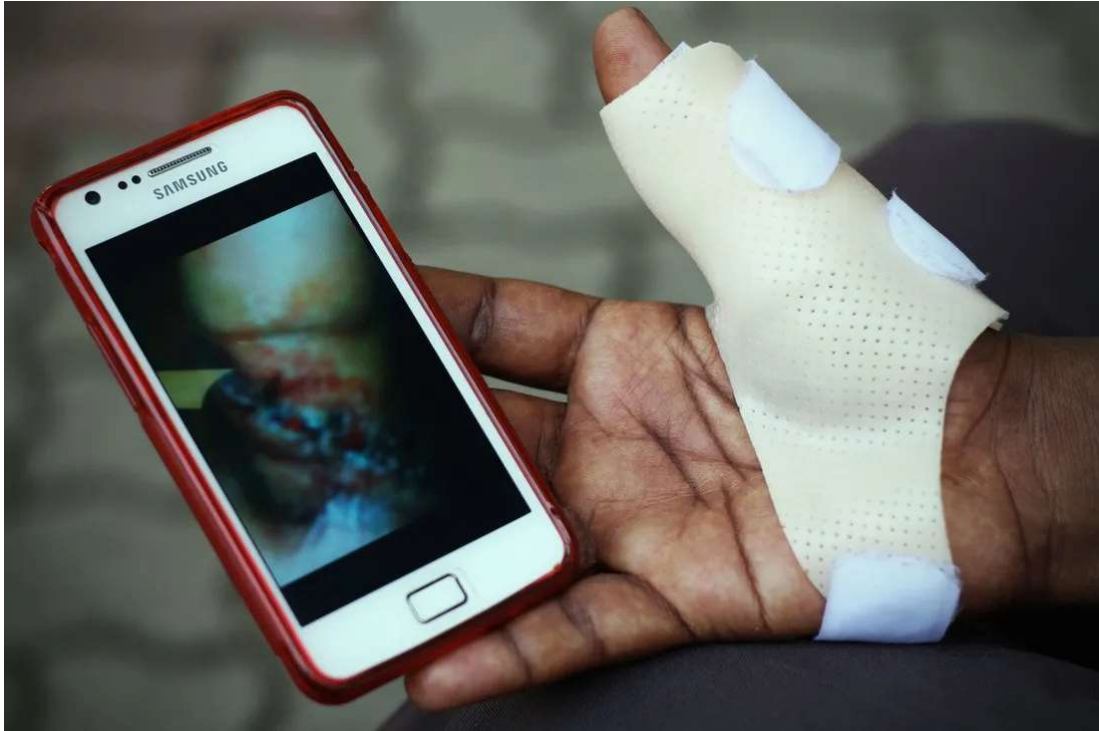


## *The Octant Explains: Migrant Labour in Singapore*

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*Murugan, 33, is a dutiful family man from Tamil Nadu, India. Toiling in the construction business, he tries his best to make ends meet for his mother, wife, and daughter back home. But earlier last month, Murugan sustained a severe hand injury that has left him in limbo.*

*The Octant Explains is a series that aims to provide a basic context around issues in Singapore so that international students can better engage with them.*

*In this installment of The Octant Explains, we will discuss low-wage migrant labor in Singapore and the various controversies surrounding it. This includes workers in industries like shipbuilding, construction and foreign domestic help.*

*This article was written with support from the Roosevelt Institute. If you would like to learn more about foreign domestic labor in Singapore, do attend Roosevelt Institute's screening of the local movie 'Ilo Ilo' followed by a panel discussion about the topic on Mar. 27, 2019 at 6pm in Tan Chin Tuan Lecture Theatre.*

Tipu Kanti Nath and Habibur Rahman Muhammad, two Bangladeshi shipyard workers who have been working in Singapore for about four and three years respectively, were on a break from their English class taught at SDI Academy, a local NGO that provides migrant workers with subsidized English courses, when *The Octant* spoke with them.

“The situation for migrant workers in Singapore is worse than I thought it would be. I have family that have come here before, and they were able to earn much more than I am earning now. I am currently looking for positions in other places including New Zealand and Saudi Arabia. If I cannot find a new job within six months, I will have to go back to Bangladesh.” said Muhammed.

“Same for me. The situation here is not very good. I am also looking for jobs in other places, and I also have about six months to find a different job.” said Nath.

While every worker's situation is different, both Nath and Muhammed reiterated a common sentiment held among many migrant workers: that the reality of being a

According to Transient Workers Count Too, a Singaporean NGO that does a variety of advocacy work for migrant workers in Singapore, there are nearly one million low-wage migrant workers in Singapore, making up about 13 percent of the total population. They most commonly come from India, China, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Low-wage migrant workers are most commonly employed in construction, shipyards, sanitation services, manufacturing, and domestic work. These industries touch the everyday lives of everyone Singaporean in one way or another. At Yale-NUS, migrant workers are employed as gardeners, custodians, handymen and pest exterminators.

### Incentives to hire migrant workers

Since before Singapore became a nation-state, it has been full of migrants from various backgrounds. As an important maritime port since the 13th century, it has long hosted merchants and laborers from various backgrounds. However, the institutionalization of low-wage migrant labor only began in 1981, when the first indications were made by the government to limit and regulate foreign workers in Singapore.

Legislation was passed in the 1980's and 1990's (including the Immigration Act the Employment Act, and the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act) that aimed, in part, to protect foreign workers from abuse by their employers. However, there has been an ongoing debate on whether migrant workers are sufficiently protected.. Dean's Fellow Jane Zhang, who has volunteered and interned with Health Serve, a local NGO that provides migrant workers with a variety of services including affordable healthcare, said, "Laws regulating the treatment of migrant workers seem to cover all the bases, but many people slip through the cracks. At Health Serve, I saw and heard about many cases where workers were injured on the job and then not provided with the required compensation."

The rationale provided by many, including the government, for why Singapore needs low-wage migrant labor is that there is a shortage of Singaporean workers in labor-intensive industries such as shipyard work and construction. A 2013 article published by the Ministry of Manpower states, "the overwhelming majority of non-resident foreigners in Singapore [i.e., low-wage migrant workers,] are here to do jobs that Singaporeans do not want to do."

This labour shortage can be further contextualised by Singapore's industrialisation which began in the late 1960s. Even in the case of foreign domestic workers (FDWs), the Foreign Domestic Servant Scheme was enacted in 1978 to cope with the influx of homemakers into the workforce.

## Expectations and Reality

Beyond the prospect of high wages, migrant workers who are drawn to Singapore often hear tales from friends and relatives who have worked in Singapore that it is a dream city where the roads were clean, people were friendly, and everyone followed the law. Both Nath and Muhammed, in their interview with *The Octant*, expressed their admiration for Singapore for the same reasons. However, they emphasized how this did not make up for the fact that they were earning less than expected.

*Although Murugan's medical fees are being covered by his company, his injury is likely to be permanent. Unable to regain full mobility of his right hand, Murugan cannot carry on with his job. He will be put on light duty and continue to draw a salary until his contract ends, after which he will have to return to India.*

According to a 2017 report published by the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), a migrant worker advocacy NGO based in Singapore, migrant workers in Singapore face many difficulties with regards to wages. Difficulties that may be faced by a migrant worker include wage depression and discrimination, unauthorized wage deductions by employers, deceptive recruitment, contract substitution and unpaid or late payments. Many of these problems stem from the payment of recruitment fees that can range from S\$3,000 to S\$15,000 for the opportunity to work in Singapore. These fees differ based on the worker's nationality, occupation and prior work experience in Singapore. For many migrant workers, these fees can amount up to eight months of working without saving.

Considering that the prospect of high wages is the main reason why most migrant workers decide to come to Singapore in the first place, it can be incredibly frustrating

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## Steps Singapore has taken to protect migrant workers

Singapore has made recent effort to improve the welfare of migrant workers. In January 2019, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) introduced a new work permit condition that prevents employers from being allowed to safekeep money belonging to FDWs. Punishments for violation of this law include a maximum penalty of a \$10,000 fine in addition to 12 months of jail time.

MOM claims that they currently receive about 600 complaints per annum from FDWs regarding salary issues, the true extent of the injustice cannot be determined because many victims of salary injustice are likely reluctant to file a report. To enable greater financial autonomy for FDWs, MOM encourages employers to help FDWs set up a bank account, which can give them financial security and freedom.

Although MOM has taken action against the problem of employers withholding money, no legislation exists to prevent employers of migrant workers from withholding passports and other identification documents. FDWs, who preferred to remain anonymous, interviewed by *The Octant* at Lucky Plaza said that employers often take away the passports of their FDWs in order to prevent them from escaping. “A Land Imagined”, a movie about foreign workers in Singapore, illustrates how construction workers have been trapped in Singapore when their employers held onto their passports.

## Views on migrant workers in greater Singapore society

Low-waged migrant workers are placed in stark contrast with their highly paid counterparts (including Yale-NUS graduates) who are usually termed ‘expats’ or ‘foreign talent’ instead. Although both groups face criticism, the former tends to be at the receiving end of Singaporeans’ condescension. The Straits Times Forum pages have historically been a rich source of letters complaining that “Sunday enclaves”—areas that have been adopted by both work permit holders as places to meet and socialize on their days off—have become “crowded”, “noisy” and “dirty”. At the same time, these pages include criticisms of the snobbery of those complaining about Sunday enclaves.

Online forums often explode with outrage over high-profile “maid abuse” cases as well as cases of ill-treatment meted out to other work permit holders. However, empathetic sentiments expressed in the press and on social media are still contradicted by the existence of explicitly discriminatory rules in semi-public places: bans on FDWs entering country clubs, using condominium swimming pools, or taking the same elevators as their employers, for example, display the demand, or at the very least indifference, of such rules. Even though FDWs constitute a big part of lots of families

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According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, there are currently 173 million migrant workers globally and this population continues to grow. Of which, there are around 80 million migrant workers in Asia and 78 million in Europe.

Even though migration provides many new opportunities, there are also risks associated with it. In particular, the work position of migrant workers are the most precarious ones in the case of an economic downturn. Migrant workers around the world face different challenges in regards to payment, work hours and work conditions. Migrant workers worldwide are vulnerable to human rights violation..

According to professor of Sociology and Public Policy at Yale-NUS College Anju Paul, Singapore is considered to have relatively better working conditions compared to countries in the Middle East. She supports her claim by comparing criteria such as the average monthly wages and the track record of the treatment of foreign domestic workers. Aside from establishing regulations, MOM institutes checks to ensure the existing policies are implemented – more than 6,500 inspections are conducted on companies each year. Nevertheless, she also remarks that Singapore still has room for development taking into account that Hong Kong can be considered to be a better working place for domestic workers. One of the examples Paul gives is that FDWs receive a long-service payment after spending five years with the same employer.

The internationally precarious situation does not bode well for Nath and Muhammed. There is a chance that even if they manage to find a job in another country as a migrant worker, their situation will be no easier than it currently is. However, their situations are not all bad. Having taken the initiative to learn English, they are opening up new opportunities for themselves. In the worst case scenario, they said that they will try to find employment in the relatively high paying outsourcing industry back home in Bangladesh.