



INVISIBLE

WOUNDS

EMOTIONAL ABUSE OF MIGRANT
DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SINGAPORE



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	01
Executive Summary	02
Introduction	05
Objectives	06
Methodology	10
What is Emotional Abuse?	11
- Emotional abuse in Singapore's context	11
- Emotional abuse in the international context	12
Singapore and Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs)	15
Mental Health and Emotional Abuse	19
Dimensions of Emotional Abuse - Workplace Emotional Abuse: A Framework	21
Findings or Typology of Emotional Abuse of MDWs	25
- Terrorising behaviour	25
- Threats/Intimidation	26
- Insults	29
- Control	33
- Social isolation	33
- Invasion of privacy and/or surveillance	38
- Degradation	40
- Disrespecting the worker's position as an employee	41
- Causing MDW loss of dignity - causing feelings of embarrassment, powerlessness	43
Concluding Remarks	45
Recommendations	47

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines emotional abuse in the domestic work sector in Singapore as a follow-up to HOME's research into forced labour and mental well-being in domestic work. This report draws on interview data from 22 migrant domestic workers (MDWs), as well as HOME's casework data.

Emotional abuse is a pattern of behaviours that controls, intimidates and harasses, is non-physical and might not produce the kinds of tangible, material or visible ramifications that other types of abuse like physical and sexual abuse may. It is thus often deemed less serious than these other types of abuse despite the deep-rooted and long-lasting repercussions of emotional abuse on those experiencing it. Such effects include fear, self-loathing, and self-doubt in the short term, and depression and anxiety in the long term, to name a few.

However, the apathy towards and the 'invisibility' of emotional abuse pose a challenge in regulating and holding perpetrators accountable. The emotional abuse that MDWs experience is further made invisible, as its occurrence within homes means that it is often deemed a private matter and thus 'out of bounds' of any external intervention—this is especially the case due to the live-in nature of domestic work in Singapore, and the fewer labour and social protections that are afforded to Singaporeans and permanent residents, and have fewer such protections than other long term pass holders.

MDWs are not afforded any of the protections that individuals have in other workplaces, creating a regulatory vacuum without guidelines or frameworks on how to address emotional abuse in the domestic work sector. Furthermore, MDWs experience low labour mobility due to the regulations requiring the consent of employers to change jobs and their indebtedness (in the form of agency loans) that typically accumulates with every change in employer.

It is important to note that underpinning the experience of emotional abuse amongst MDWs is the stark imbalance in power that hinges not only on the employer-employee relationship—which is all the more heightened in domestic work due to perceptions regarding domestic labour and policies that allow

employers to unilaterally make decisions for MDWs (e.g. repatriate them) – but also on their relative positionality, determined by factors such as class, race, nationality, gender, age, etc.

This understanding of the scope of the issue and the challenges in dealing with it effectively demonstrate the need for serious investigation into emotional abuse in domestic work and how it manifests amongst MDWs. Thus, this report aims to understand the patterns of emotional abuse that MDWs experience and the effects they have on MDWs, and to advocate for a rights-based approach in thinking about and addressing emotional abuse in domestic work.

Through interviews, case files and a literature review, we've organised emotional abuse into three main categories, with two sub-categories each:

1. Terrorising behaviour:
 - a. Threats/Intimidation
 - b. Insults
2. Control:
 - a. Social Isolation
 - b. Invasion of privacy and/or surveillance
3. Degradation:
 - a. Disrespecting the worker's position as an employee
 - b. Causing MDW loss of dignity

The six sub-categories were the most prominent forms of emotional abuse documented among MDWs, which were then divided into three main categories created in consultation with Loreleigh Keashly's conceptual framework for analysing emotional abuse in the workplace. Terrorising behaviour, as the name suggests, are words and actions that cause feelings of fear, diminished confidence, and sadness. These were often shown through threats, intimidation, and insults. Control demonstrated the stark power differential between employers and MDWs, which the former wielded over the latter in both the working and personal aspects of their lives. Lastly, degradation is the type of abuse that targets beyond words and actions that instil fear or external factors of controlling aspects of the MDWs lives – it

targets the idea of self and their identity. It is detrimental to the MDWs' self-esteem and causes them to lose their dignity and sense of self.

Our recommendations seek to tackle the systemic and structural issues that perpetuate emotional abuse. When domestic work and the individuals who perform them receive adequate legislative protection, attitudes and perception towards domestic work will invariably change and instances of emotionally abusive behaviour will be minimised. These include measures that aim to balance the power dynamic between employers and agents on the one hand, and MDWs on the other. They also seek to address the negative attitudes and perceptions of domestic work which often lead to employers treating MDWs disrespectfully. MDWs also need to be given strong labour and social protections to be able to remove themselves from emotionally abusive situations.

INTRODUCTION

This report investigates the experiences of emotional abuse faced by migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Singapore. It is a follow-up to HOME's report on forced labour in the domestic sector in Singapore that was published in 2019, *Behind Closed Doors: Forced Labour in the Domestic Work Sector in Singapore (Behind Closed Doors)*,¹ as emotional abuse of MDWs is intimately tied to the proliferation of coercive and exploitative working conditions. This report also draws from the findings of HOME's 2015 report *Home Sweet Home? Work, Life and Well-being of Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore (Home Sweet Home)*,² which looked into the general mental well-being of 670 MDWs.

Emotional abuse, as it is non-physical in nature and has no visible effects on a person's body, tends to be considered less serious than other forms of abuse, e.g. physical abuse and sexual abuse. Nonetheless, it involves a serious and pervasive pattern of behaviours that disproportionately impact vulnerable groups who face power disparity with the people around them: women, children, those with disabilities, the elderly, and other dependent and vulnerable persons.³

It is important to examine the instances and effects of emotional abuse on MDWs due to the repercussions - usually psychological - that emotional abuse has on the victim; in the short-term, it can create confusion and fear. In the longer run, it may negatively impact their self-esteem, and result in depression and anxiety that can manifest in the form of nightmares, insomnia, heart palpitations, difficulty concentrating and social withdrawal, amongst other things.⁴ Sustained emotional

¹ Humanitarian Organisation of Migration Economics, *Behind Closed Doors: Forced Labour in the Domestic Work Sector in Singapore* (2019), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a12725612abd96b9c737354/t/5c3d7b534fa51aa11983e4a/1547533156689/FINAL+Forced+Labour+Report+V8.pdf> (accessed 12 February 2022).

² Humanitarian Organisation of Migration Economics, *Home Sweet Home? Work, Life and Well-Being of Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore* (2015), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a12725612abd96b9c737354/t/5a1fe5610d9297c2b97526ff/1512039798091/Report_Home-sweet-home_work-life-and-well-being-of-foreign-domestic-workers-in-Singapore.pdf (accessed 15 February 2022).

³ Loreleigh Keashly, 'Emotional abuse in the workplace: Conceptual and empirical issues', *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 1, no. 1 (1998): 85-117; Mary Ann Curry et al., 'Abuse of Women with Disabilities: An Ecological Model and Review', *Violence Against Women* 7, no. 1 (2001): 60-79; Maria Gabriella Melchiorre et al., 'The prevalence, severity and chronicity of abuse towards older men: Insights from a multinational European survey', *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 4 (2021).

⁴ Sarakay Smullens, 'Five Cycles of Emotional Abuse: Codification and Treatment of an Invisible Malignancy': 3, https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.naswma.org/resource/resmgr/imported/FCE_emotionalAbuse.pdf (accessed 12 February 2022).

abuse can also create situations of forced labour whereby victims are intimidated, threatened or mistreated in performing their work.

The difficulties in collecting evidence as to the occurrence of emotional abuse, also poses a challenge to the state's ability to regulate the occurrence of emotional abuse and appropriately punish perpetrators. This is especially the case for instances of abuse in the workplace, as emotional abuse is not usually recognised as causing serious harm and is commonly relegated to the realm of interpersonal, private relationships rather than the professional. Accordingly, MDWs whose personal and professional lives are deeply intertwined as a result of their live-in situation are especially vulnerable.

Though “emotional abuse” does not have a universal definition, it has been considered in broader abuse and human rights frameworks. Emotional abuse is sustained by asymmetric power relations and is also a gendered issue, as it is more prevalent among women than men.⁵ As this report will elaborate below, power asymmetries are stark for MDWs due to their gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, class and employment status and their dependence on their employers. MDWs face immense barriers to financial stability, with high recruitment fees that deny them their full wages for several months, as well as typically low, depressed salaries.⁶ This financial precarity makes it difficult for them to escape abusive working conditions, even if they are able to recognise abusive patterns.

These structural power imbalances are exacerbated by the living and working conditions of MDWs, who by law, must reside at their employer's household and lack several basic labour protections (including protections against overwork, invasion of privacy, or whistleblowing unsafe conditions). MDWs also face poor labour mobility, as they require the consent of their employer to change jobs, unless their employers

⁵ Coercive control, which is comparable to emotional abuse in that it is a pattern of behaviour intended to humiliate, isolate, intimidate and dominate, appeared to be very gendered. Women were found to overwhelmingly experience this form of abuse, where 30% of the abuse reported by female respondents was coercive control, as opposed to 6% among male respondents. See Andy Myhill, 'Measuring coercive control: What can we learn from national population surveys?', *Violence Against Women* 21, no. 3 (2015): 355-375, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077801214568032> (accessed 14 February 2022).

⁶ Humanitarian Organisation of Migration Economics, *Behind Closed Doors: Forced Labour in the Domestic Work Sector in Singapore* (2019), p30, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a12725612abd96b9c737354/t/5c3d7b534fa51aa111983e4a/1547533156689/FINAL+Forced+Labour+Report+V8.pdf> (accessed 12 February 2022).

are being investigated for contravening the law. MDWs, whose families are often a key source of emotional support, also often face difficulties communicating with their families, especially when they have no or limited access to their mobile phones. On the other hand, if families are constantly demanding remittances from the MDW, that is an additional source of emotional stress, particularly if the employer is withholding salary or not paying it in a timely manner.

Lastly, MDWs may have difficulty in accessing avenues of support due to language barriers (which hamper their ability to navigate Singapore's legal institutions) and their limited freedom of movement when living with their employer. Therefore, when MDWs face emotional abuse, they are particularly vulnerable victims who exist in a dependent relationship with their perpetrators with limited means of escaping, or altering the circumstances of their situation.

OBJECTIVES

Based on HOME's casework data and interviews with residents at HOME's shelter for MDWs, this report calls for emotional abuse amongst MDWs to be taken seriously as a labour rights issue. The objectives of the report include:

- To demonstrate that, despite the penalties for physical, sexual and other forms of abuse outlined in Singapore's Penal Code and other legislation, emotional abuse of MDWs remains prevalent in Singapore. This is a particularly invisible and insidious form of abuse, sometimes accompanied by other forms of abuse (physical, sexual, verbal) and involving devastating psychological impact on its victims.
- To identify prevalent patterns of emotional abuse in the MDW population in Singapore. This involves a clarification of the term 'emotional abuse' in the Singapore context, as no universal definition exists and cases are embedded in the cultural framework of the victims and perpetrators, employment circumstances for MDWs, and the laws of the country. This report aims to identify universal characteristics of emotional abuse and examine how these pose particular risks to MDWs in Singapore.
- To relate emotional abuse to power dynamics and practices that enable abuse and fail to provide adequate protections for MDWs. This report aims to highlight the societal causes of emotional abuse and its multiple enabling factors: this includes the practical (ie. the living conditions of MDWs), the ideological (ie. the value attributed to MDW lives compared to those of Singaporeans and domestic work generally) and the legal (ie. the rights and protections offered to MDWs as compared to other migrant workers). This report investigates how this complex web of relations can perpetuate emotional abuse of MDWs in closed-door domestic situations.
- To advocate for a rights-based approach when dealing with emotional abuse, in which emotional abuse is acknowledged as a serious form of abuse and is granted the proper recognition already attributed by law for other groups of people (e.g Vulnerable Adults Act). The report examines emotional abuse through the lens of international human rights frameworks as well as the local legal context, which already seeks to offer protections to vulnerable groups.

This report is motivated by the underreporting and devaluing of emotional abuse cases as a legitimate form of abuse. It aims to provide a more nuanced definition of abuse, centred on a rights-based approach. It also depicts MDWs as a vulnerable population deserving of stronger rights and special protections in order to ensure these rights. A broader understanding of emotional abuse can contribute to the gathering of much-needed empirical data on the subject, increased assistance to MDWs and better education for employers and the general population. It seeks to expand popular understandings of 'abuse', considering implicit power dynamics, hidden factors and vulnerabilities as culprits – thus moving beyond the notion of a 'sole perpetrator', or individual perpetrators of abuse. This will help us arrive at a more systemic understanding of emotional abuse of MDWs in Singapore.

METHODOLOGY

This report relies on HOME's casework data between 2019 to 2021 to illustrate a) the prevalence of emotional abuse, b) types of emotional abuse, and c) the connection between emotional abuse and other forms of abuse. Further, it relies on the testimonies of 22 MDWs residing at HOME's shelter between July and September 2019. These testimonies were gathered during extensive focus group discussions, with groups made up of three to six MDWs of different nationalities. The participants gave their informed consent to participate in this report and were given the right to withdraw at any point if desired. The names of the MDWs mentioned in this study were not recorded.

In order to determine what constitutes emotional abuse, international frameworks and various pieces of Singapore legislation were consulted. Other sources (psychological studies, international governmental definitions, independent reports) were considered to draw out six primary categories of emotional abuse for the purpose of the report. Further details on the definition and categorisation of emotional abuse are provided in the next chapter.

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

1. Emotional abuse in Singapore's context

The only legislative definition of “emotional or psychological abuse” in Singapore is found in the Vulnerable Adults Act (VAA),⁷ as “conduct or behaviour by an individual towards another individual a) that torments, intimidates, harasses or is offensive to the other individual; or b) that causes or may reasonably be expected to cause mental harm to the other individual, including thoughts of suicide or inflicting self-harm”.⁸ It is worthy to note as well that “emotional and psychological abuse” is included in the more general definition of “abuse” under the VAA.⁹ The Vulnerable Adults Act, however, does not apply to MDWs.¹⁰

The VAA also classifies general “abuse” as any “conduct or behaviour by an individual that in any other way controls or dominates another individual and causes the other individual to fear for his or her safety or wellbeing”. It also includes “conduct or behaviour by an individual that unreasonably deprives, or threatens to unreasonably deprive, another individual of that other individual’s liberty of movement or wellbeing”.¹¹ These behaviours of *control* and *intimidation* have been classified under ‘emotional abuse’ according to several frameworks,¹² and will therefore also be taken into account in this report.

Emotional abuse is not defined under the Penal Code (PC)¹³. The closest offence in the PC that may penalise actions that cause emotional trauma is that of criminal intimidation, where a person who “threatens another with any injury to his person,

⁷ See *Vulnerable Adults Act 2018*, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/VAA2018> (accessed 15 February 2022).

⁸ Section 2, Subsection 1 of the Vulnerable Adults Act provides illustrations on emotional abuse:

- (a) X has Parkinson’s disease and cannot walk without assistance. Her caregiver, Y, does not physically abuse X but regularly threatens to beat or harm X’s grandchild (a baby) whom X is devoted to.
- (b) X has dementia and lives with her adult son, Y. When Y is drunk and does not get what he wants from X, Y shouts at X and destroys X’s belongings in X’s presence, causing fear and distress to X.

⁹ Section 2 of the VAA defines “abuse” as:

- (a) physical abuse;
- (b) emotional or psychological abuse;

¹⁰ Section 2, Subsection 1 of the Vulnerable Adults Act defines “vulnerable adult” as an individual who–

- (a) is 18 years of age or older; and
- (b) is, by reason of mental or physical infirmity, disability or incapacity, incapable of protecting himself or herself from abuse, neglect or self-neglect

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Rula O. Alsawalqa, ‘Women’s abuse experiences in Jordan: A comparative study using rural and urban classifications’, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communication* 8, no. 186 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00853-3> (accessed 14 February 2022).

¹³ *Penal Code 1871*, Rev. Ed. 2020, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/act/pc1871> (accessed 24 May 2022).

reputation or property, or to the person or reputation of any one in whom that person is interested, with intent to cause alarm to that person, or to cause that person to do any act which he is not legally bound to do, or to omit to do any act which that person is legally entitled to do, as the means of avoiding the execution of such threat".¹⁴

In 2014, Singapore enacted the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA)¹⁵. POHA states that an individual who causes harassment, alarm or distress to another person by use of any threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour by making any threatening, abusive or insulting communication, is guilty of an offence.

In HOME's experience, employers who have uttered words or actions that threaten harm to their MDWs, or who have engaged in harassing, alarming or distressing behaviour, have come under investigation under the PC or POHA, with some being issued warning letters for their actions. However, there has been no known case of employers being charged under these provisions. It is also important to note that emotional abuse is often a precursor to physical and other more visible forms of abuse, or it often goes hand-in-hand with other forms of abuse.

It bears stating that this report concerns conduct by employers (and other actors) that fall *outside* the purview of behaviours that attract criminal sanctions or are illegal. It is this conduct that often goes unnoticed and unregulated by policymakers, but this report purports to show has a deep and lasting impact on MDWs' well-being.

2. Emotional abuse in the international context

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has defined workplace violence as "any action, incident or behaviour that departs from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed, injured in the course of, or as a direct result of, his or her work".¹⁶ While it does not use the term emotional abuse, it has

¹⁴ Penal Code, Section 503, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/act/pc1871> (accessed 14 February 2022).

¹⁵ Protection from Harassment Act 2014, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PHA2014?ProvlDs=P11-#pr1-> (accessed 24 May 2022).

¹⁶ International Labour Office, 'Work-related violence and its integration into existing surveys', *19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians* (2013), https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_222231.pdf (accessed 19 February 2022).

highlighted the importance of recognising repeated psychological violence as a form of work-related violence. The ILO has defined psychological abuse as the “intentional use of power, including threat of physical force, against another person or group that can result in harm to physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. [It] includes verbal abuse, bullying/mobbing, harassment, and threats”.¹⁷

The ILO also has two key conventions relevant to the emotional abuse of domestic workers: the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (C189)¹⁸ and the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (C190).¹⁹ C189 outlines the labour rights of domestic workers. It acknowledges the persistent undervaluation of domestic work, which leaves workers particularly vulnerable to discrimination in terms of work and employment conditions and to other human rights abuses.²⁰ Specifically, C189 states that “each Member shall take measures to ensure that domestic workers enjoy effective protection against all forms of abuse, harassment and violence”.²¹

C190 concerns the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work. It defines violence and harassment as “a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm, and includes gender-based violence and harassment”.²² Importantly, C190 applies to all sectors of work, whether formal, or informal, and is relevant to domestic work, and domestic workers.²³

¹⁷ International Labour Office, ‘Work-related violence and its integration into existing surveys’, *19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians* (2013), p 8, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_222231.pdf (accessed 19 February 2022).

¹⁸ International Labour Organisation, ‘C189 - Domestic Workers Convention’, No. 189 (2011), https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C189 (accessed 19 February 2022).

¹⁹ International Labour Organisation, ‘C190 - Violence and Harassment Convention’, No. 190 (2019), https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190 (accessed 19 February 2022).

²⁰ ILO, ‘C189’, preamble.

²¹ *Ibid*, Article 5.

²² ILO, ‘C190’, Article 1.

²³ ILO, ‘C190’, Article 2.

Singapore has not signed on to either Convention. Neither Convention explicitly refers to emotional abuse but, taken jointly, the two have several implications on cases of emotional abuse on domestic workers. First, according to C189, domestic workers are recognised as particularly vulnerable to all kinds of abuse, and its provisions call for member States to accord better economic, social and labour protections to protect domestic workers against such abuses. Second, according to C190, harassment in the “world of work” can constitute abuse and includes behaviours causing psychological harm. Psychological and emotional harassment in the workplace are indicators of abuse, and domestic workers are particularly susceptible due to the nature of their labour — whereby their workplace is also their home, and workplace emotional abuse diffuses into domestic and private forms of abuse.

SINGAPORE AND MDWs

Globally, domestic workers in private households are recognised as some of the most exploited and abused workers in the world.²⁴ In the Arab States and East Asia, hiring live-in migrant domestic workers is an established practice, including in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Hong Kong, Taiwan and of course, Singapore.

A qualitative study on the abuse of MDWs in Taiwan found that live-in domestic workers are at a higher risk of potential emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. This report shows similar experiences of abuse among MDWs, such as being threatened, shouted at, scolded, or rarely being allowed outside.²⁵ The conditions of live-in domestic workers, especially in Singapore, leave them at the beck and call of their employers and other household members.²⁶ The ability of employers to fire a domestic worker and repatriate her with minimal notice exposes MDWs to exploitative treatment, a situation compounded by vague and ambiguous labour laws justified as necessary adjustments to the special and unique working arrangements of MDWs.

Under Singapore law, MDWs require the consent of their current employers to change employers, while employers are able to unilaterally terminate domestic workers and repatriate them on short, sometimes immediate, notice. Even after the expiry of their work permit (normally valid for a two-year period), employers retain the right to terminate MDWs against the MDW's will (or, conversely, renew their work permit without the MDW's consent).

MDWs lack the unequivocal, unambiguous labour and social protections normally afforded to Singapore citizens and permanent residents, and have fewer such protections than other long-term pass holders. MDWs depend on their employers to provide them accommodation and food within the confines of the latter's house. Moreover, as a result of having to pay recruitment fees, MDWs are subject to a

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, Domestic Workers (2012), <https://www.hrw.org/topic/womens-rights/domestic-workers> (accessed 24 May 2022)

²⁵ [Pan, S.-M., & Yang, J.-T., 2012](#)

²⁶ Anne Loveband, 'Nationality matters: SARS and foreign domestic workers' rights in Taiwan Province of China', *International Migration* 42, no. 5 (2004): <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-7985.2004.00304.x> (accessed 19 February 2022).

‘salary deduction’ period where they may work for up to 6 or 8 months without any or little pay.²⁷ During this salary deduction period, MDWs are even more susceptible to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as they may experience increased surveillance and isolation, and may withstand unfavourable and unsafe working conditions until they have paid off their loan. New employers — fearful that MDWs will ‘run away’ during this period, leaving the former to repay agency fees themselves — often impose additional restrictions on MDWs such as denying rest days or restricting mobile phone access until the salary deduction period is complete. This is exacerbated by the general lack of support available to MDWs, especially during this period, including from their employment agents, who are meant to be intermediaries between employers and MDWs. Agencies may be unwilling to provide assistance in transferring MDWs to new employers during the salary deduction period due to the additional costs and workload, even when the latter raise complaints about emotional abuse. This is especially the case due to the lack of importance accorded to emotional abuse, with many MDWs simply told to take it in their stride and ‘persevere’ (or, in colloquial terms, ‘*tahan*’) in the face of emotional abuse.

Interactions between MDWs and their employers (and agents) are mediated through significant structural power imbalances. For example, there is a lack of separation between work and private life for MDWs. The household as the workplace has resulted in MDWs lacking basic labour protections (including overtime, sick leave and annual leave protections). MDWs are *excluded* from Singapore’s Employment Act (EA), which governs basic working conditions, with this exclusion explained by policymakers as a pragmatic necessity because their work is “quite different from normal work”²⁸ and difficult to regulate (e.g. working hours). The EFMA requires employers to provide “adequate” rest and food and “acceptable” accommodation. However, these standards lack specificity. Ambiguity around what constitutes “acceptable” and “adequate” treatment bestows employers with undue discretion to define acceptability. Relegating decisions involving working conditions of domestic workers to a private contract between employers and MDWs, rather than to legislate them as matters of law, as with other forms of employment, leaves MDWs

²⁷ HOME, ‘Behind Closed Doors’, 30.

²⁸ Parliamentary Debates Singapore: Official Report, vol 85 at col 998 (Sitting date: November 18, 2008, ‘Employment Amendment Bill’) <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=18-11-2008> (accessed 20 February 2022).

susceptible to all forms of abuse, including exploitation, forced overtime, emotional and physical abuse and more.

The blending of MDWs' personal and private lives often gives rise to rhetoric by employers emphasising the closeness they have with their MDWs; saying things like “she’s like my family”. Such narratives, while well-intentioned, might cause MDWs to endure emotional abuse because they feel complicated ties towards their employers and their families, and cultivate a misplaced sense of loyalty which employers may exploit, given that certain liberties may be taken with family members that are unacceptable vis-a-vis colleagues or employees in a professional setting.

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) states in its website that it takes allegations of abuse and ill-treatment of MDWs seriously, especially if they concern physical or sexual abuse.²⁹ Emotional abuse is also mentioned; the MOM does acknowledge that “a foreign employee is ill-treated if the employer neglects their well-being. Other than physical and sexual abuse, this also include mental and emotional abuse”.³⁰ Still, this passing acknowledgement of emotional abuse is not realised in any meaningful way through legislative or regulatory actions. The Employment of Foreign Manpower Act, which covers the protections and entitlement of MDWs, does not make emotional abuse illegal, presumably due to ambiguities and contention over its definition, and the difficulties for MDWs to prove emotional abuse.

All these structural considerations — from a lack of separation of work and private life, to difficulties in regulating work conditions to MDW’s economic dependence on their employers — perpetuate unequal power dynamics between MDWs and their employers.³¹ These power imbalances that stem from social (i.e. race, nationality, and gender), economic (class) and structural (legal and institutional) inequality in

²⁹ Ministry of Manpower, ‘Abuse and ill-treatment of a foreign domestic worker’, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-domestic-worker/employers-guide/abuse-and-ill-treatment> (accessed 19 February 2022).

³⁰ Ministry of Manpower, ‘Does ill-treatment of a foreign employee include mental or emotional abuse?’, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/faq/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/does-ill-treatment-of-a-foreign-employee-include-mental-or-emotional-abuse> (accessed 19 February 2022).

³¹ For a more detailed description and analysis of the regulatory regime of MDWs in Singapore, including the work permit system, see *Behind Closed Doors*, pp 26 to 34.

Singapore society put MDWs in an especially vulnerable position that enables and perpetuates abusive behaviour. The following chapter illustrates MDWs' lived encounters with emotional abuse, revealing how structural imbalances and inadequate regulatory practices leave MDWs subject to difficult, often devastating, emotional experiences.

MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE

The impact of emotional abuse on one's mental health can be profound. Aimed at maintaining power and control over someone by insulting, humiliating and instilling fear in them, emotional abuse often results in self-doubt, guilt and self-loathing by the victim. Over time, victims of emotional abuse may experience a nervous breakdown, depression and anxiety. While this manifests in different ways for different individuals, the effects of emotional abuse on one's mental health need to be taken extremely seriously.³²

In the *Home Sweet Home* study done in 2015, 24% of the 670 MDWs surveyed were classified as having poor mental health, with the respondents exhibiting symptoms such as psychoticism, depression and interpersonal sensitivity.³³ In an academic study conducted in 2019, 24% of MDWs were found to have poor mental health – significantly higher than the general population.³⁴ In a cross-sectional study of female MDWs in Singapore, MDWs were found to experience high levels of stress (over 50%) and social isolation (almost 20%).³⁵ These factors significantly impact the health and quality of life of an already economically disadvantaged population. Individual working conditions had an important impact on MDW's mental health. Social connectedness was associated with good quality of life, while poor working conditions were associated with high stress levels. Beyond these individual differences, the vast majority of MDWs had no access to mental healthcare (and in many cases, to healthcare in general).³⁶

A report on the mental health of South Asian migrant workers in Singapore makes the case that mental health is a basic human right, and that poor mental health is associated with wrongful labour practices.³⁷ This consideration also applies to MDW

³² Günnur Karakurt and Kristin E. Silver, 'Emotional Abuse in Intimate Relationships: The Role of Gender and Age', *Violence Vict* 28, no. 5 (2013): 804-821.

³³ HOME, *Home Sweet Home*, 7.

³⁴ M.H.M Wong et al., 'Effects of mental health paraprofessional training for Filipina foreign domestic workers in Singapore', *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 22 (2020): 571-579.

³⁵ S.G. Anjara et al., 'Stress, health and quality of life of female migrant domestic workers in Singapore: A cross-sectional study', *BMC Women's Health* 17, no. 98 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-017-0442-7> (accessed 19 February 2022).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Nicholas Harrigan and Chiu Yee Koh, 'Vital yet vulnerable: Mental and emotional health of South Asian migrant workers in Singapore', *Research Collection School of Social Sciences* 1764 (2015), https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3021&context=soss_research (accessed 19 February 2022).

populations. MDWs are excluded from national policies to protect workers' well-being, including annual leave and are often denied weekly rest by employers. The same cross-sectional study reporting high stress levels in MDWs also reports that 51% of MDWs in Singapore experienced verbal abuse and 74% experienced restriction of movement.³⁸ Poor mental health and high stress is not always or necessarily linked to abuse. Nonetheless, a public health perspective must consider the psychological needs of MDWs and consolidate efforts to prevent abuse — especially emotional abuse — where it is recognised as a contributory factor to serious mental illness.

A study examining the relationship between depression levels and abuse in Filipina MDWs in Hong Kong found that 34.4% of those surveyed were verbally abused within a 12-month period, with 25.2% of all surveyed showing signs of mild to extremely severe depression.³⁹

A similar study that looked at Filipina MDWs in Macao found that being subject to discrimination⁴⁰ was associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression; this is in line with other studies demonstrating causal links between discrimination and poorer mental health outcomes, particularly for migrants and minority groups.⁴¹ As will be shown in the next chapter, emotional abuse can involve discriminatory behaviour such as taunts and demeaning comments about MDWs' skin colour and disparaging remarks about their nationalities and home countries.

³⁸ Anjara et al. 'Stress, health and quality of life'

³⁹ J.T.K Cheung et al., 'Abuse and depression among Filipino foreign domestic helpers. A cross-sectional survey in Hong Kong', *Public Health* 166 (2019):121-127.

⁴⁰ Williams et al., used the 'Everyday Discrimination Scale', a widely used 9 item self-reporting survey to study how much racial discrimination and socio-economic status and social class affects mental and physical health. See David R. Williams et al. 'Racial differences in physical and mental health: Socio-economic status, stress and discrimination', *Journal of Health Psychology* 2, no. 3 (1997): 335-35.

⁴¹ Brian J Hall et al., 'The effect of discrimination on depression and anxiety symptoms and the buffering role of social capital among female domestic workers in Macao, China', *Psychiatry Research* 271 (2019): 200-207.

DIMENSIONS OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE - WORKPLACE EMOTIONAL ABUSE: A FRAMEWORK

Emotional abuse can manifest differently in different cultures.⁴² The definition of ‘abuse’ is embedded in cultural considerations of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour; abusive behaviour is usually considered as such when it deviates from a culture’s norms of acceptability.

Detailed definitions are often left to local bodies and contexts, which poses risks to victims in settings where abusive behaviours are considered acceptable and/or unregulated. Separate definitions for emotional and psychological abuse have also been theorised:⁴³ for instance, psychological abuse might refer to the mental injury caused to a victim whereas emotional abuse places more significance on a victim’s capacity to express emotions. Nonetheless, as the two are used interchangeably in the VAA and in several international frameworks,⁴⁴ this report will use the term “emotional abuse” to encompass both definitions.

To analyse MDWs’ experiences of emotional abuse, this report will borrow from Loreleigh Keashly’s framework for analysing emotional abuse, in which she identified seven “dimensions of analysis” in relation to workplace abuse (see Figure 1). This framework is pivotal in providing a strong, evidence-based foundation that clearly defines the parameters of emotional abuse in the workplace. This framework was not designed for domestic workplaces specifically; rather, the framework encompasses research on various types of workplaces, ranging from medical staff to workers in the private and public sectors to those in the military. The household, vis-à-vis a corporate office, does present differences as a workplace: unlike many offices, there is an absence of institutional mechanisms and a lack of co-workers; in larger, multi-generational households, hierarchies can be pronounced yet uncertain. The domestic sphere or household as workplace is a space that is simultaneously deeply personal and professional, muddying relations in ways often disadvantageous to the persons engaged in underpaid labour. Keashly’s framework, however, is versatile and its dimensions are clearly applicable to the domestic

⁴² Jill E. Korbin, ‘Cross-cultural perspectives and research directions for the 21st century’, *Child Abuse & Neglect* 15, no. 1 (1991): 67–77, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134\(91\)90010-B](https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134(91)90010-B) (accessed 14 February 2022).

⁴³ O’Hagan, ‘Emotional and psychological abuse of children’.

⁴⁴ Vulnerable Adults Act; Syeda F.I. Rizvi and Najma Najam, ‘Parental psychological abuse toward children and mental health problems in adolescence’, *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences* 30, no. 2 (2014): 256-260.

workplace. The framework’s emphasis on the persistent, harmful and systemic nature of emotional abuse, including the power differentials involved, reflects the experiences of MDWs, pointing to its pertinence and relevance in multiple contexts. In providing vocabulary and structure, this framework facilitates a better understanding of emotional abuse in the domestic work sector in Singapore and allows us to connect it with the broader discourse on workplace emotional abuse. With around one in five households in Singapore hiring a live-in MDW,⁴⁵ it is important to recognise that many homes also function as a workplace, and emotionally abusive behaviours that are flagrantly inappropriate in ‘regular’ workplaces are, unfortunately, rather common in the domestic workplace.

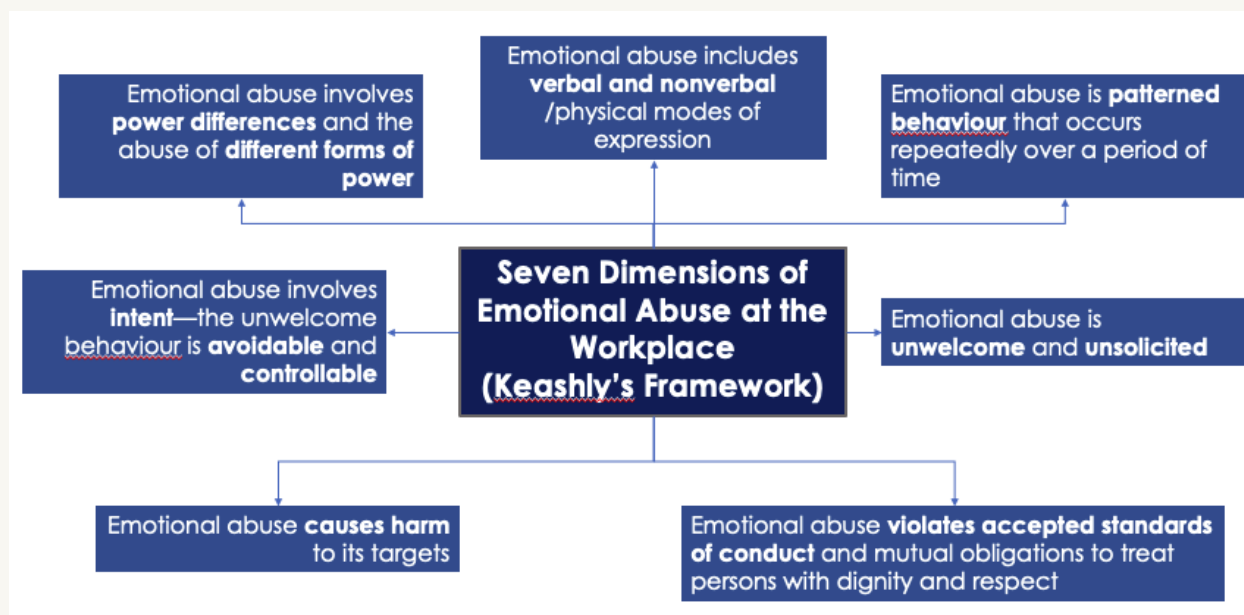


Figure 1: Keashly’s Framework of Emotional Abuse at the Workplace⁴⁶

Keashly’s framework details some key characteristics of emotional abuse:⁴⁷

1. Emotional abuse includes behaviours that may be verbal or nonverbal/physical modes of expression. This includes direct or observable behaviour such as threats and cursing as well as behaviours that are indirect

⁴⁵ Nabilah Awang & Wong Pei Ting, ‘The Big Read: As maids become a necessity for many families, festering societal issues could come to the fore’, *Channel News Asia* (4 November 2019), <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/maids-foreign-domestic-workers-singapore-necessity-families-847201> (accessed 24 May 2022)

⁴⁶ Loreleigh Keashly, ‘Emotional abuse in the workplace: Conceptual and empirical issues’, *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 1, no. 1 (1998): 85-117.

⁴⁷ Loreleigh Keashly, ‘Emotional abuse in the workplace: Conceptual and empirical issues’, *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 1, no. 1 (1998): 85-117.

(e.g. spreading rumours) or may involve omissions such as avoidance and ignoring someone.

2. Emotional abuse is patterned: this pattern of behaviour (occurs more than once) over a period of time; it may be “short and intense” or prolonged.
3. Emotional abuse is unwelcome and unsolicited: these behaviours are undesirable, with no indication that they were invited.
4. Emotional abuse violates accepted standards of conduct: these behaviours are deemed inappropriate when interacting with other people and includes mistreatment that shows disrespect for the human dignity of individuals.
5. Emotional abuse causes harm: such harm may constitute injury, hurt, and misery. This harm could be targeting the person’s sense of self as a person and/or as a competent worker.
6. Emotional abuse implies intent or failure to control actions (“the more the behaviour is interpreted as intentional, the greater the likelihood it will be experienced as abusive” and thus cause harm to its recipient):⁴⁸ the actor ‘ought to have [reasonably] known’ not to engage in such behaviours, which are unnecessary and avoidable.
7. Emotional abuse involves differences in power, and abuse of different forms of power: such power imbalances are not limited to employer-employee relations, but can manifest where the actor is in a more dominant position than the target, whether in a workplace or social setting. Power can be derived from various sources (interdependency, social networks etc.) and exerted in multiple ways (from positions of formal authority or in more coercive forms).

Though this paper’s examination of MDWs’ experiences of emotional abuse include all seven dimensions, it is the seventh dimension (i.e. that emotional abuse involves and is perpetuated by **differences in power**) that underpins and pervades much of the emotional abuse that MDWs experience. This is due to the salience of power differentials in causing and exacerbating many instances of emotional abuse in the domestic workplace. This power imbalance takes place on different scales and along multiple dimensions: it manifests in employee-employer relationships (with ‘employer’ used loosely in this context, for other household members can and do

⁴⁸ Harvey and Keashly, ‘Emotional Abuse’, 9.

participate in MDW abuse) and it intersects with nationality, race, class, gender, age, as well as the status of MDWs in (Singapore) society. The following chapter thus elaborates on the relationship between power, abuse and MDWs' specific position vis-a-vis their employers, employment agencies, the State and other stakeholders in Singapore.

In summary, emotional abuse remains a contested and culturally-specific term. Working definitions have centered the phenomenon around three key issues: 1) intent and/or neglect, 2) repetitiveness and 3) power and control. Based on these observations, this study will identify six primary categories of emotional abuse experienced by MDWs in Singapore and employ Keashly's seven dimensions as an analytical tool.

FINDINGS OR TYPOLOGY OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE OF MDWS

Based on the interviews with MDWs and HOME's casework data, we have categorised instances of emotional abuse into three main categories (each of which consists of two sub-categories of emotionally abusive behaviours); these were the most prominent forms of emotional abuse observed and documented through our focus group discussions and case studies. While some of these forms of emotional abuse may happen in isolation, it is common for different types of emotional abuse to occur in conjunction with each other. In other words, multiple forms of emotional abuse can occur concurrently and it can also lead to other forms of emotional abuse, and other, separate forms of abuse, such as physical abuse.

Based on the data we have collected, emotionally abusive behaviour can be categorised in the following ways:

1. Terrorising behaviour:
 - a. Threats/Intimidation
 - b. Insults
2. Control:
 - a. Social Isolation
 - b. Invasion of privacy and/or surveillance
3. Degradation:
 - a. Disrespecting the worker's position as an employee
 - b. Causing MDW loss of dignity

In Keashly's framework (see previous chapter), the seventh dimension of analysing emotional abuse involves power differences between the abused and the abuser, and is a significant consideration when it comes to employers and MDWs, where there exists a grave power imbalance, such that MDWs have a limited ability to contest and refuse unacceptable living and working conditions and exploitative treatment.

1. Terrorising behaviour

The words and actions that employers use can terrorise MDWs, and often have a deep impact on MDWs. Some MDWs shared that being subject to insulting, threatening and intimidating behaviour made them feel scared and hurt, and that

their employers' words and actions affected their overall level of confidence and their competence in their work. The accounts of MDWs (shown below) demonstrate that terrorising behaviours cause direct harm to victims, by causing feelings of fear, diminished confidence and sadness.⁴⁹

There are two types of terrorising behaviours that MDWs typically face: threats/intimidation and insults. Behaviour that is categorised as 'insults' are similar to that of 'threats and intimidation' in that they are patterned, verbal and non-physical in nature and are unwelcome, causes harm and are perceived to be done with intention.⁵⁰

The following sections dive into each of these two types of terrorising behaviours and exemplify them through case studies and focus groups conducted with MDWs who have experienced them.

a. Threats/Intimidation

Threats and intimidation usually take the form of verbal warnings about the worker's job security, such as the worker potentially being 'blacklisted' by the Ministry of Manpower, reporting the worker to the police, threats of repatriation or harm to the MDW herself or her family, or menacing speech about her work situation, such as pay reduction, being denied rest days or increased hours of work. Below are examples of threats/intimidation extracted from interviews with MDWs, as shared with HOME:

The employer would say, "I can do anything to you because you are the maid. I can pay the money. I can do anything to you." Reflecting on this, the MDW shared that "it was very emotionally difficult for me because, I think, I expected my employer to be very good."

The employer would always threaten the MDW, "If you complain about anything, I will bring you to jail because I know the law." The MDW expressed that upon hearing this, she felt very stressed and sad.

⁴⁹ Keashly, 'Emotional abuse in the workplace', Dimension 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid., Dimension 1,2,3, 5 and 6.

An employer threatened to hurt an MDW's family because the MDW wanted to transfer. The employer said, "I will send police, hurt family". The MDW was threatened every day, even for minor issues: one time, the MDW was mopping the floor and she was a bit slow in completing the chore. The employer kept threatening to call the police in response.

Due to the employer's constant threats to report the MDW to MOM, she started to develop a "phobia" of her employer. Every day, at around 04:00 / 05:00 AM, before the start of her workday, she would start feeling scared that she would make a mistake and her employer would scold or hurt her.

The MDW was scolded for minor issues or small mistakes at work. When the MDW asked for her salary, the employer told her, "Your honeymoon stage is over". The employer was easily irritated by the MDW and scolded her. She would throw or push items near her whenever she was angry. These actions seemed very aggressive to the MDW and made her feel afraid.

The employer often threatened to send the worker back to the Philippines. She told the other helper "be prepared to work alone". This happened frequently as the employer was often angry. When the female employer and the MDW got into fights the female employer often yelled "you don't have any rights".

The MDW was constantly threatened to be sent back. On one occasion, the MDW asked if she could go back to the agency to rest as the work is too much. "The agency is not a doctor" the employer said. They threatened to misinform MOM that the worker has Covid-19 and that she would be blacklisted permanently for refusing to work.

Her employer regularly threatened to deduct the worker's salary if he saw her resting or standing still during the day. When she asked to transfer when her initial

contract ended, he refused and said he would give her a bad reference if she tried to transfer. He threatened to send her back to her home country and blacklist her from ever coming back to Singapore if she did not renew her contract with him for one more year.

The employer was extremely stressed due to matters in her own life and regularly took this out on the MDW. When the MDW asked if she could transfer, the employer would threaten to call her agency and send her back. The employer scolded and shouted at her, calling her "stupid" and "crazy". The employer often threw things around the house, which was very intimidating, even if the items were not aimed at her. It was a very difficult environment and the worker felt stressed and scared.

Employer threatened to blacklist the MDW when she saw a tattoo on her body, and would say that she did not hire a "prostitute".

The examples above show that threats directed at MDWs are mostly verbal but may occur along with nonverbal expressions of hostility (throwing or pushing things).⁵¹ The treatment is unwelcome, violates expected standards of conduct, causes harm, and is done with intention.⁵² Threatening to call the police or blacklist workers are common threats made by employers, even if they do not intend to follow through or lack the authority to do so. However, these threats are immensely effective due to the stark imbalance of power and many MDWs' unfamiliarity with the legal and regulatory system in Singapore, such that they reasonably believe the threats will manifest. Having to work under the constant threat of violence, criminal persecution or repatriation imposes a heavy emotional and mental burden.

The Vulnerable Adults Act acknowledges that behaviour or conduct that controls or dominates another individual and causes that individual to fear for their well-being is a form of abuse.⁵³ This definition describes the kind of threatening and

⁵¹ Keashly, 'Emotional abuse in the workplace', Dimension 1.

⁵² Ibid., Dimensions 3 and 4.

⁵³ Section 2, VAA.

intimidating behaviour many MDWs are subject to. However, the exclusion of MDWs under the VAA means that they are unable to enjoy the protections and remedies that the VAA offers.

b. Insults

Insults directed at MDWs can target the MDW's character — employers may make disparaging remarks, for example alleging that an MDW is promiscuous, untrustworthy, and labelling her a “liar” or a “thief”. Negative remarks can also be made about an MDW's appearance (weight, skin colour, etc.), her intelligence (saying the MDW is stupid or treating her in a patronizing manner), her country of origin (“your country is poor”, or “backward”), as well as towards the MDW's family members. Employers may also insult MDWs by making demeaning comments regarding domestic labour, and towards the MDW for performing such labour (“you are only a maid”), and/or general profanity/swearing towards the MDW.

The examples illustrate that insults endured by MDWs are usually borne out of the devaluation of domestic work, and by extension, the individuals that carry out the work. Many of the insults demean the importance of their work, and imply that domestic work is unskilled labour requiring minimal to no intellect to complete. They also expose underlying attitudes towards MDWs that are racist, sexist, classist and xenophobic. It shows disrespect for human dignity, and is inappropriate when interacting with another person, even more so in a ‘workplace’.⁵⁴

Here are some examples, as shared with HOME:

The employer always insulted the MDW's mother and called her “stupid” for small mistakes, asking her, “Who taught you that? Your stupid mother?” The MDW felt very hurt and could not accept the employer insulting her mother. Every day, the employer would scold the MDW whenever she saw any mistakes. The MDW stated that listening to the insults of her mother felt worse than when she herself was insulted.

“Sometimes she shouted. ‘You know Singapore, I know the law. Philippines is very

⁵⁴ Keashly, ‘Emotional abuse in the workplace’, Dimension 4.

cheap. Philippines same like garbage'. Always said like this, 'Philippines is garbage. Philippines don't have money don't have food. If you go in the police never help you because I am from Singapore'".

The MDW articulated how her employer's behaviour resulted in her diminished confidence as an employee. The employer would comment on the manner in which the MDW would work, saying things like, "Oh you stupid, how do you cut the onion?" Sometimes, when the MDW approached her employers to help them, they would say, "No need no need, because you are stupid." This diminished the worker's confidence, because they are always saying "You're stupid. You're not allowed to do this.""

The employer scolded the MDW constantly, calling her slow and a liar, and used inappropriate language (e.g. "you are bullshit"). She regularly accused the MDW of stealing things such as cookbooks from the house to send to the Philippines, and did not back down even when the items were later found.

The employer got angry at the MDW every day and called her "stupid" for not doing tasks properly. The MDW had to do the same thing thrice but even then, the employer was not happy. She did not believe the MDW had already done a certain task and so made her do it again. The employer would also regularly shout vulgarities at her.

The employer often scolded the worker, calling her "dumb" and "silly". Once she scolded the worker, she would be angry at the worker for a few days, stressing the worker out to the point it affected her sleep. The employer has also accused the worker of things like using her phone and not cleaning the floor when the MDW had already done so. When the MDW asked to go home, the employer told her things like "you go and die", "you jump. See if your family has money". The worker felt very insulted. The employer's children also scolded the MDW in a similarly rude manner. The employer was aware of this but did nothing about it.

The MDW said that small issues would be turned into big conflicts by the employer. She felt that she would be yelled at for no reason. Her employer would say "you are just a maid" to belittle her and told her that if she tried to go back to the agency, they would send her back to the Philippines.

The employer would insult the MDW, as well as her home country and children. The employer told her not to let her children go to school because they are stupid. She said, "That's why your husband left you because you are stupid". The MDW stated that she felt that her employer did not realise how hard it was for her as a mother to leave them to come to Singapore to work. Despite these insults, the MDW never talked back.

The employer even asked her once, "Did you ever go to the mental hospital in the Philippines?". She felt that despite being able to carry out her tasks ably, the employer kept insinuating that she had a mental illness.

Once, the employer misplaced the spices, and then she insulted spices used in Philippine cooking. Later, the employer realised that she made a mistake but she never apologised.

The MDW was always scolded and insulted repeatedly to the point that she could not take it anymore and decided to run away. The most hurtful were the insults, where she was called things like "liar", "cheater", "filthy", "sucking blood" etc repeatedly.

The MDW asked for a transfer politely but the employer just kept asking her to wait and would keep insulting her. The MDW expressed that she understood that she may be treated differently as a domestic worker, but that she was also human and had feelings. The MDW stated that she had no motivation to work following these comments.

In an interview done with one of HOME's counsellors (C2), she stated that insults about the family member/s of the MDWs have a significant impact on the MDW; these insults as well as threats made in regard to the MDW's loved ones take more of a negative toll on them than insults and/or threats about the MDW herself. C2 noted that many MDWs migrate to find work to support their families; thus the concept of family is very important to MDWs. C2 highlighted that such abuse has not only led to heightened emotional and mental stress for MDWs, but also results in physiological manifestations, such as loss of appetite and sleep.

C1, another one of HOME's counsellors, observes that due to gender norms, many MDWs are seen as the emotional and financial pillars of their families (as well as guardians of their cultures). As they migrate as workers to Singapore, they look forward to working for employers that value and respect them and their work. They imagine that they will fulfil a similar role in their employers' families, as they have in their own.

However, according to C1, once some MDWs are in employment, they are demeaned for the nature of the work that they perform, their relatively poor financial situations and education levels, and are thus unable to fulfil the need of being connected to the family they work and care for. This has detrimental effects on an MDW's sense of identity and self-worth. It was also observed that in many cases, behaviour that included threats and intimidation, also included insults.

2. Control

Control comprises another core aspect of emotional abuse that MDWs often experience. Controlling behaviours pervade any and every aspect of the MDWs' life and result in feelings of violation, isolation and helplessness. The ability of employers to control MDWs and their actions stems from the power difference between the actors involved (in this case, the MDW and the employer), as delineated in the aforementioned seventh dimension of emotional abuse defined by Loreleigh Keashly. This ability is extended in a unique manner in the domestic work context (as opposed to other workplaces) due to the lack of any clear divide between what is work and what is personal. As MDWs live and work in the homes of their employers, employers tend to view what is personal to the worker as relevant to the job and vice

versa.⁵⁵ This can give them the impression that they have a say in and control over the personal and private aspects. Moreover, employers may tend to have a sense of entitlement over the lives of their MDWs, particularly as they see themselves as providing a livelihood for otherwise “vulnerable” women. It is further exacerbated by policies such as the security bond that reinforce the perceived need to control the behaviours and activities of MDWs.

From our findings, common behaviours that particularly exert control over MDWs include social isolation and actions involving invasion of privacy / surveillance. These often tend to manifest simultaneously, as both involve monitoring and controlling the day-to-day lives of MDWs and their interactions with individuals beyond the employer’s household.

a. Social isolation

Instances of social isolation include restricting the MDW’s movements, such as restricting her movements within the house, disallowing her to leave the grounds of residence; or restricting the worker’s communication (not allowing her to talk to others, not allowing her to use the phone, etc.). This category of emotionally abusive behaviour involves physically separating the workers from interacting with people around them, be it their neighbours, other workers, and friends; as well as forced disconnection from family members, community, and any potential interactions with others, including those who could provide a support network.

It is noteworthy that the VAA considers it “abuse” when someone’s behaviour or conduct deprives another individual of their liberty of movement or well-being.⁵⁶ This definition of abuse is especially relevant to MDWs, who frequently experience social isolation. However, as previously stated, the VAA does not cover MDWs.

The effects of social isolation on one’s mental health has been the subject of academic study: those who face social isolation run the increased risk of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and insomnia; this has

⁵⁵ Keashly, ‘Emotional abuse in the workplace’, Dimension 6.

⁵⁶ Section 2, VAA.

been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵⁷ For MDWs, these effects are heightened if they are unable to communicate with their family, who remain an important source of support for them.

Examples of instances of social isolation, as shared with HOME:

The employer locked the MDW inside the home when she was alone and did not allow her to use her phone or to talk to friends and family. She had no access to her phone until her contract ended.

On top of that, the employer would scold her and tell her that she did everything wrong and that she did not know how to do her work. The employer also insulted her, calling her “stupid” or “no brain”.

The employer would lock the house when they left and the MDW couldn't leave (not even for grocery shopping or walks). She could only be accompanied by the employer when she went outside. The MDW was not allowed to leave the house at all — she found the gate key when cleaning and then used it to run away when she had the chance.

The MDW was not provided with a phone or other forms of communication either at the agency or the employers' house. She was only able to speak to her family when she arrived at HOME's shelter. She shared a room with the elderly employer and there was a CCTV in the room, so she felt that her movements were being watched and she was completely isolated from society.

The MDW was not allowed to go out of the house on days that was not her rest day and to have any friends. On her day off, she had to return home by 04:00 PM. She was not even allowed to use her phone. The MDW had to hide it and she wanted to call her family but she could only do so very rarely.

⁵⁷ Debanjan Banerjee and Mayank, Rai, 'Social isolation in COVID-19: The impact of loneliness', *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 66, no. 6 (2020): 526, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0020764020922269> (accessed 19 February 2022).

There was CCTV in front of her room and the employer was able to look at whatever the MDW was doing and listen to what she was talking about in her room.

The employer forbade the MDW from talking to neighbours, but never explained why. Even when she went out, the employer made her look down and told her not to look at other people. She could not go out without the employer. The employer also kept the MDW's phone and only allowed her to use it once a month. Even then, the employer would only give her the phone when she was happy; if she was not happy, she would refuse to give it to the MDW. She was thus unable to contact her family, including husband and her baby.

As a result of her experience, the MDW was scared to continue working in Singapore, as this was her first time in Singapore and she had such a troubling experience.

The worker was confined to the house all the time (she also did not have any rest days). The employers locked the main door whenever they were not home. She was not allowed to leave without their permission, even to throw out the garbage or for groceries. They threatened to call the police if she ever went out of the house without their permission or without their accompaniment. On top of this, the employer confiscated her phone. She was not ever allowed to access it — if she had to contact her family overseas, she had to use her employer's phone. She raised this issue with her agency, following which she was allowed access to her phone for only one hour every day between 09:00 PM to 10:00 PM.

The MDW did not have any day off and she was not allowed to make any friends. She also did not have any privacy as the CCTV was at the door of the room she was in. Once, she tried to close the door but the employer asked her to open it. She was not allowed to talk to anyone outside the household but only work.

The MDW was confined to her employer's house, with her furthest venture being the rubbish bin at the front of the house. She was not granted any rest days nor given any opportunities to leave the house, such as going marketing. She was even warned against exchanging pleasantries or interacting with passers-by by her employers when she went out to clear the rubbish. She was also forbidden to hold a phone. As a result, she has been effectively cut off from her family back home as well as prevented from making any friends in Singapore. Her people-to-people interactions were narrowly restricted to the people living in her workplace. She only managed to contact her family after arriving at HOME's shelter.

Whenever the employer was angry, the employer called the MDW a "beggar" and would ask her to go to the carpark for sex work. She wanted to reach out for help but the employer hid the home phone and she did not have her own mobile phone. As a result, she developed feelings of anxiety and worry.

In HOME's experience, several factors contribute significantly to employers' ability to socially isolate MDWs: the live-in nature of domestic work, the lack of regulations around the use of mobile phones for MDWs (leaving the access of mobile phones for MDWs solely up to the discretion of the employer) and a lack of rest days (so MDWs are effectively confined to the home).

As previously mentioned, MDWs are required by law to reside with their employers, thus diminishing the separation between an MDW's personal and professional lives.⁵⁸ Employers are able to exert power and control over their employees' movements due to the physical proximity that exists between them at all times; this is facilitated by the common practice of employers installing CCTV cameras in the home to monitor MDWs' work and movements.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ministry of Manpower, 'Employment rules for migrant domestic workers (MDWs)', <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-domestic-worker/employers-guide/employment-rules> (accessed 20 February 2022).

⁵⁹ Desmond Ng, 'Spying on maids with CCTV – where do we draw the line?', *Channel News Asia*, 6 October 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cnainsider/maids-domestic-workers-cctv-cameras-abuse-employer-789361> (accessed 24 May 2022)

Restricting an MDW's use of her mobile phone within the employer's home is not regulated by the law. Restrictions of mobile phone usage remains one of the top complaints by MDWs that HOME assists. Based on HOME's casework data, about 40% of MDWs that HOME assists on a yearly basis have complained about employer restrictions on their use of mobile phones, on average. Examples include employers confiscating mobile phones, disallowing mobile phone usage completely, and imposing unreasonable restrictions on mobile phone usage, such as only allowing the MDW to use it for a few hours each day, or even only on a weekly or monthly basis. In *Home Sweet Home*, 73% of respondents reported experiencing some form of restriction on communication by the employer or employer's family at least once.⁶⁰ As previously mentioned, being able to communicate with their families is an important way for MDWs to deal with emotional stress, and cutting off that vital form of support denies them a key outlet for relieving stress.

C1, a HOME counsellor, noted that social isolation was a form of emotional abuse that has been greatly detrimental to the mental well-being of MDWs. Based on the interviews she has had, a majority, if not all MDWs who have gone through any form of social isolation developed some level of post-traumatic stress disorder, and the longer the workers were subjected to such abuse, the harder it was and longer it took them to recover from it, if they did at all. In the long run, this affected their mental health, and their interest and ability to work.

b. Invasion of privacy and/or surveillance

In this set of behaviours, employers may make the MDW feel unsafe or uncomfortable by engaging in behaviour that impinges on an MDW's personal space (ex. taking videos of the worker, checking personal belongings, checking electronic devices to see who they are speaking to, etc.). A sizable number of MDWs are subjected to this behaviour — *Home Sweet Home* recorded that 27% of respondents encountered some form of invasion of privacy by their employer or the employer's family at least once.⁶¹ This type of emotional abuse is closely linked to social isolation as they both involve employers' efforts in interfering with the MDW's interactions with others in the community for a variety of reasons (ranging from exerting control over the worker to disliking the worker interacting with neighbours

⁶⁰ HOME, *Home Sweet Home*, page 14.

⁶¹ Ibid.

and other workers). The dominant position of the employer and MDW can be significantly seen here as not only does the employer believe they have the right to surveil the MDW, but also to impede on her private time and space by not allowing freedom or privacy in that space or to even have that space to begin with.⁶²

Privacy is a human right,⁶³ and the invasion of one's privacy impacts their sense of self and dignity, acutely heightening feelings of vulnerability, helplessness and humiliation. The effects can extend to serious limitations on even basic daily activities like sleeping and using the bathroom, and thus impact on one's physical health, as described in the case below.

The MDW slept in a store /study room on a bunk bed. The room was stuffy and had no window. She had to climb a ladder to sleep on the bunk bed in the room and felt very suffocated. There was a study table where the employer did her office work and the bed was above the table. The MDW felt that she did not have any privacy and didn't get adequate rest. The bathroom she used had no door, so she would withstand not going to the bathroom for hours. In the mornings, she went to the public toilet in her estate and throughout the day she used the bathroom in the house only if the employer left the house. She ate and drank less as she was constantly worried about having to use the bathroom. Even when she slept, she worried about having to use the bathroom. When she used the bathroom at home she felt vulnerable and was always worried that someone would see her. Once, when she was using the public bathroom in her housing estate, the security guard kept knocking as he wanted to use the bathroom. She felt very humiliated. This disrupted her sleep, affected her health physically (she had constant stomach aches, headaches and lost her appetite) and left her emotionally distressed.

Other examples of invasion of privacy and/or surveillance, as shared with HOME:

On the MDW's rest days, the employer constantly called the MDW to ask what she

⁶² Keashly, 'Emotional abuse in the workplace', Dimensions 4 and 7.

⁶³ Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks." See: United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 12.

was doing, who she was with, and even called her family back in her home country to ask where she was and what she was doing, although it was on the MDW's rest day.

The MDW woke up at 05:00 AM daily even on her rest days. Her workday lasted for around 16 hours, with little rest. In the beginning of her employment, she was allowed to rest for 30 minutes during the day but after a few weeks, she was no longer allowed to do this. The MDW didn't dare to rest as there were 12 CCTV's in the house. There was also CCTV in the room that she slept in. The MDW felt really uncomfortable knowing that the camera was in the room and that her privacy was being violated, with her employer watching her every action.

The MDW was only allowed to use her phone at midnight. She knew she could not use her phone during the day, as the employer would check whether she was online on WhatsApp, to see if she was using her phone. This made it very difficult for her to speak to her children. The employer would also take her phone and read all her messages. She had done this twice, and she would check her phone whenever the MDW returned from her day off.

Whenever the MDW wanted to use the toilet, she had to get the permission of her employer. If she spent some time in the bathroom, the employer would knock on the door and ask her what she was doing. She would also check the MDW's belongings after she came home after going out. This included checking her wallet and checking the receipts of all of her purchases and making sure they aligned with the products that she had bought. The employer would also question the MDW about what she did during her free time, and who she spent time with.

The MDW was only allowed to use her phone at night, after work. However, she'd usually be too tired to use her phone after working the whole day. The employer also checked her phone and went through her call history, and questioned her often about who she talked to.

3. Degradation

Beyond terrorising behaviour and controlling different aspects of MDW life, the attack on the self through acts of degradation is yet another type of emotional abuse that MDWs often experience. As with the other two categories of emotional abuse, at the centre of acts of degradation lies the power inequalities between employers and MDWs that employers exploit, both in the professional sphere of the domestic work sector and in the socio-political/economic sphere (associated with their differences in class, race, nationality, gender and age). These acts aim to reinforce and remind MDWs of their “inferior” status that is very commonly associated with both their work (they are “just maids”) and their bodies (as poorer, foreign and relatively young women).

In a study among undergraduate and graduate students, it was found that being blamed unjustly and/or the feeling of worthlessness arising from acts of degradation (e.g. demeaning words being used or having to perform humiliating tasks) are linked with effects of depressive moods and anxiety. The study also reference Collazoni who said that humiliation is a predictor of depression.⁶⁴ This has damaging impacts on the self-esteem of the MDW.

There are two types of behaviours that are degrading: acts that disrespect the MDW’s position as an employee and acts that cause the MDW to lose their sense of self dignity. Quite starkly, behaviours in this category show disrespect for human dignity and depict behaviours that are wholly unnecessary and avoidable.⁶⁵ The sections below elaborate on each of these types.

a. Disrespecting the worker’s position as an employee

This behaviour includes making MDWs perform ridiculous or demeaning tasks (repeatedly being told to clean the house, cutting the employers’ nails etc.), and setting unreasonable expectations to degrade MDWs, including expressing

⁶⁴ Yun, Je-Yeon, et al. “Verbal Abuse Related to Self-Esteem Damage and Unjust Blame Harms Mental Health and Social Interaction in College Population.” *Scientific Reports*, vol. 9, no. 1, Nature Publishing Group (2019), pp. 5655–5655, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-42199-6> (accessed 24 May 2022).

⁶⁵ Keashly, ‘Emotional abuse in the workplace’, *Dimensions* 4 and 6.

perpetual dissatisfaction with the MDWs' work, expecting unrealistic levels of perfection, not recognising effort, blaming MDWs for the behaviour of the children, or overworking MDWs to compensate for previous 'poor' work.

According to C1, this has serious consequences for one's self-esteem and sense of dignity, which can contribute to a vicious cycle of deteriorating mental health, specifically by causing / contributing to depression and anxiety,⁶⁶ and make it harder for those experiencing emotional abuse to break out of it.

This set of behaviours not only affects the MDWs psychologically but may also have effects on the MDWs' physical well-being. MDWs are often overworked, and may continue to accept long working hours to please their employers. This can cause exhaustion and physical illnesses from either the extreme workload itself or the combination of physical and psychological distress. Some of these tasks are unnecessary and are demanded by the employer simply to exert control over the MDW.

Examples of instances of disrespecting worker's position as an employee, as shared with HOME:

The MDW had to do a foot massage for her employer every night while they were on the toilet bowl. She would have to kneel down in the toilet and do this, and other MDWs at the agency could see her do this. She felt very ashamed and "like a very low class person". She was very unhappy and would cry a lot as a result of this treatment.

The employer did not allow the MDW to use the bathroom at night from midnight to 07:00 AM even though it is important for her to use the bathroom at 05:00 AM before her prayers. She was usually only allowed by the employer to the bathroom after 07:00 AM. In the past she has had to urinate in a plastic bag in her bedroom. This happened on a near daily basis for the duration of her employment with this

⁶⁶ Anne Gold, 'Why Self-Esteem is Important for Mental Health', *National Alliance on Mental Health* (2016), <https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/July-2016/Why-Self-Esteem-Is-Important-for-Mental-Health> (accessed 19 February 2022).

employer, which was for about 2 years.

The MDW was accused of not taking care of the children properly. MDW feels stressed out that the employer feels that way. The employer will also comment that MDW is doing the work wrongly, which the MDW felt was unfair because she has been doing her work in the same manner which the employer has had no issues with previously, and that the employer was behaving this way simply to find fault with and humiliate her.

The employer made the MDW change clothes multiple times (sometimes six times) in one day. Oftentimes, the MDW did not have any fresh clothes to change into as her clothes were drying so her employer made her wear her wet clothes. The MDW found this itchy and smelly and said it had the potential to make her sick.

After the employer finishes taking a shower, the MDW had to powder her employer's body. She was extremely uncomfortable with this. This happened twice a day, each time the employer took a shower. Sometimes, the employer would wait until around 01:00 AM to shower and she had to wait up.

b. Causing MDW loss of dignity — causing feelings of embarrassment, powerlessness

Causing an MDW to lose her sense of dignity is also a way that emotional abuse is manifested. Behaviours in this category includes scolding/embarrassing worker in public, making degrading, invasive or uncomfortable comments, giving unreasonable instructions, making the worker feel guilty or responsible for certain events or occurrences (eg. blaming for family fights, for 'ruining' things, for not being good enough, etc.). According to C1, apart from social isolation, loss of dignity was identified as the second major factor to the detrimental state of mental health amongst MDWs.

Similar to emotionally abusive behaviours that disrespects a worker's position as an employee, loss of an MDW's dignity is linked to disregard for human dignity. Power differentials also play a key role here: the employer may feel that they have the ability to cause indignity to the MDW because of the sheer control that employers have over their MDWs' circumstances, which also leads to a sense of helplessness for the MDWs as regards her inability to change her circumstances without risking her income or deportation.

The extreme disparity in power relations at the workplace can also lead the employer to view the worker in lower standing when it comes to social class, value, and humanity; leading the employer to further degrade the worker and possibly seeing the worker only as a negative force that 'causes problems' in the household and their lives.

Examples of instances of loss of dignity, as shared with HOME:

The employer would call her MDW "stupid" or "useless maid" because of this and insult her for every little mistake. This was hurtful and embarrassing as they would say this in the presence of other MDWs (the employer was the owner of an employment agency).

The MDW was not allowed to sit down in the food court. The employer would also give her very little food and scold her that she needed to eat faster and "not as if she were a model". Other people in the food court could hear this and all of this caused her much embarrassment.

There was an incident where the employer felt that the MDW did things not up to par and scolded and shamed her in front of their friends and relatives. The employer told their relatives that they were ashamed of having a domestic worker like her.

The MDW was scolded in public by the employer's child, which she found humiliating. When she informed the employer, the child admitted to it but the

employer defended the child by saying that the child had done so as the MDW had kept the child waiting for too long while the MDW went to purchase dinner. In the end, the MDW had to apologise for making the child wait so long.

Whenever the employer was moody, they would insult the MDW by calling her “stupid”, “cunning”, “very slow” etc. They would insult her in public and in front of their friends, and the MDW felt that her employer generally looked down on domestic workers like herself.

Being insulted in public especially caused the MDW to feel embarrassed. It was a very difficult time but the MDW persevered because of her family. Because of these constant public insults, the MDW lost her confidence and started to feel dependent on the employer’s instructions as she did not have any trust in herself that she could do a good job.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The desire to feel seen, respected and connected are fundamental human needs.⁶⁷ However, MDWs are often confronted with experiences in which they are not afforded the basic aspects of dignity. As they can be stripped of these basic human needs through patterns of behaviours and interactions aimed at controlling, humiliating and isolating them, MDWs experiencing emotional abuse often begin to feel a loss of personhood and sense of self. This is extremely destructive to their mental well-being.

According to C1, the impact of emotional abuse manifests differently in individuals, depending on the context, levels of social support, personality and so on. That said, based on their experiences, MDWs facing emotional abuse tend to experience depression, anxiety, nightmares, and sleep and appetite disruptions in the short term. Over time, this treatment begins to erode their self-esteem and self-worth, especially given their vulnerable position in society as a low-wage female MDWs. They start to be convinced that they are not worth anything and that they deserve the abuse they are getting. They begin to feel trapped and demoralised, and in more advanced cases of depression, C1 found that it is almost always accompanied by suicidal ideation heightened by a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness. Some MDWs who experience a high level of trauma from abuse also develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) where they get flashbacks, night terrors, hypervigilance and so on.

Previous research by HOME has found that an alarming number of MDWs in Singapore suffer from poor mental health.⁶⁸ It also found that the most significant factors in developing a healthy mental state for the workers were the perceived sense of integration into the employer's family, a perceived feeling of privacy, and having a good social network and community in the country.⁶⁹ Importantly, the categories of emotional abuse set out above detract from these factors that contribute to the mental well-being of MDWs.

⁶⁷ Manfred A. Max-Neef, 'Human Scale Development: Conception, application and further reflections', *New York: The Apex Press* (1991).

⁶⁸ HOME, *Home Sweet Home*, 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

This close link between emotional abuse and mental health is especially true in the context of low-wage migration. MDWs often migrate having to leave their families behind and engage in “transnational motherhood”, a phenomenon where mothers are forced to leave their children behind to be able to work in the host country.⁷⁰ Due to the gendered expectations of motherhood, this distance caused by migration itself often contributes to feelings of failure of motherhood.⁷¹ Thus, in addition to the hardships of migration (such as isolation, discrimination and low-wage employment) MDWs who are mothers also face great emotional distress as a result of not being physically with their children for extended periods of time⁷² and having to navigate the dynamics of transnational mothering. Further, migrating to an unfamiliar place where their employment as a domestic worker stands them in lower social status and where there are negative social attitudes and discourse surrounding low-wage migration/migrants further impacts their mental health.

C1 explains that she finds that as a result of migrating, MDWs feel a need to recreate a family environment in some form, or at the very least an environment where they feel valued, to maintain their sense of identity and security. Therefore, in cases of emotional abuse — especially in the context of domestic work, where the line between the MDW’s personal and professional is constantly blurred — MDWs face this dissonance that has damaging impacts on their mental well-being.

MDWs are often highly resilient in the face of these challenges; having made many sacrifices to travel to a foreign land to earn a living, many endure and come to accept abusive and exploitative working conditions as a price to pay for the opportunity to work. However, relying on their resilience, which itself often comes from early experiences of inequality (e.g. class, gender), simply perpetuates gendered and racialised expectations of South and Southeast Asian MDWs to be selfless and self-sacrificial. It also excuses the continuation of unjust working conditions for MDWs, for whom this resilience comes at the expense of their physical and mental well-being.

⁷⁰ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila, “I’M HERE, BUT I’M THERE”: the meanings of latina transnational motherhood’, *Gender and Society* 11, no. 5 (1997): 548-571.

⁷¹ Maria Pineros-Leano, Laura Yao, Aroub Yousof and Gabriella Oliveira, ‘Depressive Symptoms and Emotional Distress of Transnational Mothers: A Scoping Reviews’, *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (2021): 2.

⁷² Particularly as they are often not allowed to or cannot afford to travel back home frequently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Emotional abuse is often enabled by systemic and structural issues that enable the perpetration of emotional abuse towards MDWs. In this section, we set out recommendations on changes that need to occur to reduce the prevalence of emotional abuse amongst MDWs in Singapore.

A key tenet to many of the recommendations proposed below is strong labour and social protections for MDWs. When domestic work, and the individuals who perform them, receive adequate legislative protection, attitudes and perception towards domestic work will invariably change, and instances of emotionally abusive behaviour will be minimised. While individual behaviour is difficult to regulate, putting in place conditions that govern fair and decent treatment of employees is what these recommendations seek to do.

1. Review the employer orientation programme to include trainings on interpersonal skills

The employer orientation programme (EOP) is a compulsory three-hour training programme for first-time employers of MDWs that helps them understand their role and obligations as an employer. HOME recommends that the EOP should also include training on the kinds of behaviours that are emotionally abusive and may adversely affect MDWs' mental health and safety. Effective communication methods, with an emphasis on respect and empathy, should also be taught in the EOP. Currently, employers who change MDWs frequently (several times in a year) will need to undergo the EOP again, and meet certain requirements before they are able to hire MDWs. Such employers may also be required to go for workshops on interpersonal skills, sensitivity training, and conflict resolution, and such training can come together with an enhanced EOP that is tailored to the employer in question. Here, examples of what have been classified as emotionally abusive behaviour should be highlighted. Employers who attend these training programmes will also be tasked with ensuring that other members of the household are clear about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviours.

2. Employment agencies to better support MDWs experiencing emotional abuse

Addressing emotional abuse in domestic work requires the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders, including employment agencies (EAs) who play a crucial

intermediary role between MDWs and employers. For many MDWs, their EAs are their first means of contact in Singapore, especially regarding employment issues, under which matters of emotional abuse squarely sit. However, based on HOME's casework data, many MDWs who experienced emotional abuse shared that when they approached their EAs, their experiences were either dismissed or they were told to just tolerate their circumstances (especially if it was still their salary deduction period).

Therefore, it would be useful to equip EAs with the tools to be able to better support MDWs who approach them regarding their experience of emotional abuse, or better yet, to enable them to proactively spot instances of emotional abuse and extend support to the MDW. This is in line with the recent push to encourage a bigger role for EAs to play in the welfare of MDWs and conduct checks into their well-being.⁷³ Training EAs in mediation and conflict-resolution should be made mandatory, with resources provided by MOM. Such training can form part of their accreditation criteria.

3. Import definitions of emotional abuse from the VAA to legislation covering MDWs

Currently, the VAA, which is the only legislation to define emotional (and psychological) abuse, is not extended to MDWs.

As shown in our findings, some of the acts of abuse as defined in the VAA are relevant to the kinds of emotional abuse faced by MDWs. Applying the definitions of “emotional and psychological abuse” found in the VAA, and ‘abuse’ more broadly, to legislation that covers MDWs, such as the EFMA, will acknowledge the vulnerability of MDWs towards such forms of abuse, and signal to employers that emotionally abusing MDWs will attract penalties that are equal to other contraventions of work pass regulations.

4. Ensure enforcement of laws that criminalise verbal abuse

⁷³ Wallace Woon, ‘Employment agencies to conduct checks on welfare of new maids from Dec’, *Straits Times*, 28 October 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/jobs/employment-agencies-to-conduct-checks-on-welfare-of-new-domestic-workers-from-dec-mom> (accessed 19 February 2022).

Instances of abuse that cross the criminal threshold, particularly physical abuse, are usually induced by escalating behaviour. POHA protects against behaviours that harass, alarm, distress or cause a fear of violence, and can be used as a tool to ensure that instances of verbal abuse are investigated, and the perpetrators sanctioned. Complaints of sustained verbal abuse and threats should be properly investigated under POHA, as well as other provisions in the Penal Code. employers should be taken to task when their behaviour contravenes these provisions.

5. Implement regulations which protect MDWs' privacy

In space-scarce Singapore, living spaces such as high-rise apartments usually do not have dedicated rooms for domestic workers. Many MDWs sleep in inadequate accommodation, such as in the bomb shelter or storeroom, or share spaces with other members of the household. Some sleep in open areas such as the kitchen or living room. HOME recommends that there should be enforceable regulations respecting MDWs' privacy. This can be done by ensuring MDWs have their own rooms, or a dedicated space in the house where other household members do not have access to without the MDW's permission, or ensuring that partitions are installed in their sleeping areas. The installation of CCTVs in MDWs' personal space should be strictly prohibited to maintain dignity and privacy.

6. Increase frequency of mandatory rest days for MDWs

Often, for live-in MDWs, the close proximity with their employers blurs the lines of the professional and the personal, enabling the manifestation of instances of emotional abuse.

MDWs deserve adequate time off. Under current EFMA regulations, MDWs are to be given one rest day a week, which can be compensated if the MDW works on the stipulated rest day. From the end of 2022, MDWs will receive one mandatory rest day a month, which cannot be compensated.

These stipulations in the law do not adequately ensure that MDWs receive enough rest, and separation from their place of work. Being able to swap out rest days for compensation does not take into account MDWs' comparative lack of bargaining power when negotiating with their employers and agents. Respecting MDWs as employees and giving them non-negotiable rest days will provide respite and

distance from their employers, which in turn entrenches the idea of domestic work as formal work. HOME recommends that the frequency of the mandatory rest day be increased to allow MDWs adequate rest, and distance from their place of work.

Rest days also allow MDWs the opportunity to develop and build networks and friendships outside their place of work. These can serve as a form of crucial emotional support.

7. Provide live-out options for domestic workers

Currently, all MDWs are required to live with their employers. The close proximity between MDWs and the employer enables MDWs' susceptibility to abuse and exploitation. Living in their employers' homes also means that MDWs are more isolated than other workers. Live out options decrease the chances of surveillance and social isolation that can be inflicted on MDWs, and accords privacy to both employers and MDWs alike.

Live-out options should be made more easily available for MDWs to reduce isolation and the dependency that some MDWs have towards their employers, which are key factors in contributing to emotional abuse. The Household Services Scheme,⁷⁴ which was piloted in 2017 and was made permanent in September 2021, allows companies to hire migrant workers to carry out household duties. While MDWs live in their employer's houses and can only work for their designated employer, workers under the HSS can work in multiple houses, on a part-time basis. They also do not live in their employers' homes. Similar live-out models should be made available for MDWs.

8. Ensure that MDWs have access to mobile phones without employer restrictions

Currently, there are no regulations or laws that prohibit employers from restricting the use of MDWs' mobile phones. The use of mobile phones is left entirely up to negotiations between MDWs and their employers. Access to mobile phones allows MDWs to stay in touch with their family and friends and reduces the overall social

⁷⁴ Ministry of Manpower, 'What is the Household Services Scheme', available at: <https://www.mom.gov.sg/fag/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/what-is-household-services-scheme> (accessed 14 March 2022).

isolation that they are otherwise subject to. Critically, it is a tool for MDWs to seek help when they are being exploited or abused.

The lack of laws or regulations surrounding mobile phone usage has left some employers disallowing or restricting the use of mobile phones and checking their MDWs' mobile phones to see who their MDWs are in touch with.

Such behaviour allows for the power imbalance between employers and MDWs to be exacerbated and entrenches the control that employers have over their MDWs.

HOME recommends that MDWs be given guaranteed access to their mobile phones, and employers not be allowed to access MDWs' mobile phones. MDWs and employers can work out when mobile phone usage should be allowed.

9. Allow MDWs to switch employers freely

Currently, MDWs have to obtain their employers' consent in order to switch employers, even at the end of their work permit terms. Employers are able to unilaterally terminate and repatriate their MDWs without prior notice. MDWs' constraints on labour mobility are a key reason for them tolerating emotionally abusive situations, such as verbal abuse, threats, and surveillance. MDWs should be allowed to switch employers with clearly defined notice periods, and upon the expiry of their work permit terms, without their employers' consent.

10. Abolish the online feedback channel, allow MDWs to access employer information

The Work Permit Online System allows employers and employment agents to provide negative and potentially unsubstantiated feedback about MDWs to future employers. This system can be utilised as a means to threaten and punish MDWs by hindering their chances for seeking employment in the future, and provides a tool for employers to inflict anxiety and fear on their MDWs. MDWs themselves should provide referees and details of former employers to prospective ones. This reflects the job-seeking process in other employment sectors, where MDWs can have more control over their own employment prospects.

While employers and agents can access the previous work experience of a prospective MDW, including the reason for the termination of previous employment, there is no similar chance for MDWs to do the same with prospective employers. MDWs must also be given the equal chance to access an employer's hiring history.

11. Extend the EA to domestic workers

Gaps in employment protections make MDWs vulnerable to exploitative and abusive living and working conditions, which in turn leads to emotional abuse and deterioration of mental health of MDWs. MDWs are not covered by the EA, which provides basic labour protections, such as working hours, rest days, wage and access to employment benefits. Extending the EA to MDWs and properly enforcing the protections contained therein will ensure that MDWs have adequate access to redress for the violation of their rights, making them less prone to other forms of abuse, such as emotional abuse.

12. Ratify the International Labour Organisation's Domestic Workers Convention (C189)

C189 is the first international convention that recognises that domestic work is work "like any other". It articulates that despite the very personal and specific instances of domestic work, domestic workers deserve protection, like any other workers. Specifically, C189 states that each Member State shall take measures to "ensure that domestic workers enjoy effective protection against all forms of abuse, harassment and violence."⁷⁵

Ratifying C189 would entrench Singapore's commitment to provide a safe working environment for all MDWs, free from all kinds of abuse, whether physical, sexual or emotional. It also clearly signals that all workers, regardless of occupation, should have equal employment rights. The living and working conditions of MDWs are key in contributing to an environment where emotional abuse can be perpetuated. C189 sets out internationally recognised labour standards for MDWs. The ratification of C189 will ensure that local laws will provide effective avenues for remedy for MDWs who are vulnerable to labour and human rights violations.

⁷⁵ ILO, 'C189', Article 5.

13. Ratify the Convention on Violence and Harassment (C190)

C190 is the first international convention to recognize the right of everyone to work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment. It applies in all places of work, whether formal or informal, and thus includes any domestic work setting. “Violence and harassment” in the world of work refers to a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices or threats thereof (whether a single occurrence or repeated) that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm, and includes gender-based violence and harassment, and it recognises that everyone has a right to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

C190 is important as it involves the world of work that includes informal care and household work, which MDWs undertake. Ratifying the convention will show a clear signal that emotional abuse towards MDWs is not to be tolerated.