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Forgotten and Invisible Laborers: Domestic Workers in Singapore and Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

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This paper is about legal yet unjust systems of domestic servitude; the oppressive circumstances that ‘foreign maids’ the world over face as unappreciated, unrecognized, and undervalued workers in the invisible domestic space. Regardless of political culture and regime - liberal democracies to authoritarian governance - ‘maids’ are excluded from normal labor standards. The author explains and discusses the legal blind spots, loopholes, and oversight of labor clauses for foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in the East Asian states of Singapore and Taiwan. This paper aims to spark critical conversations about the public/private divide, also the feasibility of enacting home-based legislation for private household workers. It uses the reviewed literature - relevant research studies, government websites, and news sources - and interview findings to advance its main claims. Between May 2021 and July 2022, the author conducted online semi-structured interviews on WhatsApp/Zoom with 61 people who were directly or indirectly involved in eldercare provision: FDWs, domestic employers, recruitment agency managers, unpaid family caregivers, and NGO workers. The author’s analysis shows that FDWs, called ‘maids’ in the local parlance, face a myriad of shocking abuses by sending/receiving governments, unscrupulous recruitment agencies, and host employers who view them as private property (owned) rather than human beings with needs. This paper argues that FDWs deserve to be respected and included in formal labor laws like the rest of the workforce, to better safeguard their physical safety, mental wellbeing, and personal dignity.

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the global problem of the absence of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in national labor standards legislation and legal enforcement domains in East Asia. It uses interview data and reviewed literature from two small but significant cases of receiving



destinations: Singapore and Taiwan. The author argues that FDWs should be integrated into formal policy channels and official labor recognition systems to better protect the physical safety and mental well-being of FDWs. Like in most other advanced industrial economies, FDWs residing in Singapore and Taiwan are legally required to stay (live in) 24/7 at their employer's residence, which also doubles as their workplace. This arrangement creates heightened vulnerability to abuse and exploitation because the home is not seen or treated as a proper site of employment while all the labor they perform – regardless of how professional and skilled, like medical tasks for eldercare – is not recognized as real work. As political scientists have observed in comparisons of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, their vast differences in political regime, governance structure, and hiring rules for domestics – for example, Taiwanese can only hire for urgent eldercare needs and are required to furnish proof, like medical assessments of the Barthel index – may appear legally significant but do not translate into actual differences (Laliberte, 2017). Across the social sciences, researchers note that the live-in regime is an all-important common factor of oppression through its concrete restrictions on FDWs' socioeconomic mobility, with the result that employers often ignore official rules for regular off days, salary payments following minimum wage recommendations (Wang et al., 2018), insurance provision, and the like, made worse by the "inability or unwillingness of authorities to enforce it" (Laliberte, 2017: 118). Beyond labor rights disputes, the poor health of FDWs is also well-documented, although severely underrated by employers. NGO reports reveal that out of more than 100 surveyed FDWs, only two said that their employers did not give them undesirable conditions (Dutta et al., 2018: 645). The most ungovernable yet crucial aspect to many FDWs was the connections between food access, (in)security, and general health; physical, mental, and spiritual. Employers varied widely in their approach to food management, but plenty reported feeling undignified and insulted by the lack of culturally appropriate food and their employer's nonchalance towards their overall wellness. This research builds on such existing empirical and theoretical studies of FDWs in Asia, which the author does not have the space to elaborate fully on, that are part of a global feminist problem of social reproduction struggles and the popular usage of 'maids' in informal and privatized family care (Chien, 2018; Glenn, 1992; Lan, 2016; Liang, 2018; Yeoh & Huang, 2009; Teo, 2018).

Thanks to the extensive contributions of many passionate scholars of migrant workers' rights in East Asia, there is no shortage of research studies and secondary literature – a selectively curated list is used for references – on FDWs in the locations of interest. Methodology and methods-wise, most projects take qualitative approaches and use ethnographic observations in public spaces, in-depth semi-structured or unstructured interviews, and house visits to employers' places of residence. All studies refer directly or indirectly to the themes of live-in oppression, namely the asymmetrical power-over relationship that employers wield over FDWs and the ensuing myriad of abuse, exploitation, and grievances arising from erroneous behavior and unethical exploitation (e.g. Chien, 2018; Huang et al., 2012; Lan, 2016). Some key aspects are comparisons of sending countries' protection of overseas workers especially Indonesia and the Philippines (Setyawati, 2013), contrasts of receiving states' regulations for live-in workers (Shu-Ju Cheng, 1996), restrictions on FDWs' physical and socio-economic mobility (Lan, 2016; Yeoh & Huang, 2009, 1999), and migrant strategies of resistance in response to stifling labor regimes (Lan, 2003; Soco, 2011; Ueno, 2009). In the interest of space, this paper will not elaborate extensively on the breadth and depth of the relevant literature but will identify their key strands. Less common are comparisons of skills regimes for FDWs that discuss the socio-legal processes of devaluing a 'maid's' body alongside her labor (e.g. Ortiga et al., 2020; Wang & Chan, 2017). In Singapore



and Taiwan, even fewer studies dissect the abstract and broad category of ‘domestic’, while the current discussion follows interviews with eldercare based FDWs; caring labor is at the center, which sparks further insights on the role of government ministries and recruitment agencies/brokers in improving lackluster trainee management processes. FDWs’ regulation directly implicates the host society’s elderly welfare because their survival, quite literally, is in the hands of FDWs like those the author interviewed. This paper invites other researchers to unpack the range of tasks lumped under ‘domestic’, and to think comparatively across regions and countries about the legal blind spots of house workers.

While most research studies do not differentiate between the many possible tasks of a ‘domestic’, the author interviewed FDWs whose primary responsibility is caring for elderly patients with a variety of health conditions and care needs. By doing so, this paper contributes to existing efforts to respect FDWs as a nationally legitimate workforce and underscores its urgency by connecting their legal entitlements to elderly welfare (and the lack thereof). This paper encourages privileged and powerful stakeholders in the policymaking community to give greater thought to securitizing workers’ well-being, personal dignity, and satisfactory quality of care delivery. In addition, future scholarly contributions to this journal might analyze specific sub-sectors of ‘domestic’ work like informal childcare, English tutoring, eldercare (this article), and other skills apart from general housekeeping chores that FDWs contribute. Eventually, these discussions will provide much-needed resources for understanding the devaluation of ‘foreign maids’ through finer mechanisms of skills degradation and contradictory occupational mobility; many FDWs are professional and highly skilled employees in their home countries but are paid way less than what they get as overseas ‘maids’. Research that discusses the structural injustices against ‘domestics’ is undoubtedly important, and so are studies that inquire into the full range of FDWs’ contributions, expertise, and specializations. Ultimately, the undying fight for some semblance of formal legal admission into official employment standards unites researchers of this subject matter.

2. Research Methods

This paper’s argument draws from a mixture of reviewed literature (research studies that are theoretical, empirical, and both), relevant government policy statements and news stories, and in-depth qualitative interviews done with 61 people in Singapore and Taiwan. All interviews were done remotely through WhatsApp video (FDWs’ most preferred communication method) and Zoom conferencing (other groups) from June 2021 to May 2022 when the author returned to her home country Singapore. COVID-19 situations were at their peak and due to travel or public distancing restrictions, the author conducted all interviews online. The pandemic disrupted all face-to-face arrangements, but this paper is grateful to the enthusiastic reception of many netizens who became interviewees.

Table 1 below gives a breakdown of the interviewees. The majority are FDWs from the Philippines and Indonesia whose job scope includes taking care of elderly family members in their employer’s residence. The author also interviewed a smaller number of domestic employers, unpaid family caregivers, recruitment agency managers, and NGO workers. In both Singapore and Taiwan, contacts were sourced through research participation invitations in social media groups (Facebook), texting personal and informal acquaintances, and email correspondence with migrant worker NGOs. Snowball sampling among FDWs, especially close friends, also led to additional referrals. No pairs of employers and FDWs were interviewed together because the inherent power-over relationship in live-in arrangements is



ethically problematic. The author adopts the interviewees' preferred forms of identification, comprising names or initials, as per their preferences.

Table 1: Author's interviews

Interviewees	Singapore	Taiwan	Total
Foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore/ live-in caregivers in Taiwan	14	13	26
Domestic employers	4	3	7
Unpaid family caregivers	3	3	6
Recruitment agency managers/labor brokers	3	1	4
NGO workers	8	10	18
Total	31	30	61

Although the author articulates with an 'objective' voice, this journal contribution identifies with the broader goals of methodological innovation as outlined by qualitative feminist psychologists who advocate an approach of looking backwards (at what already exists) to envision fruitful analytical horizons (Clarke & Braun, 2019: 195). This call does not intend to be prescriptive for feminist thinkers, broadly referring to researchers whose topics are concerned with women's marginalization and violent oppression, but rather stands by an intellectual commitment to novelty; a courageous willingness to trespass conventional scholarly boundaries. In this research, the author perceives a standpoint perspective of 'doer knows best' as one of the most relevant frameworks for interpreting the interview data, comprising FDWs' stories and first-hand experiences (Harding, 2009: 195). The basic premise is that personal caregivers for the elderly (FDWs) have the deepest appreciation of the care work they do on behalf of mostly unappreciative host societies, also the most salient understanding of how their labor is degraded and devalued. FDWs are highly preoccupied with labor rights issues – critiquing their own and the host society's governments for neglecting to protect their bodies and rights as workers – but they also provide candid, heartfelt, and sincere narratives of the emotional challenges at work that contradict many citizens' views of eldercare as easy, causal, and unskilled. Many FDWs spent more than half of the interview duration letting off steam and ventilating about how difficult and unreasonable their patients are, especially in cases of dementia where the elderly has violent behavior and speaks unfetteredly, usually with sexist and racist remarks. Some FDWs were fortunate to have supportive employers while others were the object of their female superior's – typically addressed as ma'am in Singapore and lady boss (*lao ban niang*) in Taiwan – random tantrums. Overall, FDWs' statements clearly reflect a higher social exposure to eldercare work and a perceptive advantage of its tribulations compared to many pampered citizens in receiving countries. Considering these contrasts between different respondent groups, a standpoint view is relevant to making sense of the structural oppressions that live-in employment regimes (24/7 service by 'foreign maids') legitimize.



3. Discussion

3.2. Lived Experiences of ‘Foreign Maids’ in Singapore and Taiwan

The author coded the interviews using NVivo software with an open coding approach that treated the original transcripts – the interviewees’ original and unmodified words – as legitimate sources of triangulation. Rather than conceptual brackets or theoretical assumptions, their words were analysed based on what they imply about the challenges, difficulties, and vicissitudes of live-in employment regimes. All FDWs demonstrated an intimate knowledge and understanding of the *legal while unjust* nature of household servitude, legitimized through official migration streams like the 1978 Foreign Maid Scheme of Singapore and 1992 live-in caregiver program of Taiwan (Liang, 2021; Teo, 2018). It is important to clarify that this paper focuses on the absence of legal rights for FDWs to enact and practice their own labor laws, hence cannot attend to comparisons and contrasts of contextual differences, like political regime and governance, across both locations. In what follows, the author explains the key interview themes pertaining to FDWs’ unique yet universal discrimination. Ultimately, their narratives point to the utmost necessity of giving household workers equal access to employment benefits and labor protection as public sector employees.

3.3. Owning the ‘Maid’s’ Body and Personhood

Studies of domestic workers worldwide show that regardless of political culture and regime (an authoritarian to democratic continuum) and government type, the domestic (home/house) sector suffers from unique discrimination where any activity, labor or task, no matter how professional and highly skilled, is not seen as real work (Sarti, 2014). The looming feminist conundrum is not that domestic employment is unenjoyable or even hated by its workers, but rather that it is seen as all kinds of things other than legitimate employment, i.e., a voluntary labor of love instead of actual and real work deserving of financial compensation. In East Asian familial welfare regimes like Singapore and Taiwan, FDWs have likewise been excluded from national labor laws and formal employment protection, the Employment Act and Labor Standards Act, respectively (Lan, 2016; Teo, 2018). Like all other capitalist patriarchal governments, both states attribute this legal oversight to the difficulty of regulating home-based work, a gendered-racialized burden that disproportionately falls on first female citizens and then migrant women, in many cases both. Initially, the decision to import ‘foreign maids’ was to free up their own women into the paid workforce to maximize national economic growth; in no way was this measure intended as a long-term one because women were still held responsible for domestic management (Lee, 2019: 2520). Working mothers were encouraged to hire ‘foreign maids’ to assist with household chores and caregiving duties – mostly restricted to eldercare provision in Taiwan, at least on paper – while they managed full-time jobs outside the home (Chien, 2018: 1150). However, what was originally meant to be a stop-gap measure and temporary reprieve for female citizens quickly turned into an irreversible welfare pillar. Today, ‘foreign maids’ are hired by at least one in five (Singapore) and one in about twenty (Taiwan) households, meaning that without their presence, these countries’ will literally be paralyzed (Ministry of Manpower, 2021; Huang, 2021). There is no publicly available data on the ratio of live-in caregivers to Taiwanese households, but their prevalence is lesser and scarce compared to Singapore’s easy availability. Taiwan’s population (almost 24 million) is almost four times that of Singapore (5.6 million), but as of end-2021, Taiwan has 250 000 FDWs while Singapore has 246 300 (Huang, 2021; MOM, 2021). Yet FDWs are troubled by the total absence of both their own and the host society government’s willingness to account for their physical safety, mental well-being, and general welfare.



In both locations, the lack of concrete formal legislation, as opposed to merely informal recommendations and suggestions for employers, is justified by the arbitrary nature of household needs. Because every family's wants and needs differ, the "live-in requirements and the private nature of individual households" is impossible to regulate and unfriendly to normal labor rights definitions around basic issues like working hours, job scope, days off, medical treatment/healthcare insurance, annual leave, and otherwise (Chien, 2018: 1151). As mentioned earlier, the author focuses on the legal blind spots and formal loopholes in the rule-of-law system for regulating FDWs, especially in Singapore, where centralized policy implementation is highly effective. As such, this paper cannot elaborate on case-specific differences or the varied histories of domestic servitude in Asia. However, for the author's argument, it is most important to emphasise that the live-in regime has profound effects on employers' psyches: its normalization of 24/7 servanthood muddies the personal/professional and work/leisure boundaries. It is a commonplace for employers to imply a sense of entitlement over their 'maid's' body that extends into ownership of their entire being, personhood, and humanity. Institutional differences in live-in regimes aside, in both locations, the existing legislations for FDWs remain informal, unenforceable, and rarely, if ever, effective.

FDWs and NGO workers identified the domestic environment as an impossible place to govern from the government's perspective, not that it should not be given stronger labor regulations: "Because the kind of informality attached to domestic work and care work is still rather entrenched in our policies, there is definitely a reluctance to kind of formalize this sector." (Jaya, Humanitarian Organization for Migrant Economics (HOME), 1 November 2021). The stories of FDWs reflected horrific instances of abuse and exploitation – fortunately, these were previous employers rather than current – like being scalded by hot water, being hit with pots/pans/heavy cutlery, prolonged starvation, restricted access to food, overwork (longer than 12 hours per day with no or little rest), no days off, no handphones and communication with the outside world, and other examples of errant employer behavior. Such scenarios have been found by many other research studies, including the ones cited, which only attest to the widespread yet invisible nature of this abuse. Some FDWs cared for dementia patients and reported violent behavior, random tantrum outbursts, and unexpected mood swings that put them in grave danger. There were also occasions where minor burns, cuts, and scratches were inflicted while trying to stop their patients from playing with the gas stove or knives.

"In times like that I just tell myself just be patient, more patience, more patience, because no matter how patient you are, there comes a time that you'll really be like, want to explode and scold already, just really fed up, but then you cannot. You must have some sense right, cannot be like you're so mad already and then don't bathe her...no matter how sad you are, you just need to calm yourself down..." (Siti N., Indonesian FDW, 22 November 2021).

Sadly, hardly any FDWs felt appreciated and supported by their female employers because the majority told of many instances where they were privately and publicly humiliated with hurtful comments, insensitive remarks, and condescending or derogatory styles of treatment. FDWs felt that their hard work was futile because employers did not recognize them on equal terms as human beings with emotional needs: "Yes, we come here to work, to give better life for our family, but we are also human right? We also have feelings..." (Sha, Filipino FDW, 2 June 2021). Another remarked that they were constantly over-exhausted "But for them, nothing. They don't appreciate what I did." (Maryani, Indonesian FDW, 20 December 2021). Sometimes, FDWs were publicly humiliated with no consideration of their dignity, like when



an employer shouted in a crowded mall: “Why you so stupid?”. This FDW lamented, “stupid is always the code word.” (Maylene, Filipino FDW, 6 June 2022).

“Because you can feel that, you know, it’s more like you already did your best but she just complains, still got something to say, and then she will talk about you to other people...you just right there and she will talk about you. It’s very...it’s not nice, it doesn’t feel nice” (Mitch, Filipino FDW, 8 June 2021).

In contrast to FDWs who had a clear view of their marginalized status as foreign outsiders, most employers spoke with remarkable casualness when describing what they gave and did not give to FDWs. Importantly, researchers cannot assume or judge the character of employers based on these offhand remarks, because typically, they are unintentional and arise out of ignorance or sheer lack of exposure rather than malign intentions. In both locations, it was common for employers to complain rudely about the quality (*su zhi*) of ‘foreign maids’ rather than recognize the deeper structural issues (patriarchy and gendered divisions of labor) of social reproduction crisis in the domestic economy. In other words, instead of asking why society is so heavily dependent on FDWs for running its own households, which should be a shared responsibility instead of just women’s work, employers direct their anger and frustrations at less privileged women. Again, because the home is perceived by most people as disconnected and separate from the formal political economy, any grievances are a private matter to be negotiated between individual employers and employees. This public/private division troubles many activist and NGO efforts to improve labor politics for FDWs. Even something as taken-for-granted like the technological revolution, which has empowered many migrants through digital activism, is not guaranteed because the home is not recognized as a real workplace. As the senior project manager at Migrant Workers Centre (MWC) said, “there is no law that says anything about handphone usage in Singapore, so technically, a domestic worker can have her phone confiscated.” (Lynn, 21 September 2021).

“My first couple of helpers didn’t actually have a mobile phone, and they didn’t have a day off, and I think a lot of it is agency dependent. Nowadays, it’s so different, frankly, the handphone wasn’t even discussed. I actually didn’t think much of it really, I mean most people just follow what the agency says right?” (PW, Singaporean employer and family caregiver, 30 November 2021).

The observation that recruitment agencies “largely set the tone in terms of the contract, like is there a day off, is their handphone allowed and so on...” cannot be underestimated for its social effects of ideological transmission (PW, 30 November 2021). Despite their very different legal administrative capacities and policy implementation power, employers in both locations view recruitment agencies as representatives of government authority and take most of their instructions to heart. FDWs who have worked in both places noted Singapore’s “very strict” rule-of-law society compared to Taiwan’s ease of mobility and freedom: “Singapore very strict, so many rules, this one cannot, that one cannot, and government strong. Here in Taiwan, they very free, don’t care one...” (Jannah, Indonesian FDW, 6 December 2021). Another FDW said that she could not freely enter and leave her employer’s house in Singapore other than on designated off days, but in Taiwan, “we go to the neighborhood park or shopping center, whenever ah gong wants to go, every day also can.” (S, Indonesian FDW, 30 November 2021).

Although this paper does not elaborate fully on this distinction, it is worth noting that civil society discourse among NGOs is less regulated and more ‘radical’ in Taiwan, which is likely related to its post-2000 democratization and changes in political culture that



trickle down into the social welfare debates and household interactions (Hsieh, 2014; Lan, 2003; Peng, 2018). True enough, Taiwanese citizens themselves said that compared to Singapore's government which "decides on a policy direction and commits to realizing it" (Heidi, Taiwanese family caregiver, 17 February 2022), Taiwan's government "changes so often, so there is no consensus on long-term care (LTC) policy direction." (Wei Dong, Hope Workers' Centre (HWC), 18 January 2022). Taiwan is well-known for being the 'democratic capital' of Asia since its post-2000 regime change when the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) achieved a historic win over the ruling Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) party; this high turnover rate between the two rotating parties in power every four years is a political flip-flop that Singapore has no equivalent of, because its ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has gone uninterrupted since 1965 (Sciubba & Chen, 2017). That said, recruitment agencies' marketing content and promotional material had equally intense effects on employers' attitudes and perceptions of 'foreign maids'. In many cases, employers partook in unethical practices that are abusive, erroneous, and uncaring yet are widely condoned by state authorities. Beyond the household level at the scale of government-to-government (G2G) and recruitment agency/broker partnerships, FDWs and NGO workers were critical of one industry practice, namely, contract replacement and/or substitution, that they felt was the root of many problems.

3.4. Contract Replacement and/or Substitution

Another significant legal vacuum is that of contract replacement and/or substitution, which many saw as a deliberate oversight and willful ignorance of all governments involved, including their own. Notably, all FDWs attributed their employer's lousy behavior and ignorance of their legal entitlements to shoddy agencies/brokers that do not communicate with employers well enough.

"Why the middleman is allowed to do this, right? If we have problems over here, only the NGOs will be able to help at all, the Indonesian government also is not able to give us any help...if we Indonesians run into problems over here, they don't have much in the way of help. Philippines is different from us, the government over there has a lot of laws and rules, but Indonesia we don't have. The domestic workers for our government, they also do not look at us as significant, very different rules and all that" (Fajar, Indonesian live-in caregiver, 26 November 2021).

"Then when we arrive here in Taiwan, the recruitment agency just gives the documents to the migrants to sign, and it's not translated into English, it's in Chinese. But because it's your first time coming here, and because you don't know the rules, you have to sign. If you ask questions, what is that blah blah blah, they just get mad or whatever, so you have to sign. And this agreement, the contract, it's not the same" (Hilda, Filipino domestic helper, 16 January 2022).

Simply put, contract replacement or substitution refers to when the official, lawful, and legal terms of employment – including stipulations on maximum working hours/rest times during the day, weekly days off, job scope definitions (e.g., child/elder caregiving or general chores) and dignified treatment – are removed and/or heavily subverted when FDWs travel between their home country and the receiving destination. The Philippines, as one of the strongest sending destinations for labor migrants, has dedicated government ministries and agencies to service its Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) worldwide. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), according to existing research and FDWs themselves, does a relatively robust job of instilling labor rights consciousness before departure compared to other sending governments like India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand



(Setyawati, 2013: 275). Indeed, all FDWs, regardless of nationality, agreed that the Philippine state was best at protecting its migrant workers due to its historical experiences with labor activism and high-profile abuse incidents (e.g., Soco, 2011). Its Pre-departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS) was credited: “From our country, we train well” about “what is right and what is correct, and what you should do...know the law when you enter this country.” (Sha, Filipino FDW, 2 June 2021). Recruitment agency managers seconded this view: “Many Filipino ladies, they read the contract line by line” and ask, “where are my rights, sir?” which is not at all common for other nationalities (Asraf, Active Global Agency Singapore, 2 November 2021).

However, as Hilda said above, it is commonplace for private ‘maid’ agencies to change, modify, or switch the terms of work without FDWs’ consent to appease prospective employers, which often leads to unbearable conditions like excessive tasks, no days off, and no handphones. It was typical to hear FDWs lament about employers failing to recognize the challenges of caregiving: “I often hear other helpers complain that it’s already very difficult to look after the elderly, but family members still give them a very hard time.” (Desy, Indonesian FDW, 10 June 2021). Furthermore, it is precisely the tricky situation of live-in scenarios that allow a ‘one of the family’ or ‘part of the family’ logic to disguise the exploitation of FDWs. Employers may “expect a wider job scope”, get “too close for comfort” and request for “all these dubious favors” using a kinship framework (John Gee, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), 12 November 2021). Some FDWs were asked to do plenty beyond their primary job scope but could not refuse, especially when employers were cordial and polite, a function of the asymmetrical power-over relationship in the live-in regime. The ‘inclusive’ nature of cohabitation leads many employers to equate FDWs with ‘one of us’, which coerces them into ‘voluntary’ overtime as a function of family life; labor violations are sugar-coated as natural favors (e.g. Brown, 2019: 254). Woefully, many FDWs are acutely aware of this situation but have little choice other than to “just accept” these “control problems” because “repatriation for them is like a death sentence”; many are supporting loved ones in financial distress back home (Father Peter Nguyen Van Hung, Vietnamese Migrant and Immigrant Office, 23 February 2022).

“Some employers are very inconsiderate...I think if you apply for the job and the job scope is to take care of baby, then you just take care baby. If got housework is okay but if there’s an elderly, I think they should take another helper and then share the housework or something like that. Otherwise, the helper will be very overworked” (Mitch, Filipino FDW, 8 June 2021).

3.5. Who Pays for the Deskilling of ‘Maids’?

FDWs and NGO workers were most privy to the connections between the state’s devaluation of eldercare, their presence as informal and poorly trained pseudo-medical or healthcare workers (migrant-in-the-family model), and finally, elder abuse and/or neglect. Contrary to host employers who do not recognize the risks that poorly managed ‘foreign maid’ regimes pose to their own elderly, FDWs identified the many dangers that both caregivers and recipients face. Part of the state’s dismissal of FDWs as real workers are reflected in their hands-off approach to recruitment agencies’ training standards and licensing requirements for caregiving duties.

When employers complain about FDWs’ inexperience and lack of caregiving expertise, they neglect that their own governments are responsible for establishing the broader systems that devalue care work by degrading its workers; globally, FDWs are the only (domestic) workforce who are excluded from formal labor legislation (Cheng, 2020; Glenn, 1992; Liang, 2018). Past and ongoing migrant labor rights studies repeatedly find that although all foreign laborers face



discrimination with salary payments, days off, and accessing healthcare, domestics are the most vulnerable because of their unique live-in situation: “Especially for the domestic helper, it’s more complicated because they reside in individual houses, and conflict tends to be tense. The complication is that they have to stay in. For migrant workers, I think the distance helps a bit. They don’t stay with their employer, they go to the dormitory, and they have their free time.” (Lynn, 21 September 2021). Consequently, many employers blame FDWs for inadequate skills rather than more powerful capital-wielding stakeholders in the caregiving arrangement. The official minimum caregiver training education/training ranges from 90 to 120 hours, but it is more than common practice – and widely condoned by state authorities at that – for many smaller mom-and-pop ‘maid’ agencies to heavily reduce or forgo this component altogether due to resource constraints, time pressure, and otherwise (Liang, 2018, 2021; Ortiga et al., 2020).

“The truth be told, the bar is actually set at a very low level. The employment agents, typically they will do the bare minimum, so they will train domestic workers in very basic domestic chores, cleaning, cooking, ironing, washing, laundry and that’s pretty much about it...Now when it comes to eldercare, eldercare is typically seen as an additional add-on, it’s like a modular...These are like a package add-on if you want, you will have to do it yourself or you request for an agent to do it” (Don, Center for Domestic Employees (CDE) Singapore, 9 November 2021).

Taiwan’s situation is no less optimistic because the NGO workers are likewise jaded about the poor regulation of caregiving skills regimes for incoming FDWs, saying that often, adult children do not realize that this version of filial piety, sanctioned by Confucian cultural and traditional norms in both locations, merely treats the elderly’s physical presence at home as an indicator of ‘good care’ rather than the actual quality of care delivery, the patient’s spirits, or otherwise. One Taiwanese observed that many advanced elderlies fare better when they benefit from a mixture of care delivery settings, like home-based support combined with day-care activity for social interaction that maintains cognitive function and lifts their spirits. She cautioned against becoming over-dependent on the one-to-one ‘foreign maid’ model that encourages a passive and sedentary disposition for the elderly, which is worse for their physical and mental health eventually, yet is a popular option because most families think “sending them to an institution is a non-filial act, like being abandoned...home-based care is the default option” (Grace, Domestic Caretakers Union (DCU) Taoyuan, 15 December 2021).

Indeed, many FDWs were cognizant of the contradiction between their employer’s self-congratulatory filial piety and their own assessments of the elderly’s quality of life, which in many cases, was less than ideal. Worse still, although less common in Taiwan than in Singapore, some employers were uninterested in the idea of letting FDWs go for additional caregiver courses and medical training to cope with the patient’s evolving needs despite their constant requests. In one case, Mitch’s patient suddenly started developing new psychological conditions and symptoms that puzzled her because the elderly woman had been cognitively sound for eight years. After some internet research, she suspected it was early dementia and asked her employer if they could sign up for dementia courses, but was unsuccessful: “I mention that I want to go for a dementia class, and then the daughter said, well my mother doesn’t have any dementia yet, so why you’re going?” (Mitch, Filipino FDW, 13 October 2021). In another scenario, this time more grievous, Sha’s employer instructed her to continue administering over-the-counter painkillers despite the patient’s worsening leg pains and need for medical intervention. Sha suggested exasperatedly to the adult children numerous times that they arrange for hospital appointments, but no one appreciated Sha’s professionalism.



“When I inform you about your mother, you think that I am bossy? I’m a reporter. I want you to know her daily life, what’s going on, you know? Shouldn’t you be happy? You know, when their mother was sick, they just ask me to give the Panadol, Panadol, everyday Panadol you know. I already told them, I cannot give you assurance that your mother is safe, and I am safe” (Sha, Filipino FDW, 2 June 2021).

No one was more aware of the dangers that eldercare skills gaps posed to caregivers and recipients than FDWs themselves. More importantly, their formidable hurdle is employers’ misassumptions and ignorance about eldercare – easy, causal, and unskilled – and the ensuing lack of appreciation and support for decent work conditions.

4. What Do FDWs Want?

“If they really recognize the caregivers and caretakers, it is easy to understand that we are workers also. Domestic work is work! Right? We didn’t see any recognition of our work, we are taking care of their lives, we are taking care of their family, the elderly in Taiwan, the sick people! Caregiver and caretaker is not included in Labour Standards Act...Why they didn’t want to include us in the LSA?” (Francia Baldera, Filipino domestic helper, 5 February 2022).

Firstly, FDWs should be entitled to inclusion under national employment standards or at least allowed to enact their own domestic-specific legislation with legal enforcement power instead of mere suggestions or recommendations to the public; the Taiwan International Workers’ Association (TIWA) has been advocating for a special household service act for decades. Above all, FDWs were most aware that because “informal workers are not entered in the labor law, there is no protection for us, unlike the formal workers.” (Siti F., Indonesian live-in caregiver, 9 February 2022). Without exception, all advocated for domestic, home-based, and household service workers to be integrated into national employment standards and labor rights provisions. Importantly, most FDWs did not argue against a live-in regime of employment, although many understood that their position as ‘migrants of need’ is a function of an uneven global political economy; large economic divides between the Global North and Global South that are underpinned by colonial histories and imperial domination. Rather, most focused on asserting their presence as legitimate workers and claiming their needs for better recognition and human dignity. In that regard, FDWs were remarkably accommodative of their employers as they recognized that many elderly patients require 24/7 attention, and to that extent, their work conditions cannot be legislated down to every minute detail. However, they did not feel that the unpredictability of care work contradicts the idea of formal legislation and labor laws that establish the essentials; the most urgent would-be regular salary payments, weekly days off, access to handphone and internet communication, adequate food, and rest, and working within one’s rightful job scope without illegal deployment (e.g., family businesses), all of which are rampant but overlooked issues.

Secondly, ironically but not surprisingly, FDWs were more concerned and passionate about eldercare than adult children or recruitment agencies; they clearly recognized the dangers of inadequate medical training and were visibly perturbed or upset. “You cannot look after the elderly in Singapore or anywhere without training!” (Sha, Filipino FDW, 2 June 2021). Like NGO activists, they too felt the urgent need for governments to professionalize the domestic sector by extending formal caregiver certifications, training, and licensing accreditation programs. As the author gathered from project managers at CDE Singapore, some NGOs have begun piloting specific FDW training incentives for eldercare. For some time, grassroots organizations like the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) in Singapore and the Global Workers’



Organization (GWO) in Taiwan have offered employers and employees the option to pre-match based on eldercare skills which are requested and sponsored by employers (e.g [Agency for Integrated Care, 2022](#)). However, these initiatives are still extremely insufficient to meet the care needs of aging populations; pilot programs are highly underutilized, have low participation rates due to cost barriers, and do not reach the majority of FDWs and/or employers alike. Especially for FDWs with gradually deteriorating patients, having accessible and affordable (if not free) caregiver classes was paramount: “one thing the government can do is boost training and knowledge for us caregivers...I need to have more training so that I can handle what I need to for the patient.” (Maylene, Filipino FDW, 6 June 2021). FDWs’ calls for their own occupational professionalization are seconded by community stakeholders like the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), which recommended standardized care matrixes for patients and corresponding skills certification for FDWs (see [Aware & Home, 2020](#)). Such pleas are targeted not only at achieving decent work standards at home but also improving the lives of elderlies.

“You have to understand how very tough being a caregiver is. You run to the hospital, you come back and do something again, you know? So sometimes, maybe some employers, they have to understand that being a caregiver is, it’s not easy for us, cleaning house, caring, you know?” (Maylene, Filipino FDW, 6 June 2021).

Finally, all FDWs reiterated the crucial importance of employers’ cooperation, support, and understanding; no laws intended for the privatized sphere will be effective without the political commitment of citizens themselves. While much is left to be done for governments that have not officiated labor rights for FDWs, since the present guidelines for respectful conduct and proper treatment remain at an informal level of strong public recommendations instead of formally enforceable law with penalty/punishments for errant offenders, the fact is that even if FDWs can access the Employment Act like public sector workers, effective implementation still relies on the charitable goodwill of individual employers. State authorities can launch home visit programs at broader and wider scales and strengthen the medical examination process for abuse checks, as FDWs testified is being done recently. However, the home’s walled-off privacy is another creature that remains largely ungovernable by even the strongest state bureaucracies. Most FDWs agreed that their circumstances would no doubt improve if the government took over the management of recruitment agencies, including caregiver training requirements, and employs civil servants to overlook the matching process themselves instead of leaving it to free market mechanisms. Beyond the institutional level, however, FDWs felt that even if the current informal hiring guidelines switched to effective formal legislation (still much needed), only improved awareness, education, and understanding by employers will bring actual improvements.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper argues for the absolute pertinence of strengthening policy enforcement of labor standards legislation in home-based employment. Among other suggestions, human rights activists (following FDWs’ own suggestions) have advocated for sending governments like Indonesia to implement revisions; untying FDWs’ residence rights to employer sponsorship, establishing proper redress channels for labor complaints, punishing errant employers strictly, and stronger community networks for abuse reports and mutual assistance (e.g [Hosen & Raharto, 2013: 401-402](#)). Many interviews were eye-opening experiences for the author, who got to hear about and witness first-hand the harrowing stories



of live-in workers beyond reading about them in scholarly perusing. Regardless of nationality, the root problem for all FDWs is an asymmetrical power relationship in the live-in regime that condones prolonged social isolation and unfree conditions: “Filipino or Indonesian or Myanmar or what, we are the maid” (Maylene, Filipino FDW, 6 June 2021). In other words, “we are all maids” whom employers wield an upper hand over.

Many themes emerged during the coding process, but the author has chosen those few that best reflect the legislative gaps in labor law enforcement. The live-in arrangement is an employment situation like no other that is taken-for-granted yet highly dangerous to FDWs; some major issues of concern are employers’ entitled ownership of their bodies, personhood, and dignity, contract replacement and/or substitution, and deskilling (eldercare) of FDWs healthcare experts, all of which pose long-term detriments. The author hopes this paper inspires further international research on ‘domestics’ in less well-represented aspects.

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