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Distress, wellbeing and coping amongst migrant domestic workers in Singapore: A thematic analysis

ABSTRACT

- Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) leave their home countries and families to seek work, where they are rarely protected by employment laws or policies.
- Previous research¹ highlighted that MDWs face many stressors and challenges. However, it typically used large samples, survey designs, and had a limited focus on resilience and coping.



11 MDWs (28-46 years)
Recruited via Facebook
1:1 semi-structured interview
Reflexive thematic analysis
Generated themes & subthemes:

6 MDWs from Philippines

- This qualitative research used reflexive thematic analysis², with results presented using Kaufman's self-actualisation model³.
- We found that MDWs are often focused on basic security needs, demonstrate strength and resilience in response to challenges, but have limited opportunities for growth.
- Challenges (migration related, nature of MDW work, human rights)
- Mental health (distress, wellbeing)
- Coping (engaging with problems, managing emotions, avoiding the problems & emotions, future-focused)

<u>RESULTS – SECURITY & GROWTH</u>

PURPÒSE

LOVE

"With Ma'am we talk a lot, like friends or maybe mother and daughter... Ma'am loves me and lately I love her too"

Feeling accepted by employers

"When you see them happy and satisfied and coming back... and say I'm in a good situation now, thank you "I apply here to be a domestic helper, now I have a chance to study... I will start Culinary School, twice a month.....Maybe after 2 years, I'll be working in Canada."

Rarely achieved as MDW

Linked to hope to achieve future goals & aspirations

"I cry there, and after I write

for your stories... oh it's the best..."

Self-development & educational courses Feeling empowered to help other MDWs

EXPLORATION

SELF-ESTEEM

CONNECTION

SAFETY

everything, I feel much better. The paper I throw."

Able to use coping strategies Awareness of own strengths Proud of resilience in surviving tough times

> "Reading book calms me down and not think too much about how difficult work is"

"You feel so down, you feel so sad and then in the morning you wake up... you have to stand up and work, because you are here for work"

"Homesickness is like having a mind that is trying to make your day twisted"

Disconnection from home & families mitigated by phone access Social connections supported by rest days

> "But I have friends here so it helps me"

"It's not easy, then you're sending me back without saving any money. So, I just keep quiet and finish the contract. It's so stressful." Insufficient food, water, and rest

- Abuse; withholding medical care; threats to send home
- Threat to personal welfare, job security & future well-being

"They give me food in one week only three days"

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Replacing existing guidelines for contracts, rest days, wellbeing, and safety with enforceable policies and employment laws.
- Public and employer psychoeducation programs to increase awareness of the importance of supporting MDWS' wellbeing, with a long-term aim to shift societal attitudes towards MDWs.
- MDW wellbeing centers to provide physical and mental health support via mentors and professionals, foster social connections, and offer opportunities to explore and work towards future goals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & REFERENCES

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¹ Van Bortel, T., Martin, S., Anjara, S., & Nellums, L. B. (2019). Perceived stressors and coping mechanisms of female migrant domestic workers in Singapore. *PloS one*, *14*(3).

² Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 1-25.

³ Kaufman, S. B. (2021). *Transcend: The new science of self-actualization*. Penguin.