has many difficulties finding business.

It is very stressful driving the van. He said it was easier to make money before. Now, the price for a journey has gone down, the cost of petrol has gone up, and there are more people doing the business [...].

Even though the husband's income covered over half of the household expenses, there were tensions between the husband and wife over the food money.

I am afraid to ask him for money. Really, he never used to take the initiative to give me money. It is not like others who would give you food money monthly on a regular basis. He would give you five hundred dollars for a week, then you used it up and you would have to ask him again for money. So it is like you would have to ask him for money all the time... Even though we are a couple, sometimes, I feel there is this distance between us.

It is like, you won't have food if you don't work. My husband used to refuse to give me any money sometimes and would slap the table. When he lost his temper, I would be really afraid to ask him for money again. I know he was under a lot of pressure as well...

She therefore chose to work despite the young age of her two children, who were just 8 and 9 at the time.

I came to Hong Kong in 2004 and when I started life here, I thought he was always losing his temper [...] So I was under a lot of pressure sometimes. Then when I began to tell him that I would like to take the domestic helper training course, he grew annoyed when I was out for a bit longer. So he did not really want me to go out to work, but later, when he saw that I could take care of home, he began to like me going out to work. If I didn't go out to work, and I needed to ask him for money, he would get unhappy. Now I can tell he is under less pressure, it is better, because at least I can help, at least in terms of food costs.

Her friend Ms Chu, also from Tin Shui Wai, came to Hong Kong from the mainland 10 years ago and has been working as a cleaner since then - despite having young children aged 11 and 4.

I first worked in Café de Coral in Aberdeen, then we moved house to here in Tin Shui Wai and I began working in schools as cleaners. I was working there during SARS times, I only changed to this company this year. So how much can I earn? Are we not in a very difficult situation?

Ms Chu's husband was and still is a construction worker but his pay has been irregular and could not cover all the major household expenditures. Because Ms Chu faces more economic difficulties than Ms Dang, she has to work an 8-hour day, whereas Ms Dang works only a 6-hour day and is able to return home to supervise her children. Both Ms Chu and Ms Dang now work in Fanling because of the difficulty of finding jobs in Tin Shui Wai and especially jobs which will fit in with their domestic duties. Dang explains,

I think it is very difficult to find a job. People often ask us, 'why are you so crazy going so far to work, doesn't Tin Shui Wai have jobs?' [...] But it is very difficult to find a job here. On top of that it is even more difficult to find a job that fits. Because we have to tend to our children, that is why I have to find a job that begins at eight. So we have to get up at about 6 o'clock to cook breakfast for them. Then I have to leave home by 6:50. I have to wake them up when I leave home. If you work too early, they may not wake up; if you begin work too late, you will be off late as well and it won't work. So you have to have a job that fits. (So what time are they off school?) Around 3 or 4 o'clock. So I am off at 2 o'clock, it takes me an hour to get back and I get home at 3 o'clock. (So you come back and oversee them?) If you do not oversee them, they won't do their homework properly. They would watch TV and fool around.

Ms Chu had to cope with her 14 year-old son who was in trouble with his school and at risk of being expelled.

(Was it because you were at work that you could not really watch over him?) Yes, since he was small, I was working. I used to work in Aberdeen, my job began at one p.m. and I came back home at 11 at night. So how could I have watched over him at night? [...] He thought that you could not watch over him, and you ... you know full well that you cannot really take care of him because you have to earn a living, you have no other choice, have you? [...]

I have worked for 10 years. I went out to work when my son was small, still in kindergarten. He is now 14 years old. But I earn the same low wage as before, and I need to keep an eye on my son. He is so naughty...I am worried all the time. You don't know how hard it is. I just don't know where to find

help. (What is wrong with him?) He doesn't go to school and plays around with the computer all the time. Isn't that very serious? I can't stop watching over him for a moment.

My son is going to leave the school, they want my son to leave, he is too naughty. He is detained by the school every day and he doesn't go to school. He hasn't gone for 20 days! [...] Even his sister cried for him, I also feel...(sigh)... (Why doesn't he go to school?) Because he likes to go to those games centres and mix with those bad people. He goes there wearing his uniform, those cybercafés, they shouldn't have let people below 18 in, but he just goes and these cybercafés really are doing harm. These children are too small, they should not let them in (The social workers are unable to help you?) No, it is too difficult. (What do the teachers say?) They said he was talking back all the time. So the teachers dislike him and punish him by making him stand. He didn't like it and became angry, and said he had been standing so long that it hurt. (So he is angry with the school?) Yes, some teachers pick on him, some teachers are not so good, it is just very difficult.

Low-wage mothers who have been in Hong Kong for a longer period are usually in their 40s or early 50s. They usually stopped working after they had children and returned to work when their children entered secondary schools. Ms Fang, who is 49 and who has been living in Hong Kong for 45 years, describes her work trajectory like this.

I used to work in an electronics factory until my son was born. Then I stopped for about two years. Then I went to work in a toy factory and was there for half a year until my daughter was born. Then I returned home to raise my kids. I became a cleaner about five years ago.

Ms Fang's son is now 21 years old and her daughter is 19. So she was working until her son was born and then returned briefly to work until her daughter's birth. She then did not work for the next 14 years until her daughter entered secondary school.

Mothers who entered low-wage work usually had to stabilise the

domestic income pool¹³ and cover household outlays on such critical items as food and school fees because their partner's earnings were often unstable or insufficient; or because the partner was unwilling to share his income for critical expenditures. Recent migrants usually have a continuous work trajectory despite their young children; whereas mothers who spent most of their lives in Hong Kong would have stopped working for about 10 or more years and re-entered the job market when their children became teenagers. It is not surprising that the recent migrant mothers, having to work full-time without childcare support, have faced tremendous pressure because the labour market in the 1990s for both them and their husbands had become more volatile. External volatility impacted on family relationships so that these households were more prone to break-ups and estrangement.

Low-wage lone mothers

Single mothers with dependent children usually have no options when entering the low-wage job market because it is urgent for them to become a wage earner just to keep the household running. In our older age sample, six women were lone mothers when entering the low-wage segment of the job market. Five of them had young children when they had their divorces or lost their husbands. Among them, two had claimed CSSA to sustain their living.

¹³ Domestic income differs from household income in that the former is the pooling of income which is used for the common good of the household while the latter is only the sum of the individual incomes and it is not necessarily shared at all (Morris, 1989).

Ms Li, aged 54, had a messy separation from her husband 8 years earlier when her husband suddenly ran off and left her with his gambling debt. She had to look for help from a District Officer to seek a formal divorce and deal with her emotional trauma. At that time, she and her husband had also just made the commitment to buy their public rental flat. Ms Li therefore was under immense pressure to find work that would enable her to make enough to pay off their mortgage, to earn a living, and to look after the daily lives of her children, who were then 9 and 13 years old. She found a 6-hour part-time job in a newspaper company's canteen very close to where she lived in Wan Chai and the job could be fitted into her daily schedule perfectly. She was required to wait at tables, wash dishes, mop the canteen floor and deliver takeaways. The wage rate was 24 dollars an hour, but she could only make about 3000 dollars monthly from this job.

She then picked up a part-time cleaning job and a part-time job as a cashier for the Hong Kong Jockey Club. Her job at the Hong Kong Jockey Club paid 40 dollars an hour but she could not do it full-time.

I wouldn't be able to take care of my family. So for example, if I work from 10 to 10 or 7 to 7, how can I buy food and cook meals? How can you take care of your family?

As a part-timer therefore, she could only work a maximum of eighty hours a month, which allowed her to earn about 3,200 dollars.

While Ms Li was forced to enter the low-wage labour market directly in 2000 and took up three separate part-time jobs to accommodate her

‘triple burden’. Sue by contrast, who is now 55, divorced much earlier in the 1970s. She managed to build a career after that and ride the tide of the booming economy in the 1990s. But the downward mobility she has experienced was also more dramatic and unexpected as a result.

Sue had first worked in Japan in 1978 as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant opened by a friend’s husband. This big step of working outside Hong Kong was possible only because she could make suitable arrangements for the minding of her children by using her overseas income.

A friend of mine had moved there after her marriage. Her husband had a Chinese restaurant there. But because my children were still very young, it was hard to get a job in Hong Kong in the 1970s, so when they asked me to go, I decided to go. Since at least they could give me an income and the money made there could be remitted back with a favourable exchange rate.

My mother-in-law looked after the children for me because I gave her the money. So I became more relaxed because I did not need to rely on some strangers to take care of my children. When my son reached Secondary One, I returned to Hong Kong [...] My mother-in-law was not refusing to take care of them, but she could not manage them anymore, because when my son reached Secondary One, I was afraid that he might go astray.

Sue returned in 1988 when the Hong Kong economy was flourishing and landed a job with Wellcome supermarket. She worked there for nearly 12 years and advanced from the position of cashier to become a branch manager. However in 2000, due to some conflicts with another store manager, she quit. She had not anticipated that she would face considerable difficulty finding another job, and was quite astonished when she ended up becoming a part-time cleaner.

I could not find anything, so I just took up whatever came my way which was a part-time job for three hours a day. I thought I would look for something else

while doing that. But it was after 1997, I left Wellcome in 2000 and the economy went into a recession in 2001. I thought I could find a job easily with my previous work title and experience. But I really could not find anything.

I thought that since I had been a manager and I had testimonial letters and that I was not given the sack but quit of my own accord, that I could find a job easily. Even if I couldn't find one with the same level of pay, I thought I could at least find one paying 6000 dollars a month. But I just couldn't. So I was forced to take up a three-hour part-time job for 2000 dollars [...] With the SARS outbreak, it was even more difficult.

Aside from her previous high pay which was not helpful in her job search, she also mentioned the problem of age discrimination.

So after 2000, 2001 and 2003, you got SARS in 2003 and you couldn't find any jobs. Then you also became older, and when you got older, they asked you to wait for their phone calls.

Lone-mothers are thrown into immediate economic crises and have to shoulder the 'triple burden' when they lose their partners. Their main difficulty lies in how to juggle the responsibilities of both a paid job and domestic work. For those who entered the job market earlier and had certain qualification to ride the tide of the economic boom, childcare could be outsourced and they could concentrate on building up a career. Those who entered the job market after 1997 only had access to low-wage jobs. They could only handle the demands from home and work by engaging in several part-time low-wage jobs. They could not move to higher paid full-time jobs because they are severely constrained by their family commitments.

Single people entering low-wage work

To understand how young people take up low-wage work and how

household contexts affect their decision to engage in this type of work, we interviewed altogether 19 young single people doing low-wage work. They are all in the age range of 16-29. We can divide them according to both the types of family their parents form as well as by whether their parents have taken up low-wage work. Hence they can be classified as:

- fathers in low-wage work (2 cases); both fathers have dependent children;
- fathers in non-low-wage work (8 cases); in all 8 cases the fathers have dependent children;
- mothers in low-wage employments (2 cases) one case with dependent children and one case without;
- lone-mothers who are in low-wage work (4 cases), 3 cases with dependent children and one without;
- lone-mothers with dependent children who are not working (1 case), and
- parents who are dependent or are absent (2 cases).

Details of the single people are shown in Table 11.

As the legal minimum age to work is 15, single young people are likely to join the low-wage job market at three points: during their secondary schooling before finishing Secondary Five, after their completion of Secondary Five, or after the acquisition of further qualifications. Joining low-wage work at different times may imply they are facing different sets of issues when deciding whether to continue their education or to work.

Table 11: Demographic information and family background of the younger cohort of respondents in 2008

Name	Family background and parents' involvement in low-wage work	Employment	Age	Years in HK	Education level	Gender	Type of housing
Grace	father with dependent children in low-wage work	clerk FT	19	19	F.5	Female	public rental housing
Emma	father with dependent children in low-wage work	Fast-food chain PT	16	13	F.4	Female	public rental housing
Tiger	father with dependent children in non-low-wage work	Fast-food chain PT	20	20	F.5	Male	public rental housing
Ah Bin	father with dependent children in non-low-wage work	Japanese fast-food chain PT	19	10	F.4	Male	subsidised private housing
Den	father with dependent children in non-low-wage work	Toy chain PT	17	17	F.5	Male	public rental housing
Jenny	father with dependent children in non-low-wage work	Fast-food chain PT	17	17	F.5	Female	Public rental housing
Minnie	father with dependent children in non-low-wage work	Fast-food chain PT	17	17	F.5	Female	subsidised private housing
Richie	father with dependent children in non-low-wage work	Fast-food chain FT	18	18	F.5	Male	subsidised private housing
Peter	father with dependent children in non-low-wage work	Toy chain PT	18	17	IVE1	Male	public rental housing
Lucy	father with dependent children in non-low-wage work	clerk PT	19	19	F.4	Female	private housing
Eric	mother without dependent children in low-wage work	Toy chain PT	19	19	IVE1	Male	private housing
Nicky	mother with dependent children in low-wage work	Fast-food chain FT	23	23	F.5	Male	public rental housing
Betty	lone-mother with dependent children in low-wage work	Toy chain PT	16	16	F.4	Female	public rental housing
Sam	lone-mother with dependent children not in work	Toy chain PT	18	18	IVE1	Male	private housing
Ah Zi	lone-mother with dependent children in non-low-wage work	Toy chain PT	18	17	IVE2	Female	subsidised private housing
Maggie	lone-mother with dependent children in low-wage work	book chain PT + private tutoring	20	20	U1	Female	private housing
Ching	lone-mother without dependent children in low-wage work	cinema usher FT	18	18	F.5	Male	public rental housing
Ricky	parents retired	Kitchen hand in a pizza takeaway FT	20	8	F.5	Male	subsidised private housing
Jo	parents absent	Kitchen hand in restaurants FT	19	19	F.3	Female	public rental housing

Note: PT=part-time, working regularly less than eight hours a day.

U= university

IVE= Institute of Vocational Education

Low-wage single people with fathers who are in low-wage work

In our sample of low-wage single people, there are only two cases whose fathers are low-wage employees. Here we only consider the case where only the father is working to illustrate how single-earner parents influence young people's entry to low-wage work.

Grace is 19 years old and graduated from Secondary Five in the summer of 2007. She had worked as a clerk for 2 months after completing the government's fully-funded Youth Pre-employment Training Program (YPTP). Her 53-year-old father has been a fisherman all his life and her mother has been a housewife. Her household has five people and they reside in Aberdeen. She described her father's income as 'not very stable'.

It is actually not very stable, he gets about 5 or 6 thousand a month. In fact he only comes back once after a long period of time and has to post his money to us. He lives at sea because he has to go as far as to Taiwan and comes back around once every half a year. (Then does he catch a lot of fish?) No, he said the business is getting very difficult. He said the diesel is getting too expensive, it is as much as 1000 dollars a barrel, and because he has to travel such long distance, he has to load the ship with much diesel. The baits are getting expensive too.

Even though her elder brother has worked for four years and is earning a good income of 10000 dollars a month selling spectacles in shops, she finds herself unable to enrol in the Institute of Vocational Education (IVE).

(Did you think about studying in the IVE at all?) Never. Because IVE takes a long time to finish, three years. Because I have some friends who are studying there, and it takes too long, I was afraid I might not concentrate and might waste money. It is too expensive and my family cannot afford it. (But you said that your family said it was ok if you continued?) Yes, they support me, but I also need to consider if it is a burden to my family. (You mean you do not want to put

a burden onto your family?) In fact my family cannot really shoulder the burden. I mean I only want to go on to government funded schools to continue, because for IVE, you have to borrow money from the government, even if they give you subsidies, it is not likely to be a lot. (You mean you do not want to borrow money to continue your study?) Yes. I am afraid I might not be able to finish the course and I would be wasting money and might not be able to pay off the debt incurred.

(If you want to continue your study and borrow money to do so, will your family agree with that?) If I borrow money to study? Yes, they will. They would think that if you borrow money, you have to pay it back yourself. So they just let you decide your own path and they are just responsible for giving you their opinions.

So Grace made the decision on her own but in the context of a household which was not too keen to shoulder the burden of financing her education. Grace's elder brother also did not continue his study after Secondary Five.

(Was your brother's case like yours in that he didn't think about continuing or your family did not want him to continue?) My family did not say that. In fact they wanted him to continue, but they did not push, nor scold him, that is if you really want to do it, and if they can afford it, they will do their best to finance you. But if you do not have such desire, they would rather have you work and gain more experience....

Grace's elder brother therefore became a salesperson in a spectacle shop. As mentioned, he earns a salary of 10,000 dollars a month and remits home 25 per cent of his income.

With the path of further study ruled out, Grace was introduced to her present full-time job as a clerk by a social worker responsible for the YPTP programme that she joined. Since Grace was a novice at her job, she was offered only 5200 dollars a month by her boss. She remits about one third of her income back to her parents. Her path to a full-time low-wage job was therefore taken after Secondary Five.

Children's education will be affected in a household in which the father

is the sole-income earner among the parents and is a low-wage employee. The oldest child is likely to be encouraged to ‘gain work experience’ after Secondary Five; and after that, even when the oldest child becomes an income earner, the household still prefers the second child to leave school and obtain a full-time job.

Low-wage single people with mothers who are in low-wage work

In the sample, there are two single people whose mothers are in low-wage work, one with dependent children and the other without. In both cases, their fathers’ work remuneration is unstable.

Eric is 19 and comes from a four-member household. Eric’s father works in renovation and was seriously affected by the 1997 downturn in the economy. Eric describes the change as follows:

Before 1997 when I was still in primary school, I never saw my father at dinnertime. But after 1997 when I was in secondary school, I started to see my father coming home for dinner. Before he would not be back until 9 or 10.

As a result, his mother had to work as a salesperson, but she switches jobs quite frequently because of workplace conflicts. Eric’s sister, who is three years older than him, has finished her higher diploma qualification at IVE and has been working full-time as a chemical analyst for half a year. While the father and mother together make approximately 6000 dollars each per month, the sister’s salary is 8000 dollars. She and the brother both faced the decision of whether to continue their studies last year. In the end, Eric prevailed and has become a student at IVE at the cost of 140,000 dollars for 4 years for a

higher diploma course. His sister on the other hand had to put her strong desire to attend university on hold. His mother was fairly indecisive about supporting her son's education.

I remember after my HKCEE exam, my mother said to me, 'I don't know whether you should study or go out to work'. But of course I only set my mind on studying. I want to finish this course and then find a job that is related to what I have studied.

The 40 thousand dollars tuition fee for Eric's first year enrolment was paid for by his parents and was doubtlessly pooled together with his sister's 3,000 dollars monthly contribution. Eric also began working as a part-time sales assistant in a toy chain store to cover his own expenses. He earns about 2000 dollars a month but at his parents' request he gives back 1000 dollars and uses 700 to 800 dollars for travelling and lunches.

Nicky is 23 years old and was already familiar with part-time work at McDonald's and supermarket chains during his years in secondary schools as he liked to earn some money and gain work experience. After Secondary Five when he was 19, he went to study in a design institute for half a year for a diploma. His parents paid 4000 to 5000 dollars for him to study this programme. But he found his diploma was of little value in searching for a job however.

I have tried looking for a job relating to design, but, many people are armed with the same diploma, from the same course, but they have something extra, the recognition of foreign countries. Furthermore, if it is a diploma from a foreign institute, or the person has studied abroad, then basically, you are out of the race. (What kind of jobs were you looking for exactly?) Photography, or design for say, wedding costumes companies.

His father is a construction worker while his mother works full-time at a

supermarket chain as a cashier. With few alternative opportunities, he returned to his old part-time jobs for more than a year before he mustered enough courage to apply for a full-time position at McDonald's last year.

(Why did you do part-time jobs all the time?) Because the full-timers I saw were like zombies. So I was a bit afraid. (Then why were you still doing it? Were you thinking that a shorter period is okay?) Yes, because my ex-boss and colleagues asked me to go back and help them.

(Why did you apply for this full-time position?) I wanted to do a full-time job, it was the word 'full-time' which attracted me. Because [...] it gives more security, like medical insurance, even if you are ill, you can see a doctor for help.

Now he is making 6200 dollars a month, working a minimum 10-hour day, and remits 2000 dollars to his parents at their insistence.

Nicky and Eric landed low-wage jobs from different paths, Nicky during secondary school and after getting a diploma while Eric took the job while still receiving further education. But a comparison with Grace will show that both Nicky and Eric have dual earning parents while Grace has only one earning parent and an earning brother. Both Eric and Nicky had siblings who acquired higher qualifications, but Grace's brother could not go beyond Secondary Five. Eric and Nicky were supported for further studies while Grace was not. The difference between the two groups of young single people can be partly attributed to whether both parents in the households are working or not. Nicky's case also shows that even after acquiring further qualifications, young people still face intense competition in the job market and they often have to resort to full-time low-wage jobs since they are unable to find an

occupation that matches their qualifications.

Low-wage single people with fathers who are in non-low-wage work

This section focuses on the situation of those young low-wage workers whose fathers are in non-low-wage work. Though one might expect that household finances might be more secure when the male household head is a non-low-wage worker, this is not necessarily the case as illustrated by the many young, part-time low-wage earners coming from this type of household.

Den's father is a bus driver earning 13000 dollars a month. He has three sons aged 10, 14 and 17 and Den is the eldest. Mother has not worked since the three children were born and is a housewife. Den started to work in fast-food chains during weekends, holidays or after school, since the summer two years earlier because he wanted money to buy teenage consumables such as cell phones and electronic games devices. But when Den finished his Secondary Five, and gained good results from his HKCEE (17 points), his father talked to him about continuing his studies.

My father said something like if I wanted to go on studying, the money would be very tight at home. He meant he would have to pay about 800 dollars a month when I go on to Secondary Six. (But you also needed to pay school fees for your Secondary Five, didn't you?) Yes, 200 dollars less, around 600 dollars. So at first, my family said that they would sponsor me. But my father actually moaned once and said, 'we have supported your studying for so long, wouldn't it be better if you try and support yourself as well?' So I said, 'I have no money, so should I go and work first'. Then he said, 'do as you please, but since your HKCEE results are so good, if you go out to work and save enough money, you can go on and finish your studies afterwards'.

Den was resigned to the fact that his father did not want to support his schooling.

I don't feel that I want to work to support my studies because you as a father should have the duty to sponsor me through my education, but on the other hand, I also want to work to experience the hardship of working.

Den has begun working like a full-timer after his Secondary Five but his wage is still calculated at an hourly rate. Like Nicky, he does not want to be tied down by the full-time status as it often means a lot of overtime work. Four months ago, he switched to a toy chain store because of hygiene problems in his previous fast-food workplace. At present he earns 4500 dollars a month working 8 hours a day and 6 days a week.

Ah Bin is a secondary four student living in a privately owned flat in Cheung Kwan O. He is 19 and came from Shenzhen 10 years earlier. His father is a renovation worker and is a small contractor for such work. He suspects his mother is a gambling addict.

My mum would take overdrafts on her credit card. And she is not in Hong Kong most of the time. [...] She always stays on the mainland and gambles with her friends. She even opened a Mahjong school there. But it has been losing money all the time.

His father's contribution to the household income is therefore greatly affected by his mother's uncontrollable gambling habit,

My father in fact can make over 100000 dollars a month. But because he is a contractor, he needs to give salaries to his workers, then after paying off the 50,000 and 60,000 debt for my mum, he is left with a few thousand dollars. So I think he is very inept.

My mother would not listen to my father. My father always complains about my mother in front of me, but when she comes back, he would start siding with my mother and scold me for complaining about her.

Their awkward relationship causes Ah Bin to yearn very much for his own independence.

My father also does not have a plan. Sometimes he will use up the last dollar in his bank account and has to ask me to lend money back to him. He really has no plans, so that's why I absolutely do not want to depend on them. So basically now I do not really...ask for money, I pay my own food at school, he just pays my school fees.

I want to be working and be independent because I want to show them that I do not need to depend on them. I always bicker with them, they always have this excuse that 'you rely on me for food and board', but in fact I have no choice, they gave birth to me, they should have the responsibility to bring me up properly. So I want to rely on myself as much as possible. I want to tell them I can be independent and can earn my living.

Besides studying, Ah Bin has been working in various low-paid and casual jobs since he was 16. He first delivered takeaways for a restaurant for three months, then he worked handing out flyers for half a year. After half a year of rest, he was involved in designing homepages but the workload was very irregular. Then he became a waiter for a Japanese fast food chain for a year. After half a year working in sales, he returned to the previous Japanese fast-food chain and worked in the kitchen. He now works five hours after school on Fridays and 12 hours from 12 mid-day to 12 mid-night on Saturdays and Sundays. He is paid 22 dollars an hour and he said he could make slightly less than 2000 dollars a month.

Though he tries to earn his way to independence, he can actually only cover his food costs and travelling expenses to school plus other small expenses. Ah Bin also said that his father did not expect him to study beyond Secondary Five. As we shall see in next chapter, Ah Bin

disagrees with his father on this point.

Youngsters with fathers in professional jobs are often allowed to acquire costly qualifications before they land full-time low-wage jobs. Richie's father is a nurse in a hospital with an income of 30000 dollars a month and his mother is a housewife. His younger sister is in Secondary Two. Richie did not enter the low-wage job market straight away after getting only 2 marks in his HKCEE exams. Instead, he went to study the Project Springboard courses which cost about 30000 dollars for a year.

It is just for the five passes that I want and to pave the path for a government job. If you have only two points in the HKCEE, there is no way you could apply for such jobs, is there? So if you can get five passes after doing the Project Springboard courses, then at least you have some muscle to fight with others. If you only get 2 points, what can you do?

But he did not actually apply for a government job after finishing the programme, instead he became a full-time worker in a fast-food chain.

(Why did you not apply for a government job?) It is not time yet. (What you do mean?) Because I think a government job is boring, so I want to see the outside world first before applying for a government job.

Working 10 hours a day and 6 days a week however, he is dissatisfied with the job after working there for half a year.

(Why do you want to change jobs?) The wage is a problem. (You mean other jobs will pay more?) A bit more. (How do you know?) I applied for two other jobs before, they said they would take me, their salaries were much higher, about 1000 to 2000 dollars more. (You mean working in a kitchen or as waiters?) Waiters, but my family said that it will be very harsh, much harsher than this one and so they told me not to do those and ask me to do this one instead. So I listened to them.

Money was not the primary concern of the household and other conditions such as the work hours and work load were also considered important.

He also thought about acquiring other qualifications to better prepare himself to join the government.

Yes, now I want to go back to study, because if I change to a government job. I can only start from the beginning. But if you want to make progress and get promotion, then you must have qualifications. So I might just as well go back to study and get certain qualifications so that I save the trouble of starting from the beginning.

Richie's path to a low-wage job was guided and paved carefully by his parents. A useful qualification was acquired first to ensure he will meet the minimum requirement for a stable government job but he was also allowed to explore the work world afterwards. Many options are open to Richie and he can take his time to decide whether a government job is really suitable to him.

All households in this group have one-earner parents. Households with fathers who earn low wages or average income do not stop their children taking up low-wage part-time work during their schooling to supplement their own expenses. Even when their children show strong academic ability and strongly desire to continue their studies beyond Secondary Five, the fathers are reluctant to invest in their further education. Fathers with more professional occupations are different however. They are much more willing to invest in their children's education to pave the way for them to enter better occupations. They would allow

them to engage in low-wage work only after they have acquired the minimum qualification that is needed for entry into relatively stable government positions.

Single people with lone-mothers in low-wage work

Single people with lone-mothers in low-wage work often entered low-wage jobs when their households were either claiming or had just stopped claiming social assistance (2 out of the 3 in this category). Most of the time, the single people cannot fully articulate or comprehend the kind of financial difficulty the household is experiencing and would rather not receive social assistance.

Betty's mother migrated to Hong Kong 10 years earlier but Betty's father died 4 years afterwards. Betty was 10 years old then and the household was supported by CSSA until last year, when her mother took over a vegetable stall from her grandfather and began working as a hawker. The income generated was between 5000 to 6000 dollars a month, which was not really sufficient for the four-member household. Given these financial constraints, the then 16-year-old Betty began working in MacDonald's in the summer and later in a toy store chain on the weekends and on Fridays after school. Her explanation for working part-time was succinct:

Perhaps because I have grown up and I have started to spend more. And my family is a bit poor ... so I don't want to ask my mother for money.

Betty could earn around 900 dollars a month without long holidays (when she could work more days) and she spent the money on 'buying

clothes, watching movies and singing karaoke'. But basically her earnings are not spent on extravagant consumption. Sometimes, she would remit one or two hundred dollars to her mother in cash or in kind. Her mother however thought it would have been better if she could support herself entirely.

They don't like me going to work sometimes. Perhaps it is because I still ask for money from my mom after working. So she thought if I still ask for money after I go out to work, I might just as well not go out to work. I still ask her for money for my school lunch. But since I only earn a couple of hundreds, I can't really afford it to be cut. But she thought that the school lunch money should be cut.

The financial pressure is something that she feels but is not able or willing to articulate fully. What is clear is that her elder brother and sisters cannot contribute to improving the economic situation of the household very much. Her 17-year-old brother left school after Secondary Three and has become unemployed. He is 'quite naughty and rebellious'. Her unmarried sister is 24, left school after Secondary Five, and has been working in a child care centre. She earns about 5000 dollars a month, and remits one to two thousand dollars to the household. The migrant background of the household appears to have some influence on the schooling of her siblings. For instance, her 24-year-old sister came to Hong Kong at age 15 and 2 years after that she left school after receiving poor HKCEE results.

A similar case is Ching's. His life is full of dramatic ups and downs and unexpected twists and turns. Ching's father was divorced from his mother after she migrated to Hong Kong from mainland China 12 years

earlier. Other household members migrated to Hong Kong at different times between 1996 and 1999. Ching is the only one in the household who was born and raised in Hong Kong. The divorced mother had to rely on CSSA and her own paid work for support. But other problems gradually arose as Ching's eldest sister failed to adapt successfully to Hong Kong society and was diagnosed as psychologically unstable by a professional psychologist. She had been physically abused by her father and grandmother since she was young and living in the village in China. When she arrived in Hong Kong, she had difficulties fitting into a Primary Five class because she was already 16. She is now 25 but has been unemployed for a year. Ching's second sister had a smoother schooling experience and is now studying for an associate degree. She was still in secondary school when Ching was in Secondary Five and her mother was working as a cleaner, and the household was claiming CSSA support. But Ching decided to take up the responsibility to provide for the household after Secondary Five.

At that time, my school teachers thought that I would continue on to Secondary Six and Seven because my results were not bad. I got 16 or 17 points from the HKCEE exams. But I did not go on because I had no money at home. So how could I study? I won't be able to sustain a living. I can't just rely on my mother, she is only a low-wage worker. It will not work. [...] so eventually, I decided to cancel the CSSA and rely on my own hands to support our living.

Ching became a waiter for a year in a chain restaurant earning 6000 dollars working 17 hours a day. When after 13 months he was promoted to a cook, he was paid 1000 dollars more. Then to pursue his dream of working in graphic design, he was introduced to a design and advertising agency. But because his eldest sister could not stand

him coming back late at night, his mother called up the boss and complained.

My mother called my boss, and my boss shouted, 'I am not here to nurse your son for you'. So he asked me to leave and I had to go.

The loss of the job dealt a particularly hard blow to Ching because the employer championed him and treasured his talent and had also once paid for him to take design courses.

I thought I had a bright future before me, but because of that, everything was shut off.

Currently, he is a full-time cinema usher in a cinema chain, earning 25 dollars an hour. He only works for 2 days a week, 6 to 7 hours a day. But despite his interests and experience in putting up big poster advertisements on buildings or shop fronts, he lacks the qualification to secure a proper job.

Of course I hope to work in a profession which I have real interest in, but right now I cannot do that because such advertising agencies often require certificates for graphics design. You also need to know how to use an Apple computer, if you do not have such computer at home, how can you learn it.

Now he is pinning his hopes on acquiring the required certificates from the government-funded Youth Pre-employment Training Program (YPTP). He hopes that such certificates would eventually land him a formal job in which he has a genuine interest.

Single people in this group do not necessarily have migrant household members. However those who have, as shown in the above two cases,

are particularly vulnerable. They are more likely to be working during secondary schooling or more likely to be forced to truncate their education after Secondary Five and enter low-wage jobs full time because of financial constraints caused by the cancellation of CSSA. Lone-mothers engaged in low-wage work are struggling to provide for their households which are comprised of young members who are often poorly qualified and unable to adapt to and integrate with the outside world. As illustrated by Ching, low-wage workers from such households have to struggle hard to try to squeeze the time and money to pursue further training.

Single people with parents retired or absent

When parents are retired or are absent, single individuals would usually leave school early. This means that they are likely to end up in full-time low-wage work after Secondary Three or Secondary Five. Among the 19 young low-wage workers we interviewed, 2 were in this category.

Jo's father and mother were divorced when she was a few years old and she was raised by her grandmother. She describes why she decided not to continue her studies after Secondary Three.

I don't like studying, I want to make money. I mean I want to make money and learn something at the same time. Even though people think that you can work in jobs that are better paid if you are educated, I think it is not necessary to study too much to get a job that you like. Because what I want to do now does not really require a lot of schooling. If I want to study later, I can do it then.

Jo eventually landed jobs in the eateries in wet markets. She worked five or six hours a day and liked the short hours because she could be free to go out at night. She was paid daily and two meals were included, so the three to four thousand she earned each month was sufficient to support her own living as well as her grandmother's.

Single individuals whose parents have retired might have to leave school early even though their elder siblings are working. Ricky is 20 years old. His elder brother, who is 26, works as an assistant civil engineer, and his elder sister works as a teaching assistant. Both of them finished Secondary Five and both have monthly salaries of between 6000 to 7000 dollars. All three brothers and sisters came to Hong Kong 8 years earlier. When Ricky was considering where to go after receiving his Secondary Five results, he discovered his household was 'indifferent' to whether he should continue his studies. But on further questioning, he revealed how his decision was made.

I have thought about studying a jewellery design course at the IVE. But I did not take it because the tuition fees were too expensive. Actually it was only 10000 dollars and it was quite reasonable. I don't know why but as soon as my family heard the figure, 10000 dollars, they objected very much. So, if they objected, I had no reasons to continue. So if I have money in the future myself, I can choose to do it then. It doesn't really matter. There is no point increasing the burden for the family. (But if your brother and sister are already working and remitting home money, do they also oppose you?) They did not object, they agreed. But my parents disagreed. They wanted me to go to work. They said I got only very few marks from my HKCEE, so they thought I was wasting money studying.

Ricky applied for a kitchen job found on the Labour Department job search website and ended up working in the kitchen of a pizza delivery service, earning 6500 dollars a month, given two meals, and working

from 9 to 14 hours a day. He has enrolled in a culinary school and will be studying in September this year. He will then support himself by working part-time.

Like those lone-parent households with migration background, the pathways to low-wage work for this group of single people are preceded by shortened education. With their relatively low qualification, their paths to full-time low-wage work are set after Secondary Five.

Conclusion

There is no *one* pathway to low-wage work. We have delineated the different pathways to low-wage employment for married middle-aged people and single young people. Determinants of the diversity of pathways can be summarised as follows. The gender of a worker and the family unit he or she forms makes a difference in the way the worker enters low-wage employments. Fathers, whether with or without dependent children, usually enter into full-time low-wage employment after experiencing periods of unemployment whereas it is usually only mothers without dependent children who enter into low-wage work full-time. It is clear gender dictates the childcare burden and domestic workload of the mothers and it has the strongest effect on lone-mothers who sometimes cannot take up higher paid full-time jobs because of their domestic commitments.

Low-wage work involvement of the parents also determines young people's pathway to low-wage work. One important finding in the

research is the way young people with single-earner parents who are engaged in low-wage work are likely to enter full-time low-wage work after Secondary Five despite the presence of other earning siblings. Hence it is not surprising when both parents are absent or are retired, young people are led to take up full-time low-wage work after Secondary Five or Secondary Three irrespective of how many income-earning siblings are already present in the household. This has implications for understanding how inter-generation poverty is transmitted.

The specific generation the individuals belong to also determines the work involvement of fathers and mothers. Low-wage fathers in their 50s and 60s often have non-working wives who appear to follow a more traditional work trajectory for women – namely no paid work after marriage or having children. Hence even when these older low-wage fathers became unemployed, their wives would not enter the labour market. The generation effect is associated with the migration effect in the cases of low-wage mothers. Some mothers who migrated to Hong Kong in the 1990s had husbands who were unable to earn a breadwinner income and they must therefore assume full-time low-wage work despite the lack of child care support. Women who migrated to Hong Kong earlier and had children in the late 1980s and early 1990s, were more able to opt out of the job market while their children were still young. When they re-join the labour market in the 2000s, they only work part-time in low-wage work.

As pointed out by Roberts (1991), the structure of local labour market conditions also determines the pathways to low-wage work. Persons living in more outlying districts such as Tin Shui Wai, Tuen Mun and Yuen Long are less able to take advantage of higher paid opportunities even when they are available because of the travel costs and long travelling time.

Chapter 4

Low-wage Work and Household Strategies

In the previous chapter, different pathways to low-wage work were analysed according to family types that low-wage workers themselves form or the family types and work involvement of the parents of the low-wage workers. In this chapter, the interrelationship between household strategies of the working poor and the low-wage work are to be examined. As explained earlier, there are two main types of strategies poor households can undertake. Social mobility strategies are essentially strategies to do with resource allocation such as investment in education and purchase of a house which yield results over a longer time span. Coping strategies are actions taken to ensure livelihood needs are met in the short to medium term and are usually of four types:

- economizing by cutting expenses;
- self-provisioning by making own food and providing own childcare;
- joining the labour market to earn wages; and
- claiming benefits from the state.

It is often stressed that household strategies are frequently adopted without full consensus among all household members. Especially with regard to longer-term strategies, it can be expected that dissent will be stronger from certain concerned individuals. Nonetheless, the

household as a unit can still be regarded as acting in a reasonably coherent and conscious way to ensure the unit's ultimate survival. These survival strategies will be examined in more detail in the following.

Fathers in low-wage work

In the previous chapter, it was found that fathers who are engaging in low-wage work are usually in their 50s and 60s and have wives who are quite removed from the labour market. If the father has dependent children, then the father would be the sole wage earner. The household therefore copes with much difficulty because of a lack of people bringing in income.

Low-wage fathers without dependent children usually have older unmarried children who are working. So they cope with a tight household budget by receiving market income from unmarried offspring, by economising and by self-provisioning. One problem they face is how to maintain intergenerational reciprocity when their children get married and achieve better allocation of labour across the households. For instance, Mr Chan, whom we described in the last chapter, was a delivery hand in a meat store in a wet market before he became a cleaner. He has an unmarried daughter who is able to supplement his income now, but he also has another daughter whom he wishes can help him out in the long-term.

The eldest daughter is also helping us occasionally. If she could improve on her finances, as her husband can find a job now, she can probably help us more.

His eldest daughter was married over 15 years earlier and has two children aged 9 and 12. Her husband is in his 30s, was unemployed for a few years, and has only recently found a job. The eldest daughter, who is a clerk, struggles financially. Mr Chan is helping her to take care of her younger child.

One of the daughters of my eldest daughter lives on the Kowloon side and one lives on this side. The latter lives with us and my wife will take her to her primary school in the morning and bring her back in the evening. It is to prevent her from mixing with others.

Mr Chan also has a second daughter living apart who is 30 years old and was educated to Secondary Three. She is a lone mother whose husband has abandoned her without giving any monetary support.

My second daughter's baby is only 13 months old. My wife will sometimes go to her and help her to care for and feed the baby. It is all quite troublesome.

The second daughter is now living on social assistance. While Mr Chan is hoping for long-term assistance from his married daughters, it appears that there is a concentration of economic disadvantages (such as unemployment, lone-motherhood, low-qualifications) (Morris, 1995) in the related households which make it difficult for him to realise his wish. About to turn 63, it is unclear how long he can remain in the labour market and whether better allocation of labour can indeed be achieved among the different households to allow him to retire.

In other cases where a son establishes his own family *within* the household, coping strategies centre on intensification of self-provisioning of child care and food, and the pressures to share market incomes is even stronger. But the same problem of intergenerational reciprocity and allocation of labour occurs. Mr Yang is 65 and has worked as a cleaner for the past 3 years after he could no longer work in construction. His household consists of his wife, his son and his son's family, and his working unmarried daughter. The seven-member household is living in a 300 square foot public rental flat in Chai Wan.

We all live together in our 300 foot flat. We cannot help the cramped condition. We can only do our best to try and tolerate each other. My son sleeps on the top of our bunk bed and his wife and the two children sleep at the bottom. The small children sometimes sleep with us, but they do not like it this way sometimes. They like to sleep with their parents most of the time. It is troublesome. My daughter sleeps in the living room. She isn't married yet.

What he really wants is to have his son living close to him when he is allocated a public rental flat, but there is no easy solution for their plight¹⁴.

Now the government is really lousy, they just don't give you a flat which is close to where your parents live when you apply for a public rental flat of your own. It will be best for all of us. We, the old people, can help look after your children, you can give us back one or two thousand dollars to show that

¹⁴ Mr Yang's wife, son and daughter migrated from China one by one in different years in the 1990s. His son arrived in 1994 after the public-rental flat was allocated and therefore was not counted as a member of the household. Consequently after the son was married six years ago on the mainland and had two children, the family can only lodge illegally in the Mr Yang's flat when they are in Hong Kong. Sometimes they have to move out temporarily and rent a room in order to escape the authorities' check and obtain leases to prove their eligibility to apply for a public rental flat.

you are filial, that you are willing to give a little to your father. But if they are far away, to be honest with you, it will be a trouble for me to go. Even if my wife would go there, it still might not be so convenient. If they are closer, we could help them take care of the children, the young daughter-in-law can do some part-time work, and at least there will be more supplementary income. The government has no sympathy. If you apply, they will only put you to the newly developed areas, or to the Kowloon side, they have no sympathy.

None of the three family units (Mr Yang and his wife, his son and his dependent family, and the single daughter) can afford to purchase a bigger or a separate flat so the household can only cope for the moment by living together and pooling their income¹⁵. What Mr Yang suggested above illustrates how his household is not striving for a social mobility strategy but (for they can never afford to buy a bigger flat) only wants intergenerational proximity by having the two generations living closer together. This can also achieve a better division of labour between the households since Mr Yang's wife could take care of the children while his daughter-in-law can go out to work to bring in income. As mentioned before, young married women out of the job market for too long are at risk of losing their job network and contacts. But if the son's family unit moves to a distant location or if their daughter gets married, Mr Yang and his wife might face economic difficulties.

So the greatest difficulty for us is, if all my daughters and son move out, I will have no one to rely on. If my daughter and son do not move or can live close to us, we can at least look after each other and share our meals. He can be filial and give money to us to support our living and pay the food bill, we can share the expenditure more. If they do not do that, then we will have no one to rely on. I do not have a lot of savings myself from having worked on construction sites. What I earned before I used up raising my children.

¹⁵ Mr Yang is remitting about four thousand, his son, an air-conditioner maintenance worker earning 14000 dollars a month, is contributing four to five thousand monthly and Mr Yang's daughter, who works as a waitress, gives three to four thousand.

The problem Mr Yang is facing is how to make the household boundary more flexible so that intergenerational reciprocity can work when their children move out. If that is not possible, the only thing low-wage fathers can rely on will then be their own labour. If they are advanced in age, even this becomes uncertain.

Mothers in low-wage work

Mothers in low-wage work are usually in their 40s and 50s and are characterised by having husbands who earn unstable income or who are reluctant to share their income. Those who migrated to Hong Kong in the 1990s are more likely to have to work full-time irrespective of whether they have young children, while those who have been in Hong Kong for longer periods of time are often more able to stop work while children are young and begin working part-time again only when their children become teenagers. Their stable and substantial income becomes critical for certain household outlays such as food money and tuition fees. However, if the work conditions for low-wage work become too intolerable, mothers may give up working or expect help from the government.

An example is Ms Ma. She started out working as a full-time cleaner for five years and had worked in many cleaning jobs. Her work experience had not been very pleasant, and she had suffered from pay arrears from one employer for four years.

When I was working for the Fire Department, we were so ripped off by the

cleaning company. They just don't pay our wages, it was really pitiful. I was there for four, five years. They just don't pay up the five months and keep delaying. [...] They only give you the first month's salary in the sixth month, I was totally disheartened after working there for three years. It was as if they thought I didn't need the money, it was terrible. The head of the fire brigade helped us to complain, but by the time I left, it was still to no avail.

When she switched to a big company, however, she earned only 4,500 dollars working a 12-hour day and she felt that the way different kinds of cleaners stationed in different posts were treated was unfair. So eventually she gave up working full-time and followed Ms Hong, her friend, to work as a supply cleaner. They are sent to different sites each time and can earn better income per day, about 300 dollars. However, the work is less steady and they only get work for about 10 days a month so there are more fluctuations in their income.

I was working in a factory once, it was 170 dollars a day, working 8 or 9 hours. How can you cope with that kind of wage? [...] We only get 19 dollars on average an hour. Then you waste much time traveling as well. You make only about 130 to 150 dollars a day. So you might just as well stay at home, and be thrifty. I might just as well 'fight a guerrilla warfare' [and have no steady jobs]. My thinking is that if you get work for 10 or 8 days a month, and you get 300 dollars each day, still you have more freedom'.

Since she is living in Tin Shui Wai, she also has difficulties finding higher paid work in other districts.

All those who clean on the street are paid no more than 5,000 dollars, only 4,000 dollars. You can research yourself; all the cleaning companies only give 4,000 something. So jobs in Yuen Long and Tin Shui Wai are paid lower than the lowest. If you go to Kwun Tong and Mei Foo, they give you at least 1000 more. We also want to work there, but we would exceed the Transport Assistant Scheme by a hundred dollars or so. It is a real shame.

Ms Ma described her husband who is working on construction sites as

having a fairly unstable income.

(Is your husband salary stable?) Not really. (So is it very unstable?) It depends, sometimes he doesn't get any work. (Then are you the one to be relied on?) But I also don't earn much. (Then how do you manage?) Then we just borrow from here and there every year and when we get work, we would spend whatever we earn. If we spend it all up then we go to work the next day.

Ms Ma has two daughters studying at the IVE and one son studying in Secondary 3. Both Ms Ma and Ms Hong are supporting three children in schooling. They therefore resort to means-tested loans and rent reduction to help make ends meet.

Ms Hong: Our burden is heavy because I have one child in university, one in a private school and one in a secondary school. So don't you think our burden is heavy?

Interviewer: But you have subsidies for studying at the university.

Ms Hong: I can get half exemptions, sometimes I can a student loan of 8,000 dollars.

Ms Ma: You have to pay interest, it is not interest-free!

Ms Hong: You have to pay interest, the low-interest type, but they have to assess you and ask you many questions. It is very troublesome.

Ms Ma: As long as your income is in excess of 10,000 dollars...

Ms Hong: As long as you have money, you better not ask them to lend to you! But if you have no money, you have no choice.

Ms Ma: But even if you make 10,000 something, you still have a lot of expenses, why can't they lend it to us?

Ms Hong: We make 10,000 something but we only got a very small loan.

Ms Ma: If you earn 10,000 something, they will only give you half or one third.

Ms Hong: We pay rent, travelling expenses, meals, and we have three children! Even if my husband makes 10,000 something, we only make that much by working very hard, if I don't get enough work...

Ms Ma: The government really has problems, it is too harsh. Even if we make 10,000 something, we need to pay a lot of expenses, you can lend it to us, and it is not that we don't need to pay back!

Ms Hong: Some have a lot of money and they still can get sizeable loans.

Ms Ma: Some are free, they get full exemptions!

Ms Hong: We work to death and we get no loans.

- Ms Ma: Like us, we are earning under 20,000 dollars, and we want to apply for the rent reduction for our public rental flat, but they said we are already exceeding the income ceiling! We are paying 2,500 dollars rent and have three children who are still studying. I put down my husband is earning ten thousand something and I am earning three thousand. Together we make ten to twenty thousand, but they do not give us any reduction.*
- Ms Hong: We also did not get any.*
- Ms Ma: See, she also didn't get any, she has children going to university and private school. I just don't understand how they assess us. We should be qualified to have half exempted; or even a third would be good.*
- Ms Hong: They said we are over the income ceiling.*
- Ms Ma: So I was honest and did not claim that I was a housewife and declared all my income. I am not cheating anyone, but I don't get anything.*
- Ms Hong: I put down we earned ten thousand something, and I also got nothing.*
- Ms Ma: It makes a difference even if it is only two hundred less.*
- Ms Hong: We are in the most difficult situation.*

Low remuneration and irregular pay practices affected workers' willingness to work. As they resort to less steady forms of work, their reliance on means-tested loans and government assistance increases. Ms Hong frankly admitted that she had thought about claiming social assistance.

When we thought about really not being able to find anything, when we really could not find any work, we have really thought about claiming CSSA. If we can find some work to do, we would go to work.

Of course it should be more work, more pay, because we labour so hard. If the wages are higher at least it can lure us into working, making us want to work more.

But even for households where children have gone through the stage of acquiring further qualification, low-wage mothers still need to cope with much pressure.

Fang has been working as a cleaner in a public housing estate in the past

five years since her children became teenagers. Fang's husband is a casual labourer engaged in moving machineries to factories. His income is highly unstable.

He has worked in the same job for 20 or 30 years, and it has always been unstable. For instance, if your wage is 10 or 20 thousand, they would give it to you in a few instalments spread over one or two months (So how much is it on average per month?) On average, it is about 8000 or 9000, that is when you work overtime. If you do not do overtime, you only get 7000. Sometimes, you don't get work every day; sometimes, you just get work once a week.

Three years ago, when Fang's son wanted to study for a diploma in hotel management, she had to borrow 20 thousand dollars for the tuition. She had let her daughter, who is 19 years old, find jobs on her own after completing Secondary Five with poor results and the daughter has been working as a clerk for over a year. Though her household has passed the stage of supporting children's education, the household is not well-off and has implemented various coping strategies. For instance she still needs to put in time to economise on the household budget by shopping for cheaper food and she only sees doctors in the hospital emergency unit to save money. She also shoulders the task of providing two meals in the household despite her busy work schedule because she has to take care of her 80-years-old mother-in-law by cooking for her. She also works full-time as a cleaner in the public housing estate where she also lives. The work is labourious.

I am working in the Kwai Chung Estate, I have worked there for over two and a half years by now. The wage is good at 5200 dollar, but you are really being worked to death. You are one person but you are taking up the duties of three people. You have to collect the rubbish from each floor, then you have to sweep the whole floor and the podium. There are forty floors! We have only

two people. After collecting the rubbish, you have to sweep the lobby on the ground floor. Then you have to wash every floor from the top to the ground floor. I cannot go off duty at 11:20, I am drenched with sweat through and through.

She also complains about unequal pay.

We have thirty people, when we sign the new contract because a new contractor got the contract. I have worked for two and a half years, and we are all cleaners, we do the same cleaning job, why do they get 500 dollars more than me, why don't we get equal pay for equal work? The manager said to me, 'mind your own business, I can give your co-worker 20,000 a month if I want, your pay is that much, 8 hours work. You either take it or leave it...' So he meant I should give it up, I was so enraged, I have put in so much energy and effort.

Ms Fang quit her job, but she cannot really afford to retire even though both of her children are now working. Her 21-year-old son worked in a few hotels for a year after gaining his hotel management diploma, but he did not like the long working hours. He quit the hotel job, and he has been working for a cell phone company for three months. Both he and the daughter are not remitting much.

He doesn't give me any money. I said to him, you can't give me nothing. If I cannot find any work, where do I get money to buy food? He said he had to save money to buy a flat or rent a flat. I said you only earned 8000 dollars a month, and you had to treat your girl friend. [...] It is not so much that he really wants to rent or buy a flat, he is just concerned about going out with his girl-friend and spending 500 or 600 dollars a night.

His son has given her only 1800 dollars in total so far after being employed for 15 months. Her daughter, who is a clerk, remits home one to two thousand dollars a month.

Ms Fang's friend Ms Chan has similar problems. Her son, who has obtained a diploma in design, has suffered from unemployment:

My son is working in design. After one year or so, his boss suddenly asked him to be re-stationed to the mainland. My son doesn't like going there, so he could either leave or go. I said to him he could give up the job if he wanted but should not talk on the telephone for hours at night. So he has to use our money, how can he pay us back? He cannot earn enough to cover his own expenses!

He would rather quit his job than work in China. He asked his boss to give him a pay rise, but his boss refused. He said his boss started to pick on him and criticise him at work. So he quit. Now he is half a year without a job. So I nag him and he becomes irritated. I asked 'why didn't you look for a job. The way you look for a job, you will end up with nothing for 10 years'. I asked him not to have such high expectations. Just find something first and look for a better opportunity later. He said, 'should I find a job on the construction site then?' He is such a nutcase. He is driving me mad. Previously, I had a quarrel with him and he would not talk to me afterwards.

Hence when young people work with a diploma-level qualification, they do not usually have smooth career paths. Other household members are then forced to shoulder any risk that is incurred from the loss of a job or from job instability.

Low-wage mothers with dependent children often allow the household to expand its scope in supporting children's education beyond Secondary Five. But because of their low wages and the unfair treatment they often experience, they would rather do less steady types of work, quit their job or make demands on the government. Older children's career paths are also becoming unstable even after they acquire further qualifications. Hence low-wage mothers are forced to stay in dead-end, low-wage jobs which can become a source of substantial grievance.

Low-wage lone mothers

As one can see from the last chapter, low-wage lone mothers usually cope with their short-to-medium term living by intensifying their efforts in paid employment as well as self-provisioning. Some of them also supplement these strategies with CSSA payments. Some of them also take to heart the schooling of their children. However, in terms of financing children's education beyond Secondary Five, those who receive CSSA appear to allow their children a freer hand to pursue education according to their interest.

Ms Wang migrated to Hong Kong in 1990. She and her unemployed husband were divorced in 2000 and she had claimed CSSA and worked at the same time since 1998. It appears she was better able to support her children's schooling than her counterparts who did not claim CSSA. For instance, her children's secondary schooling was not affected even though Ms Wang rested two years after she had developed a tennis elbow in 1999 from her work at a restaurant.

As recipients of CSSA, there was an exemption from having to pay tuition fees for her elder 24-year-old daughter's IVE education. This allowed the daughter to pursue further studies independently of her mother's preferences.

This daughter has stronger will power, she will slog through it! I told her 'I have no money, you better not study'. She said she could manage it on her own. So I have no other choice. Other people have two people for support and we have only one person for support. It is her father's fault. She is not without a father, her father is just not good enough.

The government loaned her daughter money for living expenses so that she could develop her talent in fashion design relatively smoothly. Wang's younger daughter was also able to find a job as a clerk earning a salary of 6500 dollars after finishing Form Five.

Ms Wang exudes a sense of pride when she told of how her daughter won a best student award at the IVE. Now her daughter even aspires to study abroad by applying for a scholarship.

Now her goal is to get a scholarship and to get 250000 dollars to study abroad for one year. She wants to go to university; she only needs one more year to get a degree! If she cannot get a scholarship to study abroad, she will work first and save money to go.

Lone-mothers with dependent children who have not applied for CSSA to sustain themselves are under more pressure when supporting their children's further education. Ms Li for instance, as we discussed in the last chapter, took up three jobs at one stage to support her family after her husband ran off to escape from his gambling debt.

Now after 7 years, her son is studying software engineering at the IVE. She says she supports his further education and knows full well its importance in a competitive labour market.

They should study. I encourage them to study more because I now know that if you do not have much qualification, what you do is manual work. Very exhausting, right? But you do not get rewarded for what you have done. That is why I support their studies.

The competition is going to be so fierce that it will be quite unimaginable. If you don't study now, after a few years, all those who come out will have at

least a Secondary Six education, so will those who come out to work after Secondary Five become more inferior?

But because she does not claim CSSA, a means-tested loan is borrowed to finance her son's education. The low-interest loan has accumulated to 70 to 80 thousand after three years of study and it will definitely increase if her son continues on to university.

She is also very concerned about her daughter who has been assigned to a not so reputable secondary school. Hence she has taken up two part-time jobs (cleaner cum waitress at a canteen and cashier at the Hong Kong Jockey Club), so that she can return home regularly every day to oversee her teenage daughter. The coping strategies of economising, doing extra work, and intensifying self-provisioning are all deployed by her. But her low-wage job is giving her no hope for improvement. There has not been any wage increase at her canteen job since she started working there. Some staff have left but there are no new recruits so the workload has increased. Although she has worked there for 8 years, she is not considered a regular staff and is paid an hourly rate.

Even if you are willing to work, they only pay you very little. That's why I feel it's very unfair. We have put much effort into our work. But our reward is so little. As if it is a dole that we are receiving.

My boss knows our psychology, that we are still shouldering a debt from the children. The children still need to study, how can you leave? He also knows that you live near, we can save on traveling and one meal and can go to do food shopping so that we can take care of home. He knows all about these, how can we leave? You are already 40 something, how can we punch him back?

The sense of pessimism and of being trapped by the family burden and lack of improvement is accentuated by the debt her son owes for his education.

This kind of life... is really crushing poor people to death. You have to shoulder a load of debt. Even if you get a job, what is the point? You are already laden with debt. You are already indebted through and through even before you begin working.

Parents usually assume that when their children graduate and find jobs, they can be relieved from the hardships of working. But the cases of low-wage fathers and mothers described previously call this assumption into question. Lone-mothers who have grown-up children do not face the same problem of maintaining intergenerational reciprocity.

Sue, as we discussed in the last chapter, used to have a career in a supermarket chain which has enabled her to buy a home-ownership flat by taking out a mortgage. Her son has now finished university and is a reporter for a television station. But since he got married, he no longer gives her any money.

It is not that I haven't asked him. If I ask, he will give me two or three hundred dollars a month. So it is not absolutely nothing. So he gives you three or four hundred dollars. He said he has to pay the mortgage for his flat. Too much expenditure, so I have no choice.

The son and his working wife are paying mortgages for their home ownership flat and a car. His moving out and setting up a separate household is therefore at the expense of his mother. Sue has to cope by

living with her 33-year-old unmarried daughter and doing a stint as a cleaner cum office assistant. Her daughter is a clerk with the drive to constantly better herself and is planning to study for a degree. Her salary is about 10,000 dollars and she remits 5,000 dollars to Sue each month, allowing Sue to pay the 4,500 dollars mortgage for her home ownership flat and work only a six-hour day. But she said that once her daughter gets married, she may need to apply for CSSA.

May, aged 54, is a cleaner earning 5000 dollars a month. Her income should be just sufficient to cover her living expenses since she lives in a public rental flat. However her single-mother daughter claiming CSSA support is asking her for help.

Like my daughter, she got married at 22, then she had a baby, so she couldn't go out to work, and she got divorced three years afterwards. What can she do with the baby? So she could only get money from the government. My granddaughter is now 6 years old and is studying in Primary One. My daughter even needs my help! Now that she cannot repay me, I am facing a even more difficult situation!

This generation of parents faces even harder times than the last generation. Because the divorce rate is so high, and they are not so old yet, not even 30, and they have to take care of the children. You can't dump the children, can you? The CSSA is not that much, only 4000 something, what can you do with that? Apart from rent and food, you only have 2000 dollars left for two people. Her divorced husband sometimes pays 500, sometimes 1000 dollars, for raising the child. What could you do with such money? She even needs my help to supplement her income.

So when I get my pay, when my daughter says she has no money, I need to give her one or two hundred, to help her out.

May is thus stuck in her low-wage job even though her children have grown up. At the age of 54, she still has to provide supplemental

support to her children.

Difficulties often arise for low-wage lone-mothers with dependent children when they want to support their children's further education, particularly for those not claiming CSSA. They then have to cope by means-tested loans and additional paid work to cover the costs. When children establish their own households, lone-mothers have the same difficulties of maintaining intergenerational reciprocity with their married children living apart. The more well-to-do children may want to pursue their own individualised mobility strategy and draw a clear line with the parent while the poorer ones may rely on lone-mothers for additional support. Both have the effect of pushing lone-mothers in their 50s to take up low-wage work for a living and for additional resources to top up the insufficient social assistance given to their children.

Single people in low-wage work

As was shown in the last chapter, single people might join the low-wage job market before graduating from Secondary Five; after graduating from Secondary Five; or during or after acquiring further qualifications. Each path reflects the allocative decisions of low-wage workers' households regarding their education as well as the work involvement of their parents and the family burden their parents have. But the low-wage workers themselves do not necessarily agree with such decisions and they may act to devise their own individual social

mobility strategy to counter the lack of support from their households. We delineate these complex relationships in the following according to the family types that parents of the single low-wage workers form and the parents' involvement in low-wage work.

Low-wage single people with working fathers who earn average wages or low hourly wages

Both single people with working fathers who earn average wages or low hourly wages usually have mothers who are non-earners. Even with a second earner present, the option of pursuing further studies after Secondary Five is regarded as practically inconceivable as in Grace's case.

In the case of non-low-wage fathers with dependent children, their young single offspring usually join the low-wage job market as part-timers during their secondary schooling. This is a coping strategy that the non-low-wage fathers choose for the households.

Den, in the last chapter, explained how his father who earned an average income compelled him to work after Secondary Five to save up for his own education expenses despite his good HKCEE results.

But Den's mother is actually only 39. She was educated to Secondary Five and used to work as a clerk before becoming a housewife after she gave birth to her last child who is now 10. According to Den, she works as a security guard only in the summer when Den is on summer

holiday so that he can help to look after his two younger brothers at home. She wants to 'add value to herself' and does not 'want to be a housewife 365 days a year'. What this illustrates is that married women are kept out of the labour market due to the insufficient child care provision while teenagers are pushed out to work.

Ah Bin, whose father also earns an average hourly wage, began working part-time voluntarily in different low-wage jobs from age 16 as a coping strategy for a sole-earner household. His mother, who is only 38 and was educated to Secondary Three, was discouraged from working by Ah Bin's father after she migrated to Hong Kong 10 years earlier, because he wanted her to take care of the children.

(Why is your mother so keen on gambling?) She used to work before, but my father did not like her going out to work and asked her to play Mahjong with other housewives instead. Then she began following them to cruise boats to gamble or go to Macau. Now she is gambling all the time.

The mother's penchant for gambling affected household finances. The father did not try to stop Ah Bin from working nor expect him to study beyond Form Five.

My father said, he thinks it is already very good that I finished my Secondary Five. I have my own plans however, I should save some money, but I probably will not be able to go on to F.6, so I want to work for a few years first, then I will save up some money to invest a little, and then try to go abroad to learn English.

So he develops plans of his own.

I really want to go abroad, develop myself there and to learn English. I know Hong Kong is very pragmatic. In the future when you look for a job with good English, your boss will choose you rather than someone who is just a F.5 graduate. They will consider this, now it is very international...'

I have asked my teacher. I can apply to go to Australia for one year [...] and would just work there. Even if I want to work and study at the same time, it would still be not possible. It is too expensive to live in Australia. I just want to work there for one year; they will cover me food and board and I can live there and learn English for one year. Then my English would at least be improved.

Traditional ideology and lack of childcare services keep married women away from the labour market even though they are often quite young and have acquired certain qualifications. When they are out of the labour market for too long, they cannot easily find work that enables them to accommodate both their domestic duties and their paid work. When their children become teenagers and education costs mount, these young people begin working in part-time low-wage jobs to reduce household expenses on them. But since household resources are limited, their male household heads are often reluctant to invest in their education. They then have to opt for an individual strategy to fund their further studies. These young people often regard their part-time jobs as transitional and do not expect themselves to stay in them for long.

Low-wage single people with low-wage working mothers

Most of these single people have dual-earner parents but mothers are in low-wage jobs and fathers are doing work in construction, renovation, transport or on the mainland that generates irregular and unstable income. In spite of this, these households are more supportive and more likely to pool funds to prolong their children's education. This

often helps to delay single people entering low-wage work until at least after Secondary Five.

Eric's case in the last chapter shows that the working parents first supported Eric's elder sister's IVE education. She completed her studies at the time when Eric also finished his Secondary Five, so the dilemma was whose further education to fund next. In the end Eric prevailed as his sister put her wish to go on to university temporarily on hold and helped support her brother's further study by working. Hence the household coped and engaged in a social mobility strategy at the same time by having all the household members participate in the labour market, including Eric himself¹⁶, as well as economising under one roof. It would be expected that once Eric's expensive studies are finished that he will feel equally obligated to contribute to the household resources pool to assist his sister. Eric's participation in low-wage work during his studies in the IVE is both to cover his own outlays and to show his commitment to the household project to educate him.

Nicky's case also shows that his parents subsidised him fully when he studied for his design diploma for half a year after Form Five. It did not however, really enable him to find a job he considered 'suited to himself' or open a path to social mobility because of intense competition from students returning from abroad, so he went back to work part-time in a supermarket chain.

¹⁶ Eric works part-time while studying at the IVE.

(Why did you do part-time jobs again?) Because the full-timers I saw were like dying people. So I was a bit afraid. (You mean you saw those full-timers working in Wellcome were working very hard?) Yes, it is like when they come back after taking their meals, they do not respond to you even if you greet them. They are like totally dull when they come back, I was afraid. (Then why were you still doing it? Were you thinking that a shorter period is okay?) Yes, it was okay if it was shorter time, because my ex-boss and colleagues asked me to go back and help them.

He eventually sought more stability and security by applying to work full-time in a fast-food chain. He then became incorporated in a household coping strategy which demands his financial contribution. He is asked to remit home 2,000 dollars each month which is one-third of his income.

Single people coming from households with low-wage mothers who may or may not have dependent children are better able to get support for their further studies. But even if single people can obtain further qualifications, that does not guarantee they can lift the household's social position immediately or even insure that they can find a more formal job with career prospects; their fathers and mothers remain in full-time in employment, often in low-wage positions.

Low-wage single people with low-wage lone mothers

Households of this group of low-wage workers usually have a history of receiving social benefits and migration. Single people's participation in low-wage work is a form of coping strategy to supplement the household's income. The basic problem they face is whether they can ever devise any realistic social mobilisation strategy to lift themselves

out of their current household circumstances.

In Ching's case, his mother is a lone-mother without dependent children now. He started doing part-time work since Secondary Four, and the decision by his mother to discontinue CSSA assistance when he was Secondary Five meant that he had to work full-time in low-wage jobs after his secondary school graduation. He has been trapped in these kinds of occupations for 3 years. Because the household is full of family conflicts and smoldering grievances, reaching a consensus on a strategy for coping with insufficient income is difficult. His elder unemployed sister, for instance, not only undermined his efforts to cope better by taking up a promising full-time job, as discussed in the last chapter, she also made his life very unstable.

In fact the reason why I have to change jobs all the time is largely because I am always being sacked. And the reason why I am sacked all the time is because I always have rows with my sister at night. After the rows, I usually go to karaoke bars, rent a room and stay there overnight. Then I become very scruffy and I cannot take a shower. Then you go to work and your boss will start to scold you. Then you will become even more tired and you are just messed up and cannot hold your temper.

His mother's low-wage job was of no help to him in overcoming his current quandary. He once confronted the cleaning company which employs his mother to ask that she be treated fairly. He did so on his own without assistance from labour groups.

Because I looked at her contract, she is supposed to work from nine to five. But now she isn't off until 7. She should also have four paid rest days a month and a few days paid annual leave. But she has nothing. So I started to collect information about this company and thought that she could quit this company since many cleaning jobs are subcontracted these days.

At that time I brought the contract to the Labour Department with my mother and forced her employer to come with us. Then he asked my mother to sign another contract. So I looked at the contract, it was legal and not bad. But after the contract was signed, recently, I asked the employer why he hadn't followed the contract. Then he said to me, 'The contract is just done to satisfy the Labour Department. The reality is that, how we work depends on what we say, do you understand?'

Facing financial pressure and an unstable life, he does not see further studies as a way out for him.

My second sister's associate degree is quite pitiful. She borrows a big sum of money. [...] She is involved in import and export trade, so we know that when she takes up a job, she will have to pay half of her monthly salary to the government to clear her debt.

He is also very pessimistic about the future.

It is very hard for us to pull ourselves together in this society. Because everything is so doom and gloom, it is very hard to find a path. When you walk a path, you think it is smooth, but after a while, you will encounter some setback. It seemed like I could have studied, or done other courses, but there were setbacks all the time. Even if you take up a course, you may not be able to handle it.

The chance for Ching to acquire formal qualifications to supplement his work experience in advertising seems slim, but without that, Ching can hardly land a more stable and formal job. He is forced to cope without any chance for social mobility and thus to live with his unemployed sister and working lone-mother, and economise.

In Betty's case, she joined the low-wage job market after the household discontinued their CSSA claim when she was Secondary Four because her mother had become a hawker. Her mother nonetheless still preferred her to continue her studies.

My elder brothers and sisters have all stopped studying, exactly because they don't do well in their studies. My mother is putting all her hope on me.

Betty's elder brother, who is 17 and who was schooled only until Secondary Three, is currently unemployed. Her unmarried sister is 24, was schooled to Form Five, and earns a low wage working as an assistant in a childcare centre. Whether the household could execute a social mobility strategy remains unknown.

Young people who come from lone-mother households suffer long-term economic difficulties and they often have to work to support themselves during their schooling and afterwards if they have cancelled their CSSA before Secondary Five. The lone-mothers have immense difficulty keeping a job and ensuring the smooth schooling of their children. Older children often truncate their education and become unemployed, thus accentuating the burden and crises within the household. Younger single members of the households may have to work extra hard in low-wage work to keep the household going and can easily become trapped in low-paid jobs with little hope of advancement.

Low-wage single people with retired parents or absent parents

Single people with retired or absent parents are usually not supported by the household for schooling beyond Secondary Five. They therefore must be able to plan for their social mobility strategy carefully because of unsupportive parents.

Ricky is a typical illustration. Ricky's parents objected to his plan to pursue further studies in the IVE after Secondary Five. He then landed a full-time job in the kitchen of a pizza takeaway business. He earns 6500 dollars working 9 to 14 hours a day. The household with retired parents cope by remittances from the three children each earning between 6000-7000 a month and remitting home 2000 dollars each. The non-working parents also cope by self-provisioning and economising with 3 earners and 2 non-earners living under one roof. Now Ricky has enrolled in a culinary school and is going to fund his own study by working part-time. He is saving up for his tuition fee which is 3000 dollars a year. The courses last 2 or 3 years so he considers the tuition fee 'quite cheap'. This is the only way he can pursue a social mobility strategy without drawing too much from household resources. He envisions making steady progress towards upward mobility.

I am planning to study in the day time and work at night. By working a few hours a day I can at least cover my living costs and do not have to ask my parents for money. (So you are thinking of working part-time?) Yes (Do you go to school every day?) Yes. From Monday to Friday but not the weekends.

Jo discontinued her studies voluntarily after Secondary Three because she wanted to 'make money'. She then started to work in different eateries part-time in the daytime in order to learn a skill and make a living while spending her nights engrossed in activities with other marginal youths¹⁷. However the years of her youthful excesses are

¹⁷ Though not explaining in detail what these activities were, Jo commented that her nighttime social life was so wayward that she was on the verge of being arrested and spending time behind bars.

now behind her and she is actively planning long-term for a job that she would like to commit herself to. After long consideration, she said, she decided on becoming a lifeguard.

(Why have you suddenly thought about becoming a lifeguard? Do you like swimming very much?) No, not really, I don't like it at all. (Then how did you come up with the idea?) Because the job is easy, pays well, gives good fringe benefits, is comfortable and you don't get hurt or injured. (So you have thought about it for a long time?) Yes, I have a close friend who is a lifeguard. So even after I finish the course, if I am unable to find a job, he will help me, because he is a contractor for providing lifeguards and maintenance to swimming pools .

This is a good occupation because even if the market is not developing in Hong Kong, it is developing in China. [...] Many lifeguards on the mainland are not qualified, that is, they have not actually taken courses, they just know how to swim. [...] they do not clean the swimming pool properly. So if you want to become a contractor to supply services to a swimming pool, you need an insider team to go there and do the job for you. [...] In fact, swimming has a lot of room for development, you can get many qualifications for doing different things, such as lifesaving, first aid and beach guard, or you can become a swimming coach.

So with information provided by a friend, both joined the YPTP and both of them extolled the virtues of this fully funded government programme.

(How did you know about the good courses in the YPTP?) Because I went on the internet and read about the YPTP and asked my friend. She said the YPTP is quite okay and since I wanted to pick up my studies again, and when I looked, it had exactly what I wanted to learn. And when I looked again, it also had what Jo wants to learn as well, so we both enrolled in the courses together.

In fact according to them, if Jo enrolled for a lifeguard course at the market rate, she would have to pay 700 dollars but would be in a large class. In the YPTP course, she doesn't need to pay anything and the class is smaller. There is also more than one course on offer, so she

can be examined for at least two courses and get two medals to qualify her to become a lifeguard. Jo shortens her work shifts to tailor her work time around her course.

Exactly because I need to study the YPTP courses, so I can only work part-time. So I am doing supply work, if somebody is on leave, I will stand in for them. My previous employers needed quite a lot of such people. I cannot really work long hours because once the lifeguard course begins, it is going to be demanding both mentally and physically. If I do a full-time job, I might be too tired [...].

Despite the absence of parental support, young low-wage workers can pursue a relatively independent strategy of social mobility with partial assistance from home in the form of food and board. Low-wage work in the kitchen can become a stepping stone for them to switch to other professions or to advance further in the trade as the job provides sufficient part-time positions which allow them to structure their work around their studies. But such progress is only possible when reasonably priced courses are available for them to choose from.

Conclusion

This chapter delineates low-wage work and its interaction with different household strategies. Our review suggests older low-wage fathers and low-wage lone-mothers who have non-dependent children usually cope by living together under one roof, intensifying self-provisioning of food and childcare, and pooling their market income. However, these are just short-term measures because as young people get married and want

to establish a separate household, how to achieve better allocation of labour and intergenerational reciprocity across households becomes an urgent issue. In such households usually the old parents (or parent) who do low-wage work want to provide their married children with useful services such as childcare and food provision in return for some money so that they can withdraw from low-wage work and have a steady source of income in the future. However, such reciprocity often depends on the employability of the children, the children's individual mobilisation strategies, and also whether they are living close enough to their parents. All of these often work unfavourably against the old low-wage parents because their children are likely to have low-qualifications. It is also not uncommon for them to become lone-mothers depending on CSSA. The present public housing policy also does not always favour young families living close to their parents. More childcare provision, training programmes and job matching programmes for young lone-mothers to encourage them to stay in work, and a housing policy that takes into account the needs of the elderly, may allow better division of labour and prevent long-term welfare dependence.

The comparison of dual-earner parents and lone-earner parents also shows that a coping strategy involving teenage children is often deployed in households with lone-earner parents where mothers are not engaged in paid work while the father is earning an average income or a low-income. Households which encourage such a traditional trajectory of work for women- that is, married women are discouraged from

working – might persuade or compel their teenage children to pay for their own outlays and education. Such a deployment or allocation of labour has the effect of delaying the academic career of young people who are quite capable of obtaining higher qualifications. It is important to consider whether this delay is worthwhile given that the current knowledge-based economy needs more highly qualified individuals.

Dual-earner parents with mothers assuming low-wage work often enable children to pursue post-secondary education and delay their entry to a low-wage market; that is, young people are not drawn into a household coping strategy too early. However, the current work conditions for low-wage workers often frustrate and discourage women assuming full-time low-wage work, not least because of the shortage in childcare facilities, but also because of the low pay, perceived lack of workplace fairness and lack of effective regulation of employers. This results in working mothers doing unstable work or part-time work for which the pay is insufficient to cover their household expenses so that they often have to make demands on the government to ease their difficulties.

Public assistance in various forms has contributed much to improving the lives of many low-income workers and their households. Living in public housing certainly helps, and the opportunity to study in subsidised training programmes is considered by many to be a blessing. While welfare dependency should not be encouraged and more importantly, not preferred by the low-wage workers themselves, the

CSSA scheme has been effective in most cases in alleviating absolute poverty and more importantly, in enabling some families to stay afloat while their members to undergo further training and education. However, the stigma associated with CSSA often pushes certain vulnerable households, such as those with many members who are recent migrants, to discontinue the CSSA too soon. This prevents their children from receiving help to further their education. This has the effect of pushing young people from such households into full-time low-wage work without having the chance to receive further training opportunities, thus spreading poverty to the next generation.

Our research suggests that part-time work is often taken up by young people as a transitional measure before they end up in satisfactory full-time positions. But to attain the latter, they almost always need further qualifications. This greatly disadvantages young people who are forced to get involved in a household coping strategy which requires them to work full-time after Secondary Five or Secondary Three to generate more income for the household. It is noteworthy that certain industries provide opportunities, such as the position of chefs in the catering industry, for more part-time higher paid jobs for young people who want to combine study with work. Other 'creative industries' such as advertising and graphics design appear to lack such opportunities.

Chapter 5

Employer Strategies

How employers respond to economic pressures by adjusting to the competitive market has important consequences for working conditions. Two main types of industries are examined in the following to see how employer strategies are shaped by government regulations (exemplified by the cleaning industry) and by the full force of the market (typified by the fast-food catering industry as well as other corporate chain stores). Our descriptions of the two industries are drawn from consulting the relevant literature, and interviewing officials from the Labour Department, trade union representatives, some rank-and-file workers, a proprietor of a cleaning company, and a human resource director from a local fast-food chain. The latter two were referred to by the Labour Department for their good business practices in their respective industries.

The cleaning industries

The market for cleaning services is essentially divided into two segments. The public sector comprises cleaning services which are under the supervision of government departments. The private sector includes cleaning services that are carried out within commercial buildings, transportation companies, factories and residential buildings. The market is essentially served by 1500 or so cleaning companies. As the subcontracting of cleaning and management services occurred in all

government departments since 1999, attention has been focused on the Housing Authority which subcontracted the most work (Cheung and Tam, 2002). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the principle for awarding a contract is based on the lowest price offered, and the monitoring system is focused on 'the quality of the services' rather than the 'welfare of workers'¹⁸. Trade unionists have long criticised this system as encouraging 'a race to the bottom' or the 'free-fall' of workers' wages. In 2001, it was revealed that some cleaners working in public toilets were hired for 7 dollars an hour. The situation has improved since 2005 as the government initiated regulatory mechanisms to ensure the wage levels of workers. Bidders who win contracts farmed out by government departments such as the Housing Authority, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, and Leisure and Cultural Services Department must now offer wages to their cleaning staff not lower than the median market rate. Contractors who are successfully prosecuted by the Labour Department for violating the labour laws are excluded from bidding on government contracts. Government contracts also prohibit secondary outsourcing. Cleaning companies that violate this rule are disqualified from submitting tenders for government contracts. These measures have been successful in stamping out the 'free fall' of workers' wages. Even trade union officials are satisfied by the results. Cleaning workers serving full-time under government contracts are now usually paid between 5,000 to 5,300 dollars a month¹⁹ rather than under

¹⁸ Interview with the trade union representative, 30-11-2007.

¹⁹ As workers have to pay 5 per cent MPF contributions, they usually take home between 4,700 and 5,000 dollars a month working full-time.

4,000 dollars a month as usually happened before.

In the private sector however, there is no such regulation. The government-led campaign for wage protection, the 'Wage Protection Movement' (WPM), does not really put such measures in place so that subcontracting continues to take a heavy toll on workers' wages. For instance, out of the 8000 owners' corporation which manage private residential buildings in Hong Kong, only 34 joined the WPM; out of the 1500 cleaning firms, only 27 participated in the movement one year after its initiation (Wenhui Pao, 2007). The Labour Department further revealed that there are as many as 7000 single-block buildings which do not have an owners' corporation; workers serving such building blocks will receive even less protection for their welfare.

According to Mr Cheung - owner of a small and medium size cleaning company which employs 30 cleaning workers and 4 administrative staff – labour costs account for about 93 per cent of the total cost of running a cleaning company. The remainder goes to administrative, training and material costs. The profit rate is 2 to 3 per cent of the bidding price. It is a stable business without a lot of fluctuations because during bad times, the cost of labour drops. According to him, there are other strategies to minimise costs without cutting labour, but this can only affect a small share of the total outlay.

If you do not need to repeat what you are doing [...] for example, we standardise the cleaning process, so that we don't have the person doing the job twice. If you wipe a piece of glass, you might need ten minutes for that,

but you only spend 8 minutes on it and then you do something else. Then the client will call and said the job is not done. Then you have to send a person there and redo it. So you are repeating your labour and your running cost is doubled. I think we should standardise the management practice and make it a quality management. Then we can minimise the cost.

Or when you are using the cleaning agents and equipments, you need to give people some guidance so that they will not use too much of the agents, or use the wrong agents. Though this only amounts to a small part of the cost, but at least doing those things would minimise the running cost and material cost. But the major outlay remains the labour because cleaning is labour intensive. It is not a very high-tech job. You can only make a little difference by using better quality cleaning agents.

On the other hand, after his company joined the Wage Protection Campaign, he found himself losing business to his competitors:

We used to get a lot of business from bus companies, but in these two years, we know that our basic cost is 10 to 15 per cent more than other contractors. So it is clear if I reduce my basic bidding price by 15 per cent, I will not be able to pay my workers the minimal wage. It is impossible. Our administrative costs and profits is only about 6 per cent together.

Now he has shifted to importing and selling cleaning agents and equipments to maintain profit levels. He also uses profits he makes in his construction company to help cover the loss he makes from his cleaning firm.

Now we've restructured to sell cleaning agents and equipments. Just to import the materials and do not actually bid for contracts. Because we don't want to hire illegal labour or do other illegal things [to minimise labour cost].

I have two lines of business, so I will supplement one with the other. At the moment in Hong Kong, there are a lot of unfair things. If you think that I cannot live without the cleaning business, I would tell you that it is not the case.

The intense competition between the cleaning companies means that

workers' interests are not protected as much as they should be. Ms Fang, a mother without dependent children, works as a cleaner in a public housing estate. The work is exhausting and workload is heavy.

I am working in the Kwai Chung Estate, I have worked there for over two and a half years by now. The wage is good at 5200 dollar, but you are really working yourself to death. You are one person but you are taking up three people's duties. You have to collect the rubbish from each floor, then you have to sweep the whole floor and the podium. There are forty floors! We have only two people. After collecting the rubbish, you have to sweep the lobby on the ground floor. Then you have to wash every floor from the top to the ground floor. I cannot go off duty at 11²⁰, I am drenched with sweat through and through.

The rubbish collecting bins are as tall as my shoulder; we can collect ten bins of such rubbish when there are holidays. Then we have to sweep the corridors, the lobby areas, the staircases, it takes us more than an hour. We have to be quick and cannot be slow.

Though she is paid 5200 dollars a month and has four rest days a month in accordance with the labour law, she has to take up extra duties left by other workers who have days off. The management has not made any arrangements to hire extra help when people take days off nor do they pay extra for those who take up additional work.

Now we indeed get the four rest days that we never used to have. But when the others have their days off, we have to do the rubbish for them. Then don't they save one person's labour? I don't know how they do things in the government, the budget is there, but we have to do the work for other people.

Equal work does not mean equal pay and Ms Fang eventually quit even though she needs the job.

²⁰ She has to go off duty at 11 in order to return home to cook for her 80-year-old mother-in-law,. Please see the last chapter for details.

We have thirty people, when we sign the new contract because a new contractor got the contract. I have worked for two and a half years, and we are all cleaners, we do the same cleaning job, why do they get 500 dollars more than me, why don't we get equal pay for equal work. The manager said to me, 'mind your own business, I can give your co-worker 20,000 a month if I want, your pay is that much, 8 hours work. You either take it or leave it...' So he meant I should give it up, I was so enraged, I have put in so much energy and effort. We all have done the job for the same number of years, I have even worked longer than them. I am totally outraged! (So why are they acting like that?) Only they can give you an answer! It is full of dark secrets, if you have good relationships with them you are better off. (You mean if you act like a good girl they will give you more?) Certainly, I work even harder than them! [...]

A 63-year old full-time cleaner, Ms Ching, working in a public toilet for the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, was forced to pay 310 dollars for taking half-hour lunch breaks each day. The money is deducted from her monthly salary of 4970 dollars.

If they don't force the deduction on us, I can go without taking a lunch break, I could just buy a lunch box, but since they force the deduction on us, we might just as well take our lunch breaks. So our salary was originally 4970, now it is only 4660.

Ms Ching was going to lose her job because she was out-competed by young mainlanders and she did not know how to court favour with the management.

I don't know how to fawn on people. It is very terrible if you don't know how to curry favour, if you are honest, you end up with nothing. There is no point working hard for them, in the end, you are the one who loses out. [...] Some people say if you bargain with them, they might give you something. But what is the point, you might end up being given the hard work in the future. I don't think there is any point bargaining with them. We might just as well go.

Now there are many new migrants. They are much younger and are competing with us. They are only in their 20s. [...] They are in their 20s and they are still willing to do our job, how can you compete with them? Before, there were many more opportunities, now people are cut and made redundant everywhere.

In another case, Ms Ma suffered from pay arrears for three years.

When I was working for the Fire Department, we were so ripped off by the cleaning company. They just don't pay our wages, it was really pitiful. I was there for four, five years. They just don't pay up the five months and keep delaying. [...] They only give you the first month's salary in the sixth month, I was totally disheartened after working there for three years. It was as if they thought I didn't need the money, it was terrible. The head of the fire brigade helped us to complain, but by the time I left, it was still to no avail.

A veteran cleaner, Lily, who has been in the trade for over 10 years complained about how the subcontracting system really extorted money from them.

I have done subcontracting work before. Why do I say that subcontracting is not good? I used to work for a subcontractor and my wages were all ripped off by them. So my salary became low... Also because subcontracting work not only pays a low wage, they also cut manpower because they themselves also have to maintain a certain profit rate, so they can't hire too many people. So the subcontractor earns a lot, but our workload has gone up, but the number of workers have gone down. I hope the government can implement and ...ask the companies to do the services themselves rather than to allow subcontracting. This is only my own opinion. Subcontracting is not good, like this building that has hired me, you are getting what they pay you, and you don't have the subcontractor chiseling us out of our own money. You are actually exploiting [us] and making profit at our expense. You can still have people managing the facilities and amenities in the same way, it was like that many years ago in fact, the companies themselves hire people directly, they don't outsource. It is only in this eight or ten years that they have this outsourcing practice. And the wages really have gone down to 4,000 or even 3,800. (Are the wages better now?) It is still not good. The wages in Tuen Mun and Yuen Long are still very low, Hong Kong island is better, Hong Kong island and Kowloon are a bit better. Because I always read the newspaper to look for work, I notice that only Hong Kong side offers wages which is more reasonable, 5,000 something, they won't go down to 4,000 and something. It is usually five thousand two hundred, three hundred or five hundred. The job is the same, but it is not reasonable that in Tuen Mun and Yuen Long, the salary goes down to 4,200 or 4,500.

Work conditions are of course unpleasant for cleaners.

It is like you can smell the rubbish when you are eating your food. They

wouldn't give you a proper place to eat your meals together with other people. They just let you sit in the rubbish truck or in a rubbish collecting station. [...] Sometimes they don't even have a toilet for you. Once, I worked in a place where you have to walk ten minutes to get to the nearest toilet. There is no toilet for you inside the vicinity of the housing blocks. But sometimes you cannot wait for five minutes, so it becomes very hard.

For instance when you are working on the exterior of the building, such as washing the ground, you have to be exposed to the sun fully for eight hours. Especially in the summer, it is either hot sun or heavy rain. Even under the Very Hot Weather Warning signals, you have to do the windows, walls, the ground, the letter boxes, you are given all these things to do on the exterior. You have to work for 8 hours in heat which is over 30 degrees, fully exposed to the hot sun, and you are not allowed to rest. Not even going to the toilet, so you can easily get sun stroke. I think it is unhealthy to be exposed to very strong sun for 8 hours. (You really work 8 hours without rest?) You work for 8 hours net, you have an one-hour meal break, so altogether 9 hours of work. (So they would let you rest after 2 or 3 hours?) Not really. They said you must stand outside so that the clients will see you working. Even if you have finished all the work, they still said you must stand there under the sun. Those areas are outdoor areas, especially inside Yuen Long, in the countryside, the temperature is even higher.

There are also issues of workplace safety for cleaning workers.

For some jobs, they give you equipment such as those cleaning agents or mops. But they don't give you those buckets with wringers, you have to wring the mop by your hands. So when you do it for a long time, you develop arthritis, so I've done that once, and gave it up after one week.

Sometimes they give you inappropriate equipment, such as giving you mops with very heavy mop-heads. So for instance if I clean in a karaoke bar, you have to really squat to clean the floor underneath the table. I was only working part-time for four hours, but you bent down continuously for four hours to clear the floor underneath the tables, your waist really hurts when you finish work. (Those are really low tables, right?) Yes, those coffee tables, you have to squat so much that you almost crawl on the floor and then your mop is the very heavy and big type, when you finish, you get a sore waist.

You may have to use the high pressure hose, but it is quite heavy for women, that hose is very heavy, you have to control it as well, or otherwise it will fly around and become dangerous. Or sometimes you have to really go really high up [...]. You have to climb a ladder, and clean the ceiling, wipe the windows, these are all dangerous. You can easily fall down.

Sometimes you work overtime, you are supposed to work for four hours, but you have too much to do, and there are not enough workers, then you cannot finish on time, so you have to work overtime. But they don't give you any overtime pay, they just give you the four hour' money. I feel this is really exploiting us. [...] (So did you talk to your superior about this?) No because no one dare to say anything. Because we don't want to lose our jobs, everyone was afraid, so we just let them cheat us.

Workers in the private sector still suffer from long work hours with low pay. Ms Ma for instance worked as a cleaner for a power company for 10 hours each day working from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., but she gets only 4,500 dollars (excluding the deduction for MPF) a month and gets one and a half rest days a week.

Large scale chain stores

In the case of large scale chain stores such as the fast-food catering businesses, employment conditions are governed much more by market forces and how the workplace is organised. International fast-food chains which have joined the local market with a core product such as hamburgers, fried chicken or pizza (Lan and Khan, 1995) have simplified the cooking process so that each step of the food-making process is very standardised and pre-set, hence workers do not require much skill or training to master the job. Local fast-food chains put much more emphasis on product variety²¹. The cooking process is therefore more complex and less easy to standardise. More skilled workers are required and workers are given more training. The

²¹ It was said that Café de Coral once boasted a master menu consisting of 300 items and a team of Chinese chefs responsible for product innovation (Lan and Khan, 1995)

employment relationship cannot be as flexible as in international fast-food chains so that their pool of potential young employees is more limited.

Fast-food business appears to be troubled by rising food prices, higher rents and government regulations that have imposed additional costs on employers. Recruitment is also cited as a major problem by a local fast-food chain which we interviewed.

According to Mr Li, the Human Resource Director of a renowned local fast-food chain, the fast-food company experiences ‘insurmountable’ problems in recruitment. They have tried various ways to encourage more applicants including participating in big recruitment forums, offering free bus services to work, rearranging the work shifts to 9-5 and recruiting from work deficient areas such as Tin Shui Wai. But all these are to no avail, and they still find ‘insufficient people to report for duty’. They have a staff turnover rate of 3 to 4 per cent each month. They essentially compete with the international fast-food chains for young labour but face recruitment difficulties because they cannot organise their work as flexibly as the latter (such as allowing students to work as many hours as they want with a minimum of four hours on a shift) and their pay for a full-time worker is also lower than for other comparable jobs²².

²² According to Tiger, who has worked in fast-food chain for two years, the two major local fast-food chains usually offer 5,000 to 6,000 dollars per month for 12 hours of work; whereas other chain stores can offer as much as 7,000 to 8,000 dollars per month for the same duration of work time.

According to Mr Li, the cost for labour has already climbed since 2000 because of the implementation of the Mandatory Provident Fund. The possibility of legal enforcement of a minimum wage for cleaners as well as the likelihood it will be extended to all workers worries Mr Li. He fears that the government would not be able to enforce the law properly and this might result in 'unfair competition'. He reckoned that his competitors might easily make up fancy titles such as 'ambassador for environmental services' to hire cleaners and then pay them a low wage. Strategies Mr Li's company have considered to combat rising labour costs include expanding their business share in other southern provinces in mainland China, cutting down the number of workers in each store, and 'hiring a quality few'. Employment opportunities will inevitably be affected but this would be a result of 'government's intervention' in the market.

In multinational fast-food chains, supermarket chains, and toy chains, part-time workers are deployed in large numbers so that the cost of labour can be minimised with maximum flexibility of staffing arrangements.

Ching , for instance, works in a cinema which hires 45 part-timers and only 3 full-time staff, that is, less than 7 per cent of the staff in the cinema are full-time staff. In the case of a well-known toy store chain, it was revealed that each store in the chain assumes sole responsibility for its profits and losses. In one store, over 71 per cent of the staff are part-timers. The 20 part-time workers are mostly students from

secondary schools and the IVE and they are paid about 2000 to 2500 dollars each month. Six full-time front-line staff are employed and they are paid 6000 dollars each per month. The manager is paid 9000 dollars a month and the supervisor is paid 7000 dollars monthly. Sue, who used to be a manager in a supermarket chain store, recalled how the supermarket chain that she had worked in had changed staffing arrangements after 1997.

After 1997, all the welfare benefits were cut. Before, the store did not care how many hours the part-timers work, they were hired for 40 dollars an hour or the highest was 50 dollars an hour. But after 1997, the part-timers were paid 20 something dollars. (How could they make such a drastic cut? Were their sales figures very bad?) Since the South African CEO came in, it was like this bad. Then all the things started to be cut little by little.

The result of such arrangement is that those in full-time positions may need to endure long hours with low pay which sometimes puts young people off. There is an intra-firm job ladder but moving up the ladder is not very attractive. We have seen in the previous two chapters how Nicky thought those working full-time in his supermarket chain seemed to be 'dying' and that Den did not think about changing to a full-time position in the toy chain because he did not want to work 12 hours in a row. In a multinational fast-food chain, there are eight levels of staff, but the young people interviewed usually did not find it very attractive to try and move up. Richie, whose father is nurse, is a full-time staff working there, earning 6200 a month and working 10 hours per day with one rest day per week. He was not so attracted by the promotion terms.

If you get promoted from a common staff to the managerial level, you get 7000 per month. You have to work 10 hours per day, but you have no overtime payment, or repayment for not taking leaves. They do have two rest days per week which is one day more than us, but you have to be responsible for all the things, organising the work timetable. You also have to do other things. Whether it is worth the while depends on what you think.

Emma, who goes to a famous secondary school on Hong Kong Island, has a part-time job at the toy chain store, but she did not think about staying in the post for long.

Actually if you want to get promoted, you can tell the manager, he will give you opportunities to get promoted step by step. You can first be promoted to the yellow badge, then the red badge, that is, the section head. Then you can become the 8M. That is the highest and you can get upgraded to a manager. (So can part-timers get promotion?) Yes, if you want, but usually part-timers do not think about such things, [...] because I don't think I shall stay here in the future after my studies. (Why?) Because I don't think there is a bright future. (Why, but you can progress to management.) But it feels like it takes a long time to get to the highest position; and even if you get to the highest point, your salary is not that good. You would only get one or two dollars more. (You mean you get two dollars more per hour?) Yes.

Hence part-time workers working for chain stores are usually given incentives to maintain their interest in the job. This includes discount cards which allow workers to buy certain products in other types of stores owned by the same corporation. For instance, the toy chains give 10 per cent discounts to their part-time and full-time staff who buy toys there. They are also offered discount cards which give them a 10 per cent reduction when buying from a convenience store or a cake shop operated by the same corporation. Workers from a famous fast-food chain are also given a discount card which can give them 40 per cent reduction on any food they buy from the chain. But the discount card

does not seem to be available to all workers from all branches.

The toy chain also gives a wage increase of 2 dollars per hour after the worker completes 10 training sessions. Then, for every 500 hours worked, an extra 2 dollars per hour is also added to their pay. If their sales figures meet certain targets, they also receive a bonus every three months, which can amount to about one third of their usual salary²³. This may explain why they appear to attract higher qualified students from the IVE rather than the usual secondary school students who are found in ample numbers working in fast food chains. But the better incentives for part-timers further blur the difference between part-time and full-time jobs²⁴.

The above discussion illustrates that the two types of industries are subject to different pressures which shape the employment conditions of low-wage labour. The cleaning industries have been the focus of attention since the government outsourced its cleaning services to private contractors in 1999. This marked the beginning of pressure from labour groups for more regulation of private contractors who receive public contracts. Subsequent to this, the private sector of the

²³ One respondent was given 700 dollars. It also depends whether they passed the 'mysterious customer' test whereby someone who comes to assess the quality of customer service is disguised as an usual customer. They observe whether the salespersons greet the customers when they first enter, give detailed explanations of products, and respond promptly when a customer needs their help etc. If they fail the test, points will be deducted and they may not get bonus even if they reach the target sales figure.

²⁴ In the specific niche market for food catering for office workers, the strategy for small and medium caterers is to employ some part-timers for flexible deployment of staff. But possibly due to the difficulty in managing a large numbers of part-timers, the proportion of part-timers employed is less. In a Japanese restaurant, Ms Lo observed that 10 full-time waitresses are hired with 2 part-time waitresses. In another self-service canteen, staff leave without replacement and the remaining workers did not get a pay rise for seven years.

cleaning industry has been put under the government-initiated Wage Protection Movement as a way to raise wages for these workers. Despite such initiatives, workers still face many problems such as long hours with low pay, pay arrears, unfair remuneration and stringent management control. The main strategy of corporate chain stores to compete in a mature market is by casualisation of jobs. Most chain stores are now staffed by a majority of part-timers. The minority in full-time positions have to work long hours with a low hourly rate which makes upward job mobility not very attractive for part-timers. Their only means for achieving social mobility is to aim for alternative job ladders by furthering their education.

Chapter 6

Socio-Political Attitudes and Aspirations

People become low-wage workers under different circumstances: the need to supplement household outlays in the case of older earners; to ensure the means for a basic living and sponsor a social mobility strategy in the case of most dual-earners or their children; to pursue an individual social mobility strategy in the case of some single young people coming from single earner households; or merely to eke out a living in the case of some youngsters who used to be CSSA recipients. In the following we shall examine their socio-political attitudes and aspirations and plans according to their family types.

Fathers in low-wage work

This group of low-wage workers usually enter low-wage work after being made redundant in their previous career and followed by a period of unemployment. They themselves and their households are usually 'older' with married children or are households with a large number of dependents who are still in school. The former type of household appears to focus on coping strategies, mainly based on intensification of self-provisioning activities such as food and childcare and drawing market incomes from the outside labour market. They do not really have a social mobility strategy and are often burdened by unpaid childcare demands. The latter type of household has a deficient of income earners and the low-wage workers so that the sole income earners have difficulties coping on their low income.

For this group of workers therefore, we find that some are distrustful of the government's ability to improve Hong Kong's economic performance and the risk this imposes on MPF contributions. For instance, Mr Ip commented,

Hong Kong has given me opportunities to improve my life... What can they do?...how can they help..., if the economy is good, you wouldn't need to use our money to do business. Now our money is at risk, we might not end up with anything. But since you force it on us, like stealing, if you fail, we will end up with nothing. Even the Sing Pao Daily has not contributed to the MPF. The Hong Kong government is lawless.

He once even took his boss to court because the latter did not contribute his share of the MPF.

I took my employer to court once, because I used to work in construction and he did not put my MPF contribution into my account for half a year. It was 6 years ago. My money was deducted from my salary but he did not put it into my account. The case almost reached the Supreme Court. It would have been resolved straight away if it reached there. But the woman there was pleading for him, and gave him two or three weeks to clear it up. I spent three or four months doing the whole thing. I said that if it could not be resolved, we could go to the Supreme Court. I used my salary slip as proof, the evidence was clear.

Mr Dong is also disgruntled over the government's apparent generosity towards the top officials.

(Do you think there is a big disparity between the rich and poor?) Yes, there are Secretaries and Undersecretaries, and now they even have Assistant Secretaries. This is just wasting taxpayers' money. They just sit at home and do nothing.

Mr Chan also finds the government's performance less than satisfactory

and not really meeting his needs.

I am not so satisfied with the government. (Do you think they can solve your problems?) I don't think they can. (Who do you think should take responsibility for that, the government or the business people or others?) It should be the responsibility of the government.

Mr Dong even distrusts the political parties

I don't vote. It is a waste of time. Whoever is in office we still need to work. We are voting so that they can make money, one legislator earns several thousand dollars and a whole earns hundreds of thousand dollars.

Mr Chan is also somewhat sceptical about political parties and trade unions.

(Do you vote?) I am not that interested in this kind of thing. (But you have said the Lee Cheuk Yan was right.) I just watched the tele. (So do you think the labour unions can help you?) Depends on the union. Some of them just make empty talk. (So do you support Lee's Confederation of Trade Unions?) CTU, sometimes. I think they are sometimes good and sometimes bad. (So, do you support the minimum wage legislation?) Minimum wage, if we do not need to contribute this and that, of course I would agree. But the minimum wage, they have talked about it for a few years already.

Mr Yang, on the other hand, who has strong roots in China and who wants very much for public housing policy to change to enable his married son to live near to him, is more mild in outlook.

I usually vote for the DAB (Democratic Alliance for Betterment of Hong Kong), I think they are closer to us in thinking. (So did you ask them to help you?) Yes, I told them. They said they would help, but these political parties will promise a lot, but whether they can really do what they said is another matter. But all political parties are the same. They promise you to follow it up but if they fail they would not give you a reply. [...] (Did you ask the district councillor?) Yes, it is Chiu, he is the one who manages our two public estates, I asked him and he said, 'yes, yes, yes, I will help you'. But it is the same results afterwards. All these political parties are the same. I am not a member of any party. But if they are not so anti-communist, I'd like them more. Like

'Long Hair', he is so anti-communist, to be honest, I am not saying he is not good, it's just that we cannot discuss so much together. It is better if they are not so extreme. You cannot do without them, but if you have them, you find them troublesome.

Mothers in low-wage work

Low-wage mothers usually enter the low-wage labour market in order to add stability to household income on account of the irregular income their husbands earn. They are also active in arranging rent reduction, student loans and other measures that can help them maintain their livelihood as well as realising the social mobility goals of their children. Hence they are mostly dissatisfied with the government's stringent standards for allocating benefits that could ease their circumstances and want therefore to see these standards relaxed. Ms Ma thought, for instance, that by making these measures so stringent, the government is looking down on them, the poorer people.

The disparity between rich and poor is serious. The government doesn't lend money to the poor, and fear that we won't repay, isn't it true? The government's attitude is like that. They must be thinking that way. I think they think so.

Somehow, both Ms Ma and her friend, Ms Hong, place their hopes for a better life onto their children, thinking that if they could be at least self-sufficient, the pressure on them will ease.

(Do you think you have the means to improve your family's living?) Very difficult. If you have enough jobs with high wages you may be able to improve the living, but if you do not have enough jobs, nothing will help. (So apart from your own jobs, do you think your children can improve your living?) They will be able to do that if they are grown up. They all have work and we don't need to help them. At least they can improve their own living, they don't need me subsidising them. (But will that improve your living as well?) It

should do so. If we do not need to pay with our money, then we have more money left for spending. Right now, why we are working all the time is to give money to the children. They always ask for money for eating out and traveling. [...] So at least... I don't need to pay for them. When we want to borrow, the government does not want to lend money to us. It is only because we don't have enough that we ask for their loans, but they keep assessing this and that.

They feel the CSSA system is particularly unjust because while recipients of CSSA get a lot of exemptions and regular payment, they are suffering from irregular work, unsteady income and tight requirements for means-tested loans and rent reductions.

Even if we earn 10,000 something, we are really heavily burdened. We have to spend on general outlays, traveling and food. People think they would rather claim CSSA because they get more than we get from working. When you claim CSSA, you don't need to pay anything. Is it better that way. You cannot blame people who don't want to work. Like us, sometimes we have work but we do not get paid, sometimes, they don't pay you for half a year. But if you claim money from the government, it is always on time. It covers everything, and it comes to 10,000 dollars. It is better than us working ourselves to death and we don't get 10,000. [...] It is not that we don't want to work. First, it is difficult to find work; second, if you find work, you cannot look after your children. Mine is already grown up, but some still have young children. And your wages are so low, how can you have enthusiasm in your work?

Still, they also have a very strong work ethic and do not want to claim CSSA if they can help it. The following sentiment is quite common in this group.

I have not thought about claiming CSSA, I would rather work first if there is work. Only if something suddenly happens would we claim CSSA supplement. Because it is not a good example for the children, there is some problem in that. It is better you earn your money, whether it is little or much, as long as you can sustain your living.

It is better to look 'more work, more pay', if the wages are higher, at least it makes us want to work harder. Isn't it right?

This is also a group which appears to vote more for the democratic parties. Both Ms Hong and Ms Ma supported the Confederation of Trade Unions, while, Ms Lo, another woman belonging to this group, also voted for the Democratic Party.

I think they have their own ideas, they dare to voice out. Other parties... some of them I really don't like very much.

Women in this group (or those who are lone mothers) who have smaller children and who came from the mainland recently find particular problems in bringing up their children and integrating their children into school because of their long work hours and lack of skills to communicate with their children. Ms Dong and Ms Chu were discussed in Chapter 3. They both have younger children. Ms Dang, who was pushed to work because her husband would not give her food money, commented on her young children in primary school.

(Do you think your work affects the exam results of your children?) Yes, because I am so tired, I can't supervise their work at home so much. Sometimes, I also feel upset by them. Before, when I did not work, I was not so tired, and I could supervise my daughter every minute and force her to study. Now I can supervise them less, their exam results are also worse than before. Their dictation is not good sometimes. They have gotten a lot worse and have become naughtier.

Ms Chu, who had begun working long hours after she arrived in Hong Kong more than 10 years ago and since her children were small, commented on the problems she had with her teenage son.

How can we earn a living? We can't look after our son, we can just work for a living all the time. So my son won't listen to me all the time, he just won't listen to you for a second. [...] Sometimes, I really want to find someone with whom I could talk about myself, I really want to. I have found social workers before, but you have no choice, how can they really help? I went to the Church group, I brought him with me, but he wouldn't go, just one or two times.

My son is going to leave school, they also want my son leave, he is too naughty, it is very difficult. He is detained by the school every day and he doesn't go to school. He hasn't gone for 20 days! [...] Even his sister cried for him, I also feel...(sigh)... (Why doesn't he go to school?) Because he likes to go to those games centres and mix with those bad people. He goes there wearing his uniform, those cybercafes, they shouldn't let people below 18 in, but he just goes and these cybercafés really are doing harm. These children are too small, they should not let them in (The social workers are unable to help you?) No, it is too difficult. (What do the teachers say?) They said he was talking back all the time. So the teachers dislike him and punish him by making him stand. He didn't like it and became angry, and said he had been standing so long that it hurt. (So he is angry with the school?) Yes, some teachers pick on him, some teachers are not so good, it is just very difficult.

When Ms Wang's younger daughter arrived in Hong Kong in the early 1990s, she was put in Primary Four and needed to catch up with the English standard here. However, even though Ms Wang enrolled her in the government-funded tutorial classes specially designed for newly arrived children, she found them unable to help.

Yes they do have those tutorial classes for new arrivals, but how can they really help. (Why are you so distrustful of them?) It is not me distrusting, it is the fact. We have tried them. We have gone through them alright. Those teachers said if you were new arrivals for less than two years, it was completely free. But it didn't help! Those teachers had to cater for many students, which one can help you? [...] They had over 10 students in a class. If you had only 2 or 3, you could perhaps help. So you cannot complain that they have not given you chances, they have given you chances to have tutorials indeed. But they are nominal, don't you think. So what can we do?

Ms Dang also feels that living in Hong Kong is very stressful.

It is very stressful to live in Hong Kong. It is like, if you cannot make money

you will end up having nothing to eat.

Though feeling much pressure from work and from life, both of them do not resort to political channels to address their problems.

Z: I did not vote because I had to work on the voting day.

(Have you ever thought about joining a trade union?)

Z: How can you find time to join these things.

D: As long as I have something to work with, I feel it's fine and I don't know about such things.

Ms Lo, even suggested improving opportunities for them by creating more jobs and giving them more childcare services.

Unless they create more job opportunities, just as many people already know. You should try to give low-wage workers more opportunities by giving them more types of work to do. As long as the work hours are convenient, many people will do them automatically. When my children were young, why I did not choose to go to work was because no one was looking after them. [...] If they can create more childcare services for children, the parents definitely will go and make money if they have spare time! Who doesn't want to make money? The problem is the children. You have to oversee them. You have to juggle the household chores and take care of the family, then you have no choice but to work fewer hours.

Low-wage lone-mothers

Low-wage lone-mothers enter low-wage jobs by necessity unless they applied for CSSA. Those who choose the path of self-reliance are especially burdened and keep a busy schedule between home and paid work because they can only cope by making money from different short-duration part-time jobs as well as having to be able to provide

food for the household and supervise the children. Their concerns are very much home-centred, though not necessarily oriented towards the future. Some blame government for not doing more for them.

(Do you think Hong Kong has given you opportunities to improve your life here?) But I have never seen any improvement, I am still so destitute. (Do you think there is a big disparity between the rich and poor) Very serious, the poorer you are the poorer you get, the richer you are, the richer you get... (So who should be accountable for that?) The society, the officials, those who make administrative decisions... the government officials.

But these resilient working lone-mothers are even more loath to claim social assistance.

I have never thought about claiming CSSA. I have my hands and feet. [...] I feel that I have to set a good example for my children. If they see me claiming social assistance and just while away my time at home, then they might think that my mother also doesn't work and I also do not need to work. I also don't need to study because I have the government to help, so you are passing on the wrong message to them.

Ms Tan, who claimed CSSA after she arrived in Hong Kong in 1998 to take care of her two young children when her husband died, was very grateful for the CSSA. She is preparing to work in Hong Kong now since she is now required to work at least 120 hours a month to qualify for CSSA once her youngest son turns 15. She accepted this condition.

The Hong Kong government is very good. It is just some people are too greedy. They have been very good to me indeed. Now I am most afraid that I am unable to teach my son right. I have no more demands. I don't think about those. In the future if you will find work, you can also get better. So when people say it is hard to make money, if you do not make money, you don't need to work hard, but you will remain poor. I always teach my son this way.

She also preferred not to rely on government assistance.

I would prefer to work a little, so that I don't have to rely on the government. Some people also ask me, why do I go out to work so early, and have to work so hard. But they don't see that, I am also fine, I also think that when my sons leave school and go out to work, I will at least have a path. If I can tell others that I have worked in such-and-such places, they would hire me.

Like Ms Chan previously, Ms Tan did not receive much education in China and was quite troubled by how to teach and communicate with her teenage sons.

I don't have much expectations of them. I just hope they would finish Secondary Five and be old enough to go out to work. Now they always stay at home and annoy me. They don't listen to you and it is hard to teach them. I just don't know how to teach!

Because of their busy daily schedules, the lone-mothers do not usually engage in politics. Ms Wang for instance said,

I have not joined the trade unions because I was concerned about earning a living all the time and taking care of the family. I don't have much spare time.

Ms Li also did not remember which political parties she supported.

(Have you voted in the elections?) Yes, I did. (Do you support their political programme) My legislator in my district has really done work. (So which party does he belong to?) I don't know, I don't remember. (You only recognise his face?) Yes.

Low-wage single people with working fathers who may or may not be in low-wage work.

Single people who enter low-wage employment might have fathers already earning a low-wage per hour or only earning an average wage. They are likely to be financially compelled to work part-time during

their secondary schooling as a coping strategy for the household and are often coaxed to pursue an individual social mobility strategy through self-financing of their own education.

Of the 9 people in this group, six thought that there was a great disparity between the rich and poor; four thought the responsibility for this situation should be shared between the government and the poor themselves. For instance, Den, who was persuaded to stop studying after Secondary Five said,

I think half the responsibility is the government's because since they know that Hong Kong has poor people, then why don't they put more efforts into helping the poor, and instead keep on helping the rich to earn more money. (So you think they intentionally help the rich but not the poor?) Yes, I mean they do not intentionally help... (You mean they have not intentionally helped the poor?) Not in the same way. They don't really listen and then they just do something for show. (Do you have any examples? Why do you think this way?) Just my own opinion.

A part-timer in a food chain who was still in Secondary Five said,

The disparity is rather serious. Those who are rich are becoming richer, the poor poorer. (So who do you think should be responsible, the poor themselves or the government? If it is the poor themselves, what has it got to do with the government?) The government should be more active in helping the poor, not letting the poor cry out for help.

Ah Bin, whose mother gambled, thought it was quite serious.

It is very serious, the reason is related to education levels. Some leave school after Secondary Three, and so their levels are lower, their remuneration from their jobs will be low naturally. They also don't have ideals. The government does not nurture them to develop their ideals in their lives, so their wages stay low. But as for the rich, they are using their money to make more money. That is why I think when raising revenue, they should levy heavier taxes on them, it really is a small rate to them. But for the middle- and the

lower-classes, even if they only take a small percentage, it already is very heavy for them. The government should think about the tax rate, make a fairer calculation. (So who do you think should take the responsibility?) Who should take responsibility... the government is dealing with education policies, and also the person himself. If you have no ideals in your life like my younger brother -- he hasn't thought about becoming rich and only relies on others, and never thought about being independent himself -- then it is no one's thought.

He was also very critical of the educational policy of using mother-tongue as the medium of instruction.

I think using mother-tongue is really not good. (Are you now in a school using Chinese as the medium of instruction?) Yes, now you are internationalised, but other people... they are using English to teach all subjects, they get to be taught since they are young. You are in Hong Kong and you already know how to speak in Chinese, what's the point of mother-tongue education. We can't learn English well, when we go outside, we are using Hong Kong style English, other people don't know what you are talking about. None of my classmates like mother-tongue education. (Really?) Most of us dislike it. But everyone feels antipathy when my teacher teaches in English in English lessons, because all of us are used to listening to Chinese. But when we are forced to speak to the NET teacher, I think we can really learn a lot. After all you can really learn a few sentences when you talk in English. Even if I go abroad to work in the future, I will learn something when I talk to them.

Ah Bin felt the society had not given him enough opportunities to improve his living but he was planning to go abroad to work a year after finishing Secondary Five in order to learn English. Young people who did not have such opportunities might become more radicalised towards the society.

One of them, Tiger, joined the trade union movement after continuous frustration from studying in government subsidised programmes and work. Although the Youth Work and Experience Training Scheme

(YWETS) he joined initially gave him much hope about finding his direction in life, he gradually became disillusioned and frustrated.

(Why did you enrol in YWETS? Was it because it was free?) No, it was because of the publicity on the television, they were advertising it all the time. I really put my heart into my YWETS study, even though it was a free course, but the TV commercial said that it would give training opportunities and room for development for young people. I was really stupid, I did not realise a government could really cheat you. [...] They have all these young people looking very professional and wearing uniforms in the commercial. They are just cheating us.

One of the modules in the programme was supposed to give him training in a marketable skill in which he had an interest. He selected cake bakery. But it was not useful at all.

(Why couldn't you find a job with that?) Because I went to a bakery and they said, the YWETS is not useful, you have to go to the VTC to study a bread and cake bakery course before you are ready to come back to do it.

It was not useful partly because the course teacher was not a veteran baker from a bakery but an amateur who organised bakery classes for office women. All the ingredients were basically mixed, weighed and measured beforehand for the course attendees so that they did not learn much about the baking process or receive any tips about making different kinds of bread and cakes. So he was left with no prospect for a future career. The programme was also supposed to give him placement opportunities. But he was only placed in a youth centre to be a programme assistant rather than in a bakery to gain work experience as a baker. Regarding the whole organisation and

arrangement of the programme²⁵, he felt:

(How did you feel when you were taking part in the program?) I felt I was being messed around by other people when I was taking the course.

On the other hand, while he was taking part in the YWETS, he was at the same time working part-time for a multinational fast-food chain. So when he felt disheartened by the outcome of YWETS, he thought he would return to the fast-food chain so that he might 'get promoted'. Yet when the fast-food chain had to move to another location after a few months, he and his colleagues were assigned to different stores. But they were 'bullied' at those stores.

(How did they bully people?) They had said that if we moved to other shops, we could be promoted, but they failed to honour this promise. Some were required to work longer hours, some shorter hours. But we were used to working eight hours. They have no right to force us to work for so many hours.

So he became involved in trade union activities. Once he was caught by the management for propagating workers' rights by handing out flyers at a company gathering. He has since been blacklisted and is only assigned very few work hours and is given the nastiest tasks to do.

Grace, who is 19 and has a low-wage father working in the fishery industry, held no strong opinions about the society, but she was concerned about the District Council election and took the casting of her vote seriously.

²⁵ Tiger complained that the modules were taking place in different youth centres in 'Shang Shui, Fanling and Tuen Mun' and the students were not the same batch all the time.

Because before the election, the councillors had done something for people to see. I thought that the Councillor was really concerned about us. I live on the Shek Pai Wan Estate, I felt that that Councillor was really concerned about what was going on in the estate. But the one who got elected eventually did not do anything afterwards, even though he appeared to promise a lot before the election. (You are quite careful with your vote.) Yes I am.

Low-wage single people with low-wage working mothers

This group of single people has dual-earner parents and their mothers participate substantially in low-wage work. They are supported by the household as a whole to pursue higher education. The two in this group feel the gap between rich and poor is quite wide but do not hold strong views about who should be blamed for this situation and do not think that political parties and labour groups are really helping them.

For instance Nicky said,

(Do you think there is great disparity between the rich and poor?) Quite considerable. (Quite considerable?) I mean in some schools they use things that are very old, or you see people picking up aluminium cans on the street. (Who you think should be accountable for that?) Half and half. Perhaps half is oneself and half is the government. [...] (Do you think the political parties are helping you?) Perhaps there are a few things concerning me, but it is not very close.

He has participated in the YPTP (Youth Pre-employment Training Programme) and found it was 'of some use'. He is now working full-time in a fast-food chain and is rather lost about his future.

I am lost, because if you look for work outside, you have to be at least a university graduate. But there are already so many. I have also thought about applying for the continuing education fund. But after you do your calculations, you discover it will take you a long time before you can repay all your debt.

Eric, another person in this group, is now being supported by his household to study computer programming in the IVE. He is less pessimistic about the future.

I have always wanted to study, after finishing this course, I will find something which is similar to what I have studied.

My teacher said the future is bright... in fact I did think about what I would do and how much I would earn after I finish studying this course. I don't know why other people don't look at the salary when they look for a job. But I know that if I finish the course, I should be able to make about 9000 dollars. My original thought was that studying this would allow me to make a lot of money.

Low-wage single people with low-wage lone mothers.

They usually come from households under more financial pressure. Hence they would work part-time in low-wage work when they reach age 15 and full-time after they finish Form Five. For instance, Betty was working in a toy chain while still in Secondary Four. She thought she would not be mired in low-wage jobs like her elder sisters because,

I think even if work, I would only start working after I study for a particular skill. (So what are you interested in studying?) Design. (What kind of design?) Interior design.

(Do you think you will have to fund your own education?) I don't think I can balance work and study at the same time. I would rather not work. I would rather wait until I grow older, so that I can earn more and give back more to home. It is better than asking for money from home when you become a failure.

But it is not certain how she can afford to continue studying as her mother had already stopped claiming CSSA. Betty was also quick to

reject it.

(Do you agree that CSSA makes people lazy?) It does indeed sometimes. (But your household used to claim CSSA, don't you think that there was indeed a need for you to do so?) There was a need. But it was because me and my sisters and brothers were young, so my mother needed to take care of us. But now since we are older, we can take care of ourselves and we don't really want to rely on CSSA.

Ching, who has similar background as Betty, as described in the last chapter, came from a vulnerable single-parent household, with a complex history and a family member who had developed a psychological disorder. The household is struggling to survive without CSSA and he himself is trapped in full-time low-wage jobs without any prospect for studying his favourite subject further. He holds strong anti-government views and is an active participant of several online forums which discuss social affairs.

(Do you think that the gap between rich and poor is wide?) Extremely so. (So do you think the society has given you chance to improve your living?) To tell the truth, not really. (Who should be accountable for this?) This is a big question. You cannot blame the government totally because some decisions are made by the business people. Even if the government exerts pressure, the business people might not follow...so the government can only help half. In the end it depends on how Hong Kong people themselves would act.

He is also very concerned about the political affairs at the district level.

(Do you vote?) I voted last year, but the results did not come out as expected. (What do you mean?) That is, after you have voted for the election, the person you voted for was elected. But another person could still get elected even when he lost the election. So in our estate, we have two positions, one needs to be voted for, but the other one is just appointed by the government. So we become very incredulous, why did we vote then? (So they have two positions, one is an elected one, one is an appointed one.) But the appointed

one is the worst out of the six candidates. (Really? So you think he is the worst?) I am not the only one who thinks so, a lot of other people think so too. They had a signature campaign. (You mean a signature campaign against him?) Yes, because, he does not use the money to help us, he only runs a lot of his own activities. I don't really know what else he does. But for the elected one, [...] everyone sees that he is putting in efforts. Can you believe that he will give away flowers on Mother's Day? Sometimes, when he sees that there is a need, he is willing to do a lot of things. He is really not bad, not so superficial. He will go to the Housing Authority and argue with them. (So what party does he belong to?) I think...from the Democratic Party.

Others who are subject to less harsh economic constraints also see injustice in the education system. Ah Zi first introduced herself as reading film studies at the IVE and presented quite a positive picture about her future.

Perhaps when I get to university and settle down, and feel that I like that subject and do the behind-the-screen things such as film editing then I will go to do the multimedia studies in City U, because our programme can only be bridged to City University and Hong Kong University.

However further into the discussion she said:

(Do you think the society has given you enough of a chance to improve your life?) Not really, if you are an university graduate, you can of course get a job more easily. But basically, I will no chance to get into the university. (But you said before that you intended to get to the university.) But the chances are slim, one in three. (You mean from the IVE to university?) Very slim. (You mean you do not really intend to go to university?) I have the intention, but I have to have excellent results. (But didn't your sister get into the university?) Yes, but she is very smart. I think people always said that it is very difficult to progress from secondary school to university, but the chances for IVE students to get into university are even slimmer. This subject that I am doing has been set up for a number of years. From what my teacher has told us, not many have been able to get into university. It is only those who are offered jobs outside, have given them up, have received confirmation from universities and have references written by other lecturers, who can get into the university. So you need a lot of recommendations, but I am not one of those top one students.

We are studying for a higher diploma, but because a diploma is really low, you cannot get a job with that. (According to statistics, it is indeed better to have

a higher diploma than finishing Secondary Seven...) Yes, for some subjects. Some subjects are really hot and in demand. Hotel management for instance, you land a job straight after your studies, but you have to be very bright. Aeroplane engineering is also very strong, you need to have 18 points [in your HKCEE] to get into it. But if I really got such high marks, I wouldn't have chosen that subject. Those people really study according to their interests. But subjects that have futures are few. People like us really don't know what to do. They say this is the Vocational Training Council, but if you do not land a job how can you receive vocational training?

She also sees a lot of injustice in the advantages that children of well-off parents have.

If you think about how many of us can go from secondary school to university, there may be a one-in-three chance. But if you think about it this way, it is very unfair. It is not because we do not do well in our studies. It is only because we are not as good as the others. It is not that we do not put in efforts; it is just that they are too smart. After they were born, they had many tutors coaching them, they had fathers and mothers who have lots of money. They had money to invest in their small children, but for us, we just didn't have much money and so we did not get many chances. [...] If you want to develop the multi-intelligence of a child, it is all about money. If you want to get into a prestigious school, you have to pave the way from kindergarten. [...] If your family all speak in English and they have all these people cultivating your talents, when you get to secondary school, you will of course get high marks in your English, and be able to be good in two languages and three dialects. [...]

She hasn't voted for any political parties in the last election.

(Have you paid any attention to the political parties, did you vote in the last election?) No. They annoy me. I don't know what they are arguing about. They are just concerned about themselves, not us. If they really are working for us, they don't have to canvass for votes. If you have done well, everyone would have recognised you. (It might not be that, some of them keep their heads down when they work?) [...] I always feel if you want to help someone, you cannot just pester him near where he lives. How often does one come home? That is, you go to where someone lives, you keep saying you are this and that and you can help with this and that, who will really listen to you? Perhaps it's better if you go to their workplaces. (So have you paid attention to the labour groups?) No. So that's why I think they should cooperate. I might be staying at home for just two or three minutes, I really stay very little at home. One-third of my time is spent in school and two-thirds of my time is spent at work.

Conclusion

This chapter has documented the socio-economic attitudes, aspirations and plans of the low-wage workers. Low-wage fathers are in general disgruntled or distrust the government. But those with stronger roots in mainland China support pro-government parties. Low-wage mothers feel dissatisfied with the stringent requirements for some government measures, such as rent reduction and student loans, that could help relieve their financial difficulties. Those who still have children in school also complain about the lack of assistance in raising their children while working full-time. Those with migration background thought that tutorial programmes for newly arrived children are not working satisfactorily to integrate their children into the mainstream. They think that more jobs will help solve many of their problems. Those without migration background in this group generally support the Democratic Party while those who are recent migrants are usually more indifferent.

The low-wage lone-mothers have a very strong ethic and those who have claimed CSSA are grateful to the government. Since this is a group comprised either of those with migration background (those claiming CSSA) or those who took up many jobs to support the households, they are not so engaged with politics.

Low-wage single people, with low-wage or average-earning fathers or

lone-mothers, usually have stronger opinions about the government. Not all of them would vote in an election but some of them were quite careful in choosing who to vote for particularly in district level elections.

Those who are unable to create prospects for themselves in their work and studies; and who find that government programmes fail to rescue them from their circumstances, are more likely to be radicalised and join social movements or be active in political forums on the internet.

Low-wage single people with a mother in low-wage jobs are generally milder in outlook and seek to advance through their studies or through further assistance from their households to give them a better future.

Chapter 7

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite Hong Kong's economic upturn in the recent two years, the number of low-wage workers remains relatively high. This study shows that while improvement in the economy enables a lot of the older low-wage workers to rejoin the labour force, they are still coping with different kinds of structural pressure. Global economic restructuring and increased economic integration with China since the 1990s has meant that deindustrialisation and greater cost competition have slashed job opportunities that are tied to one location and require low skills and qualifications. The global process of economic change also means that individuals are more exposed to market forces 'because of the reduction in public expenditures on urban welfare in such areas as income transfers, collective services, and subsidies of various kinds' (Roberts,1991). In becoming a global city which is 'service-oriented' and specialises in producer and financial services (Chiu, 2007; Chiu and Lui, 2005); the economic downturn since 1997 has made Hong Kong government rein in its public expenditure by shedding staff and allowing more scope for the market to provide services.

The subcontracting of the cleaning services in the public sector occurred in this context. The backlash that resulted from a free-fall of workers' wages, albeit itself more a result of the recession, has led to greater government regulation of the cleaning industries serving the public

sector and this study has found that it has worked to a great extent. However, serious malpractices can still be found in the case of cleaning service providers for the private sector. Because of the lack of accountability of the subcontracting system in the private sector, this system will need more regulation to ensure protection of the workers' interests. Where market forces have never been controlled, large scale chain stores, operating under the full impact of market forces in the absence of any government regulations, have casualised their staff. Their staff are paid low wages and provided with relatively few opportunities for full-time positions. Movement up the internal job ladder is competitive and the rewards are not necessarily very attractive.

Individuals unable to adapt to the above changes can resign from their jobs or assume less steady kinds of jobs. While older individuals resort to low-wage service work to make do in the short-to-medium term, they desire assistance to facilitate better allocation of labour and intergenerational reciprocity across households with their married children who live apart for a more secure livelihood in the long term. Better allocation of labour within households is also possible where women quit work to follow a more traditional work trajectory of leaving work to take care of children after marriage. Earning a market wage can help expand the scope of education for their children as well as prevent the latter from entering the low-wage work market too soon. Younger individuals often have difficulties adjusting to the new work regime in the service industries. Their only way to find a modicum of stability and long-term well-being is by acquiring further qualifications

and joining occupations that will ensure relative employment stability with reasonable remuneration. Whether they move forward in this path by themselves or with the assistance from their households depends on the parental family types and whether their parents themselves work.

Our study has highlighted the fact that low-income workers, like any other workers, are not isolated individuals but members of a specific household. As a basic social unit of shelter and caring, 'a household can increase its control over its environment by skilful management of resources' (Roberts, 1991). We have tried to analyse the role of the individual, the state, and the family unit in the coping and social mobility strategies of the low-wage workers. The status of a low-income worker cannot be considered in the abstract. Whether a low-wage worker will suffer from a steady deterioration of living standards, for example, will be determined by how and at what level he or she could obtain a market income, pool together resources with other income earners or derive assistance from the state.

As corporations are not offering many opportunities for workers to move up from low entry-level positions, education is crucial for young people's mobility and indeed for the long-term improvement of the standard of living of households with low-wage parents. Yet this study also finds is that some households do not support this mobility strategy as either the household has only single-earner parents or households are saddled with specific internal problems such as having many recent migrants or having lone-mothers whose earning powers are in serious

jeopardy.

The strong work ethic exhibited by our respondents shows that even the low-wage workers share many of the mainstream values in seeking to avoid welfare dependency whenever possible. So public policies should centre on helping those in low-wage positions to continue working, by rewarding their efforts in participating in paid work, by regulating employers' malpractices and by ensuring that they receive fair remuneration.

Recommendations

- Our quantitative analysis has highlighted the steady reduction in the aggregate size of the low-wage workers since the turnaround in the economy in the early 2000s. This suggests that macro-economic performance is important in shaping the living standards of low-wage workers. The financial turbulence in the global economy and the slowing down in the growth rate of the Chinese economy, however, may result in pushing up the number of low-wage workers again in the coming years. A macro-economic strategy to promote long-term economic growth in Hong Kong is of course crucial to prevent this from happening, but how this could be best achieved is obviously beyond the scope of this study.
- Another aspect of the macro-economic environment that might impinge on the livelihood of the low-income working population is

looming inflation. Itself an emergent trend and not reflected adequately in our interviews, a high inflation environment is definitely detrimental to the interests of low-income employees whose wages may not be able to move upwards concomitant with the general price level. Again, how to best tackle the inflationary spiral is too large issue for us to discuss here, but it is gratifying to observe that the government has recently announced a host of short-term relief measures to alleviate the inflationary pressure on the livelihood of the grassroots and the middle-class community. Fare concessions for students, assistance for the new school year, payment of public housing rent, increase of the CSSA allowance, electricity subsidy and price information are all appropriate measures that can help grassroots households which are already coping by self-provisioning, economising, and claiming benefits from the state.

-Enforce a reasonable minimum wage level and maximum work hours A minimum wage which is set at a level relative to the median wage for all workers can help ensure workers receive fair remuneration for their efforts (Lloyd et al., 2008). Our study shows that **public sector** government regulation of the cleaning industry effectively raises workers' wages to the median market rate. Similar government-led measures in other types of industry which are organised in corporate chains could also work. However, it is important to note that our respondents mentioned the occasional malpractices committed by contractors of cleaning services for the public sector. Effective

enforcement measures must be put in place to give confidence to employers that a level-playing field is created for those who abide by the regulations so that they will not be disadvantaged by giving higher wages or better protection to their workers. Subcontracting of services should be discouraged or penalised as much as possible in the private sector as in the public sector. Trade union involvement in the process of monitoring and revealing 'black sheep' cases can greatly facilitate enforcement (Lloyd et al., 2008). The worries that introducing a minimum wage will create job losses is now countered by evidence from Britain, where job losses have been shown to be insignificant to date (Metcalf, 2006). The British case is also reported to have shown that the minimum wage legislation did not lower company profits (Mingpao, 2008)

More regulation of the maximum number of work hours would be a tremendous help in creating a more balanced work environment. Such a measure is especially important for young low-wage workers in full-time positions who want to pursue further studies or training. More positive work experience can also result when work hours are limited to a certain level since low-wage work often involves physically demanding tasks.

-Improve the provision of child care services Our study finds that working mothers often expand the scope for young people to take up further studies; they also delay children assuming low-wage work. However, current family values often discourages women to return to

paid work after they have children. Studies have already shown that women who drop out of the labour market for an extended period lose their employment network and contacts which means they will be disadvantaged when they return to work many years later (Morris, 1991). They also experience downward movement along the job ladder (Lloyd, 2008). Young lone-mothers also run the risk of long-term welfare reliance which makes their return to the labour market especially difficult. Affordable, convenient childcare that is available at suitable hours can enable women to work full-time and encourage women to keep the habit of working even after having children (Yoshikawa et al., 2006). This will also give young single mothers a chance to catch up and integrate with the society and prevent them from seeking support from their low-wage parents.

To encourage mothers to work, child care provision should be expanded to include support for low-wage women who work full-time. Assistance including guidance on parenting (especially for lone-parents) and on how to communicate with teenagers, and self-strengthening courses such as English and Cantonese language courses for mothers who want to better prepare themselves in the world of work should be given to create opportunities for upward mobilities and to forge more positive work experience.

Special provision for CSSA households Given the importance of education and training for the young low-wage workers to land a satisfactory full-time job, more sympathetic consideration should be

given to young people who have a recent record of receiving CSSA by waiving tuition fees for their post-secondary studies. This will allow them to transcend their household disadvantages. It is necessary to make sure that the children of low-wage working parents who get off the CSSA schemes will not be penalised by having their tuition fee waiver or allowance taken away. Failure to do that will constitute a major disincentive for low-wage parents to continue to work and may help perpetuate intergenerational poverty.

Special provision for new migrant households- As low-wage workers are often concentrated in households which have other disadvantages such as low education levels owing to a migration background, which in turn contributes to low-skill levels, it is important to improve provisions for newly arrived children and people so that they can adapt to and integrate into the community as soon as possible. Some measures are already in place. For instance the Induction Programme and the School-based Support Scheme are intended to cater for the newly arrived children. Whereas the former has a specification of class size between 10 to 15, the latter, which is much more important in terms of designing suitable academic content for the newly arrived, has no such specification. If small class size can be specified so that individual differences can be catered for and ability of the newly arrived children can really be developed in the school context irrespective of their household circumstances, the newly arrived children will soon become part of the mainstream school system.

Given the important role of dual-earner parents for the working poor, it is critical to facilitate newly arrived mothers to take up paid work, so that a more secure financial base could be achieved in such households. It can also help them to integrate into the society.

Strengthen the current YPTP and YWETS schemes In view of the fact that young school leavers at Secondary Three and Secondary Five often land low-wage jobs that lack promotion opportunities, the present YPTP and YWETS should be strengthened to provide young people an opportunity to experience alternatives which may allow them to build up a future career. Job placement opportunities of the scheme must match with the self-selected training module in the course so that young people can really acquire hands-on work experience or industry-recognised qualifications. The schemes should also remain fully-funded as only this can provide genuine opportunity for underprivileged youth to lift themselves out of low-wage work.

Higher level of subsidy from the Transport Support Scheme Household coping strategies of the poor are greatly constrained by the economic cycles and structure of the local job opportunities (Roberts, 1989). The sub-prime crisis is going to have a knock-on effect on the local economic conditions and job opportunities for the poor. It is therefore urgent and important to facilitate workers to overcome the constraints of the local labour market structure. In this respect, the implementation of the Transport Support Scheme is a great step in the right direction. The recent relaxation of the eligibility criteria such as

increasing the income ceiling, extending the subsidy period and allowing people working and living in the same district to claim the funding will definitely help the needy. Yet the funding at a current rate of 600 dollars a month for the on-the-job allowance may be too little in view of the fact that most better-paid jobs are concentrated on Hong Kong island. The monthly allowance should be raised to 1,000 dollars if it is intended to attract people living in far off districts to work in job-rich areas.

Housing policies and self-subsistent community development to address the needs of the older low-wage workers Most low-wage workers over age 60 want to create intergenerational reciprocity by living closer to their married children. The current ‘Special Scheme for Families with Elderly Persons’ should be beefed up. At present, only young families applying together with elderly parents or relatives for two separate flats *outside* urban districts are allowed. Though this facilitates closer proximity between the two generations, it might not necessarily help the young families to find jobs that are often located in urban areas. In order to create a real self-subsistent community, and to correct the lopsided local labour market structure, more investment to create job opportunities in the non-urban districts is urgently needed. Recent suggestion to create an outlet market for brand name goods in Tin Shui Wai will definitely contribute towards that goal. An open-air market that allows licensed hawkers to sell Hong Kong – style food will also bring in tourists or other urbanites and create job opportunities for low-skilled workers.

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