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## Forgotten and Invisible Laborers: Domestic Workers in Singapore and Taiwan

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords

Foreign domestic workers  
Foreign maids  
Informal workers  
Labor rights  
Live-in employment regime

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 labour standards. The author explains and discusses the legal blind spots, loopholes, and oversight of labour 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 and 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 labour laws like the rest of the workforce to better safeguard their physical safety, mental well-being, and personal dignity.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper discusses the global problem of the absence of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in East Asia’s national labour standards legislation and legal enforcement domains. 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

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formal policy channels and official labour recognition systems to 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, doubling 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 labour they perform – regardless of how professional and skilled, like medical tasks for eldercare – is not recognised 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 labour 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 were the physical, mental, and spiritual connections between food access, security, and general health. Employers varied widely in their approach to food management. Still, 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 widespread usage of ‘maids’ in informal and privatised 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 behaviour and unethical exploitation ([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 labour 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 ([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 labour is at the centre, which sparks further insights on the role of government ministries and recruitment agencies/brokers in improving lacklustre 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 various health conditions and care needs ([Aceros et al., 2021](#); [Ahmad & Scott, 2021](#); [Cheung, 2021](#); [Hierofani, 2021](#); [Jones, 2021](#); [Kaur-Gill et al., 2021](#); [Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2021](#); [Parreñas, 2021](#); [Tong & Jiang, 2020](#); [Wee et al., 2020](#)). By doing so, this paper contributes to existing efforts to respect FDWs as a nationally legitimate workforce. It underscores its urgency by connecting their legal entitlements to elderly welfare (and the lack thereof). This paper encourages privileged and influential stakeholders in the policymaking community to provide further thought to securitising workers' well-being, personal dignity, and satisfactory quality of care delivery. In addition, future scholarly contributions to this journal might analyse 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 essential, as are studies that inquire into the full range of FDWs' contributions, expertise, and specialisations. 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 for 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 caring for elderly family members at their employers' residences. The author interviewed fewer domestic employers, unpaid family caregivers, recruitment agency managers, and NGO workers. In 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 outlined by qualitative feminist psychologists who advocate an approach of looking backwards (at what already exists) to envision fruitful analytical horizons ([Clarke & Braun, 2019](#)). This call does not intend to be prescriptive for feminist thinkers, broadly referring to researchers whose topics are concerned with women's marginalisation and violent oppression. Instead, it 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](#)). The basic premise is that personal caregivers for older people (FDWs) have the most profound appreciation of the care work they do on behalf of primarily unappreciative host societies and the most salient understanding of how their labour is degraded and devalued. FDWs are highly preoccupied with labour 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 have violent behaviour and speak unfetteredly, usually with sexist and racist remarks. Some FDWs were fortunate to have supportive employers.

In contrast, others were the object of their female superiors – typically addressed as ma'am in Singapore and lady boss (*lao ban niang*) in Taiwan – random tantrums. Overall, FDWs' statements reflect a higher social exposure to eldercare work and a wise 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') legitimise.





## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. 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 alterations of live-in employment regimes. All FDWs demonstrated an intimate knowledge and understanding of the legal and unjust nature of household servitude, legitimised through official migration streams like the 1978 Foreign Maid Scheme of Singapore and the 1992 live-in caregiver program of Taiwan ([Liang, 2021](#); [Teo, 2018](#)). It is essential to clarify that this paper focuses on the absence of legal rights for FDWs to enact and practice their labour laws; hence, it cannot attend to comparisons and contrasts of contextual differences, like political regime and governance, across both locations. The author explains the critical interview themes about FDWs' unique yet universal discrimination in what follows. Ultimately, their narratives highlight the necessity of giving household workers equal access to employment benefits and labour protection as public sector employees.

### 3.2. 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, labour or task, no matter how professional and highly skilled, is not seen as actual work ([Sarti, 2014](#)). The looming feminist problem is not that domestic employment is unenjoyable or even hated by its workers. Instead, it is seen as all kinds of things other than legitimate employment, i.e., a voluntary labour of love instead of actual and real work deserving financial compensation. In East Asian familial welfare regimes like Singapore and Taiwan, FDWs have likewise been excluded from national labour 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. This gendered-racialized burden 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 women into the paid workforce to maximise national economic growth; this measure was not 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 reprieve for female citizens quickly became 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 be paralysed ([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 nearly 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" are impossible to regulate and unfriendly to standard labour rights definitions around fundamental issues like working hours, job scope, days off, medical treatment/healthcare insurance, annual leave, and otherwise ([Chien, 2018: 1151](#)). As mentioned, the author focuses on the legal blind spots and formal loopholes in the rule-of-law system for regulating FDWs, especially in Singapore, where centralised 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 essential to emphasise that the live-in regime profoundly affects employers' psyches: its normalisation of 24/7 servanthood muddies the personal/professional and work/leisure boundaries. It is 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 legislation for FDWs remains 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 labour regulations: "Because the kind of informality attached to domestic work and care work is still rather entrenched in our policies, there is a reluctance to formalise this sector kind of." (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 behaviour. Such scenarios have been found by many different 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 behaviour, 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 recognise them on equal terms as human beings with emotional needs: "Yes, we come here to work, to give a 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 for their dignity, like when an employer shouted in a crowded mall: "Why are 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

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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 marginalised 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 recognise the deeper structural issues (patriarchy and gendered divisions of labour) of the social reproduction crisis in the domestic economy. In other words, instead of asking why society is so heavily dependent on FDWs for running its 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 most people perceive the home as disconnected and separate from the formal political economy, any grievances are private to be negotiated between individual employers and employees. This public/private division troubles many activist and NGO efforts to improve labour politics for FDWs. Even something taken for granted, like the technological revolution, which has empowered many migrants through digital activism, is not guaranteed because the home is not recognised as a real workplace. As the senior project manager at the 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 different legal administrative capacities and policy implementation power, employers in both locations view recruitment agencies as government authority representatives and take most of their instructions to heart. FDWs who have worked in both places noted Singapore's "rigorous" rule-of-law society compared to Taiwan's ease of mobility and freedom: "Singapore stringent, 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 she could not freely enter and leave her employer's house in Singapore other than on designated off days. Still, in Taiwan, "we go to the neighbourhood park or shopping centre, 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 democratisation 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 realising 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.

### 3.3. Contract Replacement and/or Substitution

Another significant legal vacuum is 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 behaviour and ignorance of their legal entitlements to shoddy agencies/brokers that do not communicate well with employers.

"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).

But, 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 labour 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 labour 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 labour activism and high-profile abuse incidents ([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 typical 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 recognise the challenges of caregiving: “I often hear other helpers complain that it’s already challenging to look after the elderly, but family members still give them a tough 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 “all these dubious favours” 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; labour violations are sugar-coated as natural favours Field (Brown, 2019). 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).

In addition to the direct experiences shared by FDWs like Desy and Mitch, it is evident that the systemic issues within the private ‘maid’ agency system perpetuate these challenges. The exploitation veiled under familial rhetoric and the power imbalances inherent in live-in arrangements underscores the urgent need for structural reforms and stronger legal protections for domestic workers. Without such changes, the cycle of exploitation and vulnerability will persist, leaving FDWs with little recourse but to endure untenable conditions to support themselves and their families.

### 3.4. 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 recognise 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 honest workers is 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 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 labour legislation (Cheng, 2020; Glenn, 1992; Liang, 2018). Past and ongoing migrant labour rights studies repeatedly find that although all foreign labourers 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

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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 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. Still, it is more than standard 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 set at a shallow level. The employment agents will typically do the bare minimum, so they will train domestic workers in 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 older people, 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 aware of the contradiction between their employer's self-congratulatory filial piety and their assessments of older people'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 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 older woman had been cognitively sound for eight years. After some internet research, she suspected it was early dementia. She asked her employer if they could sign up for dementia courses but was unsuccessful: "I mentioned 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. She 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 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. More importantly, their formidable hurdle is employers’ misassumptions and ignorance about easy, causal, and unskilled eldercare and the ensuing lack of appreciation and support for decent work conditions.

### 3.5. What Do FDWs Want?

Firstly, FDWs should be entitled to inclusion under national employment standards or at least allowed to enact their 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 particular household service act for decades. Above all, FDWs were most aware that because “informal workers are not entered in the labour 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 labour rights provisions.

“If they recognise 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).

Most FDWs did not argue against a live-in regime of employment. However, many understood that their position as ‘migrants of need’ is a function of an uneven global political economy and significant economic divides between the Global North and Global South underpinned by colonial histories and imperial domination. Instead, 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 accommodating of their employers as they recognised that many elderly patients require 24/7 attention. To that extent, their work conditions cannot be legislated to every minute detail. However, they did not feel that the unpredictability of care work contradicts the idea of formal legislation and labour 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 recognised the dangers of inadequate medical training and were visibly anxious 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 professionalise 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 organisations 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. ([Agency for Integrated Care, 2022](#)). However, these initiatives are still extremely insufficient to meet





the care needs of ageing populations; pilot programs are highly underutilised, 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 occupational professionalisation are seconded by community stakeholders like the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), which recommended standardised 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 at 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 privatised sphere will be effective without the political commitment of citizens themselves. While much is left to be done for governments that have not officiated labour 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 more comprehensive scales and strengthen the medical examination process for abuse checks, as FDWs testified, has been done recently. However, the home’s walled-off privacy is another creature that remains essentially ungovernable by even the most robust 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 employed 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 employer awareness, education, and understanding would bring actual improvements.

## 4. Conclusion

In summary, this paper argues for the absolute pertinence of strengthening policy enforcement of labour standards legislation in home-based employment. Among other suggestions, human rights activists (following FDWs’ suggestions) have advocated for sending governments like Indonesia to implement revisions, untying FDWs’ residence rights to employer sponsorship, establishing proper redress channels for labour complaints, punishing errant employers strictly, and more robust community networks for abuse reports and mutual assistance. 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 labour law enforcement. The live-in arrangement is an employment situation like no other that is taken-for-granted yet highly dangerous to FDWs; some significant 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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