

## ▶ Research Brief

December 2020

# Public attitudes towards migrant workers in Singapore

## ▶ Summary

Singapore has 1,427,500 migrant workers, comprising 38 per cent of its labour force (MOM 2019a). To meet the needs of sectors such as domestic work, building and infrastructure construction, as well as ship repair and construction (Bal 2017), the country has relatively open admission policies for migrant workers.

Singapore has in place regulations and mechanisms to protect migrant workers and has innovated mandatory orientation for employers of migrant domestic workers and settling-in programmes (post-arrival orientation) for migrant workers. It has made significant progress in workplace safety, with employers required to buy medical insurance. The workplace fatal injury rate has decreased by 75 per cent over 2004 to 2018, and Singapore ranked 7th best in this regard in the OECD in 2018 (MOM 2019b). The Singapore Government facilitates migrant workers' access to recourse and assistance channels by providing 24-hour hotlines. Migrant workers with valid grievances are allowed to find another employer, and employers are prohibited from withholding workers' passports. However, laws and public opinion are not all in migrant workers' favour. Migrant domestic workers are excluded from Singapore's main labour law, resulting in unregulated working hours. Singapore does not have a minimum wage; women migrant workers are deported if found pregnant; and Singaporean employers often restrict movement of domestic workers, resulting in isolation and restricted ability to seek help when needed.

This research has shown that despite the demand for "low-skilled" workers in Singapore and other countries of destination, significant proportions of the public have negative perceptions of migrant workers, attitudes in contradiction to the actual contribution made to destination economies and societies. Unfortunately, negative attitudes can condone discrimination, exploitation and even violence against migrant workers.

### Key Policy Recommendations

#### Promote inclusion and community engagement with migrant workers through policy and practice

Ensure that women and men migrant workers are able to fully access rights and freedoms in line with international labour and human rights standards.

Design policies that facilitate platforms and community events where migrant workers and the public can meaningfully interact.

Promote social inclusion by avoiding separation of migrant workers' accommodation through city planning.

#### Raise awareness among general public

Design campaigns to raise awareness by providing accurate and positive information about migrant workers and their contribution to the national economy.

Complement and reinforce public campaigns with targeted interventions directed at "influencer" groups such as schools and news media.



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Such attitudes can also detrimentally affect policies on labour migration, including those most affecting women migrant workers, such as policy on domestic work.

In order to understand the overall level of public support towards migrant workers, the Safe and Fair (ILO and UN Women) and TRIANGLE in ASEAN (ILO) programmes conducted a four-country study of public attitudes in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The full report can be found at: [https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS\\_732443/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_732443/lang--en/index.htm). This brief highlights main findings related to Singapore.

The study explores public attitudes related to labour market shortages, migration and crime, social and cultural threats, equal treatment with nationals, and violence against women migrant workers. The research also inquires specifically about women in the domestic work sector. In total, 1,005 members of the Singaporean public aged 18–65 years were surveyed, with representative coverage of major ethnicities. A gender quota was applied to ensure representativeness across each region.<sup>1</sup>

This 2019 study follows a previous 2010 ILO study on public attitudes, applying the same methodology, and finds that positive attitudes toward migrant workers have declined since 2010. The study also confirms that people who know and engage with migrant workers on a personal level are more likely to be supportive of migrants and have a positive attitude towards them. Polarization in views has increased, and people with limited or no interaction with migrant workers are less supportive than before.

Alarming, in Singapore as in other migration destination countries, positive attitudes of Singaporean respondents who employ domestic workers also decreased, despite the frequent interaction that such employers have with migrant workers.

However, the study finds that positive public support exists for policy initiatives aimed at supporting women

### Leverage the positive public support for women migrant workers

Design policies to address violence against women migrant workers and to ensure that pregnant women migrant workers have access to maternity leave.

Design and enforce regulations aimed at improving the working conditions of women migrant domestic workers, as well as ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

### Address declining attitudes of employers of women migrant domestic workers

Conduct a coordinated and evidence-based publicity campaign on the social and economic value of domestic work, and on the rights of domestic workers, involving all stakeholders, including governments, employers, trade unions, and domestic workers' groups.

migrant workers, especially related to ending violence against women and improved working conditions for domestic workers. This tends to show that focused attention towards a particular group of migrant workers and specific issues concerning those workers can help generate more public support.

The findings suggest that programmes and policies should further encourage interaction and community engagement with migrants, and must discourage exclusion, isolation and discrimination.



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<sup>1</sup> For the detailed methodology, refer to the full report: ILO and UN Women. *Public Attitudes towards Migrant Workers in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (Bangkok, 2019).

## ► Findings

### Public support for migrant workers

#### Labour market shortages: Need for migrant workers

Migrants fill labour shortages in key sectors. In Singapore 47 per cent of employers say they have difficulty filling vacancies. Singaporeans surveyed for the study recognize that migrant workers are needed to fill labour shortages in the country, with just a minority of Singaporeans saying that:

- The country does not need “low-skilled” migrant workers (25 per cent).
- Migrant workers are a drain on the economy (30 per cent).
- Migrant workers have an overall negative effect on the economy (17 per cent) (see figure 1 and 2).

#### Migration and crime: Unfounded fears

There is little evidence to back up the claim that migrant workers are more likely to commit crimes than the rest of the population. For instance, police statistics in Singapore show that the arrest rate for work permit holders was reportedly 227 per 100,000 people, compared to 435 per 100,000 for Singapore residents (Othman 2008). However, a majority of the public think crime rates have increased due to migration and a significant minority say that migrants commit a high number of the crimes (figure 1 and 2).

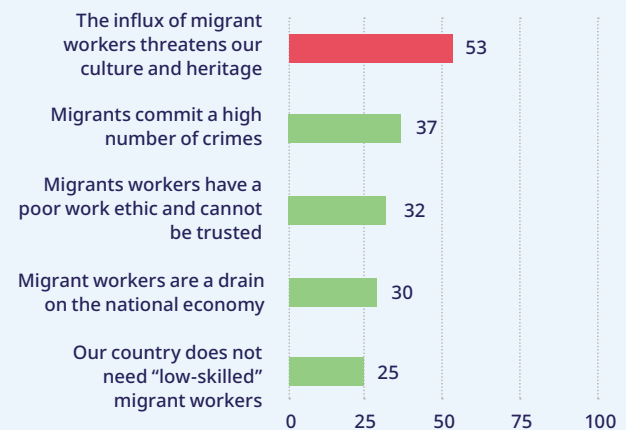
#### Social inclusion versus social and cultural threats

This study finds that a majority of the Singaporean public tends to believe that migrant workers threaten the country’s culture and heritage, and a sizeable minority say migrant workers have a poor work ethic and cannot be trusted (figure 1).

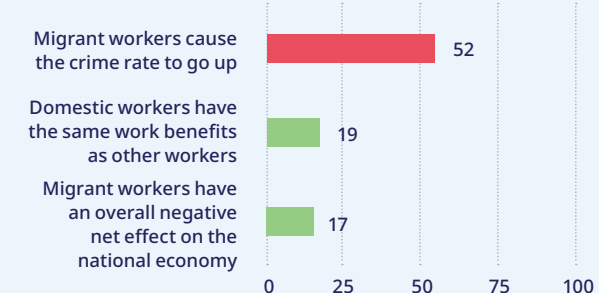
However, on a more positive note, when measuring public behaviours of inclusion, the survey found that a majority of the Singaporean public:

- Had or would help a migrant integrate into their community or get ahead in their work (62 per cent); and
- Say they had spoken or would speak out against someone who was saying offensive things about migrants (54 per cent).

**Figure 1. Attitudes about migrant workers - Support for the following statements (%)**



**Figure 2. Misconceptions about migrant workers - Support for the following statements (%)**



## Equal treatment

Equality of treatment is enshrined in international human rights instruments and labour standards. This study showed that equality of treatment is not the norm in terms of public attitudes towards migrant workers.

The majority of the Singaporeans surveyed are of the view that migrants cannot expect the same pay or benefits as nationals for the same job, and that migrant workers should not have any rights at work if in irregular status (figure 3).

These attitudes indicate that many citizens hold a fundamental view that migrant workers should be treated differently. Discrimination is therefore a problem that needs to be tackled through law enforcement as well as through efforts to influence social norms and attitudes.

However, public attitudes on migrant workers joining a union and receiving the same pay and benefits conditions as nationals are mostly positive, with only a minority holding the following views (see figure 3):

- Migrant workers should not receive the same work conditions as national workers (36 per cent).
- Migrant workers should not be able to join a union (36 per cent).

## Treatment of women migrant workers

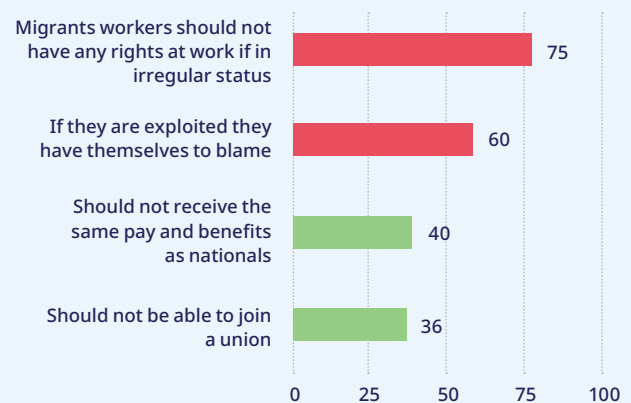
When asked whether women migrant workers specifically should have equal wages with women nationals doing the same job, only a minority expressed support (figure 4).

Singapore has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and is therefore required “to introduce maternity leave with pay or comparable social benefits”, and “dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy or of maternity leave” is prohibited. Nonetheless, Singapore has applied the following reservation to CEDAW Article 11: “Singapore considers that legislation in respect of article 11 is unnecessary for the minority of women who do not fall within the ambit of Singapore’s employment legislation.”

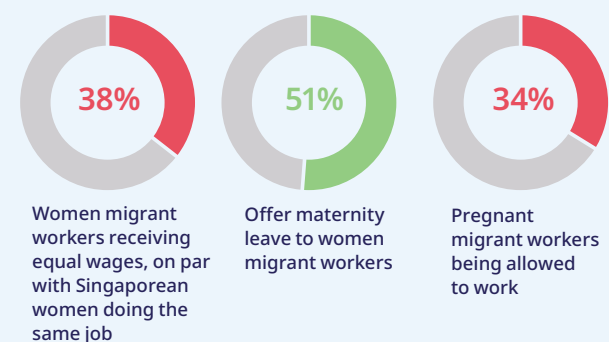
A slim majority of the Singaporean public do support offering maternity leave to migrant women. On the other hand, survey respondents do not support women migrants being allowed to work while pregnant, a contradiction in sentiment (figure 4).

Singapore has also imposed legal restrictions, subjecting women migrant workers to pregnancy discrimination and sanctions during all the phases of their migration: recruitment, employment and termination. Women are required to perform a pregnancy test prior to departure from their home country and to repeat it on an annual basis. Should the test be positive, the woman will be deported at her own expense (Rannveig Mendoza, 2018).

**Figure 3. Attitudes on equal treatment of migrant worker - Support for the following statements (%)**



**Figure 4. Attitude on treatment of women migrant workers - Support for the following statements**





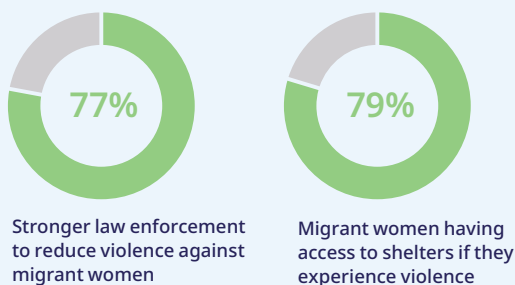
## Violence against women migrant workers

As outlined in the United Nations' 2017 Report of the Secretary-General on Violence against Women Migrant Workers,

Migration can foster women's empowerment and, through new opportunities and personal expansion, improve their agency and autonomy, yet the feminized, informal sectors in which many migrant women work are characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, limited labour and social protections, and exposure to physical and sexual violence.

Prevention and services to assist women migrant victims of violence were the issues for which the surveyed Singaporean public gave their strongest support. A strong majority of the public supports stronger law enforcement to reduce violence against migrant women (77 per cent), and also supports migrant women having access to shelters if they experience violence (79 per cent) (figure 5).

**Figure 5. Addressing violence against women - Support for the following statements**



Harnessing this strong public support for freedom from violence for migrant women and turning it into law and action is imperative, especially at a moment when governments, trade unions and employers, with the full support of CSOs, around the world have come together to adopt new international instruments to counter violence. The June 2019 International Labour Conference adopted the Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and Recommendation (No. 206), 2019, which

recognize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

Whether migrating through regular or irregular channels, women migrant workers can face the risk of violence and abuse from intermediaries and employers, as well as from partners and others. They experience intersectional forms of discrimination based on multiple identities, including job sector, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, legal status, age, pregnancy status, marital status and language, among others. Women migrant survivors of violence face multiple challenges while seeking justice or accessing essential services. Because of little access to protection and support services, absence of protection orders, limited referral networks and coordination mechanisms, lack of language interpreters, as well as fear of deportation or of losing their jobs, many migrant women suffer in silence.

Therefore, services should be available regardless of migration status, and in sufficient quantity and quality, and these services need to respond in ways that integrate human rights, cultural sensitivity and respect for survivors' choices. Key components of response are high-quality, accessible survivor-centred (for instance, non-judgmental) services by health actors, police and justice, and social services. Effective coordination is also paramount, as services cannot keep survivors safe and support healing when they work in isolation.

One challenge facing migrants who experience violence is that they often do not report it. The survey found that some Singaporean respondents (40 per cent) were aware of this problem. Women migrant workers may struggle to access services due to perceptions around their respectability or due to victim blaming. Pervasive negative attitudes can also further isolate migrant women, restricting their movement and preventing them from seeking support due to fear of reprisals.

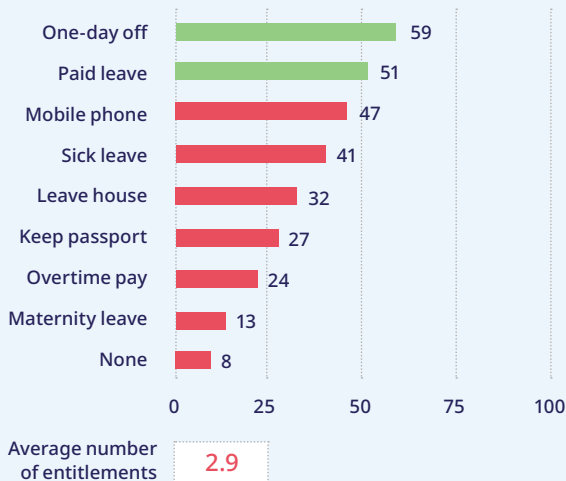
## Domestic workers: Same treatment, better protections

Singaporean public also strongly support improved labour conditions of domestic workers, though respondents who employ domestic workers are less supportive. Overall figures show that 78 per cent of Singaporeans support better labour conditions for domestic workers, and 69 per cent also support recognition of care work as a formal profession.

This public support does not appear to translate, however, into decent work conditions and provision of work entitlements. The survey asked Singaporean respondents if they employ a domestic worker in their home, and if so, asked them about the working conditions they provide to their employees. Singaporean employers were presented with a list of eight

entitlements they might provide to domestic workers (such as paid leave, overtime pay, ability to hold their passports or a phone, or a day off per week), and based on their responses it appears that Singaporean employers provide an average of roughly three entitlements to their domestic worker employees. The most commonly provided entitlements are paid leave and one day off per week, and the most commonly denied entitlements are maternity leave and overtime pay (figure 6).

**Figure 6. Work entitlements provided to migrant domestic workers by surveyed employers (%)**



Base: Singaporean employers of migrant domestic workers, n=297

## Factors that correlate with public support for migrant workers

### Interaction with migrant workers

The study explored whether demographic variables correlated with public support for migrant workers and found that they are not strongly associated. Instead, frequency and quality of interaction with migrant workers are a strong predictor of support for migrant workers generally.

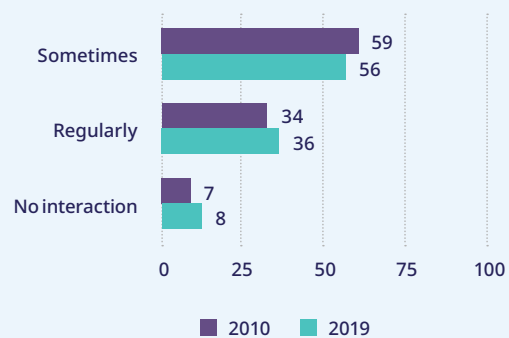
Singapore, which already had high levels of interaction in 2010, remained largely unchanged in this regard, though regular interactions declined slightly (figure 7). Only 8 per cent of the Singaporean public reported never encountering migrant workers. These findings are in line

with the fact that Singapore is a multi-ethnic country with a large proportion of migrant workers in its workforce.

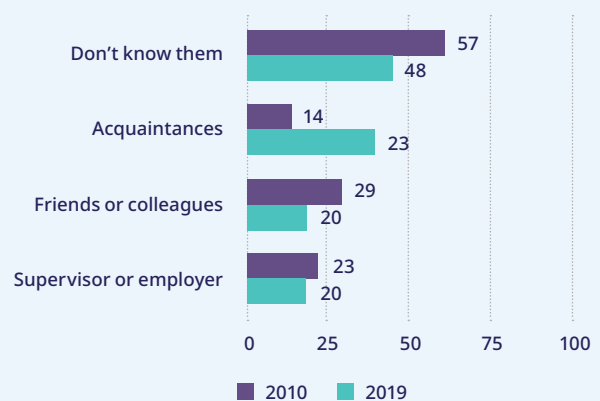
Many Singaporeans also reported having work-related relationships, which is consistent with also having more interaction with migrant workers, on average, than what was seen across the four study countries. Many Singaporean respondents report knowing migrant workers personally, most commonly as either friends or colleagues at work (figure 8).

It is difficult to say why there is a slight decline in relationships in Singapore, but this decline may explain why general support for migrant workers has also experienced a marginal decline since 2010.

**Figure 7. Frequency of interaction with migrant workers, 2010 and 2019 (%)**



**Figure 8. Type of relationship with migrant workers, 2010 and 2019 (%)<sup>2,3</sup>**



<sup>2</sup> Only includes respondents who reported interactions with migrant workers (n=927).

<sup>3</sup> Due to rounding, percentages may not precisely reflect the absolute figures.

## Role of news and media

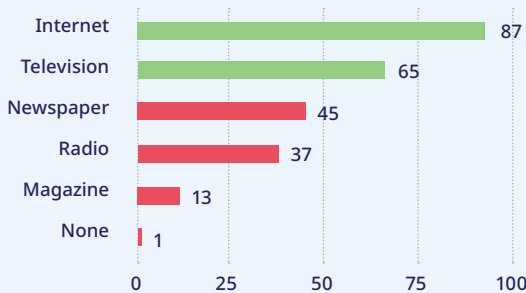
Based on evidence that the media shapes opinion about migration and drives behaviour, survey respondents were asked about the number and type of media sources they consume.

Survey respondents report regular use of mass media, with the internet being the most popular medium at 87 per cent. Television viewing is commonly cited, with 65 per cent reporting regular use; while reading of paper newspapers is less common, with 45 per cent reporting usage (figure 9). Facebook is the most popular social media platform, with YouTube second, followed by Instagram and Google+. The number of social media platforms used by Singaporean respondents stood at three per person, on average.

The study finds that the more news media sources people consume, the more supportive they are of migrant workers, irrespective of the type of media source.

Mass media, specifically news reports and social media, remains the most prominent source of information about migrant workers. But social media has risen to a strong second place since the 2010 study, surpassing television programming. The average number of media sources regularly consumed by Singaporeans was 3.8 per person.

Figure 9. Regular use of mass media (%)



Base: n=1,005

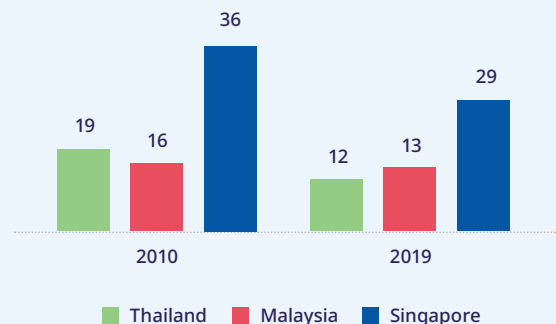
## Changes in public support for migrant workers from 2010 to 2019

For the 2010 ILO study on public attitudes, an index of questions on knowledge, attitudes and practice (KAP) was compiled, with scores summed to explore correlative factors. The “KAP Index” questions used in 2010 were also used in the 2019 study. On a scale of 0 to a 100, the KAP Index reflects how supportive people are towards migrants. The higher the KAP Index<sup>4</sup> the more supportive people are.

Comparing results for Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand from 2010 and 2019, figure 10 reflects a modest decline in the KAP Index in all three countries, meaning overall support for migrant workers declined to some degree between 2010 and 2019. Both Singapore and Thailand had a seven-point drop in the index, whereas Malaysia had a more marginal decrease of three points.

The modest seven-point drop in the Index in Singapore indicates that support for migrant workers has declined, but despite the drop, Singapore remains the higher scoring country, an indication that support for migrant workers remains relatively stronger there than in Malaysia and Thailand. However, the results suggest that most people have limited knowledge about migrant workers; hold many negative attitudes towards them; and are unwilling to engage in behaviour that would support migrants.

Figure 10. KAP Index

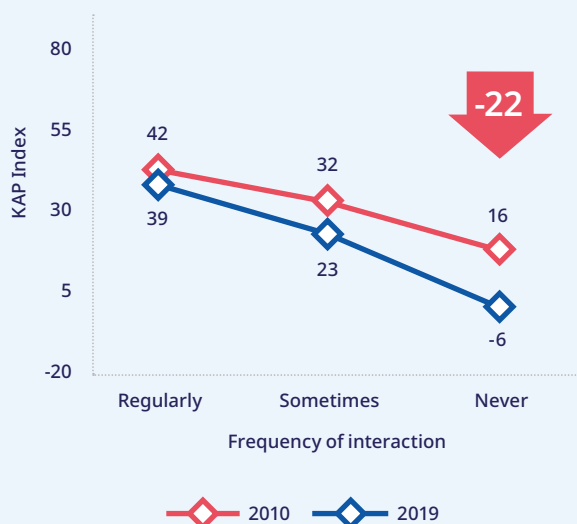


Note: KAP Index is a composite score of 15 questions about knowledge, attitude, and practice.

<sup>4</sup> KAP Index is an indicator in which knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour measures have been aggregated at the individual level and indexed, expressed as a range from zero to 100.

There is generally a correlation between a higher KAP Index and greater interaction with migrant workers, but despite overall levels of interaction remaining roughly the same between 2010 and 2019, support for migrant workers declined in Singapore over the period. This is due to a greater KAP Index decline<sup>5</sup> – by 22 points – among respondents with no interaction with migrant workers (see figure 11). The KAP Index did not change much (42 to 39) for Singaporean respondents who have regular interaction with migrant workers, which suggests an increased polarization in support between persons exposed to migrant workers and persons who are not (see figure 11).

**Figure 11. KAP Index, by frequency of interaction with migrant workers in Singapore, 2010 and 2019**

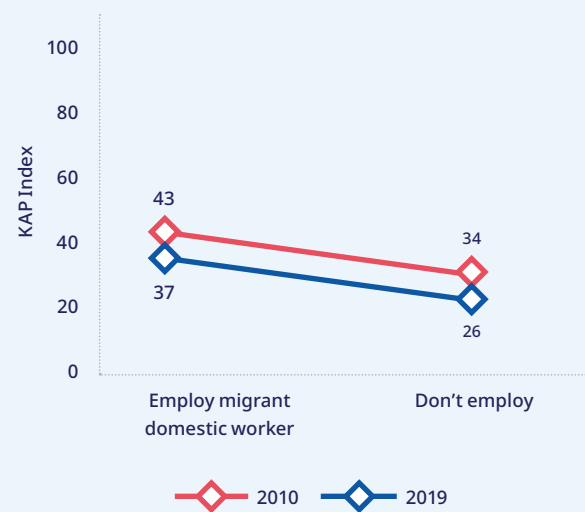


A strong, positive relationship was found in 2010, whereby Singaporean respondents who had hired migrant domestic workers had a considerably higher KAP Index – meaning Singaporean employers were generally more supportive of migrant workers than the general public. In 2019, the results remained largely unchanged in Singapore with the support of migrant workers declining by 6 points among employers of migrant domestic workers (see figure 12); however, employers of migrant domestic workers in Malaysia and Thailand appeared significantly less supportive of migrant workers generally, declining by 25 points and 22 points, respectively.

It is critical, therefore, to encourage more interaction between Singaporean communities and migrant

workers. Decreasing the distance between nationals and migrant workers requires a multi-pronged approach including city planning, workplace inclusion, community platforms, and changes to laws and policy to ensure there are no exclusions or “special rules” that keep migrant workers from enjoying fair and equal treatment.

**Figure 12. KAP Index, by Singaporean employers of migrant domestic worker(s) versus non-employers, 2010 and 2019**



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<sup>5</sup> To make the KAP Index more sensitive to incremental changes, the total index range is from 0 to 200. Based on past studies, 95 per cent of all results have fallen within the range of 60 to 160, and the scale was therefore adjusted (with tails cut off before 60 and beyond 160) to show a zero to 100 range for more common understanding. The theoretical index can therefore be negative or exceed 100. Please refer to full study.



## ► Recommendations

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### 1. Promote inclusion, social interaction, and community engagement with migrant workers in destination countries, including through changes to policy and practice.

- 1.1 Stimulate attitude changes on specific issues to tackle discrimination and barriers that prevent the fair treatment of migrant workers, especially women, and social inclusion.
  - Ensure that women and men migrant workers are able to fully access rights and freedoms in line with international labour and human rights standards.
  - Adopt policies, regulations and operating procedures that support social inclusion, including access to services, social security, schools, and health facilities, including those specialized in addressing violence and abuses.
  - City planning can promote social inclusion by avoiding separation of migrant workers' accommodation. Physical distance is a barrier that hinders migrant workers from integrating into the local community and encourages segregation and discrimination.
  - Ensure that labour migration mechanisms are accessible, affordable and not time consuming. Across all four countries, respondents said that migrant workers with regular status can adapt better than those without.
- 1.2 Design, support and deliver policies that facilitate platforms and community events where migrant workers and the public can meaningfully interact and demonstrate the positive impact of migrant workers on societies and economies.
- 1.3 Encourage inclusion in the workplace by working with employers and trade unions to promote the rights of migrant workers. Trade unions could promote solidarity and encourage inclusion by accepting and supporting migrant workers to join as members.
- 1.4 Avoid dehumanizing terms to refer to migrants and migrant workers in legal texts and other official documents.

### 2. Conduct awareness-raising activities with the general public.

- 2.1 Design campaigns to raise awareness by providing accurate and positive information about migrant workers and their contribution to national economy. The study identified that the majority of the respondents had limited knowledge about the important contributions migrant workers make to Singapore. Information

campaigns can help to inform the public ideally by working on shifting social norms and shared values. It is important to focus on specific sectors and problems so that the public can relate to the messages in a more personalized way.

- Promote campaigns that address the root of negative attitudes towards migrant workers. Strive to develop a personal connection between the public and migrant workers by focusing on specific migrant work sectors and on interactions among nationals and migrant workers within those sectors. Promote messages about the empowerment that can result when women in particular have positive migration experiences.
  - Promote evidence of the beneficial impacts of migrant workers to strengthen positive attitudes while at the same time debunking common myths about them, such as the characterization of migrant workers as criminals, as taking jobs from nationals, or as having a negative impact on the economy.
  - Tackle stigma and raise the status of roles and work sectors in which migrant workers work. Undervaluing the work of migrants has negative consequences and can lead to discrimination and social exclusion. Promoting the importance of decent work, equal opportunities, social protection, gender equality and inclusion are essential.
  - Take care to ensure that messaging does not promote migrant workers – especially women migrant workers – as “victims” or inherently vulnerable. This can feed into narratives that migrant workers are weaker and powerless, and through emphasizing difference, undermine migrant workers' claims to the same rights at work as nationals.
- 2.2 Complement and reinforce public campaigns with targeted interventions directed at influencer groups.
    - Encourage governments, in partnership with international organizations and other relevant actors, to encourage schools to promote positive behaviour towards migrant workers and members of their families. The study highlighted a general lack of knowledge about migrant workers' rights. But public education on prejudice and diversity can shape attitudes towards migrant workers as well as change discriminatory social norms and stereotypical behaviors.

- Implement interventions to encourage more balanced and inclusive reporting, as well as non-discriminatory terminology used by the news media when reporting stories about migrant workers. News media are influential and impact the public's attitudes as well as policy-makers' agendas. Terms such as "undocumented" and "irregular" can be used rather than "illegal"; and "migrant" rather than "alien". At all opportunities, humanize the individual representation of migrant workers and avoid descriptions that overemphasize the number of migrant workers or depict the migrant population as degrading the dominant culture.

2.3 Continue to track shifts and trends in public support for migrant workers in Thailand. Doing so will allow ongoing campaigns and other interventions to adjust to any changes in public attitudes. More frequent tracking of attitudes can also enable studies to identify causation of changes in public support for migrant workers.

### **3. Harness the opportunities available given the high degree of public support for women migrant workers, including opportunities to address violence against women.**

- 3.1 Leverage the positive public support for ending violence against women migrant workers. Respondents showed high levels of support for access to shelters for women who experience violence and for stronger enforcement against violence. It is recommended to work with governments, trade unions, and NGOs to ensure the availability of shelters and comprehensive services designed to meet the needs of women migrant worker survivors of violence.
- Ratify the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190).
  - Governments, employers, trade unions and NGOs should run campaigns to end violence and harassment, including against migrant women and other marginalized groups, in the world of work. Awareness raising and campaigning should form an important part of combined strategies linked to prevention of violence and harassment in the world of work.
  - Governments, employers, trade unions and CSOs should make sure information on available VAW services, including shelters, are available and widely disseminated.
  - Governments, trade unions and CSOs, including labour migration organizations should make sure to have tools and capacities to refer survivors of violence and abuse to available VAW services through established referral pathways.

3.2 Leverage the public support for women migrant workers to receive maternity leave. Policy change and/or enforcement is needed in migrant countries of destination to ensure women migrant workers have de jure and de facto access to maternity leave within broader social security schemes, and that they are not discriminated against on the grounds of pregnancy, either at work or during recruitment.

3.3 Support governments and employers to actively promote gender-sensitive policies and practices that tackle gender stereotypes and occupational segregation. Strong gender segregation of occupation in the region is the result of stereotypical perceptions of what women can or cannot do as well as the consequence of gender-differentiated barriers in access to specific job opportunities.

### **4. Address declining attitudes of employers of domestic workers.**

- 4.1 Governments, trade unions and other stakeholders, including domestic workers groups, should conduct a coordinated and evidence-based publicity campaign on the social and economic value of domestic work; and on the rights of domestic workers. Domestic work is often undervalued, and often not fully considered as work, either by employers or through lack of full inclusion in national labour laws.
- 4.2 All stakeholders, including and especially the media, should use respectful terms to describe domestic workers. They should avoid terms such as "servant", "maid" and "helper", and instead use "domestic worker", which squarely shows that domestic workers are workers, and not servile or part of the family.
- 4.3 Leverage the positive public support for domestic workers to design and enforce regulations aimed at improving the working conditions of women migrant workers, as well as ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). Respondents showed high levels of support for recognition of care workers, improvement of the working conditions of domestic workers, and equal labour rights for domestic workers on par with nationals. Singapore has not yet ratified Convention No. 189.
- 4.4 Conduct further research to understand the knowledge, attitudes and practices (work entitlements provided) of employers of migrant domestic workers. Such a study is critical in light of the fact that employers today appear to show less support for migrant workers than before.

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