MIGRANT LABOUR AND LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN SINGAPORE – A RANDOM WALK DOWN SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

The politically charged domains of immigration policy, labor market dynamics, and human rights discourse intersect in scholarly analysis of migrant labor. This exploratory study employs a randomized survey methodology to investigate self-perceptions, employment conditions, and social integration among migrant laborers in Singapore. Over a one-month period, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with randomly selected participants working in the house help, construction, and food and beverage industries. Findings indicate that respondents overwhelmingly reported positive experiences, with the majority expressing feelings of safety and stable/gainful employment. However, respondents also identified communication regarding support networks as a key area for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Migrant labor occupies a critical intersection between immigration policy, labor market structures, and human rights discourse. In high-income economies, migrant workers are frequently portrayed within policy debates and academic literature as vulnerable populations subject to structural exploitation. Singapore presents a particularly compelling case study in this

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regard. As a global financial and logistics hub with a small domestic labor pool, the city-state has long relied on a dual labor market of high-skilled professionals alongside low-wage foreign workers to sustain economic growth. This structural dependence has placed migrant labor at the center of Singapore's socio-economic model, shaping both the country's prosperity and its social fabric. This research seeks to contribute to the question: How do Migrant Workers in Singapore view themselves and their work? Is exploitation a concern of theirs? If not, what are their concerns?

This study addresses a research gap by directly engaging with migrant workers in Singapore through a randomized survey methodology, focusing on their self-perceptions, employment conditions, and social integration. By centering the voices of workers themselves, the research aims to examine whether their lived realities align with dominant narratives of exploitation or present a more nuanced picture. In doing so, the study contributes to the literature by offering qualitative insights into the intersection of economic opportunity, social belonging, and perceived wellbeing in a highly regulated labor migration context.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Migrant labor in Singapore occupies a critical space within its economic and social model. Since independence in 1965, the city-state has built prosperity through export-oriented industrialization, global finance, and advanced manufacturing. This success rests on a dual labor system: a professionalized citizen workforce supported by temporary, low-wage migrants who sustain sectors such as construction, shipyard work, and domestic care (Vu, 2011; Hong, 2002). The roots of this dependence stretch back to colonial practices. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British imported Chinese and Indian labour to build roads, ports, and plantations. These workers, often confined to the harshest forms of manual labor, established a precedent for foreign labor filling roles deemed undesirable by locals. After independence, this legacy was formalized. From the 1970s, Singapore introduced work permit schemes that institutionalized migrants as a flexible, low-cost, and strictly temporary workforce. Dependency ceilings and levies were layered on in the 1980s and 1990s to regulate inflows, reflecting a deliberate state strategy to use migrant labor as a tool for wage moderation and competitiveness, while limiting avenues for settlement (Chew & Chew, 1995; Hugo, 2012).

Over the past two decades, these structural patterns have persisted even as the economy diversified. Migrants continue to dominate labor-intensive industries, while citizens increasingly concentrate in higher-skilled roles. Yet the vulnerabilities of this system became highly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when outbreaks in dormitories highlighted overcrowded conditions and limited healthcare access. Policy responses since then have included upgraded dormitory standards, expanded welfare measures, and wage interventions through the Progressive Wage Model. These reforms mark a cautious recognition of migrant workers' precarity,

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but remain framed within Singapore's broader commitment to economic pragmatism and tight state control (Rahman, 2011; MOM, 2022–2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the existing research concerning migrant labor in Singapore has historically focused on broad policy implications, economic contributions, and overall living conditions, with much of this work spanning from the early 2000s onwards. A significant body of literature, exemplified by Chew and Chew (1995), analyzes Singapore's strategic use of foreign labor to manage economic growth and address labor shortages. Their work provides a foundational understanding of the government's highly selective immigration policies, distinguishing between "guest labor" and "immigrant labor," and highlighting the socio-political challenges arising from this dependence. While detailing the legal and demographic aspects of migrant workers, this earlier research largely operates at a macro-level, focusing on country-wide strategies and their impact on national development.

Later scholarship began to delve into the social dimensions, particularly concerning foreign domestic workers. Lyons (2007), for example, explores the challenges faced by women's rights organizations in advocating for foreign domestic workers in Singapore, revealing how state control and internal organizational dynamics (such as class and nationality differences within the activist community) can hinder effective advocacy. This research critically examines the "othering" of migrant women and the reluctance of some local women's groups to fully embrace their cause as a feminist issue. Similarly, a paper on Tamil migrant workers in Little India highlights the complex interplay of historical spaces, ethnic identity, and limited social integration for these workers (Hamid, 2014). This work reveals how even a historically familiar space like Little India becomes managed and controlled, limiting genuine connection and interaction between migrant workers of various communities. Both Lyons's and the Little India paper offer qualitative insights into aspects of migrant workers' lives, such as social connections and integration, but they primarily focus on the broader societal and activist responses, or the spatial dynamics, rather than the direct, individual experiences of exploitation as perceived by the workers themselves.

This research differs from the current literature because of two main factors. First, this research directly seeks to collect qualitative data from migrant workers in Singapore to understand whether or not they feel exploited in their work. This goes beyond analyzing policy, rather delving into the subjective perceptions and experiences of the workers themselves across specific domains: their social connections, their integration within the community, their interactions with employers, the terms of their contracts, and their daily workloads. While previous studies, such as those by Lyons, might touch on vulnerabilities that imply exploitation, my approach is a direct inquiry into the feeling of exploitation, offering a nuanced, worker-centric perspective. Second, by systematically interviewing workers on these distinct, interconnected areas, this research

aims to provide a holistic understanding of how these factors contribute to or mitigate individual feelings of exploitation. This contrasts with broader policy analyses or studies that focus on a singular aspect of migrant life, thereby allowing for a richer, more detailed exploration of their lived realities.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this investigation, the source of data chosen was interviews with migrant workers. This primary data source fully addressed the demands of the question ensuring an authentic viewpoint, untainted by others perceptions. Alongside this, this method of data collection addressed a sector of this industry where research was lacking- the migrant worker viewpoint. To approach the interviews, I followed the methodology advocated for in chapter 3: Qualitative methods within the 2017 book 'Journey into social activism'. Within the preparation phase of the interviews, I first defined clear objectives(as stated in this chapter) in order to establish the purpose of the interview and the information which I aimed to gather. Then, in crafting the research protocol, I followed the guidelines stated within this chapter, ensuring open-ended, neutral questions. Finally, I familiarised myself with the interviewee's backgrounds and cultural setting to enhance my cultural awareness. Within conducting the interview, I followed the guidelines which encouraged building rapport, active listening and flexibility. Building rapport created a comfortable interview environment to encourage openness and honest, in depth responses. Active listening allowed the researcher to follow up questions to ensure a depth in responses. Lastly, flexibility involved being able to deviate from the assigned research protocol to again, fully address the scope of the research question.

Within this method, the primary factor in tackling the research question remained creating a research protocol in order to achieve efficient data collection. In crafting this, it remained a point to ease into the questions, as the heart of the issue aiming to be addressed remains one where individuals often lack comfort in discussing. Hence, the interview took part in 3 sections, the first addressing generic personal questions, the second addressing cultural questions about Singapore, and third delving into questions surrounding their work experiences. This ensured the data collected was as accurate as possible as workers felt comfortable answering more personal questions after being eased into the interview.

Question Number	**Question**
Section A: General Personal Questions	
1	How old are you?
2	How long have you worked in Singapore?
3	What project are you currently working on?

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4	Do you find it easy to craft social connections and friendships within Singapore?
Section B - Cultural Connection Questions	
1	Do you feel culturally connected to Singapore/feel at home? How do you feel culturally connected?
2	Are there any challenges you face in adapting to life in Singapore?
3	Do you feel that you have an adequate support system here in Singapore?
Section C - Work-related Questions	
1	How did you find your current job? Were you recruited? Did you apply via a job board, etc.
2	Did you sign a formal employment contract before starting work? Do you feel as though this contract has been honored?
3	Have your working conditions matched expectations in your contract / prior to you starting work?
4	Do you feel that your working and living conditions here are safe?
5	How many people do you share your living space with? Does your employment contract provide accommodation?
6	Have you ever had to work extra time without being compensated?
7	Have you ever had your salary deducted without knowing why?
8	Do you feel that your salary accurately reflects the volume of work you undertake?
9	Has your employer ever withheld key documents from you, such as passport, contracts, etc.
10	Do you know where to go for help here in Singapore if you feel you are being treated unfairly?

Research participants/candidates were randomly selected; candidates were interviewed within the streets of Singapore, as opposed to a formal interview environment. This aimed to make the interview more casual so the workers would be honest and not intimidated. Candidates were chosen randomly, from varying areas of Singapore- Clarke Quay, Somerset, Bukit Timah Road etc. to ensure balanced and representative results. Within a random selection, I aimed to explore various migrant worker professions. Hence, I controlled the number of individuals of each profession whom I interviewed, again, ensuring balanced results which well-encapsulated the varying professions taken up by migrant labour within Singapore, allowing for analysis of differing results based on profession.

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Profession	**Number of candidates interviewed**
Migrant Domestic workers (helpers)	15
Food and Beverage Workers	14
Construction/Renovation Workers	16

The interviews took place across April of 2025, where between 6-15 interviews were conducted each week. In terms of ethical concerns, anonymity of each participant was ensured, as neither their name nor the company for which they worked was requested prior to conducting the interview. They were informed of their anonymity prior to partaking, to encourage more truthful, honest responses to fully gauge the migrant worker opinion in Singapore.

In approaching individuals, they were first asked whether they were classified as migrant labour or whether they were local to the region. Following this, some background on the project was given, informing them of the nature of the project alongside its aims. They were then asked whether or not they were happy to participate alongside ensuring they were aware of the anonymity of the interview, inclining them further to participate. Data was collected through a recording of the interview, which was consented to, alongside notes made based on key takeaways from each question. This was then compiled into a spreadsheet with each participant and their general responses and attitudes to each question which was used to analyse data and craft takeaways from the interview process. In total, the researcher approached 68 people for interviews, 45 said yes, 45 interviews, etc. Throughout the process, I approached close to 90 people, with about 10 being local, 15 being unable to speak English or Hindi, hence reducing the diversity of my sample, 10 who were uninterested in participating, and another 10 who were in work and thus unable to participate.

DATA ANALYSIS

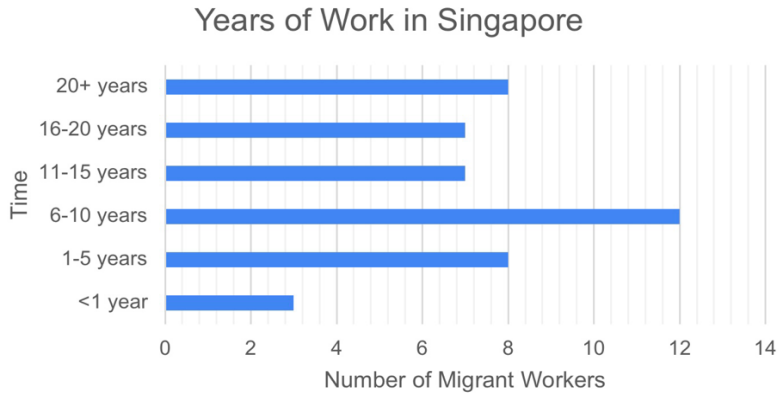

Figure 1

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In Figure 1, we observe a horizontal bar graph illustrating the Years of Work in Singapore among migrant workers. The x-axis represents the Number of Migrant Workers, and the y-axis shows different time intervals. The graph reveals that the largest group of migrant workers, 12 individuals, have been working in Singapore for 6-10 years. This suggests a significant portion of the migrant worker population has a moderate tenure in the country. Interestingly, the number of workers decreases for both shorter and longer durations, with the lowest number (<1 year), 3 individuals, which could indicate a high turnover. This pattern could imply that migrant workers tend to stay for a significant period beyond their initial year, but fewer remain for very long durations (20+ years), which might be due to policy limitations, personal choices, or return migration.

Figure 1 - ‘yeah, I’ve been here for quite a while (32 years) but most of people who started with me have gone home to get married or be with their children’
‘I feel like most people i meet here have been with the same family for very long’(6 months)

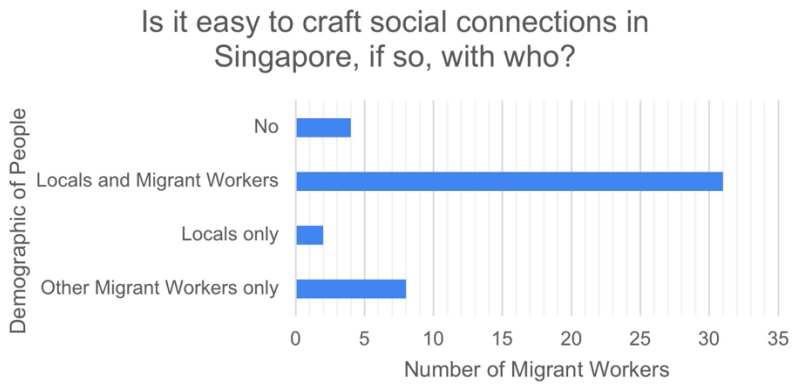

Figure 2

In Figure 2, we examine a horizontal bar graph titled "Is it easy to craft social connections in Singapore, if so, with who?". The x-axis represents the Number of Migrant Workers, and the y-axis categorizes the Demographic of People with whom connections are made. The graph clearly shows that the overwhelming majority of migrant workers, 31 individuals, find it easy to craft social connections with "Locals and Migrant Workers." This is a highly positive finding, indicating a strong degree of social integration and inter-community interaction. A smaller number of workers connect only with "Other Migrant Workers only,"(8 individuals) and even fewer with "Locals only"(2 individuals) or find it difficult to make connections ("No")(4 individuals). This suggests that Singapore's

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multicultural environment facilitates broader social ties for migrant workers, which is crucial for their overall well-being and welfare.

Figure 2 - “People here are very friendly, you just have to make the effort to talk to them”

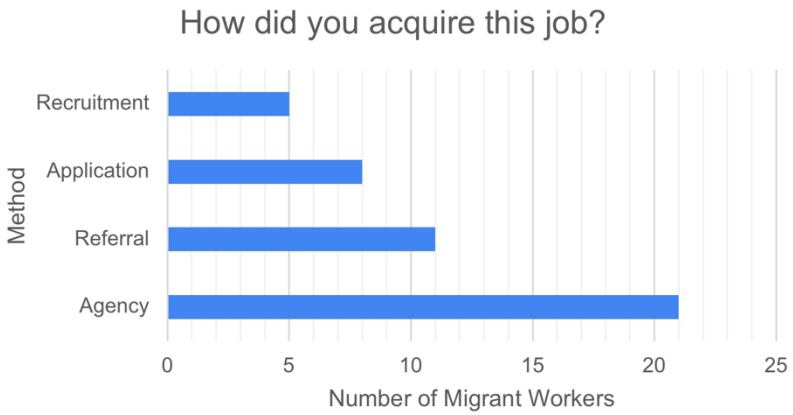

Figure 3

In Figure 3, we analyze a horizontal bar graph depicting "How did you acquire this job?". The x-axis represents the Number of Migrant Workers, and the y-axis shows the Method of job acquisition. The graph highlights that the most common method for migrant workers to acquire their jobs is through an "Agency," with 21 workers reporting this. This makes sense as many migrant workers rely on recruitment agencies to facilitate their employment overseas. "Referral" is the second most common method, followed by "Application" and then "Recruitment." The significant reliance on agencies could point to both the structured nature of migrant worker recruitment and potential areas for policy intervention to ensure ethical recruitment practices and reduce reliance on potentially exploitative intermediaries.

Figure 3 - “I feel like, for most people, agency is the way out of their country, other ways of employment only work once you are already in Singapore”
“I only know of the agency, they bring people from home country to work here”

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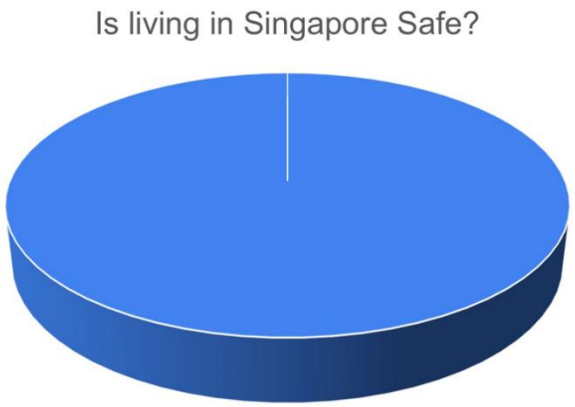

Figure 4

In Figure 4, we are presented with a pie chart asking "Is living in Singapore Safe?". The chart shows an entirely blue slice labeled "Safe." This graph overwhelmingly indicates that migrant workers perceive living in Singapore as extremely safe. This strong positive sentiment is a crucial aspect of their welfare, as a sense of security contributes significantly to their quality of life. The unanimous agreement on safety suggests that Singapore's legal framework and low crime rates are well-perceived by the migrant worker community.

Figure 4 - “Yes, absolutely. Singapore is so much safer than Bangladesh, even for a migrant worker.”
“Oh, of course. I have never felt unsafe here.”

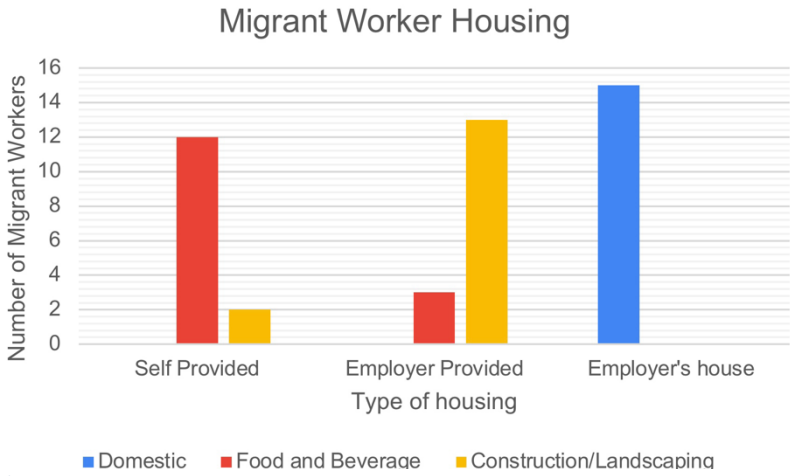

Figure 5

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In Figure 5, we observe a clustered bar graph titled "Migrant Worker Housing." The x-axis represents the Type of housing (Self Provided, Employer Provided, Employer's house), and the y-axis shows the Number of Migrant Workers. The bars are segmented by industry: Domestic (blue), Food and Beverage (red), and Construction/Landscaping (yellow). The graph reveals distinct patterns across housing types and industries. "Employer's house" is predominantly used by Domestic workers, with all 15 domestic workers residing there. "Employer Provided" housing is most common for Construction/Landscaping workers (13 workers), while "Self Provided" housing is most prevalent among Food and Beverage workers (12 workers). This differentiation in housing arrangements across industries is an interesting result, suggesting varying employer responsibilities and worker autonomy based on their sector. It highlights the diverse living conditions and welfare considerations that need to be addressed within each industry.

Figure 5 - “I live in my employers house. I feel like most helpers do unless they are part time. It makes it easy for us to do our duties.”
“I live in a dormitory with the other workers from my company (Construction). We have 25 people in our room.”

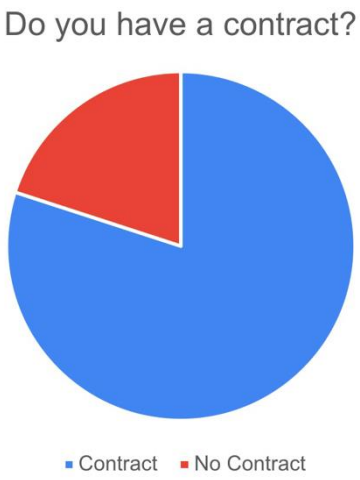

Figure 6

In Figure 6, we see a pie chart addressing the question, "Do you have a contract?". The graph indicates that the vast majority of migrant workers (80%), represented by the large blue slice, do possess a formal contract, while a smaller proportion (20%), shown in red, do not. This suggests a generally formalized employment structure for migrant workers in Singapore

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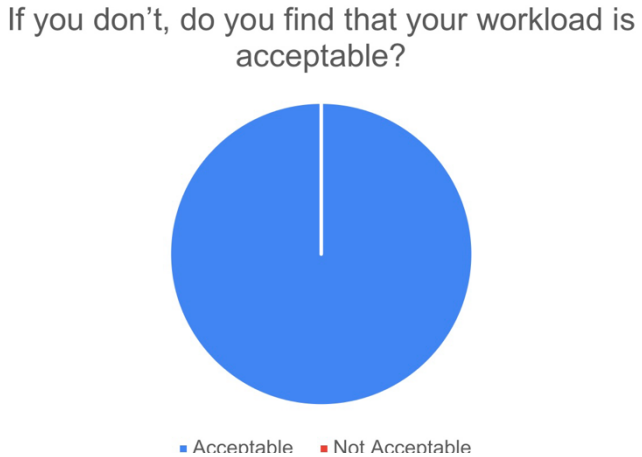

Figure 7

Figure 7, which asks, "If you don't, do you find that your workload is acceptable?", directly follows from the findings of Figure 6, focusing specifically on those without contracts. This second pie chart reveals that all migrant workers who do not have a contract still find their workload to be acceptable, with the blue "Acceptable" slice unanimously dominating the chart. This is an interesting and somewhat unexpected result, as one might assume that the absence of a formal contract could lead to less favorable working conditions. However, the data suggests that even without a contract, the perceived workload among this group is largely manageable, which could point to informal agreements or other factors contributing to their satisfaction.

Figure 6 & 7 - “I like not having a contract. It gives me the flexibility of leaving the job when I want.”
“Me. I’m on the work visa of another restaurant but I work here. Even though I have no contract for here, the boss makes me work the same hours as the other workers.”

DISCUSSION

The central finding emerging from the survey of over 40 migrant workers in Singapore is that, contrary to common narratives of systemic exploitation, the vast majority of workers feel satisfied with their employment, safe in their living and working conditions, and grateful for the opportunities available in Singapore. While minor issues around language barriers and emotional distance from family did arise, these were not framed by the workers as exploitation, but rather as expected and manageable sacrifices in exchange for better prospects. In response to Section C, Questions 3 and 4, nearly all workers agreed that their workload matched expectations, and reported feeling safe in both their working and living environments. Even among the small percentage (approximately

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20%) who did not sign formal employment contracts, responses to Questions 6–8 reveal a surprising level of consistency in reported fairness of compensation and absence of major grievances. While a few instances of unpaid overtime or unexplained salary deductions were noted, they were statistical outliers and not representative of the group. In fact, workers across industries—from domestic labor to food & beverage—routinely emphasized satisfaction with their salary, especially in comparison to earnings in their home countries. This overall contentment challenges prevailing academic and media discourses that emphasise systemic migrant worker exploitation in Singapore. It suggests that perceptions of exploitation are often overstated, or at least not aligned with how many migrant workers themselves view their situations. When asked about their emotional wellbeing (Section B), workers often focused not on unjust treatment, but rather on challenges common to transnational labor migration: missing family, adapting to a new language, or adjusting to unfamiliar cultural norms.

WHY WORKERS VIEW THEIR CONDITIONS POSITIVELY

To better understand these findings, it is important to explore why migrant workers in Singapore report such positive experiences. One explanation lies in relative expectations. Many workers expressed that while their jobs in Singapore may be physically demanding or socially isolating, they still represented a vast improvement over conditions back home. For instance, responses to Section C, Question 8 consistently indicate that workers believe their salary "accurately reflects" the labor they perform, and many stated they are earning significantly more than they could in their home countries. This contrast shapes a lens of gratitude rather than grievance. Moreover, recruitment processes and access to social networks were critical in shaping perceptions. Contrary to assumptions that agency recruitment might correlate with exploitation, the majority of agency-recruited workers in the sample described their pathways as clear, legitimate, and safe. Workers frequently mentioned finding jobs through referrals, online platforms, or relatives, and stated that their contracts were honored, even when they didn't initially receive or read a formal agreement (Section C, Q2). Notably, over 90% of respondents said they knew where to seek help if needed (Q17), a strong indicator of informational empowerment and institutional trust. Social integration also played a key role. In Section A and B, most workers said they found it easy to build social connections, either through co-workers, religious communities, or fellow nationals. While few workers reported deep ties with local Singaporeans, this lack of integration did not translate to dissatisfaction. Instead, social networks within the migrant community served as sufficient emotional support systems, with many workers referencing friends, roommates, or colleagues as sources of comfort and belonging.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR SINGAPORE

These findings hold significance in the broader context of Singapore's economic model and immigration policy. Migrant labor is often viewed as precarious, invisible, and disposable, yet the data here presents a more optimistic image—one in which the state's structured, rules-based approach may be succeeding in delivering basic standards of care, safety, and compensation. This doesn't mean the system is perfect, but it does suggest that many of the foundational protections built into Singapore's migrant labor policy—mandatory contracts, employer-provided accommodation, Ministry of Manpower oversight—are being felt on the ground. At the same time, the emotional and social dimensions of migrant life in Singapore appear to be surprisingly positive, especially when contrasted with patterns in other high-income economies. While it might be expected that language barriers and distance from family would isolate migrant workers, the data reveals a more hopeful picture. The vast majority of respondents reported finding it easy to build social connections, often with both locals and fellow migrant workers, as shown in Figure 2. These relationships were built in shared workplaces, places of worship, and communal living spaces, and were often cited as sources of emotional support and belonging. Rather than feeling like "temporary guests," many workers described feeling at home or culturally comfortable in Singapore (Section B, Q1). This speaks to the country's relative success in fostering an environment where migrants can not only work, but form meaningful interpersonal networks. These results challenge global assumptions that economic integration always comes at the cost of social isolation, and suggest that Singapore's model may offer a degree of emotional inclusion not often found elsewhere.

POLICY SHAPING

Given these findings, the way forward for migrant welfare in Singapore lies not in wholesale reform, but in micro-adjustments that address the emotional and social dimensions of migrant life. The policy framework appears to be delivering on its core promises—safe working conditions, fair pay, and housing—but the emotional infrastructure is still underdeveloped. First, targeted language support programs, especially for new arrivals, could ease cultural adjustment. This is a low-cost, high-impact solution that directly addresses the most commonly cited challenge: language barriers. Second, employers—especially in the domestic sector—should be incentivized or educated on best practices for emotional and social support, including rest days, mobile phone access, and communication with family. Third, Singapore could explore community integration hubs in dormitory areas or workplace districts, designed to offer cultural events, legal support, and communal activities. Such initiatives would not only enrich the migrant experience but could also bridge the social divide that partially exists between migrant and local populations. Finally, policymakers should be cautious of painting migrant narratives with a broad brush. As this research shows, workers' own voices often contradict activist or media portrayals. Rather than assuming exploitation, the Singaporean model should be

celebrated for what it is doing well—while still being held accountable to elevate migrant welfare from sufficiency to dignity.

CONCLUSION

Migrant worker wellbeing remains one of the most contested and misunderstood aspects of Singapore's socio-economic model—yet one that can be realistically strengthened in the near future. With more worker-centric research like this, which directly captures how migrant workers themselves perceive their treatment and opportunities, we can move beyond assumptions of universal exploitation to a more nuanced understanding of migrant life in high-income economies. While earlier studies, such as Chew and Chew (1995), offered valuable macro-level insights into Singapore's labor policy and selective immigration framework, and Lyons (2007) examined the challenges of advocacy and social "othering," this study adds a crucial dimension: the lived, subjective realities of workers across industries.

The overwhelmingly positive responses in this research—spanning fair pay, safe conditions, and strong social support networks—suggest that Singapore's structured, rules-based approach is delivering meaningful outcomes on the ground. If policymakers and NGOs can use this evidence to guide targeted micro-adjustments, such as enhanced language programs and community integration hubs, Singapore could shift from meeting basic protections to fostering a deeper sense of dignity and belonging for its migrant workforce. While more longitudinal research is needed to see whether these positive perceptions endure over time, Chew and Chew, Lyons, and other scholars can be satisfied that the growing body of qualitative, worker-driven research is already reshaping both academic discourse and policy conversations. Rather than serving solely as case studies in vulnerability, migrant workers in Singapore may increasingly become models of how well-regulated systems can align economic opportunity with social inclusion.

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