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Caring for women on the frontlines: Enhancing women workers' capabilities and building social friendship

ABSTRACT

This article examines the vulnerability of frontline cleaning workers and domestic helpers during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they empower themselves by joining a community in which they can support each other. Employing surveys by non-governmental organisations, particularly those in Hong Kong, as well as my own interviews and observations, I examine the situation of the frontline workers and discuss the moral principles and conditions for upholding women's dignity and well-being, based on the capability approach of feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum. I argue that emphasising women's moral agency and giving a voice to women themselves through women collectives are important in empowering them and building a life-giving community among women, especially during and after the pandemic. In addition, the notions of political charity and social friendship in Catholic social thought, particularly the social encyclical Fratelli Tutti, and the multi-axial analysis in post-colonial feminist theology are useful in upholding women's dignity and moral agency in care situations. Examples of social friendship are provided.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the global outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, there have been numerous reports about the sacrifices and dangers of frontline medical staff. In the health industry in Hong Kong, China, and countries worldwide, women are often the key frontline workers (China Labour Bulletin 2020; Rho & Brown 2020). It is true that healthcare workers deserve our respect. However, few people have paid attention to the contributions of cleaning workers, including hospital cleaners, street janitors, and domestic helpers, as well as the dangers they face. Every day, cleaning workers have to deal with a large amount of refuse, facing the risk of infection in hospitals, public areas, and the community. Moreover, the workload of domestic helpers doubled or tripled, due to increasing hygiene demand. In Hong Kong, for example, the majority of cleaning workers and migrant domestic helpers are women from the lower rank of society. At the early stage of the epidemic, many of them even faced a severe shortage of anti-epidemic materials such as masks and hand sanitisers. Their personal protection was inadequate and worth the attention. When everyone is concerned about his or her own safety and health, care for the frontline workers is neglected.

In view of such a situation, this article examines the vulnerability of frontline cleaning workers and domestic helpers during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they empower themselves through a care community. I argue that emphasising women's dignity and moral agency and giving a voice to women themselves are important in building a life-giving community among women, especially during and after the pandemic. To do this, I first examine the situation of the cleaning workers and domestic helpers during the pandemic in Hong Kong, with data from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and my own interviews and observations. Then, employing the capability approach of feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum, I discuss the ability and empowerment of women workers, showing the importance of upholding some moral principles and conditions, if each woman worker is to be respected and live and work with dignity, and affirming the role of a women's group in enhancing women's capabilities. I also conduct an ethical and theological reflection based on the principles of Catholic social teachings, highlighting the notions of political charity and social friendship in the Catholic social tradition, particularly in Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* and Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti*. Moreover, post-colonial feminist theology takes one's social location and multi-axial analysis seriously. This would help us pay attention to building social friendship across race, gender, class, and religious affiliation. I use pastoral responses of the Hong Kong church as illustration.

2. VULNERABILITY OF FRONTLINE WORKERS UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, first in China at the end of 2019, and then in different parts of the world, nothing has been more important than cleaning, disinfecting and sterilising hospital wards that have admitted patients infected with the new coronavirus. In addition to doctors and nurses, the entire hospital system must rely on cleaners who bear the important duty of cleaning, scrubbing, and disinfecting. In fact, both the medical and the cleaning staff were on the frontlines of fighting this global pandemic when the new coronavirus swept across the world and sanitation demands skyrocketed.

2.1 Cleaning workers

During the pandemic, cleaners and different types of cleaning services were needed more than ever. The demand for cleaning workers grew, not only in hospitals, but also in offices, schools, transit systems, and public areas. They were potentially in direct contact with the coronavirus, as they had to disinfect many important places such as light switches and doorknobs that people touch every day. Some were also responsible for disposing of refuse. However, many cleaners said that they were not provided with adequate training or personal protective equipment. Due to insufficient personal protective equipment, caregivers were given priority to use the protective equipment. The cleaners often only wear gloves when cleaning and sanitising, but no goggles and protective clothing. They were concerned that they would spread the virus to each other. These cleaners were responsible for maintaining public health. Whether their personal protective equipment is adequate is worthy of our attention. Apart from insufficient protective equipment, there is a lack of compensation for affected cleaners and the long-lasting unfair treatment of outsourced workers.

The home isolation and quarantine measures also led to the accumulation of more refuse. It is obvious that the cleaning and sanitation industry is an abominable job that demands heavy workload. The government should provide relevant unified epidemic prevention measures to help ease the risk of spreading the virus in the community (Oxfam Hong Kong 2021). After urgent appeal from the cleaners and the NGOs, the Hong Kong government decided to send 700,000 masks to the government-outsourced cleaners every month to ease the problem of masks. However, working outside for a long time, contacting a large number of people, and cleaning up high-risk items such as masks and tissues, cleaners need more comprehensive protective equipment, more detailed work instructions, and more specific

assistance. Many workers were concerned that, if they get infected with the virus, they may transmit it to their family members.

Lin, who is over 60 years old, is one of these cleaners. She is an outsourced cleaner of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department. According to the Hong Kong Women Workers Association (HKWWA 2021), the average age of outsourced cleaners of government departments is over 60 or even over 70 years. Many elderly cleaners are women who earn a minimum wage. Many of them have hardly any education and find it difficult to get other jobs; thus, they have less bargaining power. As women, they have to do housework and take care of other family members after work, which means double the workload. The elderly is a high-risk group that is susceptible to infection during the pandemic. Lin has to push the refuse truck back and forth on a short street every day (Ching 2020). From Lin's daily work, it is not difficult to see the risks faced by cleaners: they need to clean discarded masks and paper towels, their eyes may be splashed by sewage, and when cleaning refuse bins, they have to touch the risky ashtrays, and so on. But Lin and other cleaners were often given only one mask a day and no goggles to protect their eyes. During lunch break, they can only eat at the refuse station or in outdoor areas. Their uniforms worn at work have to be brought back home for cleaning.

Jean is another cleaning worker in an outsourced pest-control group. The scope of her work includes cleaning up refuse, holding rat carcasses, putting up rat cages, filling rat holes, removing stagnant water, and spraying mosquito repellent. During the pandemic in 2020, the government subsidised outsourced cleaners for seven months, but workers of the pest-control group were excluded at the beginning. Their work was not considered cleaning work but pest-control service. However, in fact, they spend most of their time cleaning. Jean and her colleagues felt that they were being treated unfairly and discriminated against. They wanted to voice their dissatisfaction and fight for their rights. With the help of the Catholic Labour Centre, which provides services to workers, Jean and her colleagues collected signatures from other pest-control workers and made an urgent appeal to the government. Finally, they obtained a positive response from the government and succeeded in getting subsidy like other cleaning workers.¹

1 Interview with Jean at the Catholic Labour Centre, 24 August 2021.

2.2 Migrant domestic workers

According to the International Labour Organization, 55 million domestic workers globally, of whom 37 million are women, were at risk of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. In different places, including Hong Kong, there were a number of dismissal cases among domestic helpers, due to concerns about COVID-19.

Like other cleaners, many domestic workers have to do cleaning and disinfection work. But unlike the local cleaners, who live in their homes with their family members, migrant domestic helpers faced other problems and challenges under the pandemic. As live-in workers, many domestic workers were required to stay in home quarantine with their employers. Some were fired, but unable to return home or inform their families about their situation. Many of them also faced double or triple workload, due to the increasing demand for cleaning and hygiene. Unfortunately, they had hardly any bargaining power against their employers and had to either accept unreasonable working conditions or risk termination.

Given their already deprived condition, the domestic workers were under severe pressure and discrimination to undergo testing and vaccination. On 30 April 2021, the Hong Kong government announced plans to require all migrant domestic workers to get vaccinated, but only encouraged Hong Kong citizens to get vaccinated voluntarily. In fact, a substantial number of local residents and migrant workers were not vaccinated, due to health conditions. Philippine Consul General Raly Tejada stated that the Hong Kong government should not force its 370,000 helpers to get vaccinated, although the consul general encouraged all Filipino in Hong Kong to avail themselves of Hong Kong's free and voluntary vaccination programme. She argued that, if the new rules applied to them, all non-resident foreign workers should be made to follow suit. Migrant right bodies also blasted the vaccination drive for helpers, saying that the government had stigmatised the group and created a perception that its members were carriers of the coronavirus. Earlier, when two domestic workers were found to be infected with mutated strains of the virus, the government also ordered all domestic helpers to get tested before 9 May 2021. The mandatory testing was viewed as unnecessary and further scapegoated the community (Low & Magramo 2021). Due to wide criticisms, the Hong Kong government reviewed the plan and finally did not enforce the policy.

In Hong Kong, based on the Standard Employment Contract (ID407) for foreign domestic workers (clause 3), the worker should work and reside in the employer's residence, as stated in the contract. Thus, while the vast majority of individuals could stay at home during quarantine, domestic

helpers had to stay at their employer's home. They lived and worked in the same place, and many worked in small apartments and did not have their own bedroom. The Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions pointed out that, after working six days with no legal limits on working hours, domestic workers are entitled to take their rest day away from their workplace if they wish to do so. When they stay in, they are with their employers and not their own relatives or friends. They do not have much space to do anything, and some cannot truly rest because their employers still ask them to carry out domestic work, which the workers find difficult to refuse. However, during the pandemic, many domestic workers were not allowed by their employers to go out or to have days off for fear that they would be infected with COVID-19 (HKCTU 2020). Even when they were able to go out, some domestic workers reported that they felt harassed and intimidated by the police force who were enforcing policies on distancing and mask-wearing. They felt that they were being singled out by the Hong Kong government who intentionally mobilised police and other authorities to target the migrant domestic worker community. Instead of providing some space for migrant workers to rest, the migrant workers were viewed as spreading COVID-19 and were treated like criminals.

The pandemic also highlights the unsettling problems migrant domestic workers faced for a long time. These include long working hours, limited local support networks, physical abuse, and hardly any access to social protection. Moreover, women who make up about two-thirds of the world's migrant domestic worker population are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence (Zinser 2020).

3. CONDITIONS FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN WORKERS

Although vulnerability among frontline cleaning workers and migrant domestic helpers is a social reality, it should not be the only object of concern. Rather, the focus should be on responsiveness and empowerment. Otherwise, we may not be able to respond to those in need. Gilson (2014:31-38) argues that, when vulnerability is regarded only in a negative sense (as weakness, dependency, powerlessness, deficiency, passivity) and, simultaneously, invulnerability is prized, attentiveness to one's own vulnerability and ethical response to vulnerable others remain out of reach goals. When we are exposed to the vulnerable, such encounter should allow us to respond. We should affirm that the vulnerable can be transformed and regain their capability through empowerment and solidarity actions.

As noted earlier, the dignity of the frontline workers is neglected and they are often discarded in a “throw-away” culture. If every woman worker is to be respected and to live and work with dignity, some moral principles should be borne in mind and put into practice. Political philosopher Martha Nussbaum recognised that women are often treated only as instruments of the ends of others instead of being treated as ends in their own right, persons with a dignity who deserve respect from institutions and laws. Nussbaum thus developed the capabilities approach to address the issue of poverty and human development among women. The core of the theory is a principled account of a set of fundamental human capabilities that are held to be essential to a good human life or quality life. The resulting list can serve as both a guide and a critical standard for the development policy (Nussbaum 2000a; 2007).

3.1 Affirm dignity of each person

Nussbaum’s capabilities approach emphasises the principle of each person as an end. Under this principle, liberties and opportunities for each and every person should be preserved; each of them is treated as valuable and worthy of respect as an end, rather than simply as the agent or supporter of the ends of others. This approach respects each person’s struggle for flourishing, treats each person as a source of agency and worth in his/her own right. The individual person should be the basic unit for political distribution, that society secures a threshold level of the basic goods of life to each, seeing each life as deserving of basic life support and of the basic liberties and opportunities. This is especially urgent for the lives of women in family and society. All too often, women have been denied the basic goods of life because they have been regarded as parts of an organic entity such as the family, rather than as political subjects in their own right. They have been viewed as reproducers and caregivers, rather than as ends in themselves (Nussbaum 2000b:55-56, 58).

Under this principle, every person, including the cleaning worker, should be respected and his/her voice should be heard. But very often they are treated differently. Cleaning workers belong to a group that faces high risks with low protection. For example, in February 2020, five civic groups in Hong Kong, including the Hong Kong Catholic Commission for Labour Affairs, Oxfam Hong Kong, and Cleaning Service Industry Workers’ Union, conducted a survey on the working conditions of outsourced cleaners during the epidemic, proving the lack of protection among cleaners (Oxfam Hong Kong, 2020). As noted earlier, in the cases of Lin, Jean, and other cleaners and domestic helpers, they wanted to support their family and contribute to society, but they did not receive enough

care and respect from the other side. Emphasising individual rights and entitlements, according to Nussbaum, would seem essential, in order to promote more fruitful and less exploitative styles of caring.

3.2 Basic human capabilities with support from the State and social arrangements

The frontline workers need respect from others, economic ability, enhancing self-confidence, social support, and other social skills. Some of them do not enjoy equal social status and basic protection as other workers and people in society. Due to the lack of a social network, in times of crisis, they may become even more vulnerable. Therefore, there is an urgent need for them to develop their capabilities with legal protection. Nussbaum provides a list of core capabilities that contribute significantly to one's capacity to lead a life of well-being. Among these capabilities are life; bodily health; bodily integrity; capabilities relating to the senses, imagination, thought, and to emotions and emotional attachments, and capabilities for practical reason, social affiliation, and political engagement (Nussbaum 2000:78-80). These basic rights and human capabilities must be affirmed through specific mechanisms. According to Nussbaum, the government should guarantee all its citizens basic human capabilities through its law and constitution. This implicates not only the State, but also structures in civil society, including the family. The principle of moral constraint plays a role, in this instance. Anything that is cruel or unjust, whether it takes place in the family or in society, does not deserve to be included in what we value when protecting the family (Nussbaum 2000:275-276). The State can intervene and take action. Practically speaking, Nussbaum's approach requires that all citizens have real access to the resources they need, in order to develop and sustain their basic human capabilities. To do this, social conditions, arrangements, and practices should foster social and gender justice (Nussbaum 2000:104-105). However, there is a lack of such social conditions and arrangements to treat the cleaners fairly.

In Hong Kong, for example, there is a lack of compensation for affected cleaners and no law to protect the infected workers at work. That is the reason why workers and other labour groups advocate for workers' protection through a change of law. As in the case of Jean and her colleagues, they collected signatures from pest-control workers and made an urgent appeal to the government for an equal treatment as other cleaners. After negotiation with the government, they received a positive response and succeeded in getting subsidy like other cleaning workers. This example shows the importance of social arrangement in affirming workers' dignity and capabilities.

3.3 Promoting capabilities in women's collectives

Nussbaum points out that, in achieving a good human life, people have needs for love and care, for bodily health; children need love, support, and education, and people also enjoy a wide range of associated liberties. Her capabilities approach urges one to see what different groups do in promoting these capabilities. She recognises that women's collectives play a valuable role in giving women love and friendship, in caring for children, and in fostering the other capabilities, whereas conventional families often do less well. They also play a prominent role in supporting the various capabilities, especially emotions, affiliation, practical reason, and thought (Nussbaum 2000:276-277). She proposes that the government should not only support the family, but also these women groups that can strengthen women's capabilities and nurture their love and care.

Jean, the cleaner who belongs to the pest-control team, after succeeding in getting a subsidy of the salary like other cleaning workers, joined a pest-control workers self-help group at the Catholic Labour Centre. She attends monthly gatherings and other activities of this group. Jean mentioned the following:

This is the first time I advocated for workers' right. Through this group, I have learnt more about workers' rights and knowledge relating to work and health. I also know more friends. I love chatting with other group members and feel happier after joining this group. In the past, I just focused on my work and my family. After work, I usually just go back home and do housework, without my own time. Now I can join activities during my leisure time. I feel a sense of cooperation and connectedness in this group.²

Mr Tin-Lok Ho, a social worker at the Catholic Labour Centre, is one of the organisers of the monthly gatherings of the self-help group in which Jean participates. He points out that workers share various kinds of topics, including the problems they may face at work, retirement policy and protection, health issues, and so on, during their gatherings. He introduces the relevant social issues to them. Sometimes other guest speakers are invited to share work safety or health knowledge with the workers. Besides, celebrations or parties have been organised on special days, such as during the New Year season, Christmas, and Chinese festivals. These are times for relaxation, fostering relationships, and enriching their lives. Ho emphasises that the group members can widen their scope and social life through learning social issues, knowing new friends, and sharing their stories with the mass media and visitors. Ho also

2 Interview with Jean at the Catholic Labour Centre, 24 August 2021.

mentions that many members appreciate talking with other people such as students, parishioners, and journalists. They are happy that other people are interested in understanding their working conditions and their lives. Ho states that he often encourages workers to participate in various kinds of activities and to voice the problems themselves from their perspective as workers. Ho adds: “I am happy to see the growth of the workers through these works.”³ The self-help group and its activities empower cleaners and nurture their human capabilities and self-confidence.

For migrant domestic helpers in Hong Kong, there are migrant groups that offer them material, emotional, and spiritual support, including the Catholic Church’s Diocesan Pastoral Centre for the Filipinos (and Indonesians), the Anglican Church’s Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW), Bethune House, and so on. Not only do these groups offer support and assistance to the migrant workers, they also invite migrant workers to be volunteers and help others, especially during the pandemic. They extend care and distribute daily necessities to those in need.

4. ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS: POLITICAL CHARITY AND SOCIAL FRIENDSHIP

After examining the conditions of frontline workers and Nussbaum’s capabilities approach in affirming women’s dignity and identity, I now reflect from both a theological and ethical perspective. Nussbaum rightly points out that each individual is a rightful participant in society. There are basic human needs for women in human flourishing, with the focus on individual liberty. This approach emphasises women’s moral agency and the importance of women collectives, without stating what types of social relationships and community best contribute to their development. Catholic social thought has greater recognition of the sociality of individuals and the social dimensions of human embodiment (Cahill 2006:83; Filice 2021). Meanwhile, although Catholic social thought also affirms human dignity and women’s rights, it does not place as much emphasis on women’s moral agency and the importance of women collectives as Nussbaum’s capabilities approach does. Thus, these two approaches can complement each other.

In the Catholic social tradition, affirming human dignity and the social nature of human beings are the foundations of a society with common good, emphasising interdependence and social responsibilities. In his recent social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis (2020a) points out

3 Telephonic interview with Mr Tin-Lok Ho, 10 September 2021.

that the practice of casting away the vulnerable is among the primary impediments to developing universal human fraternity. A society's throw-away people, and how they are discarded, tell us a great deal about its values, how it defines humanity, and who gets to participate in community. No one person should be disposed of as though s/he is of no value. To affirm the dignity of the vulnerable and to foster connectedness with them, Christians should treat them as members of the human family through political charity and social friendship. Based on the social teachings of the church, with the focus on Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti*, and Asian feminist theology, I would like to discuss how we can resist the throw-away culture of the contemporary world, and how we can develop friendship with people of different class, gender, and race.

4.1 Human dignity and common good

Often, societies create laws and systems that serve a privileged few and neglect the powerless, those on the periphery, the ignored, and the forgotten ones. Pope Francis points out in *Fratelli Tutti* that

God has created all human beings with equal rights, duties, and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters (2020a:#5).

He further states that

[w]hen the dignity of the human person is respected, and his or her rights recognized and guaranteed, creativity and interdependence thrive, and the creativity of the human personality is released through actions that further the common good (2020a:#22).

This resonates with Nussbaum's principle of every person as an end.

Pope Francis uses the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to propose a solution for the wounded world. The parable shows us

how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good. At the same time, it warns us about the attitude of those who think only of themselves and fail to shoulder the inevitable responsibilities of life as it is (2020a:#67).

Pope Francis emphasises that we cannot be indifferent to suffering, allowing anyone to go through life as an outcast. Instead, we should feel indignant, challenged to emerge from our comfortable isolation and be changed by

our contact with human suffering. That is the authentic meaning of dignity (2020a:#68). Holding up the image of the Good Samaritan, Pope Francis invites us to teach and preach about

the social meaning of existence, the fraternal dimension of spirituality, our conviction about the inalienable dignity of each person, and our reasons for loving and accepting all our brothers and sisters (2020a:#86).

With this attitude, people would affirm the dignity and basic rights of the frontline workers.

4.2 Social friendship and political charity

The parable of the Good Samaritan shows that

the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions (2020a:#66).

Jesus' parable summons us to be builders of a new social bond, to direct society to the pursuit of the common good, to persevere in consolidating its political and social order, its fabric of relations and human goals.

Pope Francis warns against politics totally subject to the economy and an economy dependent on a technocracy. Neither the marketplace nor technology can solve every problem. We need to work toward a political order that puts human dignity at the centre and has social charity as its soul. We need alternative social structures and politics that look to the common good in the long term (2020:#168). Good politics will seek ways of building communities at every level of social life, in order to recalibrate and reorient globalisation and thus avoid its disruptive effects (2020a:#182). Nussbaum also suggests that empowerment of women needs social arrangements and groupings. The government should reform social institutions and policies that support women's empowerment and development. As Pope Francis said:

A better policy, placed at the service of the true common good, is necessary to allow the development of a world community, capable of achieving fraternity from peoples and nations that live in social friendship (2020a:#154).

When we seek and work toward social fraternity and social justice for all, for a social and political order with social charity as its soul, this is the greatest charity: political charity. This is one of the highest forms of charity. This love, this charity, is found not only in our personal relationships, but

also in our macro-relationships: social, economic, and political realms (2020a:#180-181).

Quoting Pope Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), Pope Francis insists that charity is at the heart of every healthy and open society, yet nowadays, "it is easily dismissed as irrelevant for interpreting and giving direction to moral responsibility" (2009:#2). When accompanied by a commitment to the truth, charity is much more than personal feeling. Indeed, its close relation to truth fosters its universality and preserves it from being "confined to a narrow field devoid of relationships". Otherwise, it would be "excluded from the plans and processes of promoting human development of universal range, in dialogue between knowledge and praxis" (2009:#4). Without truth, emotion lacks relational and social content. Political love is a kind of love, expressed in those acts of charity that spur people on to create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures, to work to change the social conditions that caused one's suffering. It is an indispensable act of love to strive to organise and structure society so that one's neighbour will not find him-/herself in poverty or suffering (2020a:#186).

Charity, therefore, cannot be reduced to the mere relationship of help and assistance. It is justice, hope, and love in action at different levels.

Any commitment in this sense becomes a supreme exercise of charity. In fact, an individual can help a person in need, but when he joins with others to create social processes of fraternity and justice for all, he enters the field of the greatest charity, political charity (2020a:#180).

In extending social and political friendship to the frontline workers, relevant labour laws and policies must be enacted to protect workers' rights.

4.3 Social friendship without boundaries

Social friendship is the other name for fraternity, care, and benevolence and the search for the right relationship. It is a strong moral posture that refuses to disdain the other, the weakest in society, and that opens up to the construction of co-responsibility. This relationship makes us sensitive to the other and to respect the other, allowing us not to distort the image of the other. Hospitality, experienced as reciprocity, sheds light on the challenges of solidarity with the frontline and migrant workers, the vulnerable in our society.

The Good Samaritan disregarded all cultural, historical, and religious boundaries and put a wounded and helpless person in the centre. This is

an act of selfless and outgoing love. Pope Francis proposes a “culture of encounter”, meaning that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone ... an aspiration and a style of life. The subject of this culture is the people (2020a:#216).

In the final chapter of *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope assigns a special role to religions. He believes that all religions,

based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building human fraternity and defending justice in society (2020a:#271).

Hope lies in rebuilding a society of “fraternity” and “social friendship” or, in “humanism inspired by faith” (2020a:#86), and in love, truth, justice, and mercy.

In building social friendship across boundaries, post-colonial feminist theology, from an Asian perspective, which emphasises multi-axial analysis and building friendship and solidarity across race, gender, class, and religious affiliation sheds light on our understanding. For feminist theologians, from both Asian and Afro-American perspectives, sexism is not the only kind of oppression in society (Kwok 2000; 2021; Cannon 1988; Williams 1993). Sexism is often intertwined with classism and racism. For Asians with a colonial background, colonialism is also an area of concern. We must thus consider all these different kinds of oppression. We must analyse marginalisation in various ways. There is always the Other within the Other. Post-colonial critics challenge any simple dualistic caricature of the power dynamics behind domination/submission, insider/outsider, powerful/powerless, and coloniser/colonised. A woman should not be treated solely as a sexualised subject, because her identity is also shaped by class, language, ethnicity, and so on (Kwok 2000:62). We need to pay attention to the intersecting axes of gender, sexuality, militarism, and empire (Kwok 2021:102). We thus have to avoid the attitude of indifference when we face people whose jobs, class, gender, and race are different from ours. During the pandemic, when we focused on the health and safety of ourselves and our families, the safety and well-being of the frontline workers, especially cleaners and foreign domestic helpers should not be neglected. Below are examples of social friendship and political charity.

4.4 Pastoral responses

The Catholic Commission for Labour Affairs (HKCCLA) *cum* Catholic Labour Centres have organised self-help groups among cleaners and workers with different kinds of job, striving for equal rights with the workers, empowering

workers through various activities, for both native local workers and ethnic minority workers. They also mobilised parishioners and Catholic schools to distribute masks and disinfectant to cleaners and other workers, as well as food and daily necessities to people in need. Some of the parishioners or volunteers who were involved in this project donated money and materials, and spent time and effort to purchase and organise supplies. Moreover, some listened to the stories of those who received the supplies and talked with them. A considerable number of receivers were willing to share their experiences with other people, to hear their stories.

Bethune House is a temporary women's shelter run by MFMW, dedicated to serving the migrants. It offers refuge to dozens of distressed workers at a time. It is "home" for many migrant domestic workers who have nowhere to go. Many have had their contracts terminated for no reasonable cause. Some are facing court cases, while others are simply seeking safety away from abusive employers. Bethune House provides not only free food and shelter, but also legal guidance, educational classes (language, computer, and cooking lessons), as well as outings and activities (yoga and handicraft). The Catholic Church's pastoral centre also has a women shelter that offers similar services to migrant workers.

The rights group Social Justice for Migrant Workers coordinates an online campaign for those domestic workers who were penalised for violating the social distance measure. It raised over HK\$78,000 (approximately USD10,000). A description for the campaign reads:

With your help and donations, we can relieve those who are regarded as the backbone of our society, from the heavy financial burden they now face.

All these groups and initiatives aim to build a care and life-giving community that is inclusive, communitarian, and respects differences. This community goes beyond the boundaries of gender, class, ethnicity, and religion.

5. CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, affirming the valuable contributions of frontline cleaning workers and migrant domestic helpers was indispensable. We should extend our solidarity and share resources and friendship with them in various ways. This article shows that Nussbaum's capabilities approach emphasises women's moral agency and the importance of women collectives, whereas Catholic social thought has greater recognition of the social dimensions of human embodiment and structural change of society. Moreover, post-colonial feminist theology,

from an Asian perspective, emphasises multi-axial analysis and building friendship and solidarity across race, gender, class, and religious affiliation. All these approaches can complement each other in actualising solidarity with women on the frontlines.

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