

# Food and Health Security among Burmese Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore amid Myanmar's 'Triple Crisis'

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**Migration & Food Security (MiFOOD)**

Paper No. 24

Series Editors: Sujata Ramachandran and Jonathan Crush

## Abstract

Migrating overseas to work as domestic workers is an increasingly important livelihood strategy for capital-poor women in Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar. However, the recent COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest in Myanmar has highlighted the entrenched precarities and uncertainties attached to this migration strategy. The health crisis has further heightened the importance of remittances and food security for migrants and their sending households. Food production, food systems and access to food supplies in the country have been especially hit by political instability, the energy crisis and inflation. This paper explores issues concerning the food and health security of female migrant domestic workers (MDWs) from Myanmar in Singapore, as well as the food and health concerns of their families left in Myanmar. Drawing on the findings of in-depth interviews with 24 Burmese MDWs in Singapore, the paper first focuses on the women's access to food and healthcare as low-waged live-in domestic workers whose lives and needs are highly dependent on their employers' generosity and goodwill. Next, the paper employs a transnational lens to understand how these women, who are also mothers, become active participants in the larger network of global (food/health) care chains as they continue to deliver care both materially and ideologically to their left-behind families. Finally, it analyzes the food security and health concerns of their left-behind families in Myanmar through this volatile period.

## Keywords

Myanmar, Singapore, migrant domestic workers, left-behind families, food security, health security

## Suggested Citation

Yeoh, B., Morais, F., Lam, T., Acedera, K. and Somaiah, B. (2024). Food and Health Security among Burmese Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore amid Myanmar's 'Triple Crisis'. MiFOOD Paper No. 24, Waterloo.

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## Cover Image

Burmese migrant domestic workers during their off-duty hours in Singapore. Photo credit: Julio Etchart/Alamy



**MiFOOD Network**  
GLOBAL MIGRATION & FOOD SECURITY

This is the 24th Working Paper in the MiFOOD Working Paper series published by the Hungry Cities Partnership, an international network of cities and organizations that focuses on building sustainable cities and urban food systems in the Global South. The seven-year collaborative MiFOOD project is funded by a Partnership Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

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Published by the Hungry Cities Partnership at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

## Introduction

The combined effects of a military takeover in 2021 and COVID-19 pandemic against the backdrop of an already-volatile economy have entangled Myanmar in a difficult set of circumstances that have been characterized as a “triple crisis” (Lorch, 2021; Reed, 2021). This compound set of crises, or “polycrisis” comprised a potent mix of political, health, and economic emergencies. In April 2021, two months into the military coup, Han et al. (2021, p.1) observed that “while the global community has been fighting COVID-19, Myanmar citizens are also fighting for their freedom from oppression [and] to protect their human rights”, which, in turn, “risks increasing the spread of COVID-19 at a time when coordinated efforts to manage COVID-19 are hampered by political restrictions”. These interrelated crises have major consequences for Myanmar’s food security and the well-being of its population. By 2022, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) noted that the “entire national food system” had been severely disrupted by a combination of factors, such as ongoing violence, economic crisis and COVID-19 (FAO, 2022). According to the most recent food security update by the World Bank, the proportion of households with low food consumption scores as well as inadequate dietary diversity increased from 2021 to 2022, with marginal social cohorts such as wage workers, migrant households, and displaced communities especially vulnerable to hunger and food insecurity (World Bank, 2023a).

In light of these circumstances, this paper explores how Myanmar’s “triple crisis” has forged important consequences for the health and food security of Burmese migrant-sending families in particular.<sup>1</sup> Such households not only make up a significant proportion of the population but are also crucial contributors to Myanmar’s economy. It is estimated that about 10% of Myanmar’s labor force are international migrants working abroad, with roughly 1.87 million Burmese nationals employed in Thailand, Malaysia, China and Singapore, primarily in low-skilled jobs (ILO, 2022; World Bank, 2020). Migrant-sending households are dependent on remittances to supplement food expenses and reduce debt (World Bank, 2016). In 2020, an estimated US\$2.25 billion was officially remitted by migrants, although this figure excludes the millions of dollars informally remitted through unofficial money brokers or *hundis* (ILO, 2022). A World Bank (2016) qualitative study on migration showed that both internal and international migration in Myanmar are direct responses to personal and external shocks, operating as a form of risk management, or means of accessing higher wages and better employment overseas. For many marginal households who rely heavily on farming for their livelihoods and exist close to the poverty line, a single shock (e.g. in cases of crop destruction and harvest failure due to extreme weather events) can produce severe consequences for their incomes, health and well-being. Migration can thus be seen as a direct coping mechanism to the loss of livelihoods and food insecurity, and a socioeconomic strategy providing vulnerable households with non-agricultural income so that they may be better able to manage such shocks (World Bank, 2016).

The paper highlights the perspectives of Burmese migrant domestic workers (MDWs) who were working and living in Singapore during the pandemic and the military coup. It considers how the volatility and uncertainty of Myanmar’s multiple crises, marked by its associated strains on public health infrastructure, disruptions to businesses, increased violence, electricity outages, and trade and foreign exchange restrictions have far-reaching implications for food security and health of Burmese migrants abroad and their capacity to support their left-behind family members.

The next section provides the background and context for the unfolding of these “multiple crises”, and their spiraling in Myanmar and shows how each crisis reinforced the other. The third section examines the food security issues of sending households, while the fourth examines migration trends and remittances. The fifth section provides a brief account of the migration of Burmese MDWs to Singapore, while the sixth presents an overview of the methods used in this study. Section seven draws on an analysis of qualitative interviews conducted with Burmese MDWs in Singapore to discuss issues related to health and food security, of both the migrant workers themselves and their families in Myanmar. The concluding section draws the discussion to a close with some general observations regarding the links between migration and food security during times of crisis.

## Myanmar’s “Triple Crisis”: Pandemic, Civil Unrest and Economic Instability

The first COVID-19 cases were identified in Myanmar on 23rd March 2020 before rapidly spreading across the entire country in multiple waves (IHME, 2022). By February 2021, there were more than 140,600 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 3,100 recorded deaths (WHO, 2024). These figures are likely to be far lower than the actual numbers due to underreporting from remote areas, technical constraints and delays with data management, and deaths at home not being accounted for in the total numbers (Htun et al. 2023; World Vision, 2021). The crisis scenario forged by the COVID-19 pandemic was soon compounded by the political crisis. On 1 February 2021, the military assumed control of the country and declared a state of emergency. The military coup dramatically worsened the health crisis in Myanmar with nationwide energy and supply chain disruptions and increased armed conflicts and internal violence (Mahase, 2021). Reportedly, the military junta also specifically targeted health workers who helped civilian protestors, resulting in numerous arrests and instances of violence against medical personnel. This targeted aggression further exacerbated the health crisis, as many healthcare professionals were forced into hiding or fleeing the country, severely undermining the already strained healthcare system, where mass resignations led to the closure of public hospitals (ibid).

State responses to COVID-19 involved mask mandates, widespread school and business closures, and international and domestic travel restrictions (Figure 1). However, these measures were largely ineffective and insufficient in this complex crisis scenario. COVID-19 tests remained “constantly limited”, vaccinations were disrupted by the military

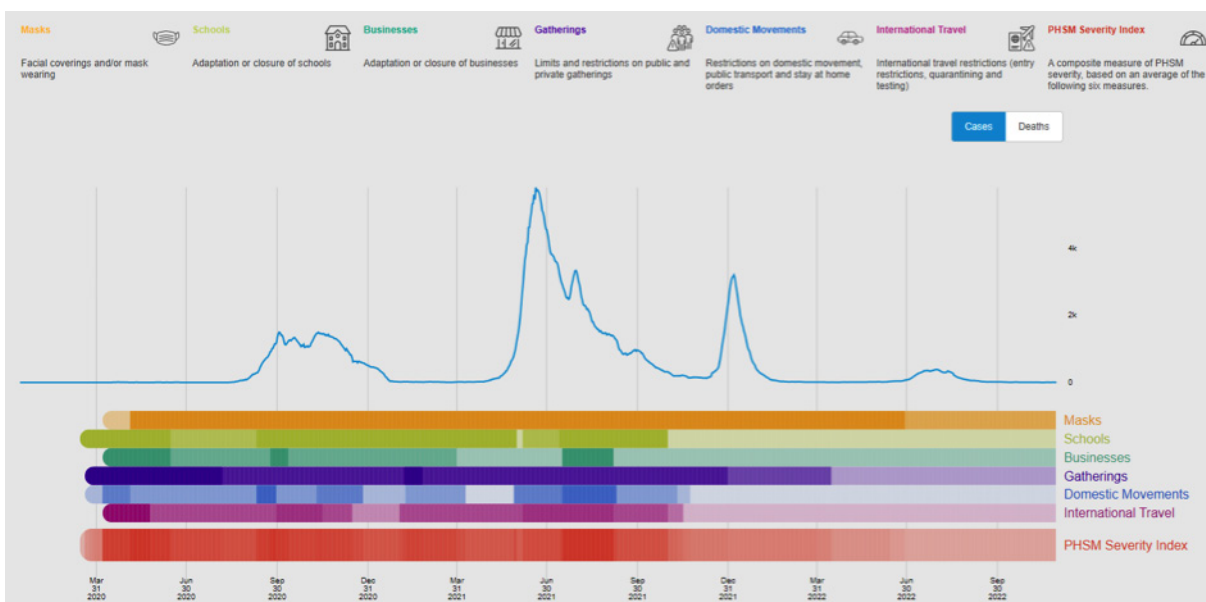
coup, stay-at-home orders lost their effectiveness by the third wave, and existing quarantine facilities were unable to keep up with the high caseloads (Lwin et al., 2022, p.4). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) transferred USD327 million to the Central Bank of Myanmar for emergency COVID-19 support; however, it is unclear how the junta used these funds, and it also blocked humanitarian aid (Human Rights Watch, 2021). By mid-February 2023, Myanmar had the lowest vaccination rate in Southeast Asia, with only 50% of its population fully vaccinated, compared to the above 70% rates of neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, China, Laos, and Thailand (WHO, 2023). The latest estimates (as of 2 June 2024) suggest that the country witnessed 642,482 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and 19,494 deaths attributed to the pandemic (WHO, 2024).

Even as the country faced the onslaught of multiple COVID-19 waves, its residents had to contend with various forms of violence, chaos, and uncertainty associated with the military coup (Figure 2). In February 2021, the Myanmar military organized a successful coup against the civilian government on the grounds of election fraud. The governing National League for Democracy (NLD) party had won the 2020 General Elections with a large majority, while the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) saw its worst results (Maizland, 2022). The military takeover prompted nationwide civilian protests. Between February and April 2021, government crackdowns and armed clashes continued, which rapidly involved the use of explosives, destruction of infrastructure, air/drone strikes. Nearly a year after the coup, there were reportedly some 600 cases of armed conflict, 300 remote or improvised explosive detonations, and 159 cases of infrastructure damage. Although the lockdowns were lifted in 2022 and the

country's borders reopened for international travel after the decrease in COVID-19 cases, the military conflict persisted through 2024 to this day, with frequent air strikes, arson attacks and civilian deaths (Ratcliffe & Kyaw, 2023a; 2023b; ReliefWeb, 2024). In January 2024, the military announced a fifth extension of the state of emergency operational until the end of July (Regalado & Robinson, 2024). UNICEF's (2024) latest humanitarian update for Myanmar (as of 31 May 2024) noted that the situation continues to remain bleak, with more than 3.1 million people internally displaced to date (Figure 3). One key event that triggered large-scale displacement was the airstrike in Sagaing on 11 April 2023, which caused at least 170 fatalities.

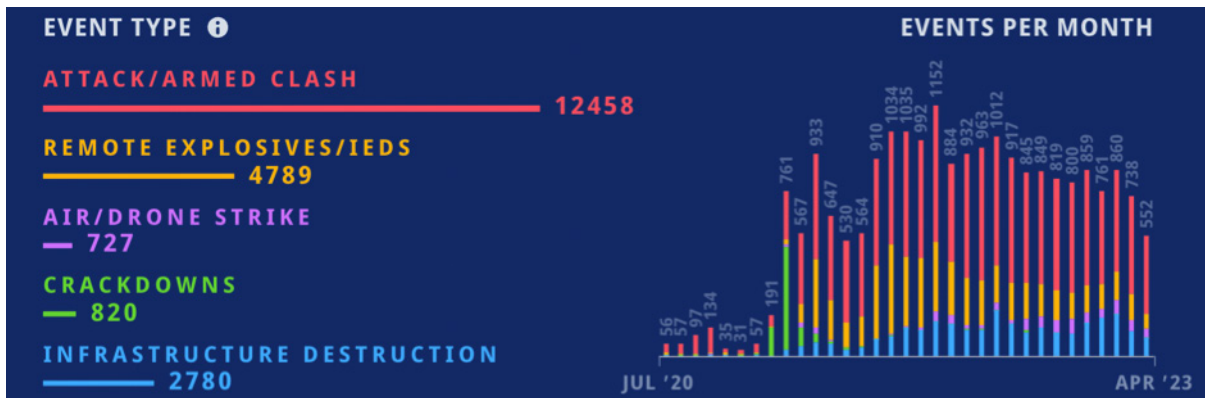
The combined impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and military takeover have hit the economy hard with falling exports, vanished revenues from tourism and a slump in remittances. Poverty rates have doubled from 24.8% in 2017 to 49.7% in 2023 (UNDP, 2024). This has completely undone Myanmar's past progress at reducing poverty. Poverty levels fell from 48% to 25% between 2005 and 2017 (World Bank, 2023b). Prior to the military coup and the pandemic, the country witnessed rapid economic growth. This was especially the case after its first democratic elections in 2015, which ushered in economic reforms, market liberalization, demolished trade barriers, controlled inflation and increased foreign direct investments. As the cumulative economic consequences of the military coup unfold along with rising global prices and inflation, household incomes have become increasingly stretched. According to the World Bank (2023c, p.2), nearly half of all households reported income losses in July and August 2022 compared to the previous year and were forced to reduce their food and non-food consumption.

**Figure 1: Timeline of Myanmar's COVID-19 case rates and response measures, March 2020 to September 2022**



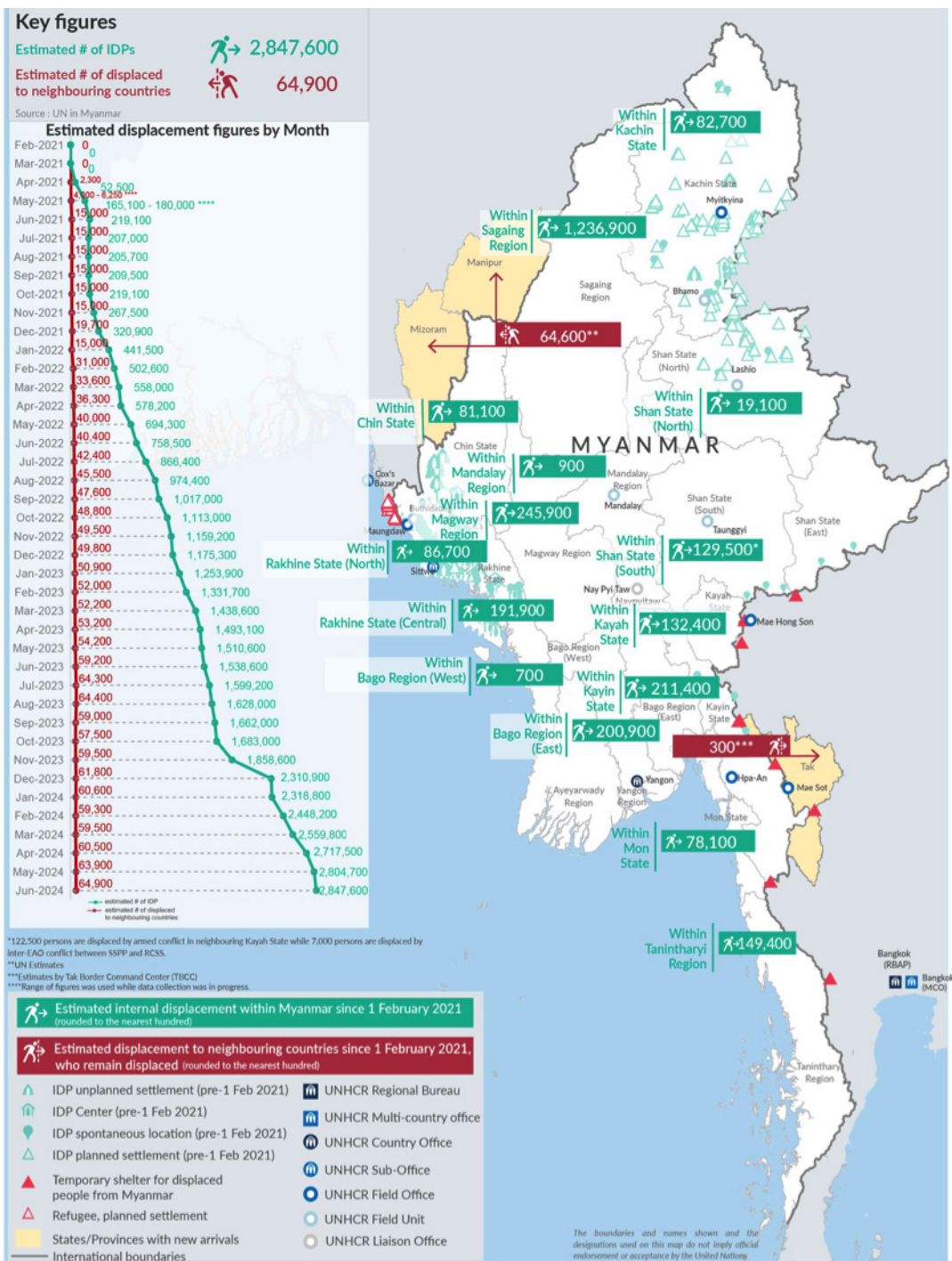
Source: WHO (2023).

Figure 2: Conflict in Myanmar, July 2020-April 2023



Source: IISS (2023).

Figure 3: Number of displaced people in Myanmar since February 2021 and remain displaced (to June 2024)



Source: UNHCR (2024).

## Food Production and Food Security

Myanmar is a resource-rich, agriculture-based country, where the farming sector employs 70% of the rural population. It is also a major supplier of food to neighbouring countries such as China, Thailand, Bangladesh and India (Htay, 2022). Paddy rice is an especially important staple in Myanmar both in terms of domestic consumption and exports, and 60% of farming households in the country grow paddy during the monsoon season (Minten et al., 2023, citing the Myanmar Livelihood and Consumption Survey in 2017). The national and local food systems have been tightly controlled by the state since the 1962 military coup. Under the socialist system, farmers have been encouraged to sell their farm products at low prices set by the government in order to gain foreign exchange reserves through rice exports (Minten et al., 2023). As a result, farmers have been forced to sell their rice on the black market, increasing food prices while leaving villages in circumstances of poverty. There was a renewed emphasis on rice yield exports by the ruling junta after the military coup of 2021. As Htay (2022) argues, current and past military regimes have prioritized generating foreign income for the state from the sale of agricultural products, such as rice, for their own narrow interests, rather than supporting the socioeconomic welfare of rural communities.

Minten et al. (2023) examined the impacts of the new military coup on Myanmar's rice value chains and found that rice processing and its trade had remained relatively resilient. Rice availability was not substantially lower than before the coup. However, consumer prices had significantly increased, especially for those living in more remote regions. The study identified two primary reasons for this marked dispersion of rice prices. The first reason, and perhaps the primary contributing factor, is the increased challenges of food transportation due to sharp spikes in fuel prices and other factors. The World Food Program (WFP, 2022) estimates this increase in fuel prices to be 133%, which exerted an enormous negative effect on the transportation systems. Restrictions on transportation and imposition of curfews, imposed differently at various administrative levels and enforced at unpredictable times and locations intensified the

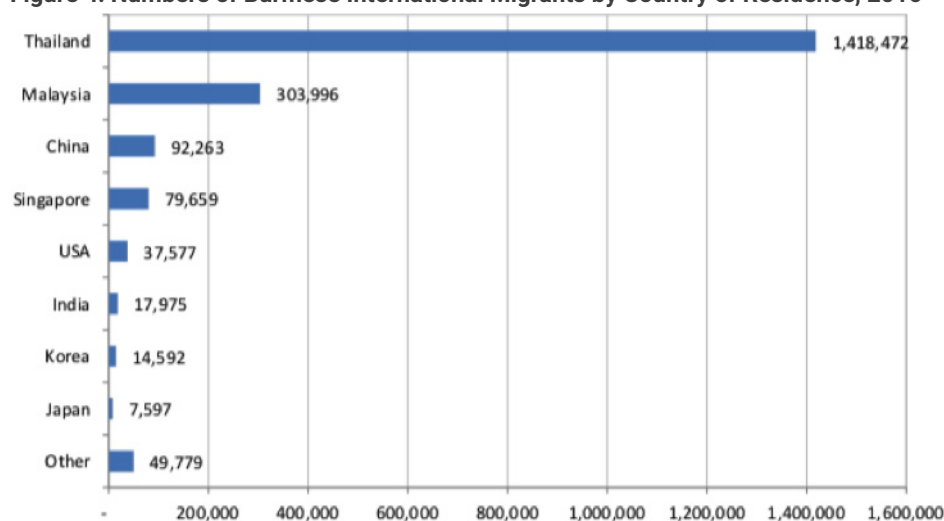
existing frictions to the intranational transit of rice. Armed conflict and related violence especially near rice mills and vendors was the second contributing factor to the food system disruptions in the country (Minten et al., 2023). Furthermore, freight truck drivers were reluctant to deliver produce from farms to markets for fear of hitting landmines while on the road (*Frontier Myanmar*, 2022). Similar arguments have been made by other studies. Tun (2022), for example, noted that heavy conflict in Sagaing (the third largest rice producing area) and Magway (the fifth largest rice producing area) regions was expected to reduce rice production in both areas, resulting in the further hiking up of prices in the country. Even in regions like Rakhine where the violence and conflict have mostly subsided, farmers have been hesitant to return to work for the fear of landmines (Tun, 2022).

Sharp hikes in food prices have not only applied to staple foods such as rice. Overall, commodity prices have seen an increase from 15% to 37% between December 2020 and 2021, while the prices of other household staples, such as cooking oil, rose by more than 80% in a single year (WFP, 2022). Faced with the cumulative effects of multiple crises through skyrocketing food prices, residents of Myanmar have resorted to rationing and cutting back on essentials (Solomon, 2022). Others have drawn on their savings, borrowing money and food, and foraging to make ends meet (UNSDG, 2021). According to a recent OCHA (2023) humanitarian needs report, more than 15.2 million people in Myanmar, roughly a quarter of the population, are experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity. This has also been the case for migrant-sending households with family members abroad. Their food consumption at home decreased because of the declining flow of remittances – a critical source of income – even as they adapt to rising food prices (Zan, 2022).

## Migration Trends and Remittance Flows

Internal and international migration are common household strategies in Myanmar to sustain and diversify their livelihoods. Although international migration is lower in

**Figure 4: Numbers of Burmese International Migrants by Country of Residence, 2016**



Source: Department of Population, 2016, p.76.

numbers in comparison with the population migrating internally (20%), past decades have witnessed an increase in Burmese citizens migrating outside Myanmar (Department of Population, 2015). According to the 2014 Population and Housing Census, around 4% (2.02 million) of Myanmar's population of 51.5 residents have migrated to other countries (Department of Population, 2016). Other estimates such as the UNDESA and the World Bank report higher figures of international migrants at 2.6 and 3.1 million respectively (ILO, 2015).

Socioeconomic and political instabilities in the country have been driving its citizens to increasingly migrate as refugees or labour migrants to other areas (IOM, 2008). International migration aspirations have also intensified. A Gallup poll found that the number of people who wanted to leave Myanmar quadrupled from 6% in 2018 to 24% in 2021 (Ray, 2022). Loss of personal freedom, deteriorating internal security situation, and continued economic decline, all conditions aggravated by the military coup and COVID-19 pandemic, were cited as the main reasons for these rising migration intentions. The 2014 Census reported that neighbouring Thailand was the top destination country (1.4 million migrants/70%) followed by Malaysia (304,000 migrants/15%), China (5%) and Singapore (4%) (Department of Population, 2016) (Figure 4). Although Singapore is further away from Myanmar, increased demands for low-waged and disposable labour in this fast-developing economy is driving new flows (IOM, 2016).

### **New Military Regime and Myanmar's Remittance System**

The out-migration of its citizens has generated important flows of remittances into Myanmar. In 2017, the country received USD 8 billion dollars as remittances constituting about 13% of annual GDP (Akee & Kapur, 2017). These remittances are an essential source of income for migrant-sending households in Myanmar with more than 10 million people reporting remittances as one of their income sources in 2017 (WFP, 2022). Remittances were relatively resistant during the initial onset of COVID-19, as migrants abroad continued to send money and support their families living in Myanmar. However, the military coup led to temporary closure of banks and disruptions to international money transfers, resulting in a reduction in formal remittance flows (UNCDF, 2023). According to Ma (2019), domestic workers' remittances mainly (more than 90%) utilize the *hundi* system, an informal system where money does not cross borders, but is instead facilitated by a transnational network of traders and agents. In 2022, the military government ordered that remittances should be sent through formal channels to control these important fiscal resources (Zan, 2022). These increased attempts at formalizing such financial transfers were accompanied by crackdowns on the informal *hundi* system. Migrants were pressured to open bank accounts before they left Myanmar and additionally remit a certain proportion of their income from other countries (Zan, 2022). Since they are reluctant to fund the activities of the military junta, migrants have tried to continue using the *hundi* system (Zan, 2022) or migrate through irregular channels (Kyaw, 2023). Reacting to the new stringent requirements

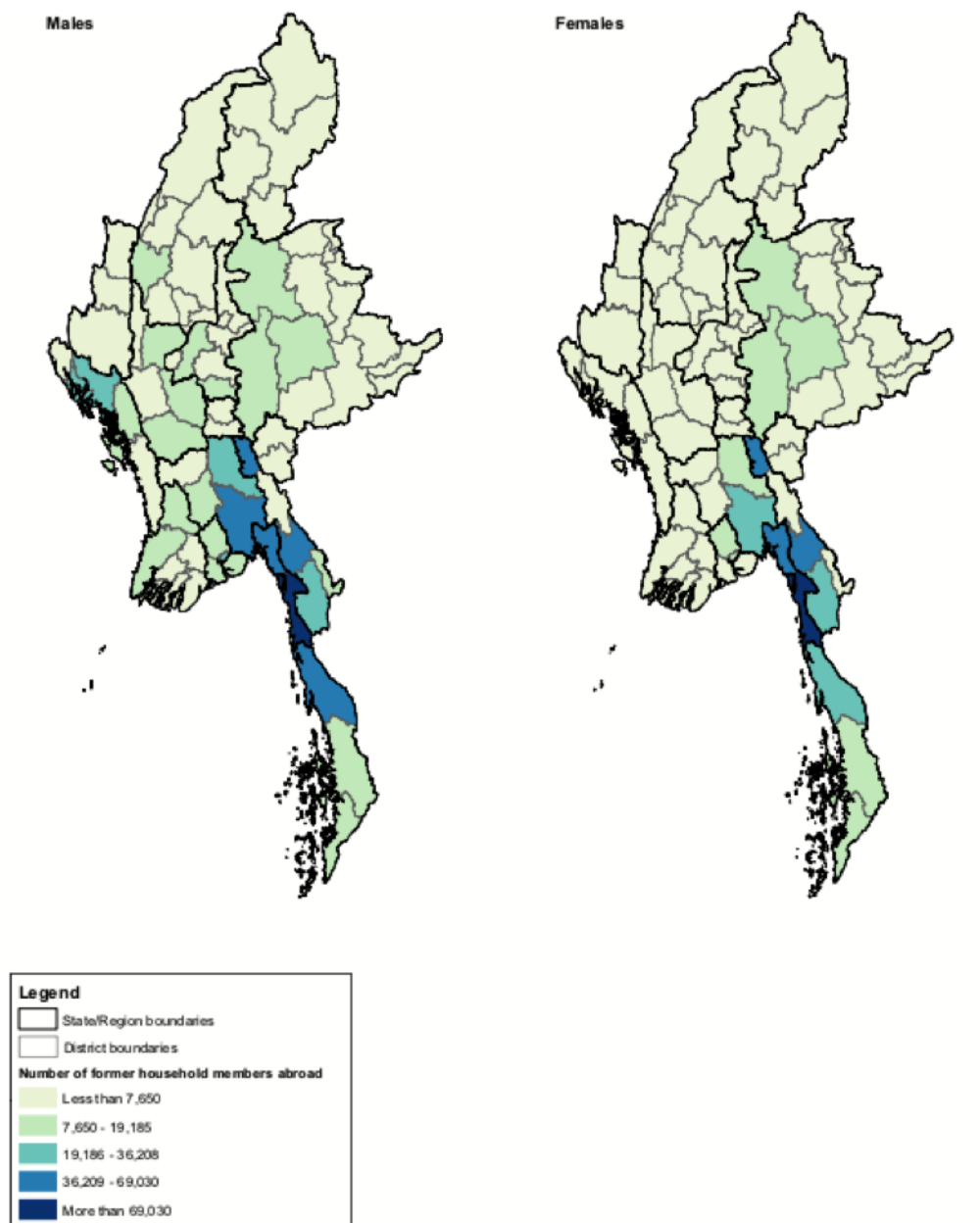
for sending remittances, Burmese migrant communities abroad have rallied to provide financial aid and humanitarian assistance to Myanmar by directly donating to NGOs (Matthew, & Abu Baker, 2023). These efforts have, however, not been entirely effective due to the prevailing difficulties in the local banking systems, where cash transfers and withdrawals are often delayed.

### **Female Domestic Workers' Migration from Myanmar to Singapore**

A striking feature of the migration of Burmese citizens to Singapore is that it is predominantly female, given the high demand for domestic and healthcare workers to address shortages in the feminized care economy (Department of Population, 2016; IOM, 2016). The feminized care economy refers to the significant reliance on women to fulfil caregiving and domestic roles in many societies, reflecting deep-rooted gender norms and economic structures that prioritize cheap, flexible female labour in sectors such as domestic work and healthcare. The labour migration of Burmese women for domestic work was only officially permitted in 2013, with two pilot schemes for Hong Kong and Singapore (UN Women, 2017). Some scholars have pointed out that the practice of women migrating as domestic workers has long predated this state sanction (Deshingkar, 2021; Ting & Ho, 2022). In September 2014, the government abruptly criminalized international migration for domestic work less than a year after officially permitting this mobility, ostensibly as a move to protect migrant workers, especially women. This turn of events took place amidst a number of high-profile cases involving the severe abuse and extreme exploitation of Burmese female domestic workers in various receiving countries, and the Myanmar government's pledge to clamp down on human trafficking and protect migrant workers from victimization (Arnold, 2016; Deshingkar, 2021). Once the ban was imposed, the activities of migrant recruitment agencies for domestic work and related activities such as training and facilitation of the departure and overseas settlement of domestic workers was rendered illegal. In reality, this ban did not freeze the out-migration of domestic workers. Burmese women continued to migrate through clandestine recruitment agencies and other informal channels that were not regulated, putting such workers at greater risk (Deshingkar, 2021; Ho & Ting, 2023; Kipgen, 2023).

International migration from Myanmar is characterized by its heavy reliance on social networks and kinship ties, and facilitated through relationships of social trust, shared ethnic origins and common spoken languages (Department of Population, 2016; Kipgen, 2023). This is especially the case for the MDWs. As Figure 5 shows (using the 2014 Myanmar Census), the geographical clustering of the areas of origin of emigrants is clearly evident. Female emigration was confined to a few areas in lower central and southern Myanmar, while the areas of origin for male emigrants had a wider spatial spread across the country (Department of Population, 2016). MDWs were largely emigrating from Yangon (IOM, 2016).

**Figure 5: Geographical Clustering and Districts of Origin of Burmese Emigrants**



Source: Adapted from Department of Population, 2016, pp.86-87.

Several empirical studies have highlighted the manner in which the criminalisation of domestic worker migration both undermined and disrupted established dynamics of migrant recruitment practices built on trust, familiarity, and social ties between prospective migrants, brokers, and agents (Deshingkar, 2021; Ho & Ting, 2023). When established recruitment agencies ceased to operate, prospective migrants sought the services of illegal, unregulated and underground recruitment agencies outside of these social relationships. Before the ban, the recruitment, training, and deployment of aspiring MDWs were bound by moral rules (Deshingkar, 2021). For prospective migrants, the choice of recruiting agents and brokers was heavily influenced by referrals and recommendations of those who had previously successfully migrated through them, fostering mutual trust and care (Deshingkar, 2021; Ho & Ting, 2023; Kipgen, 2023). Although this did not completely restrain agents and brokers from taking advantage of migrants and abusing their

power, there was a sense that community policing helped to enforce various 'moral rules' that would protect migrants to a certain extent. The recruitment process also contained a structured program that prepared aspiring migrants for working and navigating a new environment overseas.

Deshingkar's (2021) study shows that before the criminalisation of domestic work migration, Yangon recruitment agencies held predeparture training lasting from 3 to 6 months depending on the skills of aspiring migrants. These training sessions included lessons on how to navigate the airport and what to do upon arrival in Singapore, basic English lessons, and household skills (such as how to operate kitchen appliances, kitchen management, and how to care for both elders and children). Since all these activities became illegal, domestic work migration not only lacked legal support from the Myanmar government, but was confined to the clandestine operations of unregulated recruitment agencies. This resulted in the increased vulnerability of domestic workers,



including placement without adequate training and having to pay exorbitant recruitment fees (Deshingkar, 2021; Ho & Ting, 2023; UN Women, 2017). This ban on female domestic worker migration was eventually lifted in April 2019. The President of the Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Federation, U Peter Nyunt Maung, claimed that by repealing the ban, the government would be able to effectively manage the migration of women for domestic work and limit their movement through the unregulated and informal channels as witnessed during the ban (*The Straits Times*, 2019). New regulations were to be introduced to protect prospective MDWs from being charged exorbitant fees by recruitment agencies, though the implementation and effectiveness of these regulations remain uncertain and have been a subject of ongoing scrutiny. More recent accounts show that Burmese MDWs still face significant salary deductions to pay off the high placement fees (Thazin & Campbell, 2023).

### Burmese MDWs in Singapore

In 2022, there were 268,500 MDWs of different nationalities working and living in Singapore (MOM, 2023). The official breakdown by nationality of the domestic worker population has not been released by Singapore authorities. The authorities in Myanmar estimated that there were some 40,000 'undocumented' domestic workers from Myanmar working in Singapore in 2016 (Zaw, 2016). Other accounts suggest that this number had grown to nearly 50,000 by 2019 (*The Straits Times*, 2019). No official records of MDWs were released by the Myanmar government during the period of the overseas migration ban (September 2014–April 2019). It is believed that domestic workers from Myanmar constituted the third-largest group among the MDWs in Singapore, after Indonesia and the Philippines (TWC2, 2016).

Women moving to Singapore to take up domestic work exit Myanmar through informal channels using falsified passports and documents in some cases. Many arrive in Singapore as tourists before applying for work permits to legitimize their status as "foreign domestic workers" (Ho & Ting, 2023). That is, although they leave Myanmar as irregular migrants, their status changes once they receive work permits and are considered documented migrants in Singapore. Despite having legal status in this receiving country, MDWs face multiple precarities in their lives and work largely because they are treated as temporary labour with circumscribed rights (Deshingkar, Awumbila & Teye, 2019; Ho & Ting, 2023; UN Women, 2017; Yeoh, Goh & Wee, 2020).

In their qualitative study of Burmese domestic workers in Singapore, Ho & Ting (2023, pp.147-8) argue that Burmese MDWs experience compounded risks across multiple intersectional domains at the individual, household, national and transnational scales. On the individual scale, most domestic workers shoulder the financial risks and burdens of migration. Due to the ban, many migrate to Singapore as tourists and lack secure employment upon arrival. They incur large debts to migrate without any guarantee that they will secure paid work to repay these loans. Debts incurred towards recruitment and travel fees are sometimes deducted from their salary for a period of seven to nine months (Deshingkar, 2021). It is not uncommon for the domestic workers to not

be paid any money during the period of debt repayment preventing them from sending any money home to their families in Myanmar (Deshingkar, 2021; Tan, 2016). Placement agents and migration brokers sometimes use fake documents with falsified details such as ages or educational background to circumvent Singapore's strict qualifying requirements for domestic workers, such as the minimum age of 23 years. If these fabricated details are discovered by Singapore's state authorities, the MDW alone has to face its legal and punitive consequences. Moreover, Burmese domestic workers' lack of proficiency in English and variations of ethnic dialects in Myanmar create formidable barriers to their easy integration in the employer's home and social life in this receiving country (UN Women, 2017).

At the household level, MDWs experience multiple risks because they are required to live in the homes of their employers. Scholars have highlighted several aspects of live-in domestic work that place migrant women in precarious situations. These include the blurred boundaries between work and home resulting in long, ill-defined working hours; their social isolation within privatized households; restricted access to social support systems; and their weak status as lowly paid foreigners performing undervalued women's work. These key dimensions have structured migrant domestic work as a "site of multiple exploitations" linked to the intersecting effects of gender, class, race/ethnicity, and nationality (ILO, 2023; Yeoh, Huang & Cheng, 2015, p. 298). Although Singapore's Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has created detailed guidelines to protect the rights of MDWs, the privatized spaces of the home are not easily amenable to legal regulation. As a result, domestic worker abuse is often invisible and hidden from view. The lack of effective legal regulation is perhaps why Singapore-based domestic workers report working exceptionally long working hours, averaging 12.8 hours per day and totalling 81 hours per week, which is nearly double the national standard of 44 hours per week at a maximum in other sectors (ILO, 2023). The media has also periodically reported horrific cases of MDWs being starved and abused to death by their employers (Iau, 2023). News accounts have suggested that a growing number of domestic workers from Myanmar were escaping from their employers' homes because of severe restrictions on their mobility and constant surveillance at home, and some had even committed suicide in extreme cases (*Myanmar Times*, 2015; Tan, 2016).

Ho & Ting (2023) argue that the national policies in the sending and receiving countries of Myanmar and Singapore position MDWs in risky situations. The criminalisation of migration for domestic work in Myanmar has deepened the precarity of these domestic workers since they cannot seek protection from their own embassy in Singapore, especially those who migrated "illegally". Although Singapore's law criminalizes domestic worker abuse, the prosecution of employers' abusive actions is often reserved for extreme cases of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, with "everyday", regular forms of abuse and overwork going largely undetected (see also Chua, 2023; Ho & Ting, 2023; Yeoh, Goh & Wee, 2020). The minimum salary for domestic work is also negotiated via a memorandum of agreements between

migrant sending and receiving countries. The Myanmar government has fixed SGD450 as the minimum salary for employing Burmese domestic workers. This wage rate is considerably lower than the minimum salary of SGD550 and SGD570 negotiated by the governments of Indonesia and the Philippines respectively (Devaraj, 2020).

In the face of considerable vulnerability and lack of protective rights, Burmese domestic workers often rely on their own social networks to navigate the symbolic and material risks of working in Singapore (Ho & Ting, 2023). Constructed along ethnic and religious affiliations, these networks are important resources for Burmese domestic workers in adapting to everyday life in Singapore (Kipgen, 2023). On their days off work, Peninsula Plaza becomes an informal gathering place for these domestic workers to socialize, share stories, and meals together. In some cases, churches become the important sites of belonging and socialisation. A new study has revealed that despite some ethnic differences, MDWs from the Kuki ethnic group have forged a sense of common identity through their shared Christian religion in Singapore (Kipgen, 2023).

## Methodology

To document and provide nuanced understanding of the food security issues among MDWs as well as the food and health concerns of their children and family left in their home country, this study conducted face-to-face in-depth qualitative interviews with MDWs from Myanmar in Singapore between June 2022 and March 2023. During this period, the research team recruited 24 female MDWs from Myanmar using a range of methods including personal contacts, snowball approach and direct recruitment at public places such as Peninsula Plaza and an NGO, ACMI at Agape Village, frequented by MDWs for vocational courses. It allowed the team to reach a variety of respondents who had or lacked days off for either rest and/or participation in training programs in Singapore. The length of interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes and were guided by an aide memoire organized around themes of food and health concerns and practices, food consumption and security, remittance behaviour of the MDWs in Singapore and their families in Myanmar as well as their concerns about the pandemic and military coup.

The study set out to recruit around 15 to 20 females from Myanmar aged 23 years or older who had been working as a domestic worker in Singapore for at least a year. Eligible respondents had to be mothers with at least one child aged between 3 and 21 years who had been left under the care of either the child's father or grandparents. The sampling criteria in terms of the age and gender of the grandparent caregivers and gender of children were kept fairly flexible because of the heightened challenges of recruiting respondents under the COVID-19 restrictions in Singapore. Attempts were made to include MDW participants who had children of different ages to allow us to compare and contrast the different food security challenges based on the ages of children left behind in Myanmar and their differential dietary and nutritional requirements.

Our interviews revealed that childcare arrangements had become difficult and uncertain because of the civil unrest and in some cases, illness and deaths of family members in Myanmar, some of which were also due to the pandemic. We found that kinship was defined rather flexibly by respondents who often regarded (non)related individuals such as aunts as their own parents. Therefore, the carer criterion was gradually relaxed. Ethics approval was received from National University of Singapore's IRB Board (NUS-IRB-2021-415) as well as Wilfrid Laurier University's REB before the interviews commenced. All interviews were conducted in Burmese with the help of student research assistants (RAs) who are bilingual in English and Burmese. The interviews were digitally recorded with the respondents' consent, transcribed verbatim and subsequently translated into English. Our study's RAs were helpful in explaining socio-cultural practices and provided contextual information of life in Myanmar.

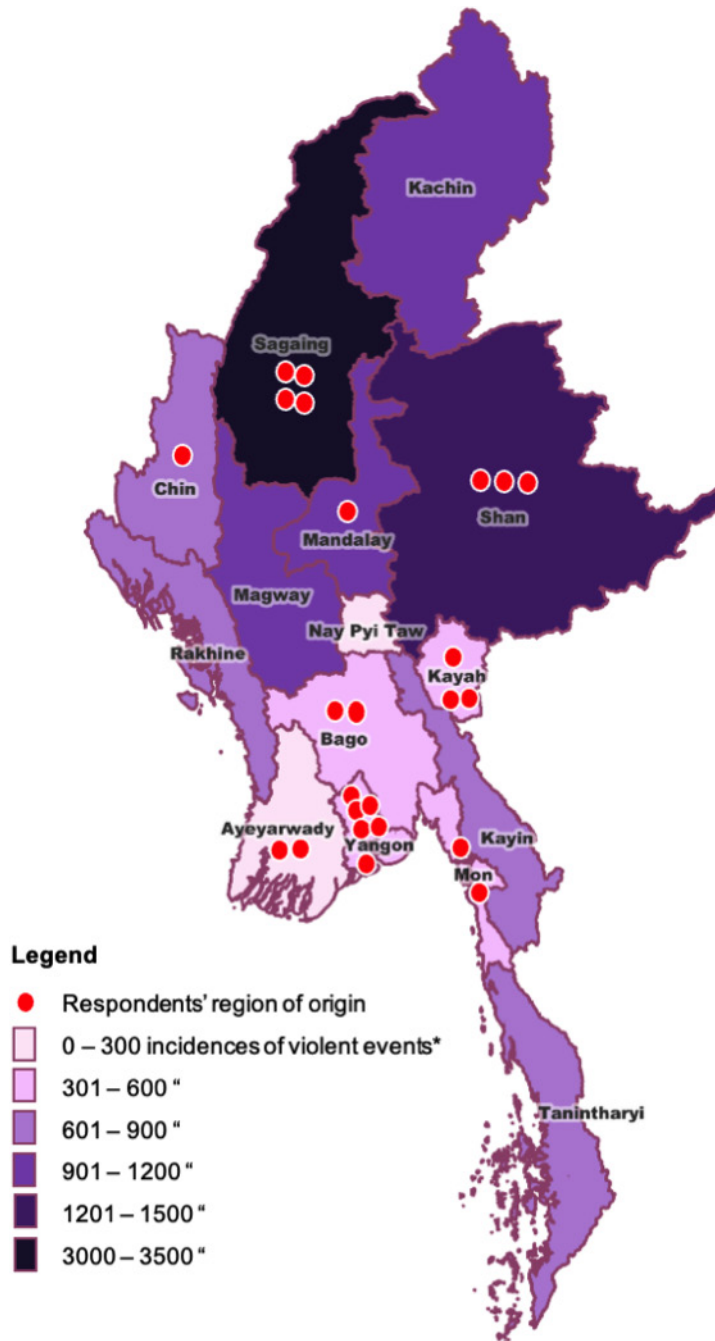
Details of the respondents are provided in Appendix 1. The ages of the female respondents in the study ranged from 25 to 43 years and they originated from four states and five divisions in Myanmar. As Figure 6 shows, Yangon was the most recent residence of the larger majority (n=6), while others came from areas such as Sagaing Region (n=4), Kayah State and Shan State (n=3 respectively), Ayeyarwady Region, Bago Region and Mon State (n=2 respectively), and Chin State and Mandalay Region (n=1 respectively). Nearly half of the respondents were already divorced or separated (n=11), while the other half were still married (n=10). Three of the respondents were widows. Most of the respondents had two children (n=13), and eight respondents had one child each. The remaining three respondents had 3, 4 or 5 children respectively. The ages of the children left in Myanmar ranged from 4 to 20 years, with more daughters (n=27) than sons (n=19) in the sample. The gendered ideology of caregiving persists in Myanmar where an overwhelming majority of the children were left mainly under the care of female caregivers (n=20) such as grandmothers, aunts and daughters. Only three of the caregivers were males, including two fathers and a grandfather. Due to the civil unrest, the children of one respondent had been split up and were being cared for by the employees of the schools where they had sought refuge. Among the respondents, half of the respondents mentioned being personally affected or having immediate family members who were touched negatively by the civil unrest in the country, with widespread violence, bombings, and muggings leading to increased fear and restricted movements. Map 1 illustrates the regions of origin of the respondents against the spatial distribution of violent events in Myanmar, highlighting how those from conflict-prone areas such as Sagaing and Shan State were particularly affected. Respondents described the necessity of hiding or fleeing to safer areas, the closure of schools, difficulty in obtaining food and essential supplies, and the challenge of supporting families financially due to disrupted economic activities and inflation.

In terms of the number of years spent working in Singapore, the longest period was eight years for one respondent. By contrast, five respondents were relatively new arrivals,

having just completed their first year of employment. The remaining respondents had been in Singapore for between two to six years. Nearly half of the respondents (n=11) had only worked with one employer thus far while two participants were placed with their fourth employer. The remaining eight respondents were with their second employer while three were with their third employer. Their duties as MDWs mainly involved caring for the elderly and young children.

Besides their caregiving work, most were responsible for at least some cooking for the households employing them and themselves. While most respondents' labour migration experiences were limited to Singapore, several respondents had previously worked in China, Thailand and Malaysia. Singapore was perceived as a destination of choice because of its reputation as a safe country and the promise of higher salaries in comparison with other neighbouring countries.

**Figure 6: The spatial distribution of violent events in Myanmar by state (totals between February 2021 to May 2023) and study respondents by region of origin**



Created by the authors using QGIS and publicly available data from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2024)

\*Violent events include but are not limited to battles, armed clashes, explosions and air/drone strikes.

# Health and Food Experiences of Burmese MDWs in Singapore

## Food security

Slightly less than half of the respondents (42%) reported currently or previously experiencing food insecurity during their employment in Singapore. These instances included inadequate provisioning of food, lack of proper nutrition, and limited access to their desired food items. As live-in workers, the food security of Burmese MDWs in Singapore was less shaped by the intersecting crises in Myanmar. Rather, it was closely tied to their marginal positionality as low-wage workers, the terms of their employment, and their living situation residing and working in their employers' homes. For example, a respondent (Kyine, 32)<sup>2</sup>, exhibited the most extreme case of food insecurity among the sample. She revealed that she "even collapsed once" because of the meagre quantities of food her employer gave her. Respondents who experienced food insecurity shared how they were only fed cheaper foods such as "radishes and coffee packets", or were offered leftovers that their employers did not want to consume themselves. While their employers might enjoy a more balanced diet, many MDWs shared that they were given mostly non-nutritious food or consistently fed only a particular food type, such as vegetables (e.g., cabbage and carrots) and carbohydrates (e.g., instant noodles and rice). Most MDWs said that since they did not want to cause trouble with their employers, they chose to solve these food-related challenges independently. The lack of proteins, fruits, and other essential food groups in the foods provided by their employers meant that many MDWs needed to buy their own food using their limited personal funds to supplement their diet. Kyine described these challenges and how she managed them.

*...I also don't want to cause any problems so I'm keeping quiet. I have my own money, so I just go out and buy food for myself. Sometimes, even when I use my own money to buy food, they're like, "The fridge is full, you can't put in anymore" and things like that. I don't even eat any of their food, I don't drink any of their canned drinks. I went out to buy my food with my own money. To tell you the truth, it's not just food, there are other things too. They don't buy me things, [so] I have to buy it myself...*

Communication barriers between employers and Burmese MDWs contribute further to the prevailing misunderstandings and gaps regarding dietary preferences and needs. Half of our respondents pointed to language barriers as key challenges with employers. While some Burmese MDWs resorted to purchasing their own food, others had to confront their fear and silence before voicing these concerns to employers. Furthermore, cultural differences in dietary habits and preferences often complicated the provisioning of adequate meals. Most Singaporean employers are unfamiliar with Burmese cuisine and did not understand the dietary preferences of their Burmese workers. While not intentionally depriving the workers of food, some employers provided food that was not to their workers' liking or which did not al-

low them to "feel full". For example, Burmese workers prefer to have rice for all three meals while their employers may be providing an abundance of bread and noodles (Somaiah et al., 2024a). Some older employers also judged the workers' dietary needs against their own reduced intake, overlooking that these migrant workers were younger bodies in need of higher nutrition to perform their daily workload.

The food security of Burmese MDWs in Singapore is shaped by various structural factors, including the role of recruitment agents, migrants' length of stay, their language proficiency, and social networks. For many respondents, these issues were resolved with time, and food insecurity was generally a challenge only at the beginning of their employment. Over time, some Burmese MDWs managed to communicate their dietary needs to their employers and further adapted to the food available to them (see Somaiah et al., 2024a). As such, slightly over half of the respondents reported experiencing food security (58%). Some shared that they did not just accept their situation passively. They were aware of their rights and adopted limited strategies such as buying their own food, such as in Kyine's case. In some cases, they actively sought a new employer. Others took some time before they overcame their fear and reluctance to openly articulate their food concerns to their employers although they suffered in silence initially. Dietary preferences also evolved as both Burmese MDWs and employers adapted to each other's culinary practices and preferences. In some cases, both workers and employers adjusted their dietary preferences to accommodate each other.

About 41% of our study respondents shared their positive experiences surrounding food while working in Singapore. These positive experiences were strongly tied to their relationships with their employer, and the willingness of both parties to learn from each other and compromise. For example, one domestic worker mentioned that her employer would go out of their way to buy her Myanmar food to make her feel comfortable, showing respect and ready willingness to accommodate her preferences.

Overall, the food security of Burmese MDWs in this study was intricately linked to their employment conditions, relationships with their employers, and personal agency. While nearly half of the respondents reported experiences of food insecurity, many highlighted the complex dynamics at play, including inadequate food provision, nutritional deficits, and limited access to preferred foods. Communication barriers, cultural differences, and employers' lack of understanding of their cultural food needs often exacerbated these issues. However, the resilience and resourcefulness of MDWs were evident as many actively sought ways to improve their situation, such as purchasing Burmese foods or negotiating their dietary preferences over time. Positive experiences were generally tied to open communication with employers and mutual respect between workers and employers, which led to more satisfactory food arrangements for these migrant workers. Ultimately, ensuring food security for Burmese MDWs requires addressing structural challenges and fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment within their placement households.

## Health concerns

The health security of Burmese MDWs in Singapore encompasses various aspects, from compliance with state regulations on vaccination to individual health-seeking behaviours, and the support provided by employers or the lack thereof. This multifaceted issue structures the general physical and mental well-being of Burmese MDWs and their ability to effectively perform their duties. Many Burmese MDWs take proactive steps to maintain their health, despite facing various challenges in accessing healthcare in Singapore. Respondents shared their experiences of dealing with their health issues independently, often without assistance from their employers. For example, many respondents bought their own medicine, such as Panadol, to alleviate body aches in order to continue performing their regular duties. The general trend of self-medication at their own cost underscores the lengths to which these migrant workers would go to protect their health in the absence of adequate employer-provided health resources.

Traditional health practices from Myanmar also play a significant role in the well-being of Burmese MDWs. One respondent mentioned using Myanmar medicine, such as Innwa (a type of antacid), as an aid for digestion issues. These traditional remedies provide comfort and a sense of connection to their homeland, helping Burmese MDWs navigate health challenges while working abroad. Such practices were an integral part of their overall health strategy, blending traditional and contemporary approaches to maintain their well-being. Another important aspect is the role of support networks. One respondent shared her struggle with high blood pressure and the difficulties in accessing necessary medication. She relied on a cousin to bring her medication from Myanmar and her example illustrates the dependency on external support networks when local resources are inadequate.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant health challenges for Burmese MDWs in Singapore, many of whom faced severe restrictions on their movements and limited access to healthcare as migrant workers. In this migrant receiving country, state regulations require employers to ensure that their domestic workers are vaccinated, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compliance with these vaccination requirements is generally high among employers, driven by strict government oversight measures. For instance, the Singapore government facilitated special vaccination drives to protect both the migrant workers and their employing households. However, beyond vaccination support, the healthcare provisions Burmese MDWs received varies by the household where they are employed and their employers' efforts to provide such facilities.

Over one-third of our study respondents (38%) reported contracting COVID-19, often due to close living conditions and interactions with their employers, who also fell ill. One respondent vividly described her experience with COVID-19, emphasizing the severity of her symptoms and the strong sense of isolation she felt, underscoring the harsh reality for MDWs who fall sick while away from their families. The

emotional toll of being ill in a foreign country was evident, as she reflected on how much she missed her mother's care while she was ailing with the coronavirus. Similarly, another respondent recounted contracting COVID-19 from her employer's family. Despite displaying symptoms, the family delayed accepting that they had contracted COVID-19 and failed to take necessary precautions, which led to their Burmese MDW also being infected. Her narrative highlights the risks MDWs faced during the pandemic when their employers did not follow the necessary precautions.

Coping effectively with stress and emotional challenges is another crucial dimension of the Burmese MDWs' health security. One respondent shared that she confides in friends and takes time to be alone when feeling overwhelmed, using these moments to clear her mind and reduce stress. Another mentioned using her phone to watch shows and find solace, indicating the importance of personal time and distraction in managing mental health. These coping strategies were deemed essential for maintaining their overall well-being in a demanding work environment. The mental health of Burmese MDWs was closely tied to their relationships with their employers. Supportive employers were able to offer their migrant employees vital emotional reinforcement, whereas strained relationships between them could easily lead to severe psychological distress. One respondent's case illustrated the beneficial consequences of a caring employer on mental health. Her journey to mental recovery began with the emotional support from her employer and fellow MDWs, which helped her develop a more optimistic outlook towards life and her personal circumstances, and alleviate the despair that had previously led to self-harm. Conversely, another respondent often dealt with stress by isolating herself, feeling uncomfortable confiding in others. The lack of open communication with her employer exacerbated her feelings of isolation and helplessness.

About 20% of respondents openly shared the negative emotional toll of working abroad on their general well-being. The absence of a reliable support system and strong fears about being unable to return to Myanmar if needed compounded their mental health challenges. Three of these respondents mentioned having suicidal thoughts. One respondent (Htun, 42) poignantly expressed the overall sense of vulnerability of being a MDW in a foreign country:

*We are coming to someone else's country to work. At this time, even when nothing happens, I feel small. If something happens in their country, we cannot go back to our own. The feeling that we cannot rely on our own country (sob). I feel it very much. No matter what, in the past, like a child who wants to run back into the mother's arms if something happens. With the present situation, the sense of security that if something happens in their country, I can go back to Myanmar and support myself, I don't feel that security anymore. So, for people like us, we have to stay as others wish us to stay in their country. Endure it if you can. There are many people who suicide because they cannot, right? This is not what one person feels. This is what many feel.*

The “triple crisis” in Myanmar – comprising the pandemic, the military coup, and the ensuing civil unrest – exacerbated the mental health struggles of these workers. Many respondents reported constant worry about their families back home, who were often caught in the crossfire of military operations or forced to flee their homes. One respondent (Yadana, 36) shared her concerns for her family members.

*I would always worry for them. There are always wars and shootings... I sometimes even get high blood pressure, that's how I get sick. It's not safe for them anywhere. Nowhere is safe.*

The compounded stress of fearing for their families' safety, coupled with the isolation and pressures of their work abroad, significantly affected their mental well-being.

These cases underscore the critical importance of supportive employer relationships in safeguarding the mental health of Burmese MDWs. Empathy, open communication, and emotional support from employers can significantly alleviate the psychological burden experienced by these workers. The health security of Burmese MDWs in Singapore is a complex issue influenced by state regulations, employer support, and individual health practices. While vaccination compliance is high, the overall support for Burmese MDWs' health varies, necessitating more consistent and comprehensive measures to ensure their well-being. The mental health of Burmese MDWs is particularly impacted by their relationships with employers, highlighting the urgent need for better awareness and mental health resources.

## Remittances

In times of polycrisis, remittances from the Burmese MDWs serve as a major form of transnational social protection for the migrants' families in their home countries. This was expressed in the form of “transnational foodcare chains” where migrant women's labour elsewhere helps ensure food security for their families left behind in home countries (Somaiah et al., 2024b). These chains are characterized by interconnected relationships of mutual support among caregivers, spanning both familial ties and networks established with fellow MDWs in host countries like Singapore as well as family members in sending countries (Somaiah et al., 2024b). Under the pandemic circumstances, “transnational foodcare chains” also encompassed “the domain of well-being and healthcare as food becomes evoked as medicine and cures” (Somaiah et al., 2024b). Given the volatile and insecure situation in Myanmar, migrant workers' remittances could still be insufficient to purchase enough food, or food with adequate nutrition, for the left-behind family. Migrant workers were also worried about remitting more money home fearing robbery or that the money would be seized by the military junta. Amidst these anxieties, remittances remained a critical resource and often served as the only source of income for their entire sending household. Next, we examine the patterns and methods of remitting, and effects of these remittances drawing on the interviews with Burmese MDWs. We reflect on the complex dynamics of providing financial support to their families during economic and political crises.

## Frequency and amount of money sent

Even as some workers faced personal food insecurity while working in Singapore, they spared no efforts to ensure that their family in their home countries had food. Some gave up their own day off in exchange for more salary, while others ate more frugally in order to accumulate more money to remit. The frequency and amount of money sent by our Burmese MDWs varied significantly, influenced by their individual financial circumstances and the actual needs of their sending households and other relatives. While some Burmese MDWs managed to send money regularly, others struggled due to their own financial constraints. Most respondents tried to remit money as regularly as possible, even if it meant cutting down on their own expenses. One out of five respondents (20%) remitted on a monthly basis because of the financial hardships faced by their families. Other respondents who remitted money less frequently, such as once every two, three or up to five months did not send money as often because their families were not in immediate need. Others were unable to send money back every month due to personal financial difficulties. For example, respondent Kyine shared that she sends between 700,000 to 1,000,000 kyats every two to three months, explaining that, “I can't send regularly each month. I have my own difficulties too”.

## Means of sending remittances

Several different methods, both formal and informal, were employed to send money back home. The choice of remitting mode was largely dependent on factors such as accessibility, cost, and safety. A significant number of Burmese MDWs in our study utilized digital platforms like Wave Money and KPay, with varying fees depending on the service provider and economic conditions. For instance, one respondent mentioned that a 10% remitting fee had been imposed during the worst period of the coup, highlighting the financial hurdles encountered during such crisis times. Another used KPay to remit and mentioned a 1% deduction for this service, conveying the latest efforts by the platform to minimize costs while ensuring reliable transfers.

Other respondents opted for more traditional methods of remitting, such as sending money through trusted individuals or shops, particularly when faced with restrictions on banking services. This approach provided a workaround when direct banking transactions were impractical or inaccessible due to political instability in Myanmar. Sending money “through trusted people” was especially popular during the military coup in early 2021 when respondents faced difficulties using other remittance methods due to the political situation. The informal method of *hundi* was popular among some Burmese MDWs despite the inherent risks involved: “if they get caught, everything will be seized”. Respondents reverted to using banks for remittances when the political situation became more stable in the country.

Our Burmese participants face numerous challenges in sending remittances, from navigating political instability to dealing with high transfer fees. The introduction of new taxes and regulations by Myanmar's junta further complicated the process, leading to increased costs and the

greater use of unofficial channels. Despite these obstacles, Burmese MDWs continued to find ways to support their families. They adapted by using various transfer methods, negotiating lower fees, and sometimes taking on additional work to ensure they could send enough money home. Additionally, remittances often included non-monetary items like toys, books, and clothes, indicating a broader support system extending beyond financial assistance.

### **Purpose of remittances**

The remittances sent by Burmese MDWs were primarily being used for essential expenses such as food, education, and medical bills, and thus played a vital role in ensuring that the basic needs of their families were being met. Caretakers in Myanmar would request for about 8,000 kyats each day in order “to buy enough food to last both lunch and dinner” (see Somaiah et al., 2024a). The remittances of Burmese MDWs were not just being used to meet the needs of their immediate family, but also their extended family. In the case of one respondent, 30,000 kyats out of the total 750,000 kyats sent home was used to pay her nephew’s medical bills. Despite their own financial struggles, many Burmese MDWs prioritized their families’ needs over their own, even if it meant sacrificing their personal comforts. Over 66% of the respondents emphasized the importance of these remittances in ensuring that their families did not face food insecurity. As Somaiah et al (2024b, p. 11) have underscored, the transnational foodcare chains organized by migrant women workers “provide a site of grounded albeit limited care-as-resistance, agency, and selfhood” in their attempt to reclaim agency and redistribute care across unequal circumstances.

### **Recipients of remittances**

The recipients of remittances were usually close family members, such as parents, children, or siblings who may or may not be the primary caregivers. The dynamics of who received the money could vary based on changing family relationships, structures and needs. For example, one respondent (Nyein, 30) used to send money to her father but was later sending it to her daughter directly, instructing her on how to allocate it for more targeted financial support – “now, I send it to my daughter. Through my daughter, I budget how much to spend a day... Daughter, give this much to your grandfather, [and] you use this much on this”. In this case, this shift suggests a strategic approach to ensuring effective resource allocation within the family unit to meet changing family dynamics and needs. In some cases, the remittances were sent to multiple family members to ensure the various needs of different relatives were covered. Some respondents entrusted extended family members and in-laws with managing and distributing funds on their behalf. Political instability and economic hardships in Myanmar often caused families to split up, necessitating that remittances be sent to multiple locations.

### **Food security of family left in Myanmar**

Exacerbated by the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and military coup, the food security crisis in Myanmar has manifested acutely at the individual and family scales for

marginal households. For the families of MDWs in Myanmar, these issues translated into daily struggles of basic sustenance. Nine respondents shared the challenges of food security for their families back home in Myanmar, including insufficient quantity and quality of food, lack of nutritious options, and rising food prices.

Several respondents expressed their worries about the adequacy and nutritional quality of the food available to their families. One respondent said that despite their financial limitations, active efforts were made to maximize nutritional value through informed dietary choices. Another mentioned the persistent struggle of their relatives to afford nutritious foods on a regular basis. This was especially the case for family members with chronic medical conditions such as high blood pressure and kidney issues which required specific dietary restrictions. However, they could only afford basic staples like dried fish and rice with fermented fish paste (*ngapi*) on some days (see Somaiah et al., 2024a).

Financial constraints amidst rising food prices often forced families to adjust their food purchases as well as make dietary compromises, such as consuming lower-quality rice and reducing their meat or fish intake. Concerns about insufficient meals were also prevalent, with some families having to limit their food consumption due to affordability issues. In some households, children’s diets were a particular concern, such as inadequate food intake among younger children, especially when their household was only able to afford two meals a day. Rising inflation has dramatically increased the cost of essential staples such as rice which have become prohibitively expensive for many families. Respondents highlighted the stark reality of sharp price increases, noting that snacks that once cost 100 kyats now required 200 kyats, and a bag of rice could exceed 30,000 kyats. Despite these difficulties, some respondents adopted an active role in advising their families on food choices, emphasizing frugality and practical meal planning to cope with these financial pressures.

In addition to economic pressures, violence and conflict have further disrupted food supplies and accessibility to food products. Ongoing conflict in regions like Shan State has displaced families, disrupting their livelihoods, and forced them to relocate to safer areas such as Kyaukpadaung in Mandalay. This displacement not only strains financial resources and exerts a negative effect on the money available for food, it has also interrupted their children’s education. Frequent power outages and electricity shortages have also inhibited food consumption and preparation. These combined factors – economic instability, conflict, and infrastructural challenges – have reconstructed daily food consumption and preparation practices. Our respondents’ families often needed to adapt to these limitations by simplifying their meals, turning to more affordable alternatives like dried fish, noodles, and vegetables when meat prices surged. Families resorted to simpler, less nutritious meals and rationed their food supplies carefully.

The transnational nature of Burmese MDWs’ work means they constantly worried about their families back home. As

argued by Somaiah et al. (2024b), MDWs' foodcare is constantly marked by deep emotional concerns for their families, which underscores their continuous efforts to ensure food security and the well-being of their loved ones. Communication and remittances were crucial ways of caring for their families, yet rife with challenges. The remittances sent by Burmese MDWs were often the primary source of income for their families, but the high cost of living and inflation quickly eroded their monetary value. For example, Pemala (25) shared this observation:

*... only on the day that I transferred money, maybe on that day only, they can cook meat. For the rest of the days, ... [I remind them] to stock up on rice, oil, dried fish, eggs ... in case of emergencies and they cannot go to the market.*

The decision for MDWs to continue working abroad was driven by the urgent need to support their families amidst Myanmar's economic crisis. Respondents felt compelled to remain away from their families as a personal sacrifice and said that the steep rise in household expenses was a primary factor influencing their decision. Unlike MDWs from other countries such as the Philippines or Indonesia, Burmese MDWs have been unable to return home frequently due to the restrictive conditions and the volatile situation in Myanmar. This prolonged physical separation created an additional layer of anxiety and helplessness for our study participants. The ongoing food security issues in Myanmar deeply affected their personal life trajectories and future plans. For many, working abroad in places like Singapore was perceived as their only lifeline.

### **Health concerns of family left in Myanmar**

Food concerns incorporated a strong health element for most participants to assist and manage the ongoing and emergent medical issues faced by their left-behind family members. Material and social remittances of food items, food practices, and measures safeguarding health were transferred and/or communicated online. This took the form of clarifying information on vaccines, encouraging the intake of vitamins, consumption of healthy foods, and ideal food preparation to secure and optimize health under constraints, sharing advice on eating at home rather than eating out, among others. These health-centric social remittances were informed by their ongoing concerns for the health and well-being of left-behind family members and expanded beyond the nuclear family to include extended family, kin, ageing individuals, and carers of left-behind children. They would also seek the carers' help in enforcing discipline among their children by not letting them eat too many snacks or street foods, by using specific type of oil to cook their food and by not adding MSG to their children's food.

As mentioned earlier, respondents often faced financial constraints and personal food insecurity, yet still opted to send remittances to cover the health and food expenses of their left-behind family. One respondent mentioned that she sent remittances to her mother to cover the monthly expenses for her children, including breakfast and vitamins.

Another respondent instructed her aunt to purchase specific type of vitamins for her children, sometimes sending these vitamins to Myanmar when shipping costs were reasonable. Several respondents were conscious about the need to feed their children good-quality vitamins such as those from the Appeton brand and *Kaung Dee* (a Burmese brand of multivitamins) or particular supplements such as Omega-3, Vitamin C and fish oil so that their children would grow "taller", "smarter, ... big and strong", and increase their appetite (see Somaiah et al., 2024a).

Many of our participants were hyper-aware of every food source that was beneficial in terms of the nutrients and vitamins that they contained. They emphasized the importance of eating nutritious food even when faced with financial constraints and drew on advice from nutrition classes and experiences. One respondent encouraged her children to eat water spinach for its vitamins and meat (and if not available, then eggs) for the protein. She had informed her child that "even oil has its own nutrition". She repeatedly mentioned that her advice "from here [in Singapore]" to her family was to find ways of making a little go a long way, that is, be able to "eat a nutritious meal with little money". Another respondent gave her children Appeton brand vitamins which "helps in brain development" and "vitamins that help with height" for her older child – "Even if [we] don't have much money, like even with one dish, how to eat to make sure your own body gets enough nutrients, how to get vitamins, things like that... I tell them". These examples illustrate how under conditions of food insecurity and poverty, migrant mothers attempted to ensure the food security of their family by extracting the greatest benefits in terms of nutritional content from limited food sources and supplements (see Somaiah et al., 2024a). Despite these strategies, the tension between affordable quality and adequate quantity was not resolved.

Ageing left-behind carers faced their own health issues which weighed heavily on our respondents who often responded by exhibiting care through the language of food despite some differences in opinions. For instance, one respondent advised her mother with high blood pressure to avoid certain meats such as pork. Nevertheless, despite being acutely aware of the healthy diets that they should consume, not all respondents and their family members in Myanmar could afford to eat such nutritious food due to their limited financial resources. Our analysis highlights the catch-22 of marginal migrants and their impoverished families who experience hidden hunger (Somaiah et al., 2024a). While there might be enough quantity of certain foods, these tended to be high in sodium or calories rather than nutrients or variety. The health of some families was impacted by their inability "to avoid certain food" due to poverty and food insecurity exacerbated by not just the pandemic, but the recent military coup in Myanmar. While being acutely aware of their children and their elderly parents' health issues, they could not do much even as they sent remittances back home. Respondents' remittances were not just financial resources. They were also social resources, yet marked by the chronic emotional strains of constant, persistent worrying about the food situation back home and how it impacted their children and parents' health and general well-being.



## Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the intricate interplay between migration, food security, and health among Burmese domestic workers in Singapore amidst Myanmar's "triple crisis" of pandemic, civil unrest, and economic instability. Unlike the Indonesian and Filipino MDWs in Singapore, the literature on domestic workers from Myanmar remains sparse. The few empirical studies on Myanmar domestic workers have mostly been centred on the issues of precarity and social protection (Ho & Ting, 2023; Thazin & Campbell, 2023; UN Women, 2017), and changing dynamics of the migration infrastructure in Myanmar (Deshingkar, 2021; Deshingkar, Awumbila & Teye, 2019). These dimensions have received more attention because of the rise of irregular migration and lack of governmental support during the ban on the deployment of overseas domestic workers in this sending country. There are very few studies on the everyday lives of Myanmar domestic workers in Singapore (rare exceptions include Kipgen, 2023; Ting & Ho, 2022), creating large gaps in our understanding of how domestic workers from Myanmar navigate their lives in Singapore, as well as how they foster their bonds with their families back home. Despite some attention to food scarcity, low quality of food, and lack of access to "culturally appropriate food" for MDWs in Singapore at large in a recent study (Dutta et al., 2018), there is currently limited empirical work on the food security of Burmese MDWs in Singapore.

Our study's findings underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by Burmese MDWs, both in Singapore and in their home country. In Singapore, MDWs in general encounter various structural factors circumscribing their food security, including employment conditions and access to social networks. We offered some insights into the difficulties encountered by Burmese MDWs in ensuring and navigating their access to adequate food. While some of the respondents in this study reported positive experiences, many grappled with inadequate provisioning of food and limited dietary choices. These challenges, coupled with concerns about health access and autonomy, paint a complex picture of Burmese MDWs' well-being in their country of employment, Singapore.

Moreover, the impact of Burmese domestic workers' migration on their families left in Myanmar cannot be overstated. The remittances sent by Burmese MDWs serve as a lifeline for their families, yet the economic and political crises back home pose significant challenges to their food security. Families left behind must navigate inflation, conflict, and infrastructural challenges, resulting in the daily struggles for basic sustenance. The transnational nature of MDWs' work further compounds these challenges, as communication and remittances become fraught with uncertainties.

These findings underscore the resilience and resourcefulness of Burmese MDWs in navigating these challenges, often resorting to adaptive strategies to cope with food insecurity and health concerns. Yet, the paper also highlights the profound impact of Myanmar's crises on the personal trajectories and future plans of MDWs. The decision to mi-

grate and remain abroad is driven by a complex interplay of economic necessity, familial obligations, and concerns for personal safety. Given the persistent instability in Myanmar, their stint overseas is likely to be extended in the near future.

## Endnotes

- 1 The paper refers to the diverse population from Myanmar as Burmese collectively.
- 2 All respondents have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our student research assistants, Htet Myet Min Tun, Myat Noe Pwint, Nyan Lin Htet, Shun Pyae Phyo, Win Win Khine and Voon Jung, our intern Wang Jun Hao and the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People (ACMI) for supporting this research. Special thanks to all our respondents for their courage and taking the time to share their stories with us.

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## Appendix 1: Summary Profile of Respondents

Respondent Pseudonym	Age	Recent Residence	Marital Status	No. of Children	Children's Carer in Myanmar
Nyein	30	Ayeyarwady Region	Widowed	2	Grandfather
Thawda	35	Yangon	Married	2	Grandmother/ Grand aunt
Pemala	25	Yangon	Separated	1	Grandmother
Kyine	32	Bago Region	Separated	1	Grandmother
Eindra	34	Yangon	Married	1	Grandmother
Haymar	36	Ayeyarwady Region	Divorced	1	Grandmother
Win	43	Yangon	Married	2	Grandmother
Lei	35	Shan state	Divorced	1	Grandmother
Htay	41	Shan state	Married	3	N/A
Yadana	36	Shan state	Widowed	2	Grandparents + Aunt
Zeya	36	Sagaing Region	Divorced	4	Eldest daughter
Ruby	35	Sagaing Region	Divorced	2	Aunt
Thanda	28	Chin State	Divorced	2	Grandmother
Penden	39	Mon state	Married	2	Father
Alice	31	Sagaing Region	Divorced	2	Aunt
Myine	28	Kayah State	Widowed	2	Grandmother
Ei Thiri	27	Kayah State	Married	1	Grandmother
Shwe	31	Kayah State	Divorced	2	Grandmother
Htun	42	Mon state	Married	2	Aunt
May	39	Sagaing Region	Divorced	2	Grandmother
Sri	33	Yangon	Married	2	Grandmother
Kar	27	Bago Region	Separated	1	Grandmother
Zaw	30	Yangon	Married	1	Grandmother
Kywe	42	Mandalay Region	Married	5	Father