



Treatment of Migrant Workers in Singapore

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Abstract

This research paper examines the treatment of migrant workers in Singapore, pointing to a pressing issue seen by labor exploitation, poor living conditions, and inadequate legal protections and policies. Migrant workers, primarily from countries like Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar, form the majority of Singapore's construction and domestic sectors. However, their contributions are often overshadowed by the challenges they face, including wage theft, unsafe work environments, and limited access to healthcare and basic rights.

To explore this issue, I utilized a mixed-method approach combining secondary sources such as online journals, news reports, and academic research papers with primary data from in-person interviews conducted with migrant workers, activists, and labor rights organizations. This method of research enabled a deeper understanding of the systematic issues backed by reports and statistics, and personal experiences of the workers.

A noticeable gap between Singapore's progressive economic sector and the treatment of its migrant workforce was revealed. Despite the construction of legal frameworks, enforcement remains weak, leading to continued exploitation. Interviewees shared personal stories of mistreatment, while activists pointed to systemic flaws in labor policies.

This research concludes that change requires stronger labor law enforcement, improved living conditions, and greater efforts towards social integration to protect migrant workers' rights. These changes are crucial to ensuring fair treatment and safeguarding human dignity in Singapore's workforce.

Keywords: migrant workers, exploitation, discrimination, marginalization, social integration, social isolation, systemic issues, singapore

I. Introduction

Migrant workers play a crucial role in Singapore's economic development, particularly in the construction, domestic work, and manufacturing sectors. These workers, primarily from neighboring countries like Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar, often leave their home countries in search of better opportunities. However, behind Singapore's image as a global economic hub lies the darker reality of systemic mistreatment and exploitation of these workers. Many migrant workers face long working hours, delayed or unpaid wages, cramped living conditions, and inadequate access to healthcare. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, exposed the vulnerabilities of this marginalized group, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of their lived experiences and the systemic issues they face.

Despite existing legal frameworks that aim to protect worker rights, numerous reports and research studies suggest that enforcement remains weak, leaving migrant workers in precarious situations. While much has been written about the economic contributions of migrant workers in Singapore, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding their experiences and the everyday challenges they face. This gap limits stronger, structured policy reforms and public awareness of the issues.

This research paper seeks to address the question of “What is the migrant workers' experience in Singapore and the underlying systemic causes of this experience?”. The goal of this study is to examine the lived experiences of migrant workers, assess the efficacy of existing labor laws and policies, and propose solutions that could ensure fair treatment and protection of workers' rights. Through a combination of secondary research and primary data collected from interviews and surveys, the study aims to uncover key factors contributing to the experiences of migrant workers in Singapore and offer recommendations for improving their conditions.

II. Literature Review

The mistreatment of migrant workers in Singapore has been a topic of growing concern in recent years, with researchers, activists, and organizations highlighting the various challenges these workers face. The literature primarily examines labor exploitation, systemic inequities, and the socio-economic factors contributing to the mistreatment of this marginalized group.

Many studies review labor exploitation of migrant workers in Singapore. Research by Pooie (2022), emphasizes that migrant workers in Singapore are often subjected to exploitative working conditions, including long hours and low wages. Despite contractual agreements, instances of wage theft and delayed payments are widespread, as highlighted in a study by Home (2024). Furthermore, poor workplace safety standards, particularly in the construction industry, exacerbate their vulnerability. According to Unsafe workplaces (2021), the incidence of workplace injuries among migrant workers remains disproportionately high compared to local employees, underscoring systemic neglect.

The issue of inadequate housing and poor living conditions is another recurring theme in the literature reviewed. Research by Ng (2023) reveals that many migrant workers are housed in overcrowded dormitories with insufficient access to sanitation, privacy, and recreational facilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these conditions became particularly problematic, with dormitories serving as epicenters of infection. Ng highlights the roles of such conditions in exacerbating physical and mental health risks for migrant workers.

When it comes to legal and policy gaps, several studies point to the limitations of Singapore's legal framework in protecting migrant workers. While the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act provides basic rights, enforcement is often inconsistent, as noted by Wham (2014). Employers and agents frequently exploit loopholes, leaving workers with limited legal recourse. An article by Goh (2021) argues that the dependency of workers on their employers for visa sponsorship creates a power imbalance, rendering them vulnerable to abuse.

Beyond economic and legal aspects, the literature also explores socio-cultural factors. For instance, ILO (2020) research highlights how negative public perceptions of migrant workers reinforce discriminatory attitudes and justify their marginalization. Public narratives often depict these workers as economic burdens rather than contributors to Singapore's growth, further entrenching systemic inequities.

While these studies provide valuable insights, there is limited research on the lived experiences of migrant workers from

their perspectives, particularly through qualitative methods such as interviews. Additionally, few studies offer practical, policy-oriented solutions to address the systemic challenges these workers face. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by combining secondary research with primary data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and to propose actionable recommendations for reform.

III. Methods

3.1 Study Design

Multiple approaches were used to examine the mistreatment of migrant workers in Singapore. A combination of qualitative and secondary research methods was utilized to explore personal narratives, societal perceptions, and systemic challenges. This design allows for a holistic understanding of the issue by integrating primary data collected through interviews and surveys with insights from existing literature.

The qualitative component focused on firsthand accounts and opinions, while the secondary research provided context and corroborated findings with established studies. This approach ensures a balanced perspective, grounded in both empirical data and scholarly analysis.

3.2 Data Collection

1. **Interviews with Migrant Workers:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with migrant workers from the construction and domestic sectors. These interviews explored their experiences with working conditions, housing, and employer relationships, providing detailed insights into the challenges they face.
2. **Interviews with Soup Kitchen Volunteers:** Additional interviews were conducted with volunteers at a soup kitchen serving migrant workers. These discussions shed light on systemic issues and the social dynamics influencing the treatment of migrant workers as observed in their daily interactions.
3. **Google Forms Survey:** A Google Forms survey was sent out to Singaporean citizens and residents as well as those with experiences in Singapore. The survey was made to understand public perceptions of migrant workers, attitudes towards them, legal protection, and social integration. The responses provided a broader societal perspective on the issue.
4. **Secondary Research:** To supplement the primary data, extensive secondary research was conducted using online journals, news articles, and academic papers. Sources such as journals, reports from reputable organizations (e.g., The UN), and government statistics were selected, based on their credibility, relevance, and objectivity.

3.3 Data Analysis

Interviews were translated and transcribed, and qualitative data analyzed from transcriptions.

Survey responses were analyzed using a combination of basic questions and open-ended questions. This analysis provided a nuanced understanding of societal attitudes and perceptions regarding the treatment of migrant workers.

For the secondary research, content analysis was applied to understand findings from multiple sources, ensuring that the themes identified in the primary data are supported by official data. By integrating these diverse data points, the study offers a comprehensive look into migrant workers' experiences in Singapore and the underlying systemic causes of this experience.

IV. Results

4.1 Interviews

One of the most pressing issues for migrant workers is financial insecurity. Many workers prioritize sending money back to their families over their own well-being, often leading to poor living conditions and food insecurity. One interviewee noted that workers hesitate to spend money on fruits or other nutritious food, as those are seen as “luxury items” rather than necessities. Another participant emphasized the financial motivation behind migration, stating, “He wants others to know that they are also here to make money for their families back home.”

The economic burden is due to inflation, particularly the rising cost of food, which affects both workers and the soup kitchens they rely on. A volunteer highlighted this issue, stating that a bag of cabbages, which previously cost \$8, now costs \$28, making it increasingly difficult for workers to sustain themselves.

Migrant workers frequently endure physically demanding and hazardous jobs, often with minimal workplace protections. One interviewee described his job as “hacking buildings” for demolition projects, explaining that “his job is to hack. Very tough work. Very tough.” These conditions highlight the physically intensive and often precarious nature of their employment.

However, not all workers reported negative experiences. Some stated that they did not face significant workplace challenges or discrimination. One interviewee remarked, “He said no challenges for him,” suggesting that perceptions of workplace hardships vary based on individual circumstances and industry.

Beyond financial hardships, many struggle with loneliness and social isolation. To combat this, some workers find solace in community engagement. Volunteering at soup kitchens provides an opportunity for social interaction and a sense of purpose. One worker explained his motivation for volunteering, stating, “For them, when they volunteer, it’s like doing service to God. He said it’s better here than spending his time alone [...] and isolated.” This demonstrates how social support networks play a critical role in mitigating the isolation that many migrant workers experience.

The duration of stay varied among interviewees. Some workers had been in Singapore for a short time, while others had lived there for over a decade. One participant mentioned arriving in Singapore in 2013 and had since returned to India seven times, while another had lived in the country for 15 years without returning home. This contrast reflects differing levels of financial stability and personal obligations.

4.2 Survey

My Google Form survey received 15 responses, despite wide distribution and repeated requests for responses. Out of those who responded, 20%, or 3 respondents, were under the age of 18, 6 respondents, or 40% were aged over 50, 1 of our respondents, or 6% were between 35 and 50 years old. 5 of our respondents or 33% were 24 to 35 years old

What is your age group?

15 responses

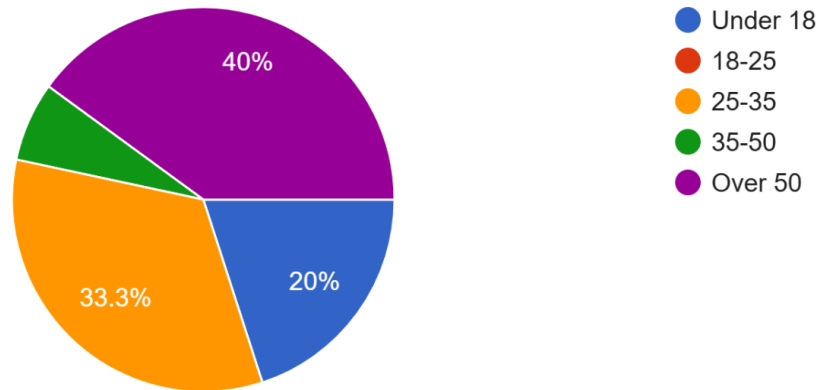


Fig. 1: Demographics

40% (6 respondents) were Singaporean citizens by birth, 20%, or 3 people were naturalized citizens, and another 30% were Singapore residents. 7%, or 1 respondent was each a Singapore resident who moved to India, on a work permit, or none of the above.

What is your status in Singapore?

15 responses

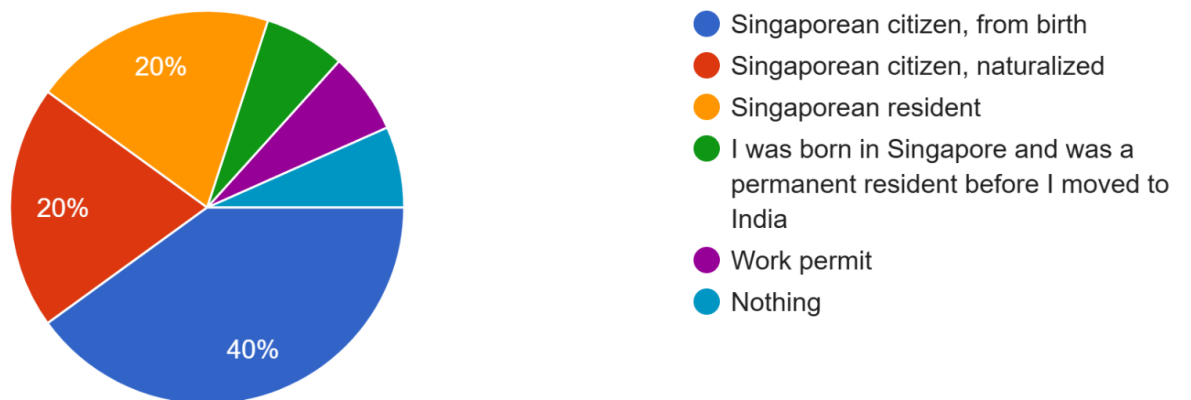


Fig. 2: Legal status

60% (9 respondents) have never worked with or around migrant workers.

Do you, or have you in the past, employed or worked with or around migrant workers in Singapore?
15 responses

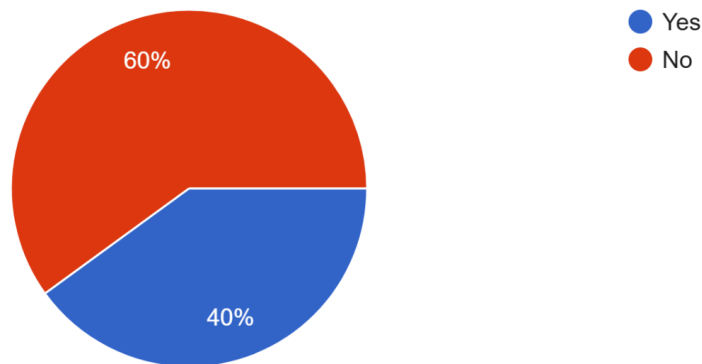


Fig. 3: First-hand familiarity

However, 80% (12 respondents) do not think that migrant workers are treated fairly or equally.

In your experience, are migrant workers in Singapore treated equally and fairly?
15 responses

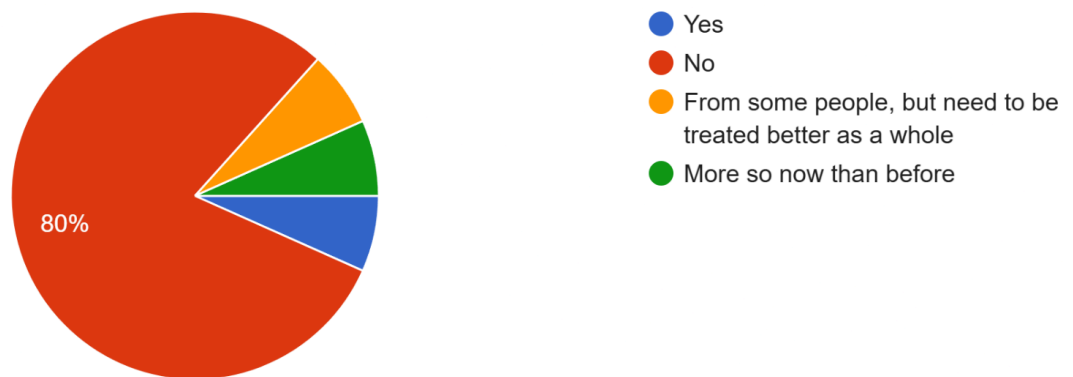


Fig. 4: Treatment sentiment

Similarly, 73% of respondents also feel that there are not enough laws in place to ensure the fair treatment of migrant workers.

Do you think there are enough laws in place to ensure fair treatment of all workers in Singapore?

15 responses

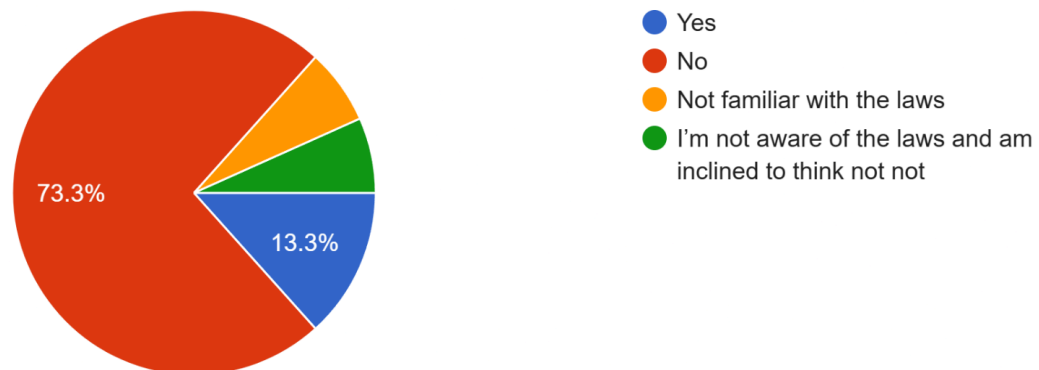


Fig. 5: Sentiment on laws and regulations

Additionally, 73% also think that there are not sufficient labor laws and policies to ensure the fair treatment of migrant workers.

Most of the respondents feel that migrant workers are crucial to Singapore's economy and should be treated better. For example, one of the respondents stated that:

“This country would not be the same without these migrant workers and they should be treated more equally.”

And another stated:

“They do jobs that no Singaporeans would want to do.. they have the skill set that we don't.”

Majority of the respondents felt migrant workers had a difficult life and were not treated well, with respondents saying:

“I feel they are treated marginally and a lot of local citizens look down on them with no respect.”

“I have heard stories about how they aren't treated as well as other workers, work very long hours and aren't paid well either.”

“They are grossly underpaid for the work they do.”

V. Discussion

This study sought to address the question of “**What is the migrant workers' experience in Singapore and the underlying systemic causes of this experience**”. The findings align with these objectives by discovering the financial struggles, food insecurity, and prioritization of remittances over personal well-being that many migrant workers face. The testimonies from interviews provide direct evidence of these challenges and emphasize the need for greater societal and policy support.

The findings reinforce previous studies on migrant workers in Singapore, which document economic instability, legal vulnerabilities, and social exclusion. Literature on labor migration suggests that wage suppression and lack of adequate

support structures contribute to persistent hardships. The emphasis on remittances is also well-documented in migration studies, showing how workers prioritize family financial support at great personal sacrifices.

One study is *Precarious Fates: The Experiences of Migrant Workers in Singapore*, which examines the legal, social, and economic constraints that migrant workers confront daily. This research underscores how low-wage migrant laborers are often treated as expendable within the capitalist workforce, leading to significant hardships (Human Trafficking Search, 2017). A migrant worker in his interview described his construction work as “tough work, very tough work”, and another described his daily life as just “working”.

Additionally, the article *Precarious Work and its Complicit Network: Migrant Labour in Singapore* explores how precarious employment conditions contribute to social vulnerabilities among migrant workers. It discusses the systemic issues that perpetuate these vulnerabilities, emphasizing the need for policy changes (Asia Pacific Viewpoint, 2019).

Singapore has many laws and regulations protecting migrant workers, including:

1. **Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA)** – Governs the employment terms for Work Permit and S Pass holders, outlining employers’ responsibilities, including fair wages and housing conditions.
2. **Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA)** – Provides compensation for work-related injuries, though enforcement can be inconsistent.
3. **Foreign Employee Dormitories Act (FEDA)** – Regulates large-scale dormitories to ensure minimum living standards.
4. **Employment Act** – Covers basic employment rights but does not apply to domestic workers, who remain highly vulnerable to exploitation.

Despite these regulations, numerous reports indicate that many workers still face unfair treatment, unpaid wages, and poor living conditions. The interviews reinforce the idea that while legal protections exist, they do not always translate into tangible improvements in workers’ daily lives.

In regards to the emphasis on remittances and the personal sacrifices made by migrant workers, the study *The New Economics of Labour Migration and the Role of Remittances* is of crucial importance. It discusses how migrant workers prioritize sending money back home, often at the expense of their own well-being, highlighting the complex economic decisions they must navigate (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2003). This is similar to what I have heard in the interviews conducted, where workers send money home instead of buying fruits which they consider a luxury.

The written responses in my survey reveal issues that the public may be aware or unaware of within migrant worker treatment. One of the most prominent issues is economic hardship and low wages. Many respondents acknowledge that migrant workers perform physically demanding jobs yet receive inadequate compensation. As one respondent noted, “They do jobs that no Singaporeans would want to do... they have the skill set that we don’t... so lowly paid for the hard work job they are doing.” Others emphasize that these workers are “grossly underpaid for the work they do” and that “they aren’t treated as well as other workers, work very long hours, and aren’t paid well either.” This highlights the financial mistreatment that many migrant workers experience, particularly in a city with a high cost of living like Singapore. While Singapore does not have a minimum wage for workers, the government has a sector-specific Progressive Wage Model in industries such as cleaning, security, and landscaping to ensure fair wages. However, many migrant workers, particularly those in construction and domestic work, remain outside these regulations and continue to face unfair or exploitative wages. Given their crucial role in building and maintaining Singapore, as well as providing necessary services, their pay is disproportionately low compared to their contributions.

Another theme is the lack of recognition and social marginalization faced by migrant workers. While they contribute significantly to Singapore's economy and infrastructure, their efforts often go unnoticed or underappreciated. One respondent stated, "They do all the hardest laborious work with no recognition." Others expressed concerns about societal attitudes, with comments such as "I feel they are treated marginally, and a lot of local citizens look down on them with no respect." There is a clear perception that migrant workers are not given the same treatment as other members of the workforce, despite their crucial role in sustaining key industries.

Additionally, many responses emphasize the harsh working and living conditions that migrant workers endure. Some mentioned that workers "may not have a day off" and that "they work very long hours." These statements reflect broader concerns about labor rights and the physical toll of their work. The dedication of these individuals to providing for their families despite challenging conditions is a strong underlying theme, as one respondent acknowledged their "courage for coming to a new land to do the needful for their family."

Several respondents also recognize that migrant workers are an essential part of Singaporean society. One respondent stated, "This country would not be the same without these migrant workers and they should be treated more equally." Others described them as "an integral part of our workforce" and "really important for society." These responses highlight a growing awareness of the indispensable role migrant workers play, but also suggest that more should be done to ensure they receive fair treatment.

Finally, the responses also show a mixed awareness among respondents about the struggles migrant workers face. While some express deep respect and empathy, others simply state "Not aware." This suggests a gap in public knowledge and engagement, reinforcing the need for greater awareness and advocacy efforts.

The direct interviews with migrant workers and soup kitchen volunteers present a slightly different picture. Firsthand accounts from the workers themselves do not focus on the mistreatment and unfairness, and the workers themselves do not seem unhappy; rather, they focus on their obligations and reasons for being in Singapore. They don't seem to be aware that they are treated poorly, and most are not in Singapore for themselves, but for others, prioritizing sending money home over their own well-being. The interviews highlight that many workers express a sense of obligation to support their families in their home countries, sometimes at the cost of their own health and nutrition. One interviewee mentioned that workers hesitate to spend money on fruits or other nutritious food, as those are seen as 'luxury items' rather than necessities. Additionally, one interviewee spoke about loneliness and isolation, and uses his free time to volunteer at the soup kitchen in order to have social interactions, and give back as 'service to God'. This supports the general conclusion that migrant workers are not socially integrated into Singaporean society and lack social support systems.

The soup kitchen's volunteers, including individuals who themselves immigrated to Singapore, provide an essential safety net. Volunteers observe that many of the beneficiaries are migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia, particularly India and Sri Lanka.

One volunteer emphasized that the kitchen does not discriminate based on financial need and actively encourages single parents and workers experiencing economic hardship to take food. Additionally, some workers (soup kitchen customers) contribute small donations to the soup kitchen when possible, demonstrating their willingness to give back despite their financial struggles.

Singapore has long relied on migrant labor to sustain its economy, particularly in sectors such as construction, domestic work, and manufacturing. Historically, migrant workers have faced challenges related to wages, living conditions, and legal protections. The interviews suggest that these issues persist, with many workers struggling to maintain a basic standard of living despite their essential contributions to the economy, even though they may not be aware of this in their subjective reporting.

While both local low-income individuals and migrant workers rely on soup kitchens, their needs and motivations differ. Local beneficiaries (low-income individuals) tend to use the soup kitchen to save money for other expenses, whereas migrant workers often have no other options due to their financial constraints. The burden of remittances and job insecurity further exacerbates their dependence on such support services. This became apparent in an interview with the soup kitchen owner, who mentioned that at the soup kitchen, they try their best to distribute fruits, as migrant workers tend to hesitate when buying fruits, which they consider a luxury, and instead choose to send money back home.

The findings of this research clearly point to the fact that the migrant worker issues are multifaceted and require several levels of intervention.

First and foremost, the findings show the necessity for policy changes, including wage improvements, better housing conditions, and increased access to affordable food. While Singapore has labor laws and regulations in place to protect migrant workers, such as the Employment Act and the Foreign Employee Dormitories Act, enforcement remains a significant issue. Many employers fail to follow these regulations, and migrant workers who attempt to report mistreatment may face repercussions, including the risk of termination or deportation. Fear of retaliation, coupled with the complexity of legal processes, discourages workers from seeking justice. Additionally, some employers withhold wages or force workers to live in poor accommodations despite housing regulations. Stronger enforcement mechanisms, along with better protections for whistleblowers, are necessary to ensure that labor laws are not only in place but also upheld in practice.

To improve food security, implementing a subsidized program for essential groceries, particularly fruits and vegetables, could ensure that workers have access to nutritious food without financial strain. Employers and government agencies could collaborate with supermarkets or community organizations to provide discounted food vouchers or meal subsidies. Additionally, strengthening labor laws and enforcing wage regulations would help alleviate financial difficulties, ensuring workers receive fair compensation for their contributions.

Raising awareness among the local population and policymakers may require a mix of education, media engagement and policy advocacy. Schools and universities can integrate discussions on labor rights and social justice into their curriculum, fostering empathy through workshops and guest speakers. Media outlets, including documentaries, news reports, and social media campaigns, can highlight migrant workers' struggles and contributions, putting pressure on the government to change. Community engagement initiatives, such as cultural exchange programs, language classes, mentorship schemes that create relationships between migrant workers and local citizens, and volunteer work, can help bridge the gap between locals and migrant workers, breaking down stereotypes. Employers could also play a role by organizing social activities and ensuring workers have adequate time off to participate in community events.

NGOs and advocacy groups should push for stricter enforcement of labor laws, whistleblower protections, and policy reforms while also engaging with the government to drive systemic change. Social media can serve as a powerful tool for digital activism, amplifying workers' stories and mobilizing public support through petitions and interactive content.

Community-driven systems, such as soup kitchens, play an important role not only in providing essential resources like food but also in introducing social integration among migrant workers. Organized social activities, such as cultural events, language classes, and recreational gatherings, can further bridge the gap between migrant workers and local communities, promoting mutual understanding and breaking down stereotypes. Religious and community organizations can also have mentorship programs, legal aid services, and financial literacy workshops, empowering workers with the information they may need. Encouraging interaction between migrant workers and Singaporean citizens through volunteer-driven initiatives can humanize them to the public and reinforce their contributions to society. In the end, fostering inclusive spaces and structured social programs can help alleviate the alienation many migrant workers experience, promoting a more cohesive and empathetic society.

Providing better housing conditions, such as subsidized dormitories with improved living standards, could enhance workers' well-being and reduce social isolation.

Lastly, increasing awareness through media campaigns, advocacy groups, and social media would empower migrant workers to report mistreatment without fear of retaliation. In order to improve the lives of migrant workers in Singapore, addressing these issues through policy changes, community engagement, and responsibility of companies is necessary.

VI. Limitations

One key limitation of this paper is the limited number of interviews conducted. A broader sample size could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue; however, most migrant workers did not want to be interviewed. While the exact reasons for refusal are not known, there is a general sentiment of fear and concern that speaking out about their experiences will have consequences to their status and contract obligations. Additionally, the Google Forms survey received a low number of responses, and had a skewed distribution of Singapore citizens and permanent residents. While I can only speculate on the reasons for such a low response rate, it may reflect on the issue of ignorance and turning a blind eye that my secondary research discovered as well. Singaporeans are either not aware of the issues or prefer to ignore the situation. Future research could expand data collection efforts through wider outreach and more diverse respondent samples.

VII. Conclusion

The findings of my research, combined with the responses of those surveyed, emphasize the importance of the roles migrant workers play in Singapore's society and economy, while also revealing issues with their well being and social integration. The data collected in my survey, which included 40% of respondents who were Singaporean citizens by birth, indicates that a large number of respondents have lived in Singapore for a long period of time and are familiar with the social dynamics. However, only 40% of respondents reported having worked with or around migrant workers, pointing to limited direct interaction between locals, expats, and migrant workers, which may contribute to social distance and stereotypes.

More responses highlight the public awareness of challenges which migrant workers face, common themes being underpaid, overworked, and underappreciated. The majority of respondents showed respect and understood migrant workers' importance in Singapore's society; however, a number of responses showed concerns about their marginalization and lack of recognition for their efforts. This aligns with the results of my secondary research, which points to systemic mistreatment and limited social integration of migrant workers.

These findings highlight the importance of addressing both social and structural barriers. Policies must focus on improving legal protection, ensuring fair wages, employer transparency, and creating an inclusive society with opportunities for social interaction. Public education campaigns or community centers which advocate and allow these opportunities are crucial for reducing the stigma towards migrant workers.

More research to explore the long-term impact that awareness campaigns and legal reforms have on the lives of migrant workers is needed. Studies which involve in-depth interviews between migrant workers and locals could provide insights into the dynamics of integration. Comparative analyses with countries which have successfully implemented policies to include migrant workers, such as Sweden, Portugal, Canada and Australia, to name a few, may also offer solutions. By closing the discrimination and integration gaps identified in my research, Singapore can look to become a more equitable society.

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Appendix

Survey: <https://forms.gle/XEu7QxmQsboBoepL7>

For transcripts of interviews with migrant workers, please contact junusim@gmail.com