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How Deteriorating Conditions in Myanmar Affect Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore: A Transnational Analysis of Migrant Labour Regulation

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and 2021 military coup in Myanmar have greatly exacerbated the existing economic distress of ordinary people across the country. Yet, what has been the impact of the pandemic and the coup on Myanmar migrant workers abroad? To address this question, we investigate the situation of Myanmar migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Singapore. We find that pandemic-related economic contraction in Myanmar and heightened insecurity following the country's 2021 military coup have increased outmigration and intensified pressures on Myanmar domestic workers in Singapore to increase remittances and set aside aspirations of shortly returning home. These origin-country conditions, mediated through a transnational system of labour brokerage, have increased Myanmar MDWs' vulnerability to exploitation and abuse relative to MDWs of other nationalities. This article thus contributes to analysis of the transnational constitution of migrant labour regimes. Manuscript received 4 December 2022; accepted 22 February 2023

Keywords

Burma/Myanmar, labour regimes, migrant workers, Singapore, social reproduction

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Introduction

Coming in quick succession, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in Myanmar in 2020 and the military coup of February 2021 greatly exacerbated economic conditions for ordinary people across the country (ILO, 2022a; World Bank, 2022). But how have these developments affected Myanmar migrant workers in destination countries like Singapore? Addressing this question not only illuminates recent developments in Southeast Asia but also contributes to understanding the transnational character of migrant labour regulation in an unequal global order.

Critical scholarship on migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Singapore has focused on two main topics of analysis. The first is a regulatory bifurcation, which creates a segmented labour market structured by unequal restrictions and privileges – most notably, between salaried foreign professionals and low-waged migrant workers (Huang and Yeoh, 2003; Ye, 2021; Yeoh, 2006; Yeoh, 2004). The second topic of analysis has been the everyday, and often abusive, interpersonal dynamics between household employers and live-in MDWs (Huang and Yeoh, 2007; Kaur-Gill et al., 2021; Parreñas et al., 2021; Yeoh and Huang, 2010).

These studies thus speak to the domestic constitution of migrant labour regimes in Singapore. There is, however, a relevant older literature on the political economy of labour migration, which emphasises the role of relational global inequality in structuring labour migration and its domestic regulation (Burawoy, 1976). This approach underlies a critical tradition of political-economy-informed feminist analysis (Mies, 1986; Mohanty, 2003; Parreñas, 2015; Vergès, 2019). In this latter literature, the organisation of social reproduction within the home is understood to be structured by an uneven global order.

To investigate contemporary developments in the transnational shaping of domestic social reproduction, our guiding question is as follows. How do shifting external relations of global inequality and origin-country conditions inform uneven migrant labour regimes internal to the country of arrival – and specifically, in the case of Singapore, those that regulate MDWs? We employ the concept of labour regime here to denote the configuration of institutions and social relations regulating workers in particular times and places (Baglioni et al., 2022: 1). Increasingly, scholars of work and migration have shown how labour regimes are transnationally constituted by institutions, actors, and conditions beyond national borders (Chang, 2022: 138).

The situation of Myanmar MDWs in Singapore presents a particularly revealing case with which to explore this transnational shaping of both migrant labour regimes and social reproduction arrangements. This is because, as we elaborate below, Singapore's current economic model is structurally dependent on low-waged social reproduction labour performed by migrant women from low-income countries in the region – mostly Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar (Yeoh et al., 2021). At the close of 2022, there were, in Singapore, 943,400 migrant workers registered in the low-waged Work Permit category, of which 256,300 were MDWs (MOM, 2021). Excluding these Work Permit (and mid-level S-Pass) holders from Singapore's population of 5.45 million, there was, at the close of 2022, one MDW for roughly every seventeen residents

and Employment Pass holders (foreign professionals, managers, and executives). There was thus one MDW employed for almost every five households.

In addition, Myanmar MDWs in Singapore earn on average less than MDWs of other nationalities. According to a 2020 survey of maid agencies in Singapore, the average wage of a Myanmar domestic worker was S\$450 per month (the lowest of any nationality), compared to S\$570 per month for domestic workers from the Philippines (MSIG, 2020). Our own research confirms the persistence of such discrepancies into 2022. Alongside these wage disparities, recruitment fees vary by country of origin, and the resulting debts render migrant workers in Singapore differently vulnerable to wage theft and other abuse (Chok and Ng, 2017: 6, 16). This structural inequality calls for analytical inquiry into the determinants of differential migrant regulation, including informal disparities in treatment. The February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, as a severe turn of events, presents an additional recent independent variable around which to investigate the impact of changing home-country conditions on arrival-country labour regimes. In this regard, we find that deteriorating post-coup conditions in Myanmar have increased pressure on Myanmar MDWs in Singapore to accept lower wages and more disagreeable working conditions. This finding supports our overall contention that disparities in sending-country conditions underpin uneven migrant labour regimes in countries of arrival.

The findings presented herein are based on interviews with twenty-five individuals conducted in Singapore between November 2021 and February 2022. Interviewees included fifteen MDWs from Myanmar, three from Indonesia, and two from the Philippines, along with two staff of Singapore-based migrant employment agencies, two staff of Singaporean migrant-support organisations, and one Singapore-based Buddhist monk from Myanmar whom we consulted for historical background. We conducted all interviews with Myanmar MDWs in Burmese. With everyone else, we conducted interviews in English. MDW informants were selected through snowball sampling. Our methodological choice of privileging in-depth interviews was motivated by our aim of centring migrants' personal narratives of their migration experiences. Our analysis is further informed by our respective prior research on Myanmar migrants in Singapore (Khin Thazin, 2021) and Thailand (Campbell, 2018), and on internal migration within Myanmar (Campbell, 2022). This latter research in Myanmar informs our analysis of the push factors prompting outmigration from the country of origin.

By attending to the narratives of MDWs in Singapore, our research explores how domestic labour regulation mediates global inequality and is experienced, in turn, by individual migrant workers. To that end, we proceed by sketching the historical background informing our analysis of MDW regulation in Singapore. We then outline the theoretical grounds for analysing how global inequality and origin-country conditions inform the uneven regulation of migrant domestic labour in countries of arrival. Subsequently, we explore the perspectives and narratives of our informants, as insights into the reality of global inequality, as experienced by MDWs themselves. In closing, we consider the broader implications arising from our investigation, and from the views and narratives our informants conveyed.

Historicising Migrant Labour in Singapore

Since its founding in 1819, Singapore's development has relied heavily on migrant labour. In the colonial period, China and India were the source countries of choice. At independence in 1965, the new government pursued an export-oriented industrialisation agenda aimed, in part, at addressing domestic unemployment, with Malaysia designated as the exclusive source for migrant workers (Rodan, 1989: 85). By the early 1970s, Singapore reached full employment. Domestic manufacturers demanded, in turn, more "low-skilled" labour from abroad. In response, the government looked to "non-traditional" source countries, like Thailand, Bangladesh, and the Philippines (Kitiarsa, 2014: 11). Seeking to insert the country more effectively into global capitalist markets and to attract foreign investment, Singapore's government restructured its development agenda in the 1980s to focus on capital-intensive growth and a value-added service economy (Low, 2002: 96). This led to the government's present emphasis on raising productivity and sharpening the country's competitive edge as a global finance-tech hub, where Singaporeans work in a "post-industrial", "knowledge-based" economy, while low-waged foreign migrants are imported to fill menial, but nonetheless crucial, occupations (Yeoh, 2006: 27).

Although Singapore's dependence on foreign workers is longstanding, migrant labour policy has shifted over time to accommodate the country's changing economic imperatives. At present, the differentiation of migrant workers operates through categories that distinguish between skilled professionals, managerial workers, and "un-skilled/low-skilled" transient workers. An official statistical breakdown of migrant worker nationalities is unavailable, as Singapore's government considers such numbers sensitive (Low, 2002: 96). Nonetheless, Singapore's Work Permit requirements distinguish between "traditional" and "non-traditional" source countries, with the majority of Work Permit holders hailing from the latter, such as from Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines (Ye, 2021: 8).

It is through this highly differentiated system of migrant labour regulation that Singapore's government manages the country's "structural reliance" on MDWs (Goh et al., 2017). This reliance grew concomitant with women's increased labour force participation, which began in the 1960s but rose more significantly from the 1980s onwards, as Singapore transitioned into a global finance-tech hub. The result has been a substantial "care deficit" – a shortcoming in household social reproduction that MDWs have been tasked with filling (Goh, 2017: 411). Initially, in the 1970s, domestic workers in Singapore were mainly Cantonese *amahs* and Malaysian women (Goh et al., 2017: 412; Gaw, 1988). Beginning in 1978, the government granted approval for migrant workers from "non-traditional" source countries to enter Singapore as domestic helpers (Huang and Yeoh, 1996: 481). Specifically, the government launched a Foreign Maid Scheme to expand MDW recruitment beyond Malaysia, initially targeting the Philippines and Indonesia (Devasahayam, 2010: 47). Singapore's structural reliance on MDWs is thus inseparable from the country's global positioning as a "post-industrial", "knowledge-based" economy. Singaporean capital, meanwhile, has been increasingly invested abroad, including in extractive industries in migrant-sending countries, like Myanmar, where Singaporean plantation investments have displaced villagers and fuelled land disputes (ALARM Myanmar, 2018: 4).

The nature of Singapore's dependence on MDWs has also shifted to accommodate the needs of a rapidly ageing population, especially since the 1990s. As a staff of a local migrant support organisation told us, the high costs of specialised elder care in Singapore have motivated many households to outsource this work to cheaper MDWs, few of whom are professionally trained practitioners or nurses. In 2021, Singapore's Minister of Manpower noted that 86 per cent of MDWs in the country were hired by households to address caregiving needs (Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 2021).

The Singaporean government has endeavoured to manage this structural reliance on MDWs by establishing a highly segmented migrant labour regime, stratified along national, racial, ethnic, and gendered differences. What Yeoh (2006: 32) terms Singapore's "bifurcated labour" arrangement positions MDWs as the most alienated within the larger "unequal (non)incorporation" of migrant labour. This ordering of migrant workers became even more restrictive in 1984, when the government introduced measures prohibiting marriage between MDWs and Singaporeans, banning MDW pregnancies, and instituting biannual tests of MDWs for sexually transmitted diseases (LKYSPP, 2016: 5). At present, if MDWs are found to be pregnant or carrying sexually transmitted diseases, they face deportation and a possible ban from returning to Singapore to seek future employment.

Since around 2010, increased public scrutiny and civil society advocacy over MDW abuse and poor working conditions have pushed the government to amend some of its more draconian regulations (Devasahayam, 2010). Recent changes include enforcing mandatory weekly days off for MDWs, house visits by Ministry of Manpower officers, and changes in legislation to implement stricter rules on agencies and employers (Poh, 2016/17). These amendments evince how government policy and practice continue to structure "the real and discursive contours" of Singapore's migrant labour regimes (Coe and Kelly, 2002: 347). At the same time, however, the domestic regulation of migrant labour cannot be disentangled from regional geopolitical relations and Singapore's position in an uneven capitalist world system. Understanding Singapore's racialised and gendered migrant domestic labour regime thus requires that it be contextualised within the country's unequal relations with regional source countries.

For such an analysis, Myanmar is a particularly revealing case. While the 1990s saw a small influx of Myanmar nationals fleeing the post-1988 reassertion of military rule, it was not until the early 2000s that low-waged labour migration from Myanmar to Singapore significantly began. As we discuss below, the spur for this migration was largely post-socialist economic restructuring, which catalysed rural land dispossession, exacerbated income inequality, and heightened household debt. By the time of Myanmar's 2014 census, approximately 3.9 per cent of the country's population was labouring abroad, of whom 40,581 were women in Singapore employed almost exclusively as domestic workers (ILO, 2015). The latter figure is just over 18 per cent of Singapore's then total number of MDWs. This number continued to grow throughout Myanmar's so-called democratic transition, which lasted from 2011 until the 2021 coup. Responding in that period to concerns over alleged abuse of migrant women and to international pressure to address human trafficking, the Myanmar government

banned migration of domestic workers to Singapore from 2014 to 2019. Yet, given enduring push factors in Myanmar, the ban did little to curb the outward flow of migrants, or to reduce the abuses they faced. Instead, the move provided opportunities for underground labour brokering and thus increased migrant worker vulnerability (Deshingkar, 2021: 136).

Turning to the present, the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup have exacerbated economic pressures on women in Myanmar to migrate for work abroad. Individuals in Myanmar have also, since the coup, turned to labour migration to escape generalised insecurity across the country (Tun Aung, 2022). Meanwhile, the post-coup economic contraction and military crackdown have motivated workplace closures across public and private sectors. By July 2021, factory closures in Myanmar had resulted in a loss of 250,000 garment sector jobs (ILO, 2021). By the start of 2022, 1.6 million jobs had been lost in the country due to fallout from the coup (ILO, 2022a).

The most recent official estimate of Myanmar's population labouring abroad is 4.25 million, of whom around three million are in Thailand (Wongsuban, 2021). When the pandemic began, destination countries, including Thailand and Singapore, shut their borders to new arrivals, or at least severely restricted entry through onerous quarantine requirements. In Singapore, pandemic border controls, which curtailed or delayed the arrival of new MDWs, created a politically salient social reproduction shortage, as many households were unable to independently manage their caregiving needs (CNA, 2021). This imposed constriction on the supply of new MDWs gave some bargaining power to MDWs already in Singapore. However, as we discuss below, this temporary leverage was offset by MDWs' concerns about repatriation, as the pandemic had prompted an economic crisis in Myanmar wherein alternative livelihood options were scarce. By the end of 2021, the imperative to reopen the border to allow more domestic workers had become a pressing topic in parliamentary debates (Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 2021). In response, the government lifted the more onerous border controls, enabling once again the regular entry of MDWs into Singapore.

This brief historicisation of migrant labour in Singapore has highlighted how the country's structural reliance on MDWs is connected to its emergence as a global finance-tech hub, with high rates of female labour force participation and a rapidly ageing population. Myanmar, by contrast, has since 1988 been relegated to the role of a low-wage, extractivist export economy, wherein rural land dispossession, spurred by foreign investment and export speculation, has been a major driver of outmigration (Campbell, 2023: 7). This historical contextualisation allows us to connect questions about domestic migrant regulation to global political economic dynamics. In what follows, we elaborate on existing theorising of gendered and racialised social reproduction in an unequal global order. We then present our informants' narratives as insights into the uneven experiences of MDWs in Singapore.

Theorising Social Reproduction in an Unequal Global Order

That gendered domestic labour is integral to reproducing the capitalist mode of production is an argument most frequently traced to the 1970s wages-for-housework campaign (Federici, 2012; James and Dalla Costa, 1972). Such labour is deemed socially reproductive as it

births, raises, and cares for the proletarian bodies on which continued capitalist exploitation depends. Yet, as Black feminists in the United States were quick to point out, there have been stark racial and class disparities in patterns of social reproduction (Hooks, 2000: 38). Whereas white, middle-class women increasingly pursued full-time careers outside the home after the 1960s, working-class African-American women had long engaged in low-wage employment, in addition to unpaid domestic labour (Mohandesi and Teitelman, 2017: 44, 45). Moreover, in the US's racially segmented labour market, the latter employment had hitherto been largely restricted to labouring in the homes of white employers – an arrangement that facilitated the “super exploitation” of African-American women (Jones, 1949: 4, 11). Such racialised labour segmentation persists into the present, despite shifting demographics. By subsidising white middle-class social reproduction, the labour of low-waged, racialised domestic workers continues to enable employers, and especially women, to pursue full-time careers outside the home (Rosenbaum, 2017: 58).

Since the late twentieth century, paid domestic work across the North Atlantic has been increasingly carried out by migrant women from the Global South (Parreñas, 2015: 200). This has led to particular racialised regimes of social reproduction. Susanna Rosenbaum (2017), for example, writes of Mexican and Central American women employed as domestic workers in white households in Los Angeles. These racialised and gendered domestic labour arrangements, argues Rosenbaum (2017: 16), have “made possible the prosperity that defines white middle-class subjectivities.” To this, Mohanty (2003: 19) adds that globally divergent patterns of social reproduction need to be contextualised within the unequal world system that structures their emergence.

Global political and economic shifts since the late twentieth-century challenge the presumption that North Atlantic arrangements are paradigmatic of racialised migrant domestic labour regimes in general. In particular, East Asian economic ascendancy has disrupted prior conceptual cartographies of global relational inequality that followed the historical contours of European colonisation. What light might therefore be shed on the co-constitutive relationship between global inequality and patterns of social reproduction by centring inter-Asian domestic worker migration? With a kindred analytical interest, Hoang (2015) writes, in her ethnography of sex work in Ho Chi Minh City, that shifting racialisations in the industry's niche markets reflect the economic ascendancy of East Asia and the relative decline of Western economies. The industry, writes Hoang (2015: 53–77), now differently caters to a clientele segmented by race, class, and nationality, with wealthy East Asian businessmen at the top and white budget backpackers at the bottom. As for MDWs, their population in Asia now dwarfs that of such individuals employed in the North Atlantic. Of the 75.6 million domestic workers worldwide in 2022, over 50 per cent laboured in Asia Pacific countries, when compared to just 6.7 per cent across all of North America and Europe, according to the International Labour Organisation (2022b).

All of this is relevant for analysing the impact of shifting global political-economic inequality on MDW regulation in Singapore. Junjia Ye (2021: 5, 8), for instance, argues that domestic Singaporean state policy and practice have constructed a hierarchically segmented migrant labour market. Her account makes clear that this regulatory

bifurcation of migrant labour operates through pre-existing racialised, gendered, and classed inequalities, with resulting wage disparities closely correlated to country of origin (Ye, 2021: 4). In Singapore, MDWs are registered under the low-income Work Permit category, which limits source countries to Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand (MOM, 2022). In practice, however, MDWs in Singapore come overwhelmingly from Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, with lesser numbers arriving from India and Sri Lanka. By contrast, source countries for client-facing service sector jobs under the Work Permit scheme are restricted to Malaysia, China, South Korea, and Taiwan.

This nationality-based employment bifurcation establishes uneven access to formal employment protections, leading to racialised and gendered disparities in working conditions. Notably, MDWs are legally excluded from Singapore's Employment Act – which regulates such matters as working hours and paid leave – and from the Work Injury Compensation Act (Poh, 2016/17). Singapore's Ministry of Manpower has acknowledged that due to these legal exclusions, MDWs face disproportionately arduous working conditions. But officials defend this disparity on the grounds that the nature of domestic work makes it “difficult to regulate” (HRW, 2005). Tellingly, the harmful impact of COVID-19-related restrictions on male migrants employed in Singapore's construction, marine shipyard, and manufacturing sectors garnered important early critical attention (e.g., Loong, 2020). Yet, the parallel impact on MDWs received far less scrutiny, due largely to the locus and dynamics of the homespace (but see HOME, 2020 for an exception).

MDWs in Singapore are thus at disproportionate risk of certain employment-related harms. Documented abuses against MDWs in the country include forced confinement, restrictions on mobility, unpaid wages, lack of rest days, illegal deployment, inadequate accommodations, food deprivation, confiscation of passports and mobile phones, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and verbal abuse and threats (HOME, 2019, 2020; HRW, 2005). As is evident from our findings, the transnational system of labour brokerage plays an enabling role in exacerbating MDW vulnerability. To this, Parreñas et al. (2021) add that the unequal employer-sponsorship arrangement in Singapore subjugates MDWs to heightened discipline, thereby engendering a dynamic of “soft violence” in the home, which employers obscure through proximate interpersonal relations. Yet, even among MDWs, wages and working conditions vary, with nationality being a significant determinant for such disparity, as we elaborate below.

Trajectories of Myanmar MDWs in Singapore

After ten years of labouring in Singapore, forty-three-year-old Ma Khaing¹ felt she had had enough. The two-year contract she had signed at the start of 2020 was supposed to have been her last. “I had decided that I'd return to Myanmar in February of this year,” she told us in early 2022. Her plan, however, had been thwarted. First, it was the COVID-19 pandemic. “When Covid started, the economy constricted a lot,” Ma

Khaing explained. But also, her widowed mother contracted the virus, as did all seven of her siblings in Myanmar. “My mother had to close her betel stall... And since she closed it, I obviously had to send back more [money].” Eventually the pandemic “calmed down,” said Ma Khaing, and her mother was able to reopen her stall. “But now,” she added, “the [post-coup] unrest has happened. So, she’s had to close her stall again.” All of these developments impinged on Ma Khaing’s decision-making: “I’d been planning to return—to go back home to stay when the two years [of the contract] finished. But now, because of the turmoil in Myanmar, I’m no longer going back. I’m going to continue [working in Singapore]. I’ve got to stay on, obviously.”

As a Myanmar MDW in Singapore, Ma Khaing’s experiences were far from unique. Indeed, as we elaborate in this and the following sections, her life course paralleled that of tens of thousands of her compatriots who labour as domestic workers in Singapore. From November 2021 to February 2022, we interviewed fifteen Myanmar MDWs regarding their life histories, their motivations, their working conditions, and how the COVID-19 pandemic and 2021 coup have impacted their lives. These individuals came mostly from rural villages. Their ages ranged from twenty-four to forty-five years. One was divorced and had a daughter. The others had never been married and had no children of their own. At the time of our interviews, they had been working in Singapore for two to twelve years, with occasional visits home to Myanmar in between. In what follows, we sketch the roughly shared trajectory of these women. For comparison, and to highlight the particularity of the Myanmar migrant situation, we also include details from our interviews with Indonesian and Filipina MDWs. In doing so, our aim is to underscore nationality-specific patterns, not rigid distinctions. We include, as well, pertinent observations and insights by staff of Singapore-based migrant employment agencies and of local migrant-support organisations.

Key factors that MDWs identified as motivating them to seek employment in Singapore include needing to support parents and school-age siblings, the imperative to repay household debt, and a lack of adequate livelihood options in Myanmar. Ma Sandar’s experiences are illustrative. “I’m the only one who’s able to work,” she told us. “Neither of my parents have occupations. Other than me, I have my younger siblings, and they’re still students. Everything I earn is used to provide for the four of them—for food, rent, and school fees.” In fact, all the MDWs we spoke with sent remittances back to family members – the amounts and frequencies varying according to the number and needs of their dependents. Those we interviewed had between two and nine siblings, and their remittances were greater if these siblings were still in school. Ma Khaing, for example, had before the pandemic been remitting just over 40 per cent of her salary to support her mother, while banking the rest as personal savings. Naw Mu, by contrast, sent her mother everything – “as much as I earn,” she said. Her mother used this money mostly to support Naw Mu’s younger siblings, who were still attending school.

Debt was likewise a commonly identified catalyst for migration, although amounts varied. For example, Ma Nyo’s household debt was 15 million kyat (S\$11,240) when she first migrated to Singapore in 2017. When we interviewed her in late 2021, she still owed two million kyat, despite having serviced the debt monthly for almost five

years. Ma Phyu, who was also in debt, estimated that half of all Myanmar MDWs in Singapore have migrated to the country to pay off debts. What we see, therefore, among Myanmar MDWs in Singapore is a pattern of debt-driven migration – a phenomenon that researchers have increasingly documented across Southeast Asia (Bylander, 2019). Notably, this pre-existing household debt is aside from the recruitment fee that MDWs must pay to secure work in Singapore – a matter we return to below. As with indebted migrants more generally, MDWs needing to repay household debts often feel compelled to tolerate less-than-ideal employment arrangements in Singapore. Ma Ni explains: “Most importantly, I’m here to make money. So, whatever they say to me, I’ll just have to accept it. That’s my personal mindset... My only goal in coming here was to settle my debt.” Thus indebted, such individuals face increased pressure to persist in disagreeable jobs. “There are a lot of people who want to return [to Myanmar],” said Ma Pwint. Yet, “people with a lot of debt have to stay in Singapore longer. People with debt aren’t able to return.” Notably, the Indonesian and Filipina MDWs we interviewed said debt was not a major factor informing outmigration for them and their co-nationals.

Debt-driven outmigration from Myanmar is a historically specific phenomenon. This is because household debt increased and became more widespread under the country’s post-1988 economic restructuring, and especially since the early 2000s (Fujita 2009; Griffiths 2019: 607–608). Assessing the impact of this restructuring in Myanmar, political scientist Thawngmung (2019: 66) draws a comparison with post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, where “relatively decent living standards fell along with the advance of market capitalism.”

Concurrent with this trend of increased indebtedness has been a process of land dispossession and deagrarianisation across rural Myanmar. In a study of Myanmar’s post-1988 market liberalisation, economist Kōichi Fujita (2009: 256) found that liberalisation of agricultural export and foreign investment laws had fuelled an exponential increase in rural land values – a dynamic that priced-out landless rural dwellers and deepened agrarian inequality. At the same time, the Myanmar military and corporate actors seized small-holder agricultural lands for mines, plantations, aquaculture ponds, and industrial zones. Such seizures began in the 1990s but continued into the post-2011 period of quasi-civilian rule.

The landlessness resulting from these dynamics has been a key factor informing rural outmigration in Myanmar (World Bank, 2016: 23–25). For the most part, our informants confirmed this connection, with some adding that affected migrants also remit larger sums to family back home. Naw Mu remarked, “Obviously, those without farmland have more difficulties.” Ma Aye added, “In homes without farmland—if someone from the household has come to Singapore, they have to send back money every month.” Ruth, an employment agent from Myanmar who had recruited thousands of MDWs to Singapore concurred: “For people without land it’s even more constrictive. They have to send more remittances back to their family.” In short, economic restructuring and the dispossession of rural smallholders, spurred by foreign investment and export speculation, have since the 1990s exacerbated pressures on women in Myanmar to seek employment abroad.

It is under these conditions that brokers have been able to recruit tens of thousands of Myanmar women for domestic work in Singapore. Anna, an employment agent from Myanmar, initially went to Singapore as a student in the 1990s. Upon graduating in 2001, she got an administrative job with a Singaporean employment agency. Anna was certain that her agency had been the first in Singapore to recruit domestic workers from Myanmar. It had been her language ability and connections in Myanmar, Anna said, that had made possible the initial liaising with local partners to arrange recruitment. “After we started,” explained Anna, “it gradually became known [that domestic workers could be recruited from Myanmar]. At other agencies, the employers had never been to Myanmar, as I had. I had to explain [to her Singaporean employer] how to connect with Myanmar workers.”

Regarding the recruitment process, Anna elaborated as follows. A Yangon-based partner agent travels by car to the countryside, visiting assorted villages. Arriving in a given village, the agent offers a finder’s fee to anyone able to deliver women willing to labour in Singapore. Said Anna,

“The Yangon-based agent gets a villager to do the recruiting and for this pays one lakh [S\$73] per recruit and also gives an advance of one to two lakhs [S\$73–146] to the family of the recruited villager. The Yangon-based agent covers the travel cost, passport processing, living expenses [in Yangon], and the medical check-up. There are lots of expenses. And [the agent] arranges English lessons and cooking instruction—basic training. The person coming [to Singapore to work as a domestic worker] doesn’t have any money.”

Other MDWs we spoke with confirmed this pattern. Neighbours or acquaintances had approached them about working in Singapore and had put them in contact with Yangon-based employment agents. Since the local agent bears all initial costs, the woman does not need to pay anything up front. This amount, however, along with the agent’s profit, will be deducted from the woman’s future salary. The arrangement is notably different from that of men from Myanmar who migrate to Singapore to work in construction, or at marine shipyards, who pay upwards of S\$10,000 to agents in advance to obtain employment (Poon et al., 2020: 7). As the men often borrow this money beforehand, their salary during their initial years in Singapore is almost entirely spent on debt servicing. Ruth – the other agent we interviewed – highlighted the fact that many people in rural Myanmar lack official identification documents. This leads to inflated costs when arranging passports, and the requisite bribes to local officials are factored into the MDW’s recruitment fee. “[The agent] arranges it for them,” said Ruth, “so it’s a bit expensive. As I said, some [villagers] don’t have identification cards. They don’t have passports. They don’t have any documents. So, it’s expensive to arrange the passport. It costs around 4.5 lakhs [S\$330].” These costs, along with other expenses and the agency’s profit – totalling S\$1,440 to S\$4,770 for the women we interviewed – are deducted from the migrant’s salary upon arrival in Singapore. The arrangement thus maintains them in what is effectively a relation of debt bondage.

Specificity of the Myanmar Migrant Experience

The salaries of Myanmar MDWs we interviewed ranged from S\$480 to S\$700 per month. Within this range, specific amounts are effective proxy indicators for the number of years a given individual has worked in Singapore. The two women we interviewed who earned S\$700 per month had been in Singapore for ten and twelve years, respectively. A more relevant baseline, therefore, for comparing salaries across nationalities is the monthly base pay for first-time MDWs. Ruth said that the informal, but widely adhered to, standard monthly base pay for Myanmar MDWs in 2022 was S\$480. This was the rate, she clarified, for individuals who were “totally fresh.” If, however, these women work on their legally prescribed weekly day off, as they often do, they can earn a total of around S\$550.

The contrast between the salaries of Myanmar MDWs and those from Indonesia and the Philippines is telling and speaks to the different conditions in countries of origin. Ariani, from rural Java, said that monthly base pay for “new” Indonesian MDWs was S\$650–S\$700 per month, as of 2022. Similarly, Maria, a Filipina MDW said that standard salaries for “newcomers” from the Philippines was S\$600–S\$650. These disparities across nationalities align with the survey findings cited earlier (MSIG, 2020), notwithstanding inflationary increases across the board.

Informants offered several explanations for these salary discrepancies. Heidi, a Singaporean who worked with a local migrant support organisation, suggested that Indonesian MDWs are valued more highly because of their perceived cultural proximity to Singaporeans, whereas Filipina MDWs obtain higher salaries due to their stronger command of English, which enables them to negotiate better terms of employment. Maria added that individuals who are under pressure to repay debts back home – as is the case with many Myanmar migrants – have been more willing to accept lower salaries in order to hasten their employment abroad. Especially significant, according to Heidi and the MDWs from Indonesia and the Philippines with whom we spoke, was that the embassies of these latter countries set a minimum salary for MDWs, to which Singaporean employment agencies largely adhered. Ruth offered a stark contrast between such interventions and the disregard that the Myanmar government has shown to migrants in Singapore: “Their embassies do a lot to protect them. Their embassies set a minimum wage for domestic helpers. This is the case for the Philippines and Indonesia. As for our Myanmar [government], they don’t even help.”

Whatever the debt that an MDW may have in Myanmar, she finds herself, upon arriving in Singapore, additionally indebted to her employer for the amount of the recruitment fee, which the latter pays to the agency upon obtaining the worker. To recover this cost, the employer deducts all – or nearly all – of an MDW’s initial salary. For Myanmar MDWs, these deductions typically last six to seven months. Officially, the Singaporean government limits agency fees to two months of an MDW’s salary. However, partner agencies in Myanmar make additional financial claims – in part for profit, but also to recover costs incurred for the migrant’s travel, food and lodging in Yangon, and passport processing. This can push Myanmar MDWs’ salary deductions

beyond seven months, and beyond the repayment period of other nationalities. Both Ma Khaing and Ma Nyo, for instance, had the first nine months of their salaries deducted. By contrast, Filipina MDWs typically lose two to four months of their salary as agency fee, while for Indonesians it is typically four to six months, according to a migrant support organisation staff we interviewed.

These nationality-specific discrepancies in repayment periods inform the uneven regulation of migrant workers in Singapore. During the initial repayment period, MDWs remain in a situation of debt bondage to their employer. Those in disagreeable employment arrangements thus find it difficult to quit or change jobs. Such was Ma Nyo's experience upon arriving in Singapore. "The food was inadequate, and I wasn't able to get enough sleep," she said. "I told the agent [about wanting to quit]. The agent said, 'Stay on. You still have a debt.' I told the agent I wanted to return. The agent said, 'You can't return.' Only after I repaid my debt would the agent let me return home [to Myanmar]. I felt really depressed that I wasn't able to go back."

Similar to Ma Nyo's experience, the most common grievances among MDWs we interviewed were overwork, mobility restrictions, inadequate or objectionable food, and discourteous treatment by employers. To be sure, several of the women we interviewed had no explicit grievances and said their employers were "good natured." The issue, however, is not that some bosses are "good" while others are "bad." The problem, rather, is that MDWs are consigned to an arrangement wherein their working and living conditions are rendered highly contingent on the arbitrary generosity (or otherwise) of their employers. This is especially the case during the initial period when MDWs are repaying their agency fee – a period that, as we noted, is typically longer for women from Myanmar. As with foreign domestic worker arrangements in other countries, the legal residency of MDWs in Singapore is contingent on their continuous and sole employment under a designated sponsor. To legally transfer employers require their sponsor's formal permission. This condition, in effect, relegates MDWs in Singapore to a situation of unfree labour (Parreñas et al., 2021: 4671). It is a major reason why affected individuals find it difficult to escape workplace maltreatment. Under these conditions, MDW suicide has been an enduring trend, as Singapore's Ministry of Manpower (MOM, 2017) acknowledged.

In sum, a range of factors, from origin-country labour export policies to cultural-linguistic barriers, co-constitute the differential exclusion and incorporation of migrant workers in their country of arrival, while informing distinct mechanisms of migrant regulation and racialisation. In all cases, however, MDW arrival-country employment arrangements are analytically inseparable from home-country conditions – conditions that are themselves impacted by unequal geopolitical relations.

The Impact of the Pandemic and the Coup

As is evident in the preceding section, Myanmar MDWs in Singapore faced particular difficulties even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, since the start of the pandemic, conditions for MDWs have deteriorated further. In late 2020, the Humanitarian

Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), a Singaporean migrant worker advocacy and support organisation, reported the following trends in MDW employment conditions due to pandemic-related restrictions and pressures: increased workload, imposed work on rest days, heightened surveillance by employers, increased restrictions on communication and mobile phone usage, loss of employment, substantial wage decreases, increased verbal abuse by employers, and increased workplace stress due to prolonged isolation with employers (HOME, 2020: 4). Our present focus, however, in keeping with our transnational conceptualisation of migrant regulation, is on how pandemic-related developments in Myanmar impacted MDWs in Singapore. On this matter, Myanmar MDWs we interviewed highlighted two main issues – both related to the worsening economic situation back home. These were: needing to send more remittances to family members and needing to remain working longer in Singapore. Thus recounted Ma Sein, a thirty-six-year-old woman from Yangon:

“After Covid started, I had to send back more remittances, obviously. For example, I’d been sending 350 to 400 [Singaporean dollars] per month. But then I had to send over 500, or up to 600 per month because prices increased, and all my family members became unemployed. When Covid started, they could have continued selling in the market, but I didn’t want them to go outside. It was better for them to stay at home.”

Ma Shwe, a thirty-three-year-old woman who supported her three school-age siblings and whose widowed mother sold rice at a market, felt similarly pressured. “When Covid started, some businesses had to close,” she recalled. “My plan had been to just work two years in Singapore. But then Covid happened, and it wasn’t possible to return to Myanmar.”

Such were the added challenges for MDWs in Singapore during the pandemic. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has compounded these difficulties. Alongside intensified post-coup violence and repression, the ensuing insecurity and economic fallout have reduced livelihood options in the country and have heightened pressures on family members abroad to increase their financial support. The coup and ensuing humanitarian crisis have thus exacerbated what were, under the pandemic, already difficult conditions for Myanmar MDWs in Singapore. After the coup, recounted Ma Shwe, “The economic situation [in Myanmar] got worse, of course. Some people had to pawn their belongings just to eat because they had no work.” Responding to these conditions, many MDWs increased their remittances. “I’d been sending money each month—three lakhs [S \$219] for one month,” explained Ma Ni. However, “since the coup, I’ve been sending about four to five lakhs [S\$292–365].” Meanwhile, most MDWs in Singapore are seeking to renew their contracts, and many have set aside prior aspirations for future livelihoods in Myanmar. “I had planned to save and buy a home [in Myanmar],” recounted Ma Sein. “Now, because of the political situation and the Covid situation, my plan isn’t feasible anymore. Given the current situation, I’m going to continue staying [in Singapore]. Will I stay for one year, two years, or four or five years? I can’t say.” Ma Yadana reflected similarly: “I’d thought about opening up a restaurant [in Myanmar], or something like that. But now, I have to continue on here [in Singapore].”

Understandably, these conditions are also motivating women in Myanmar to seek work abroad in larger numbers. “Now, everyone wants to leave, since there isn’t work in Myanmar,” said Ma Sandar. “Especially since the coup,” she added, “there are those with passports waiting to leave for Singapore.” Confirming Ma Sandar’s observation, *Mizzima News* reported at the end of 2021 that the Yangon passport office had seen a near ten-fold increase in applicants despite a doubling of the passport fee. To this, Ruth, the employment agent, offered further detail. “Now, since the coup, there are so many people who want to come [to Singapore],” she said. “There are many people who want to leave [Myanmar]. In the past, I’d have about 50 maid profiles to advertise. Now, I have 200 to 300. There are so many. There are so many people who want to come. There is so much supply.” The reason, Ruth explained, is that since the coup, “There’s no work anymore. There’s no office work. There’s no work for school teachers. Workplaces are closed. Factories are closed. That’s why there are so many young women who want to come [to Singapore].”

One of the more pernicious outcomes of this situation, added Ruth, is that certain agents are leveraging post-coup precarity to reduce salaries for new Myanmar MDWs below the norm of S\$480 per month. “Some agents,” she explained, “they’ve got so many helpers [waiting in Yangon]. So, they negotiate with the helper. They say, ‘You’ll have to wait here for however many more months. So, why don’t you accept 460 or 450 [Singaporean dollars]. Then you can go faster [to Singapore].’ So, maybe some of them want to go faster [and therefore accept a lower salary].” Ruth would never do this, she assured us. But “some agents,” she acknowledged, “are unethical.”

Stressing the impact of home-country conditions on MDWs in Singapore risks conveying a rather deterministic analysis. It is thus important to note, as well, that many MDWs we interviewed expressed a sense of political awareness and agency, in which they saw themselves as active participants in the post-coup struggle against renewed military rule in Myanmar. Ma Yadana’s words are illustrative, and they offer a fitting close to this section:

“At first, I thought I’d gone abroad to work for my family. Later, beyond my own family’s financial status, I realised that it’s actually because of my country’s poor conditions that I had to migrate, and it’s not because of my family... That’s why I haven’t returned. Because even if I do have the financial means, while people around me are struggling, it can’t be like that. That’s why I can’t return just yet... Even if we win the revolution, there’s a lot of work to be done in rebuilding.”

Conclusion

In this article, we have advanced a transnational analysis of migrant worker regulation, which includes informal employer–employee relations. Investigating the experiences of Myanmar MDWs in Singapore reveals how shifting external relations of global inequality and origin-country conditions underpin uneven migrant labour regimes internal to the country of arrival. This argument aligns with a feminist approach to

political economy that theorises globally divergent regimes of social reproduction as being conditioned by the unequal world system that structures their emergence. Moreover, contextualising the experiences of MDWs within changing home-country political-economic conditions allows a deeper understanding of the factors informing migrants' various motivations and choices.

More concretely, this analysis anticipates certain trends for migrant domestic labour in Singapore. The enduring effects of the pandemic, compounded by post-coup insecurity and economic contraction in Myanmar, means that more and more women are likely to leave the country for work abroad in the coming years. Indeed, many of our informants suggested as much. Under these conditions, brokers and state agents can be expected to continue in their efforts to capitalise on the precarious conditions driving outmigration from Myanmar. Salaries for Myanmar MDWs are also likely to remain significantly lower than those of MDWs of other nationalities. Meanwhile, the Singaporean government has declared its aim to increase the number of MDWs in the country to 300,000 by 2030 (MK, 2020). It is thus reasonable to conjecture that, in the coming years, the number of Myanmar women working as MDWs in Singapore will increase, both in absolute numbers and in proportion to other nationalities. Of course, this is contingent on current trends continuing. The conflict in Myanmar is by no means settled. An uncertain future persists for many people in and from the country. What is certain, however, is that ongoing transformations within the country will continue to impact the lives of Myanmar migrants labouring abroad.

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1. All interviewee names included herein are pseudonyms.

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