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■ EDITORIAL ■

Superpay for supermaids

A SERIOUS contradiction, apparently caused by naiveté or dishonesty or both, has infected nongovernment efforts to improve the lot of household helpers.

While some groups have been clamoring for the passage of a bill raising the wages of domestics working in the Philippines, others have protested against government efforts to increase the minimum salaries of those deployed abroad.

The legislative measure aimed at increasing the wages of locally-employed domestic helpers is premised on human rights, and is meant to align existing norms with the higher standards required by the principle of emancipation.

The bill's progress in the halls of Congress is a testament to the unwavering efforts of nongovernment organizations to advance the human rights of domestics. The Senate recently approved the measure, taking the cause of raising domestics' living standards a step closer to reality.

To be sure, a P2,000 minimum monthly pay isn't enough, especially in Metro Manila. That amount translates to a measly daily wage of about P67, way below the mandated average of P250. However, the adjustment is a big improvement over the P800 minimum now obtaining for local domestics.

But while things are looking up for them, the same cannot be said of their peers deployed in other countries. A Palace initiative meant to raise the wages of household helps working abroad has come up against opposition from nongovernment groups supposedly working to uplift their lives.

These groups surprisingly have marshaled free market-inspired arguments to push for their cause. They say increasing the minimum wage for domestics abroad would price them out of the market, as Indonesians and other nationals are more than willing to do the same job for less the pay.

This argument reminds us of employer groups who buck another pending legislation aimed at raising the national minimum wage. But should we align local employers' interests with those of overseas-based domestics?

We think not. Local employers' opposition to raising the national minimum wage by legislation is driven by economic realities and the structural weakness of most Philippine enterprises. To reprise an argument we raised in an earlier editorial, not all businesses enjoy the double-digit profit growth reported by blue-chip firms, since many are small and medium enterprises whose margins are narrower owing to the great number of players in their industries.

Despite this, their workers still have recourse to regional tripartite boards or to collective bargaining for wage adjustments. Not so for domestics working abroad, whose only recourse is the Philippine embassy or consulate, which, in any event, can't enforce an employment contracts to which it isn't a party.

The Palace plan to require a minimum wage for overseas domestics is aimed at obtaining parity for these workers who are employed in so-called 3D work situations. The matter of pricing them out of the market, therefore, is worth pursuing if that is a market for dirty, degrading and dangerous jobs, from which only unscrupulous recruiters benefit.

From a strategic trade perspective, therefore, it makes sense to secure the premium niche for Filipino domestics by demanding a higher minimum wage. If pursued, this policy provides incentives for everyone in the business—from the recruiter to the applicant—to ensure quality employment. This will result in better work and living conditions for domestics abroad, and would minimize the tragedy of 16-year-old girls returning home abused or, worse, in caskets.