The Grateful migrants: Indians and Bangladeshis in Singapore in times of COVID-19

Diotima Chattoraj*

Abstract

Singapore has had a dramatic spike in coronavirus infections in early 2020, with thousands of new cases linked to clusters in migrant workers (MWs) dormitories. To control the spread, the Government attempted to isolate the dormitories, test workers and move symptomatic patients into quarantine facilities. But those measures have left thousands of them trapped in their dormitories, living in cramped conditions that make social distancing near impossible. This paper investigates how COVID-19 has impacted the lives of these workers in varied ways and highlights the migrant workers' belief if Singapore’s effort has been enough for them during the COVID-19 pandemic? The focus is mainly on the low-skilled workers from India and Bangladesh, who are prone to be affected in various ways by COVID-19. My collected data show that migrant workers are grateful to the Singapore state for the support extended during COVID-19. I used the concept of subcultures to explain the condition of the workers in the state of Singapore. Because they expect so little social protection from the state, they are genuinely grateful for its support during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Singapore, Migrant Workers, India, Bangladesh.

Introduction

COVID-19 or Coronavirus turned out to be one of the terrifying diseases causing an impending crisis the world has not witnessed in the recent era. Originating in Wuhan, China, this highly contagious disease has spread in 215 countries, infecting more than 119 million (as of mid-March 2021) and killing more than 2.5 million (as of mid-March 2021) within a year. Almost all countries in the world (at least 210) is under some form of restrictions like full

* 684 B, Jurong West STREET 64. #12-123, Singapore- 642684. Contact: diotima.chattoraj@gmail.com
or partial lockdown to prevent the spread, leaving millions stranded (Ullah et al., 2021).

While trials of vaccines are ongoing, World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommendations like staying in quarantine, isolation, maintaining social distance, and lockdown are only measuring available to combat Covid-19 at the moment (Ullah et al. 2021). These measures are of course, the most effective in deterring the spread of the virus (Ullah et al., 2021). However, the real challenge lies in maintaining social distance and lockdown among the migrant workers living in overcrowded and smallest spaces in the dormitories. Migrant workers (MWs) in Singapore are no exception.

Among 351,800 MWs in Singapore² Indian and Bangladeshi workers are an essential part of the country's workforce. Many toils for long hours (8 am to 7 pm from Monday to Saturday and sometimes during Sundays) on their worksites, busy constructing and reconstructing buildings, roads, and carrying heavy loads to send money to family and relatives back home. Their dormitories are mostly situated outside the city-state in non-residential areas, making them isolated from the rest of the population in the island-country.

Singapore, despite handling this pandemic situation quite well, became one of the biggest hit countries by COVID-19 since January 2020. The Asian city-state has had a dramatic spike in coronavirus infections in February-March 2020, with thousands of new cases linked to clusters in MWs dormitories. In the effort to control the spread, the Government attempted to isolate the dormitories, test workers regularly and move symptomatic patients into quarantine facilities, which left them trapped in their dormitories, living cheek by jowl in cramped conditions that make social distancing near impossible.³

As of March 14 2021, the city-state reported 60,088 laboratory-confirmed cases of COVID-19 in a total of 5.7 million population (Ministry of Health, Singapore).⁴ MWs constitute more than 90% of the cases, with a prevalence rate of 16.3% compared with 0.04% in the local population (Yi, 2020). Such a sharp disparity in COVID-19 infection is explained by ‘high-density and

³ Jessie Yeung, Joshua Berlinger, Sandi Sidhu, Manisha Tank and Isaac Yee, ‘Singapore’s migrant workers are suffering the brunt of the country’s coronavirus outbreak’, CNN, April 25 2020.
⁴ MOH | Updates on COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) Local Situation
unhygienic living conditions of migrant workers and a lack of inclusive protection system of equal access to healthcare and a social safety net (Yi, 2020). This makes the nation as a whole more vulnerable to the virus, exposing more broadly how unequal treatment of one group can affect the rest of the country.

This paper investigates how in varied ways COVID-19 has impacted the lives of these workers. Does this also highlight if the migrant workers believe that Singapore has done quite a bit for them during the COVID-19 pandemic? The focus would mostly be on the low-skilled MWs, from India and Bangladesh, who are prone to be affected in various ways by COVID-19.

**Objectives and methodology**

This paper aims at investigating the impacts that COVID-19 has on the foreign MWs from India and Bangladesh in Singapore. Also, the relationship between the MWs and Singapore amidst the Covid-19 would be highlighted.

Since this is an ongoing issue, published articles are rarely available, and I had to depend mostly on ‘Internet research’ (Chattoraj, 2017), which provided a wide range of online reports, documents and newspaper articles. Internet research allowed me to gather secondary data on migrants in Singapore and about the grave situation they have been in due to this pandemic. I did reviews of the literature on human mobility/migration and studies on the spatial spread of diseases.

I conducted around 72 informal interviews (via Zoom and WhatsApp) with Bangladeshi and Indian MWs in Singapore in two phases: one from April to September 2020 and the other one in March 2021. I got associated with one of the NGOs in Singapore that helped me establish networks with the migrant workers. I spoke to each of them for about an hour.

For conversational convenience, I chose Indian and Bangladeshi MWs. With the Bangladeshi MWs, I spoke in Bengali, which is their native language as well. The Indian MWs, whom I chose, are mostly from Punjab and Bihar, so I

---

5 This NGO works for the welfare of migrant workers and is in close contact with the Ministry of Manpower and Ministry of Health in Singapore.
spoke Hindi with them. To respect their privacy and security, I have not used their original names.

Questions I asked were about their experiences concerning Covid-19 before and after the lockdown. How their lives got affected? I asked them who has provided help and in what ways? What are the challenges that they faced like food quality, boredom, lack of communication, job security/salary payments)? How are their families in India and Bangladesh? When do they feel they can again see their families back home? The MWs ranged from being Work Permit Holders to Special Pass holders. During the time of the interviews, most of them were staying in the dorms, and few were in the rented rooms provided by their companies.

**Theoretical framework: Subcultures**

I draw upon the concept of subcultures to theorize the condition of the MWs in Singapore. Yinger (1960) defined subcultures as groups that are smaller than society and which differ in language, values, religion, diet, and style of life from the larger society from which they are apart. Subcultures do not necessarily oppose or become a threat to the dominant culture (Yinger, 1960).

Indian and Bangladeshi MWs in Singapore form their own subcultures because—unlike Singaporeans, Permanent Residents or foreign talents– are governed under an illiberal immigration-citizenship regime of temporary migration, which disempowers them vis-à-vis the state (Yeoh et al. 2020). Tight regulatory measures that enact such transience include 2-year employment contracts, an employer-sponsored work permit system, restrictions on labour movements and denial of any residency rights or pathways to formal citizenship (Yeoh et al. 2020). MWs are promised as much as S$1,200-S$1500 per month but typically receive way less, which is between S$450-750. They are often reluctant to complain about fear of being repatriated.

Singapore’s migration regime also shapes the political values held by the MWs during their sojourn (Qin-Liang & Hassan, 2020). Like ordinary people, MWs carry conceptions of how the state should operate, whom it should serve (or not), who pays for it and who benefits. They form these political values primarily through their interactions with the state of their home countries.
Coming to Singapore, most of them recognize their low-status as 'second-class citizens and the precarity in their labour conditions and—as I demonstrate in the following sections—expect little social protection from the Singapore state during their employment. Neither do they believe that the Singapore state will extend more social protections to them because their precarity benefits the Singaporean economy? These values may persist even if they yearn for policies and programmes that can better ensure their wellbeing.

In contrast, using their home countries as their point of reference (I have shown them in the later part), most of the MWs hold Singapore in high esteem for its political stability, sound economic management and good governance. Significantly, their admiration contributes to their trust in the efficacy of the Singapore state in running the lion-city.

As Dutta (et al. 2018) writes, '[culture] passes on values within a community, and at the same time co-creates opportunities for transforming these values over time. In this paper, I discuss how their subcultures had structured their expectations and impressions of the state amidst the COVID-19, such that the MWs are grateful for the Singapore state’s support despite their vulnerabilities during the pandemic.

Covid-19 and the Indian and Bangladeshi MWs

Social distance framework

The WHO recommends social or physical distancing, implying that people must stay at least one metre away from each other to protect against Coronavirus. Together with this, regular handwashing/disinfecting is the key to halting the spread of COVID-19. The WHO's specific guidelines are: Social distancing [at least 1 metre apart] is an effective protective measure against the Coronavirus, and measures to ensure people observe this are in force (Ullah et al. 2020).

It is estimated that about one-third of the world’s vulnerable population is under quarantine in their own homes, and, in many countries, the police are

---

6 Douglas Broom, ‘In pictures: this is what social distancing looks like around the world,’ World Economic Forum, April 2, 2020.
enforcing social distancing (Ullah et al. 2021; 2020). Quarantine means restricting activities or separating people who are not ill themselves but may have been exposed to COVID-19 (Ullah et al., 2021). The goal is to prevent the spread of the disease at a time when people just develop symptoms. Isolation denotes separating people who are ill with symptoms of COVID-19 and may be infectious to prevent the spread of the disease, and the social customs have been revamped by implementing a no-visitor policy and greeting without physical contact (no handshakes, no kisses, no hugs etc.) (Ullah et al. 2021).

The Reality of the MWs’ dormitories

Of 351,800 migrant workers,7 200,000 workers reside in purpose-built dormitories (PBDs; specially built with features for their needs); the rest are housed in dormitories converted from disused industrial sites and other unlicensed residences.8 Thousands of workers live in close quarters, and between 12 and 20 men sharing a single room which is 45-90 sqm. Making it difficult for them to maintain a safe distance amongst themselves. MWs use bunk beds, where they sleep just a few feet away from each other.9 They share toilets, shower stalls, laundry clotheslines, storage spaces and line up together to receive food. For them, in the cramped and unsanitary living conditions, ‘social distancing is a luxury’ (Ullah et al. 2020). And due to this condition, an outbreak was inevitable.

From the first confirmed case among the workers reported on February 9, 2020, another four workers who lived at ‘different’ dormitories were infected. Since then, Covid-19 clusters have mushroomed in workers’ dormitories despite immediate contact tracing and disinfecting affected sites (Yi, 2020). The largest, at the S11 Dormitory at Punggol, which housed 13,000 workers, went from four cases to 62 in under a week. New clusters formed in the other dorms and worksites. Over 100 migrant workers were tested positive for

---

9 Jessie Yeung, Joshua Berlinger, Sandi Sidhu, Manisha Tank and Isaac Yee, 'Singapore's migrant workers are suffering the brunt of the country's coronavirus outbreak', CNN, April 25, 2020.
Covid-19 within the mid of February. In total, 25 out of 43 PBDs were declared as isolation areas within 1 month from the first case.

All other buildings accommodating the city-state’s 351,800 workers were placed under effective lockdown. The restrictions, an attempt to reduce further transmission, have left the dormitories even more crowded than usual as only essential workers are permitted to leave. While interviewing one of the health care officials in Singapore through the NGO, he told me that the MWs are excluded from the state planning of healthcare and covered by medical insurance that employers purchase for workers under their charge, without eligibility for subsidized healthcare. Healthcare quality is limited to meeting compliance standards of immigration procedures and occupational safety. They are covered only for acute conditions but not for specialized outpatient treatments, allied health (e.g., physiotherapy), rehabilitative, preventive or mental health services.

Respondents informed me that even until mid-April 2020, they did not have access to soap and adequate cleaning supplies. While migrants were being served food, either by the Government or by their companies, so that they did not use shared kitchens, the quality of meals was poor and lacking in nutrition. In some cases, more than 100 men shared five toilets and five showers.

Monsir Ali, a middle-aged construction worker from Bangladesh (whom I interviewed in late April), told me that in their dormitories, every-day, they have to stand in long queues to use shared bathrooms, which often did not have enough water for the showers or toilets to function. “Until, now none of us in my dormitory has been tested positive, but there are many with symptoms, some feel they have no energy, someone has body aches,” he said. “We are frightened.”

“My family thinks that I have a good job in Singapore because I spent so much (4 lakh Bangladeshi Taka) to come here. They don’t know the work we do. If I tell them that I work so hard in Singapore, they will be sad. My family will cry.” said Rafiqul. When asked about his experiences with Covid-19, he

---

10 1 Bangladeshi taka is 0.016S$.
11 I interviewed him through a WhatsApp video call at the end of September 2020. Rafiqul is a construction worker who was under quarantine at the time of the interview.
replied, "it is the worst. I was quarantined for three months; they tested me, I got negative, still have to stay in the quarantine. I don't know why. My boss came and let me go out for one day in August and then again got me quarantined. Until September 3, I was there. I was released on the 6th, started working, but again got quarantined from September 20. I am still there. Please help me to get out of here. I cannot stay like this anymore. I do not see a single person since I am inside here. The hotel-man comes and gives food and goes away. How am I supposed to survive like this?"

Through my interviews, I found that the MWs, I interviewed, though they have been treated very badly by their companies, yet held a deep sense of respect for Singapore. Shami, a worker who had been quarantined in a renowned hotel following the outbreak, had shared his initial motivations for coming to Singapore.

“Coming here felt like a dream because Singapore is a modern, rich and developed country [...]. I wanted to come to this country to earn a huge amount of money and send the m back home so that my family can have a good life.”

The deep reverence towards the country has also come from the economic hardships most workers had experienced back home in India and Bangladesh. Migration is about people, their aspirations and fears, triumphs and tragedies (Ullah and Haque 2020; Chattoraj 2020). While motivations for migrating to Singapore varied, they largely revolve around two factors: 'status claims' and 'economic deprivation’ back home (Rahman, 2017). In this context, status claims are made through statements, behaviours or symbols which would indicate someone’s position on the social hierarchy. Migration is regarded as a way through which one can increase their social standing through both economic and social terms (Rahman, 2017).

Jobs acquired in Singapore were seen to fetch higher salaries compared to home countries, which, combined with exchange rates, had made way for these workers to earn more money. Beyond material gains, the trajectory of migration itself seemed to hold a distinct form of cultural value for workers, thus allowing them to progress up the ladder of social hierarchy (Qin-Liang & Hassan, 2020). While these factors are certainly powerful in motivating them to migrate, there are also economic conditions that facilitate this decision.
In understanding Singapore to be a desirable destination to be worked towards, migration is deemed a way through which one would attain a level of reassuring success. Rana, a MW who migrated to Singapore in 2013, espoused his feelings:

“Singapore is an extremely successful country. People here have good jobs and earn a lot of money, and my cousin who came here some years back is also earning enough to lead a good life could at least earn a livelihood. Seeing him, I also wanted to try my luck if I could do something for myself and my family here.”

“In calculating benefits of migration, there is no way we can ignore the invisible cost migrants’ pay in pursuing migration”- this is a very important argument made by William Lacy Swing, Director-General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Ullah and Haque 2020:vii). This argument complements the situation of the MWs as well in Singapore. Though they are well aware of the costs they need to pay; yet, they understand it to be an inevitability of their employment conditions. These conditions create ‘hyper-precarity’–a term used to connote the multi-layered vulnerabilities faced by workers as a result of insufficient protection as well as exploitation (Qin-Liang & Hassan, 2020). Such insecurities pervade every part of their life: From the threat of unilateral deportation to irregular salaries, migrants are subjected to precarity as they undertake such risks in order to continue working. Abul, a construction MW, remains cognizant of this as he had worked here for the past four years.

“It is a beautiful and brilliantly efficient city. But I know I am only a second-class citizen here. My rights and obligations are not assured. I am not on the same level as a Singaporean.”

To explain and understand the relationships between MWs and the state, this paper attempts to analyze the causes behind and nature of gratitude felt by MWs in the midst of this pandemic.

Gratitude towards the “State”

Especially compared to their countries back home, many workers see Singapore to be the better alternative. "Our Bangladeshi Embassy was given a
huge amount of money to distribute among us, but what did they give us? One packet of snacks but that also not to everyone!" This reflects the disappointment that the workers have towards their own Government. "We do not get any kind of help from our Embassy. Let me tell you, we only have holidays on Sundays, but our Embassy remains closed. So, if we need help, where should we go?" Shakil, a 26-year-old Bangladeshi worker, was taken by real surprise about the efforts of the Singapore Government in giving them the due attention:

“Of course, we are to suffer the most from the crisis […]. We are the ones with the least entitlements; we are not citizens after all. I did not imagine the Government would care for us. But in the midst of COVID-19, they took so much care of all of us.”

As narrated by Shakil, being the ‘second-class citizens’ in the country, he was pretty sure that he and his fellow workers would have to bear the worst effects of the pandemic. Yet, the ways in which they were taken care of were more than enough for an MW like Shakil. The wide-scale mass testing efforts and quarantine orders along with distribution of free food, masks and hand sanitizers topped the list. "Until today, none of my friends nor me have to buy any mask or hand sanitizer. Government is providing them throughout. Still today, I remember, when I returned home from work (it was in mid-January, I think) I saw a pair of masks, and a hand sanitizer was lying on my bed”. As a result, the gratitude felt was mostly contextualized against larger felt systemic gaps that had left these workers vulnerable in the first place. This shows that the attention placed on them as a result of the pandemic had been a stark contrast from the usual times.

The Government has also succeeded in gaining trust from the MWs in this time of crisis by providing all kinds of support: "[…] my company want to send me back to Bangladesh, but I want to work in Singapore. […] If I go back, my family will die because of financial reasons. We have no one to help us. I don’t want to go to Bangladesh. […] I am now in Quarantined, so cannot go out; otherwise, I am sure, if I would have gone to MOM, they would have surely helped me as they helped so many of my friends." This quote is from Rubel, who is quarantined and had been threatened by his company that he would be sent back to Bangladesh. But he trusts MOM and believes if his problem can reach them, they will surely provide some kind of support.
Additionally, they felt immensely appreciative of frontline medical personnel who had tended to them in the midst of the outbreak in the dorms. Many MWs had recounted the reassuring and pleasant experiences with the medical professionals working with them. Alamin, another migrant worker, had recounted his pleasant experiences with the medical team there.

“The doctor was very nice and comforted me a lot. I was grateful and amazed at the strength of the medical teams working tirelessly for us. I do not think any other country would have done this for their workers.”

In addition, several respondents also showed gratitude towards the country by comparing it with other countries like Saudi, Brunei and Malaysia: "Some of my friends and relatives are migrant workers in Saudi, Brunei and Malaysia. When I hear their stories, I feel how lucky I am that I have come to Singapore and not to those countries. I agree that the dorm conditions are far better than ours, yet the money we receive here is much better than theirs. Also, the workloads are much better for us."

**Role of NGOs**

Finally, as the pandemic progressed, there was also a gradual conflation of NGOs and the state for the MWs. While the state was seen to be responsible for the initial outbreak in the dorms, the involvement of several NGOs in responding to this crisis was, again, seen to be an extension of the state. The mass number of infections had seen NGOs rendering services to vast numbers of MWs alongside other government agencies.

"When Covid-19 came into being, no doubt Singapore Government helped us a lot and is still helping us. But I should also mention some of the NGOs, who supported and helped us in the troubled times. They provided basic necessities, like dry foods during Ramadan, clothes and many more." Not only NGOs, but there are many Bangladeshi Singaporeans who have also initiated in helping the workers at the dorms.
“MOM [...] all have been doing so much for us workers. The Government is trying their best and helping us through all these steps. At least I can be treated here, and I am being taken care of properly.” In a country like Singapore, where its citizens get the most priority, "we, migrant workers will be given the Covid-19 vaccine soon. In fact, more than a dozen of my friends from another company have already been vaccinated. They are doing fine. I am waiting for my turn now."

**Protecting the precarious: Singapore’s role during Covid-19**

Singapore was one of the worst affected areas in the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak. Since then, the nation-state has steadily built up its outbreak preparedness, including developing a national pandemic preparedness plan based on risk assessment and calibration of response measures that are proportionate to the risk (Lee et al., 2020). This includes holding regular exercises and building the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), a 330-bed purpose-built infectious diseases management facility with integrated clinical, laboratory and epidemiological functions.

Since the end of January 2020, the Asian state undertook a whole-of-government approach by establishing a Multi-Ministry Task Force (Lee et al., 2020). It implemented effective measures to limit the importation of COVID-19 and augmented active case finding, extensive contact tracing and quarantine, testing, clinical management and community and social measures (ibid.). Initially, MOM issued advisories to dormitories on maintaining clean residential premises and promoting personal hygiene among workers. However, the monitoring system was lacking. As COVID-19 continued to spread in the local community, much of the Government's focus was on curbing spread among local residents. The potential risk of MWs contracting COVID-19 was not given much priority. MOM’s guideline for precautionary measures in dormitories was not successfully implemented due to crowdedness in the dormitory, sharing facilities (e.g., toilet and shower rooms), lack of supplies of masks and hand sanitizers and inadequate manpower resources.

---

Singapore implemented a 'circuit breaker.'\textsuperscript{13} Phase (a local term for lockdown) for two months from April 7. While MWs were confined, extensive swab operations and serological testing were undertaken in all dormitories. Medical and recovery services were established to transfer infected workers with mild symptoms to ‘community care facilities’ and recovered workers to ‘community recovery facilities’ before their transition to work.

Two weeks before the end of the 'circuit breaker', the Government laid out a three-phase approach to exit lockdown: (i) safe reopening, (ii) safe transition and (iii) safe nation. Accordingly, the Government was set to resume construction projects with transition strategies, including regular testing to identify those with an asymptomatic infection and safe distancing guidelines for workplaces and construction sites. Although these strategies are essential to allow MWs to resume their economic roles in due time, special attention needs to be paid to non-work–related activities of workers.

The lockdown succeeded in slowing the transmission of COVID-19, yet the sustained human-to-human spread is still occurring in the community even today. MWs remain at high risk of contracting the disease if there are no guidelines to provide guidance when they engage in non-work activities. Knowledge of the social-ecological contexts of the activities in the population is crucial to implement a well-informed lockdown exit strategy to protect workers and prevent the further spread of COVID-19.

The highlighted problems affecting the MWs took a sharper turn prior to the spread of COVID-19; the pandemic brings them into sharper relief. For example, the difficulties of living in tight, crowded spaces in dormitories have been exacerbated. Existing problems of hygiene indicated by bedbugs and rat infestations have become important public health concerns. The discourse of containment, used to justify the seclusion of migrants in dormitories (often at the edges of the island), now enables greater restrictions on their movement, with thousands locked into their rooms for weeks. Relaxation during their off-days has now an old phenomenon. They can only go out from their dormitories on their off-days provided they have already got the ‘exit pass’ which allows

\textsuperscript{13} Circuit breaker refers to the set of measures implemented by the Singapore government from April 7, 2020, to June 1 to restrict the movement of the population towards suppressing, or mitigating, the COVID-19 pandemic.
them to go to the recreation centres for 3 hours—and going home to see their families? A big question still remained unresolved.

MOM’s advice to dormitory operators was that workers should “stay in their rooms and minimize physical interactions.” No advice was given on how to achieve this—probably because it can't be done: “We ask for the cooperation of workers to take necessary precautions and exercise individual responsibility. MOM also urges […] dormitory operators to educate their workers and residents on the advisory to remain at home or in dormitories on their rest days.” Even so, gaps existed in the measures which had been implemented. According to Dev, from a dormitory in Woodlands told, “temperature-taking was not consistently done because queues were getting too long.”

The dorms themselves were still notoriously filthy, with garbage piling up, insect infestations, and broken amenities left unfixed for weeks. Misinformation and poor awareness are legitimate concerns but separate issue from dormitory overcrowding, which is beyond either residents' or dormitory operators' ability to solve. This was a strikingly obvious problem that needed time, attention, and resources to solve. The Government could, and should, have acted much sooner. Measures were also announced at other dormitories, including moving 'essential services' workers into other spaces, reducing intermingling between floors, and housing sick residents (even if not positive) in isolated sick bays. All of this is commendable but comes regrettably late.

To prevent further spread in the dorms, “decisive steps need to be taken right now”, stated one of my respondents. One, ramp up cleaning frequency. Workers should also be reassured, in line with the Government's announcements, that they will not be penalized in any way for seeing a doctor and/or missing work. Operators who do not comply should be held accountable in the strictest possible terms.

Social scientists have shown convincingly that structural change often happens in times of great socio-political and economic upheaval. Goodwill efforts are welcome and necessary at times of crisis like this, where banding together demonstrates solidarity and gives much-needed immediate help. However, it should be ensured that policy change takes place to ensure better living and employment conditions for MWs, even after this crisis.
In addition to improving standards in worker dormitories, more direct channels of communication need to be established by the state to reach the marginalized MWs migrant communities. Migrant rights—whether in relation to wage payments or days off—need to be addressed within the larger realm of labour rights, as these individuals are as crucial as other workers in the country’s economy. Many states are prioritizing the health and wellbeing of their citizens. Others, such as Portugal, have extended full citizenship rights to migrants and asylum seekers (Ullah et al., 2021). The Prime Minister of Singapore has pointed out the significance of non-citizen migrants within the national border. Migrant welfare and rights must be prioritized now for the betterment of the interconnected global community. Guaranteeing rights and welfare of the MWs should not then be left to the discretion of individual employers but should be ensured collectively by the state working together with migrant advocacy agencies and a concerned public.

From my collected data, I show that my respondents gained respect for the efficacy of the Singapore state in managing the pandemic. Most of them, though unhappy with their country’s control of the pandemic, observed that the Singapore state was able to discipline its population effectively through its circuit breaker measures and, by doing so, mitigating the scale of the COVID-19 outbreak outside of the dormitories. As described by Shamim: “Singapore government very good in managing the pandemic. People back home no listen to the Government. But in Singapore, Government tells people to stay home; they stay home. It's like they take control.”

Significantly, my interviewees felt safe staying in Singapore because they believed in the capabilities of the Singapore government to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Another interviewee quipped: 'my family, no worry about me. Because it is safer to stay in Singapore than back home now.’ Some of my interviewees observed that the state has paid for the hospital bills incurred by COVID-19 patients in public hospitals, whether Singaporeans or MWs from the dormitory clusters. They assumed that it would extend the social aid to any infected by COVID-19.

---

15 Same as footnote 9.
In accordance with the prevailing subculture, my interviewees directed their frustrations towards their employers or the COVID-19 while overlooking the role of the Singapore state in reproducing their precarity, which allowed these issues to fester in the first place. Having little expectations of the state to protect their wellbeing, they are grateful for its efficacy in managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Persistence of subcultures post-COVID-19**

I expect the subcultures of MWs to remain mostly unchanged in the foreseeable future because the values and norms that underpin these subcultures evolve slowly by nature. MWs would likely continue to hold the Singapore state in high regard for its strong governance as long as it continues to function effectively and efficiently. In addition, so long as an economic disparity persists between their home countries and Singapore, they are likely to want to migrate and work in the lion-city despite the precarious labour conditions.

Moreover, I do not foresee the occurrence of any major events that could trigger a drastic shift in the political values of these MWs or the Singapore state. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrust the plight of MWs into the limelight of Singapore society like never before, yet even it has failed to galvanize any political agitation among the MWs or engender structural changes to Singapore’s temporary migration regime. The subcultures of MWs in Singapore are, hence, likely to remain largely unchanged in the foreseeable future.

Unfortunately, the endurance of the existing political cultures of MWs is a cause for concern because it allows the Singapore state to perpetuate its illiberal migration regime. As discussed above, MWs in Singapore understand their precarity but expect little social protections from the state. Though, some are wary of constant surveillance and the risk of repatriation if they speak or mobilize against the state. As a result, most choose not to participate in advocacy on issues concerning their wellbeing. The erasure of their voices from civil society relieves some political pressure on the Singapore state to enact any institutional changes to the temporary migration regime. As Bal (2015) explains, NGO activism has been the most concerted challenge to Singapore’s migrant labour regime, but the political impetus behind it comes
from overtly confrontational outcomes of workplace struggles by low-waged MWs. These struggles are translated into a critical mass of casework through the nexus of NGO direct services. This casework forms the primary basis of advocacy within various political sites, without which advocacy cannot be conducted effectively.

**Conclusion**

This paper concludes that the MWs are grateful to Singapore for its support during COVID-19, despite its role in creating and perpetuating their vulnerabilities to the pandemic in the first place. I used the subcultures of MWs in Singapore to explain this phenomenon. As MWs expect so little social protection from the state during their stay and respect its efficacy in governing Singapore, they are grateful towards the Singapore state despite its complicity in shaping their vulnerabilities to this pandemic.

This study highlights the impact of COVID-19 on the MWs, who are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 largely due to high-density and the unhygienic built environment. To address the structural barrier and contain the spread of COVID-19 among the MWs, Singapore's multi-ministry task force has made significant efforts by increasing geographic accessibility to testing and treatment facilities which is a key to controlling the epidemic. Such a multi-sectoral response system involving the MOM and the Ministry of Health should continue to provide migrant workers with coordinated care in the time of post-pandemic (Yi, 2020).

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has unmasked health inequity and shed light on the complex pathways from socio-economic exclusion to infection of the disease in the diverse populations of low-wage migrant workers, racial and ethnic minorities, refugees and other marginalized people with residential instability (Mann et al. 2020). Individuals from lower socio-economic strata often are 'essential workers' with pre-existing health conditions and have to continue working during lockdowns; they were thus at higher risk of exposure, and hence disease, including deaths, than the general population (Greenaway et al. 2020). While the risk factors of adverse health outcomes are context-specific and epic historical dependent, the literature evidences structural causes of health disparities—lack of legal, social and health protection in inadequate living conditions—and calls for accountability in global health justice (Yi,
Although the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the world into disarray, it presents us an opportunity to work together towards health equity, ensuring equal and easy access to resources for tests, treatments and future vaccines for migrants and ethnic minorities. The pandemic and its impact on the MWs continue to evolve. There might, hence, be perspectives that emerged only in the latter stages of the crisis, which I have not been included in this paper.

References


Qin-Liang, Yeo and Samira Hassan. (2020). “No Apologies Demanded: The Political Subcultures of Low-Waged Migrant Workers and Foreign


