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"WE ARE ALL MIGRANT WORKERS": COMMONALITY OF BANGLADESHI MIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES IN SINGAPORE AMIDST COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The number of COVID-19 infections in Singapore has increased dramatically since January 2020, with tens of thousands of cases linked to clusters in migrant workers' (MWs) dormitories. The government planned to isolate the dormitories, conduct COVID-19 tests regularly, and relocate symptomatic individuals into quarantine facilities in order to combat the spread. Despite this, the majority of them were locked in their dormitories, living in tight conditions where social distancing is a myth. This research explores how COVID-19 has impacted the lives of these workers in several ways and illustrates the experiences these migrants have during the pandemic. The emphasis is on low-skilled workers from Bangladesh, who are vulnerable to COVID-19 in a variety of ways. This study used the theory of commonality to explain the diverse experiences of Singapore employees. The data demonstrate the shared hardships of commonality they accepted during COVID-19. Apart from their families, they face a life of uncertainty and anguish in the dorms, stating that commonality is felt and embodied individually while collectively negotiated and enacted. Despite the fact that their lives are filled with uncertainty and worry, they are happy and comfortable in Singapore because of how the government has taken care of them during times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, Singapore, migrant workers, Bangladesh, commonality

INTRODUCTION

> We will surely beat this disease (COVID-19) together, but we need some time and to do our best […]!

This statement was made by Shiraj, a 31-year-old Bangladeshi migrant worker (MW) who has been working in Singapore since 2014. He migrated to Singapore with the hope of making a solid living and providing a better life for his family back in Bangladesh. The story revealed a lot about his sense of "commonality" and "togetherness" with his co-workers in Singapore. This represented an "intimate bond" with his co-workers. He was convinced that he and his friends and family would succeed in defeating the coronavirus or COVID-19. However, he underlined his responsibility to do the right thing and be patient to get rid of COVID-19—a reference to the social components as well. The interview also revealed that Shiraj and his compatriots share similar living and working experiences in Singapore.

This pandemic is one of the most fearsome and contagious diseases that has caused an impending crisis across the globe (Chattoraj 2021a) and has forced us to adapt to the "new normal" (Ullah and Chattoraj 2022). Since its beginning in early 2020, millions of individuals have been infected and killed by the disease. To contain the spread of the virus, almost all countries introduced strict restrictions such as border closures, quarantines, expulsions, and lockdowns of refugee camps and MW communities (Ullah et al. 2021).

Even though the world is being vaccinated at a rapid pace, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), our only defence against COVID-19 is to wear a mask, keep our hands clean, maintain a distance of at least one meter from others, keep our windows open whenever possible, and sneeze/cough into our elbows (Ullah et al. 2020a). However, the problem is maintaining social distance and sustaining healthy lifestyles among MWs or refugees living in congested conditions in dormitories and refugee camps, respectively. These are the people who are directly and indirectly affected by the COVID-19 issue and who bear a disproportionate share of the social and economic consequences (Ullah and Chattoraj 2022).

In this study, the main aim is to raise crucial issues that will aid in the development of a fuller understanding of migrants' livelihoods in Singapore during the COVID-19 period. To do so, data are collected from narrative interviews with MWs who have lived in Singapore for 5 to 10 years. The intend is to investigate the various ways in which COVID-19 affected the lives of workers through empirical data analysis. Furthermore, this demonstrated

the commonality of experiences that the MWs had in Singapore during times of crisis. This research focuses mainly on low-skilled male MWs from Bangladesh, who were affected by COVID-19 in various ways in Singapore.

The MWs shared their daily challenges and joys, worked in comparable occupations such as construction, cleaning, and masonry, and how they were at a higher risk during their works. Their interviews also revealed how the government, initially, imposed harsh restrictive measures on them during COVID-19 (in 2020 and 2021), and how such restrictions later (since late 2021) changed to a more accommodating approach to their wellbeing. Several of them, though, remarked that the government has done a commendable job for the residents outside the dorm, but its performance inside the dorm was questionable especially during the initial months of 2020. Thus, their accounts highlighted the obstacles they endured since the commencement of COVID-19, living through the challenges of uncertainty and anguish in the Singapore dormitories, and show how commonality is perceived and embodied individually as well as collectively negotiated and performed.

Despite living a difficult life, they have been content to remain in Singapore through this crisis because of the government's incredible concern for them. Singapore is deemed significantly superior to its counterpart Bangladesh due to its political stability, sound economic management, and democratic administration. Their confidence in the Singaporean government's capacity to handle the pandemic so well originates in part from admiration and appreciation. They have praised the government's efforts to discipline its population effectively through "circuit-breaker" measures, which have reduced COVID-19 outbreaks outside dormitory areas. As Shamim, a 28-year-old MW who was interviewed in November 2020, said, the Singapore government has been doing a good job managing the pandemic. The MWs generally believe that the government has taken good care of them.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COMMONALITY

This study draws upon the theory of commonality, one of the dimensions of belonging, as propounded by Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013), to theorise the experiences of the Bangladeshi MWs in Singapore. As the characteristic of belonging, Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013) highlights the ability to create new connections with collective boundedness and converse it with collective

boundary lines. She divides the notion into two: "Belonging to", which is experienced individually while affected by collective constellations, hence, socially negotiated, and "belonging with", which draws upon and results in both intersubjectivity in the sense of a person's feeling or enacting the sense of common belonging as well as in collective practices and collective representations. While she distinguishes these two, she also states that belonging has been constructed by individuals who seem to have explored their life experiences in different ways: commonality, reciprocity and more or less formalised modalities of collective allegiance as well as the material and immaterial attachments that often result in the sense of entitlement.

As a result, in order to address the MWs' diverse experiences, this study discusses the theory of "commonality," which is one of the characteristics of "belonging with". According to Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013), commonality refers to collaborative processes but also to how individuals perceive and embody "belonging" in collective constellations. It mainly refers to the sentiments, concerns, and experiences that we all share, such as language, culture, religion, lifestyle, customs, values, observations, and memories. On the one hand, it refers to a sense of self that can be felt alone, while on the other, it is shared and accomplished together (Chattoraj 2022).

For instance, Wilke (2014) shows that those who live in the mountain village of Camburnu shared experience of commonality which occurs as a result of the kinship ties, the daily sorrows they share in their neighbourhood, the rural occupations they engage in, and the natural beauty around them, has been preserved over centuries. After the Turkish administration established a garbage dump immediately above Camburnu, their tacit understandings of commonality led to a sense of collective threat, resulting in collective action (Wilke 2014). They endured foul odours and poisonous substances leaching into the ground, causing them to feel alienated from their world. A tacit property of being, i.e., a sense of commonality that does not need to be expressed, has given way to an increasingly politicised sense of belonging—as a commonality of suffering and commonality of purpose (Wilke 2014). Both the covert sense of being part in a communal setting as well as the process of drawing collective boundaries make for different forms of commonality in the contemporary world.

Brubaker (2005) explains that collective constellations emerge in the form of "categorisation" (a marker-based abstract process), "groupness" (an emotional sense of belonging), and "self-understanding" (drawing upon joint cognitive assumptions). There is often a perception that collective constellations are a horizon that divides insiders from outsiders. Therefore,

the constellations are often based on mental boundaries (Migdal 2004), everyday life distinctions, and public representations in order to bolster collective boundaries. A commonality at this point is likely to develop into a collective identity that requires the outside to foster a sense of sameness inside.

Data showed that images of the MWs living in dormitories, as well as the slogan *We are all MWs, Together, we are going to overcome this pandemic*, provided the perfect example of practicing and experiencing commonality. *We are all MWs* established the foundation for the existence of commonality through identity, which was the most significant narrative in its expression. In *We are all MWs* and *We, together...*, they expressed their feeling of togetherness irrespective of their racial or religious backgrounds. Furthermore, sharing a common destiny, mutuality, and purpose revealed commonality. Dormitory workers were, moreover, linked together by cultural, social, and religious ties.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This article aims to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on the Bangladeshi MWs in Singapore and provided insights into the various experiences of commonalities they shared in Singapore during the pandemic. Therefore, the following research questions which acted as the main guidance in this study were developed:

1. What kind of challenges did the MWs face during COVID-19?
2. Did the Singapore government help them to overcome those challenges?
3. In what ways did the Bangladeshi MWs share common experiences?

As part of the researcher's Internet research (Chattoraj 2017), COVID-19 statistics from Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) website, as well as government advisories and information about COVID-19 from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) have been collected and evaluated. The MOH website is the best source to get the daily case count of the number of COVID-19 cases in Singapore. In addition, documents and newspaper articles related to this issue were collected. Available newspaper articles helped to gather secondary data concerning migrants in Singapore and the grave situation they have been in as a result of this pandemic. Thorough literature reviews on the epidemic and on Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore were conducted.

In two phases, 114 informal interviews (through Zoom and WhatsApp) with male Bangladeshi MWs in Singapore were conducted: one from April to December 2020 and the other from February to December 2021. The respondents, aged between 25 and 40 years old, were living in dormitories when the interviews were conducted. All of them have been staying in Singapore for 5 to 10 years. Most of them held a work permit, while others held special passes due to medical conditions. The interviewees were all tested positive for the COVID-19 virus in 2020, some with mild symptoms, and others with severe ones which brought them to the hospitals as well. One of the NGOs in Singapore assisted the researcher in establishing networks with the MWs. Approximately an hour was spent interviewing each of the MWs. Bangladeshi MWs who speak Bangla were chosen for ease of discussion since the researcher is a native Bengali speaker. Their identities were changed to protect their privacy and security.

The questions asked were about their experiences with regard to COVID-19 since January 2020. What was the impact of COVID-19 on their lives? What were they afraid of when they heard about lockdown for the very first time? What were the challenges that they faced during a lockdown? Was it about food, boredom, lack of communication, or job security/salary payments? Did anyone help them during those trying times? What was the impact of the virus on their families in Bangladesh? When did they feel they could again reunite with their families back home? Did they like living and working in Singapore? Or were they willing to return home? Did Singapore provide a better level of safety and happiness than other countries?

In the following sections, the context and various experiences faced by the MWs during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020–2021 are discussed. Their mutual challenges with commonality, faced in the dormitories away from their families since January 2020, explained how commonality was personal and manifested while being negotiated and enacted collectively. Although the government succeeded to contain the outbreak outside the dormitory, it also came under scrutiny for ignoring the MWs who were housed in dormitories where facilities, hygiene, and social distancing were deemed inadequate.

SINGAPORE AND MWs: AN OVERVIEW

Singapore is home to around 318,400 male MWs (MOM 2021a) from countries such as Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and China who work in industries such as construction, manufacturing, marine, landscaping, and other low wage sectors. As an unskilled or semi-skilled worker, they are classified as "temporary workers" and are issued "Work Permits"[1] for two years with the potential for extension. Most of them live in either "government-approved" or "licensed dormitories" located on the urban outskirts of the city-state, which facilitates social exclusion and serves as a means to separate them from the rest of the population. The MWs are not permitted to choose their accommodations; they must remain wherever they are instructed.

Around 200,000 MWs resided in 54 Purpose Built Dormitories (PBDs) managed by operators regulated by the MOM (Koh 2020). The larger dormitories offered 1,500 to 25,000 bed spaces and had common recreational facilities, socialising areas, laundry services, kitchen with dining halls, mini grocery stores, and remittance services.[2] Around 97,153 workers[3] resided in these PBDs, about 1,200 factory-converted dormitories housed another 95,000 workers (Koh 2020) and the remaining 20,000 workers lived in temporary quarters at their worksites.

This section elaborates on the living conditions of the MWs' in pre-COVID-19 days and intends to analyse the reasons for the "ripe" ground for the formation and transmission of outbreaks and clusters. Singapore has three kinds of housing facilities for MWs: apartments, dormitories, or worksites (mainly construction worksites) (Rahman 2017); the predominant being the "worker dormitory" which were specially constructed with basic amenities such as common dining places, a grocery shop, an entertainment room, prayer places, and sports and other relevant facilities. Each dorm consisted of around several thousands of MWs, where 12 to 20 men used to share a single room of around 45 to 90 sq. m. (Chattoraj 2021a). Each room was equipped with bunk beds (2 tiers) and several of the MWs even shared the bed with their co-workers based on their working hours (Yeung et al. 2020). Many dorms often exhibited issues of hygiene caused by bedbugs, roaches, mosquitoes, rat infestations, and overflowing toilets (Lim 2020). Most of the dormitories had five toilets and five showers on each floor which were shared among 100 to 120 workers. MWs often experienced chaos during the morning hours because of insufficient supply of water in the showers and

toilets, or because the water flow was very slow. Sharing toilets, showers, laundry clotheslines, storage spaces, and lining up all-together to get food and eat were their daily activities.

Their work conditions revealed the stringent regulatory requirements such as the two-year employment contracts, employer-sponsored work permits, and immigration bans that prevented them from acquiring citizenship (Yeoh et al. 2020). According to Yeoh and her co-authors (2020), most MWs were offered SGD1,200–SGD1,500 (SGD1 = USD0.73) a month during their interviews with employers; however, these figures were more frequently SGD450– SGD750 in reality. Long working hours from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (or even more, which were counted as overtimes or OTs) from Monday to Saturday (and sometimes on Sundays), building high-rise buildings, Housing & Development Board (HBD) flats, condos, Changi Airport, Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) lines, and carrying heavy loads were some of the basic workplace similarities that MWs shared. Furthermore, as Ullah et al. (2020b) demonstrated, they were assigned the most dangerous and risky jobs, making them more vulnerable to occupational injuries and fatalities. As a result, workers were often at risk of accidents and deaths. Though their income was unstable, their high hopes and desire to send money to their family back home enabled them to survive despite all these difficulties in Singapore.

Through these shared aspirations and spaces, the categorisations of their status as the "marginalised group", "dorm workers", and "Bangla people" create a sense of "commonality" or "collective constellations" among themselves. This sense of belonging further leads to their forming a boundary of their own in a country that usually views them as meagre, low-wage workers.

COVID-19 AND SINGAPORE

In 2003, Singapore's experience with the SARS outbreak prompted the nation to strengthen its preparedness for any future outbreaks of infectious diseases (Wong et al. 2020).[4] Despite Singapore being one of the most prepared Asian countries, COVID-19 did not spare the city-state, especially the dormitories for MWs. Since February–March 2020, thousands of cases have been reported from dormitories and in 2020, among the total 60,000 cases, the MWs accounted for well over 90% of the cases (McDonald 2021). One of the contributing factors being the over-crowded

rooms coupled with poor ventilation, and dirty and inadequate toilets which plagued the workers' accommodation. Yi et al. (2021) also explained the reasons included the "high-density" and "unhygienic living conditions" of MWs and a lack of an inclusive protection system with equal access to healthcare and social safety nets. As a result, the nation was increasingly vulnerable to the virus, illustrating the impact of migrant populations on entire societies.

To contain the spread of the pandemic, Singapore implemented a "circuit breaker" phase (also known as a lockdown) for two months, from 7 April to 1 June 2020. The dorms were separated, and testing began on a regular basis for all MWs. All COVID-19 positive MWs were transferred to quarantine facilities, where they were locked in tight dormitories with no possibility for social separation (Yeung et al. 2020). Additionally, the "critical services" staffs were moved, inter-floor intermingling was reduced, and sick patients were organised into separate sick bays (Chattoraj 2021a). Medical centres were constructed to assist workers with moderate symptoms, and re-infected workers were moved to rehabilitation centres before returning to work (Chattoraj 2021a). Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) comprising of volunteers also delivered lunch and dinner packs to the MWs since the beginning of the "circuit breaker" (Phua 2020a).

COVID-19 has, undoubtedly, adversely affected the livelihoods of MWs as well as intensified their experiences of commonality and collective constellations. It became increasingly difficult to live in congested, tight quarters in the dorms. Several workers brought up the issues of hygiene exhibited by bedbugs, roaches, mosquitoes, and rat infestations. The discourse of containment, used to justify the seclusion of migrants in dormitories, enabled greater restrictions on their movement, with thousands locked into their rooms. With the decrease in the number of daily cases, the government started relaxing some of the restrictions in late 2020. However, since there were significant clusters in the dormitories, there was concern that MWs might contract the virus outside (Baharudin 2021), so, unlike other residents, they were only allowed to go out from their dormitories on their off-days with their "exit pass" that enabled them to leave and go to the recreation centres[5] for four hours (MOM 2020). They went back to their jobs, and life started getting back to normal. However, the flare-up in the community cases since late April 2021, prompted to the tightening of the restrictions again and sent more than thousands of MWs into quarantine to prevent a repeat of the explosive dormitory clusters seen in mid-2020 (Aravindan

and Lin 2021; Zhang et al. 2021). To leave the dormitory (like the days of circuit breaker), they were again asked to request for "essential errands"[6] to MOM through their employers, which allowed them to carry out their essential errands safely and mitigate the risks of COVID-19 transmissions. Therefore, once again, they were in quarantined life.

Several states prioritised their citizens' health and wellbeing, while others, like Portugal, offered full citizenship rights to immigrants and asylum seekers (Ullah et al. 2021). France granted citizenship to hundreds of migrant frontline workers (Davies 2020). In this regard, the Prime Minister of Singapore also emphasised that MWs would be treated equally (McDonald 2021). He further stated that in an interconnected global community, protecting migrants' rights and enhancing their welfare must become a priority now. MWs' rights and welfare should not be left to individual employers but should be assured collectively by the state, working alongside migrant advocacy groups and a concerned public (Koh 2020). He empathised with the MWs who were seen as the backbone of Singapore since they were the foundation for the Lion State and handled jobs that the locals were unwilling to do. The contribution of the MWs and their hard works could be found all over the city, from airport terminals to apartment blocks, from public transportation to road constructions, and everything else in between. Consequently, MWs needed to be properly cared for to keep the city-state going.

PROTECTING THE MWs: SINGAPORE'S ROLE DURING COVID-19

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in several dormitories, the Singapore government took several measures to contain the spread in the dorms and protect foreign workers. An interagency task force, comprising MOH, MOM, the Singapore Armed Force (SAF), and the Home Team have been set up to handle the situation in the dorms (MOM 2020).

The task force has deployed Forward Assurance and Support Teams (FASTs)[7] to all the dormitories to manage the daily needs of the MWs such as food as well as ensure cleanliness and hygiene at the dorms in times of the COVID-19 crisis (Zhuo 2020). Additionally, the workers were in close contact with the dorm operators in order to respond quickly to their needs. Supplies and food were distributed to medical units and clinics were triaged to coordinate logistics and provide the necessary care. Also, the MWs

had access to WiFi for entertainment purposes and to keep in touch with colleagues, friends, and family at home and elsewhere. As part of the welfare monitoring programme, it was ensured that the MWs received their salaries and could transfer money home.

Several measures were taken to protect the MWs in the dorms (Gov.sg 2020). They were not allowed to go to work. Recreational facilities were closely monitored to prevent inter-mingling. Their movement between blocks was monitored. Interacting with others belonging to other rooms or floors was not permitted. Care packs were given to each worker, which included masks, thermometers, and hand sanitisers. In addition, they were also given other essentials such as data cards, snacks, clothes, shaving machines, etc. Furthermore, the MWs also received salaries during the quarantine period, treated as paid hospitalisation leave. The employers were granted a levy waiver for the circuit breaker period from April to June 2020 and received a rebate of SGD750 to be paid to the MWs (deducting allowances for food and housing). The caterers served three meals each day.

Local medical assistance was provided to the MWs in dorms. Routine temperature checks and monitoring for fever and respiratory issues were made mandatory. Also, increased health screening measures were in place to take urgent care of the workers in need of medical attention. Improvement was observed in the cleanliness of the dorms and regular garbage collection. The disinfection and cleaning of common areas and restrooms were boosted (Gov.sg 2020). Furthermore, as Koh (2020) explained, the local community assisted in a variety of ways. Within days, for example, websites offering English to Bengali and English to Tamil translations to medical care teams were created. This assisted in breaking down the language barrier, allowing non-Bengali and non-Tamil-speaking healthcare staff to undertake an initial consultation without the use of an interpreter. Furthermore, substantial logistic arrangements were made to provide workers with lodging facilities so that they might benefit from adequate social separation, which included unoccupied public housing flats, military camps, exposition centres, and even floating hotels (Koh 2020).

Newspaper reports spoke of the government's strategy to keep COVID-19 out of the dorms (Today 2020; Phua 2020b). In a few years, there will be new foreign worker dormitories with better standards that will accommodate 100,000 workers. Former schools, vacant factories, and other state-owned properties will be renovated and rebuilt to reduce current dormitory density. These newly built dormitories will have amenities such as minimarts and barber services along with access to medical care and

support (Today 2020; Phua 2020b). About 11 PBDs will be built (Table 1); they will have at least a 6.0 sq. m. increase in the living space per resident at the new dormitories with at least 4.5 sq. m. per resident (including shared facilities) currently. These dormitories will accommodate a maximum of 10 beds per room compared to the present 12 to 16 beds in each room (Table 1). Single-decked beds separated by one meter will be available instead of the double decks. Unlike present times, there will be at least one bathroom, sink, and toilet for every five beds in the new dorms, instead of every 15 beds. Additionally, dormitories will need to include more sickbay beds—15 per 1,000 bed spaces as opposed to the current requirement of one per 1,000 bed spaces (Today 2020; Phua 2020b).

Unlike many other countries, Singapore already immunised 98% of its MWs (Gov.sg 2021). However, even after receiving the two doses of the immunisations, numerous workers continued to test positive for COVID-19 (Kamil 2021). Many were moreover re-infected even after a year or two. State employers were compelled to pay workers even when construction sites were closed as part of the circuit breaker. The workers were fed and given medical attention as needed. As a result, among the MWs, there is a sense of shared gratitude to the government (Chattoraj 2021a).

According to the ranking of the best places to live during the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore topped the list (Hong 2021). This is mostly because the city-state brought down the number of locally transmitted cases to near zero, implemented border curbs and strict quarantine procedures, and allowed citizens to go about their daily lives as usual (Hong 2021). Even the vaccinated MWs, since December 2021, received permission to visit any place within their community for a maximum of eight hours at a time (Chew 2021). Furthermore, as of 4 July 2022, 96% of the total eligible population were fully vaccinated, 78% were given booster doses, while those aged 60 years and above are getting their second booster doses and 12 years and above are eligible for their first booster doses (MOH 2022). Nevertheless, the sustained human-to-human spread of COVID-19 continued in the community, including in the MWs' dormitories, despite the resuming of restrictions countrywide. Clusters continued to spring up in the community and the dorms as well.

Table 1: Comparing the present conditions at the dorms with the improved standards

Facility	Present day	Improved
Occupancy per room	In practice, 12 to 16 residents per room. No requirement for spacing between beds, mostly double-decker beds	≤ 12 residents per room ≥ 1 m spacing between beds, double-decker beds allowed
Occupancy per floor	≤ 240 residents	≤ 240 residents, capable of being divided into self-contained sections of 120 residents
Communal facilities (e.g., cooking, dining, and laundry facilities)	No segmentation required	Designed to allow segmentation for dedicated use by ≤ 120 residents per section
Ventilation	Windows or openings to be at least 5% of the floor area of the room	Additional requirements: ≥ 1 exhaust fan per toilet Adequate number of fans, reasonably spaced out throughout room, to provide sufficient air circulation If air conditioning is provided in room, additional requirement, i.e., install a filter of at least MERV14 rating to reduce transmission risks in enclosed areas
Toilets	≥ 1 set of common or en-suite toilet, bathroom, sink and urinal: 15 residents	≥ 1 set of en-suite toilet, bathroom, sink: 6 residents
Isolation facility	≥ 1 isolation bed per 1,000 bed spaces during peacetime ≥ Additional 19 isolation beds per 1,000 bed spaces to be stood up during pandemics	≥ 10 isolation beds per 1,000 bed spaces during peacetime ≥ Additional 15 isolation beds per 1,000 bed spaces to be stood up during pandemics
Living space excluding shared living facilities[5]	≥ 3.5 sq. m. per resident	≥ 4.2 sq. m. per resident
Wi-Fi	Wi-Fi in common areas for residents	Wi-Fi in common areas and rooms for residents
New dormitories	11 new PBDs by end of 2022	2 new PBDs will be built with at least 12,500 beds within 2024

Source: MOM (2021b).

However, mid-2021 witnessed a sudden spike in infections due to the Delta variant. In October 2021, the city-state experienced an "unusual surge" of 5,324 new infections of COVID-19 in a single day, which was the highest figure since the beginning of the pandemic. As beds in intensive care units were rapidly filling up (Reuters 2021), everyone residing in Singapore, including MWs, were subjected to further restrictions.

Apart from this, the increased frequency of suicides and attempted suicides among MWs who were restricted to their dormitories due to COVID-19 became a source of concern for various NGOs and the MOH. Uncertainty in the workplace, salary concerns, or anxiety about living alone during quarantine days all contributed to suicide or suicidal attempts in many cases. There was no specific figure, but it was a shared experience among MWs during COVID-19. In addition, this situation was exacerbated by the discrimination the MWs faced when they were labelled as "carriers of the virus" (as inferred by Ullah et al. 2021 regarding MWs in other countries). When the cases shot up in the dorms since April 2020, the Government separated "dormitory cases" from "community" cases in its daily COVID-19 report (McDonald 2021; Chattoraj 2021b). This, no doubt, created anxiety among the workers and intensified their sense of collective constellations which resulted in their belonging to a marginalised group.

COVID-19 AND THE BANGLADESHI MWs: EXPERIENCES AND SENSE OF COMMONALITY AND COLLECTIVE CONSTELLATIONS

Commonalities with Regard to Their Aspirations to Come to Singapore

Bangladeshi MWs formed an essential part of Singapore's workforce. In this context, it would be right to put forward Rahman's (2017) argument that the young Bangladeshi minds were attracted to international migration to escape from unemployment, poverty and social stagnation at home. In a review of Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore, it was found that the island's clear migration policies and strategies to ensure migrant wellbeing has attracted Bangladeshi migrants for ages (Chattoraj 2019).

The deep reverence for Singapore was moreover precipitated by the economic difficulties most Bangladeshi workers had experienced back home. Migration is about people, their aspirations and fears, triumphs and

tragedies (Ullah and Haque 2020; Chattoraj 2020). While motivations for migrating to Singapore varied, they primarily revolved around two factors: "status claims" and "economic deprivation" back home (Rahman 2017). In this context, status claims are made through statements, behaviours or symbols which indicate someone's position on the social hierarchy. Migration is regarded as a way through which one can increase their social standing through both economic and social terms (Rahman 2017).

Through my interviews, the most dominant point of commonality I found among these MWs was that almost each and every one of them came to Singapore to have a better life. MWs, in their own way, created their own group that aspired to have a safe and secure future. Thus, we can see a sense of collective constellation among these group of MWs. The statement of Shabbir, a 27-year-old MW, who was in Singapore since 2017 and interviewed in September 2021, confirmed this point. He spoke about his aspirations and how it got fulfilled once he landed in Singapore: "Coming here felt like a dream because Singapore is a modern, rich and developed country […]. I wanted to come to this country to earn a huge amount of money and send them back home so that my family can have a good life".

In Singapore, workers were paid significantly more compared to their home countries, so they decide to migrate. Saving for their families is easier in Singapore because they earn more money. Their migratory trajectory held a distinct cultural value beyond material gains, which enabled them to advance up the social ladder.

This is evident from the following statement of Nasir, a 37-year-old MW, interviewed in April 2021, working in Singapore for the last 7 years: "Here, most of us make between SGD400 and SGD800 a month […]. My Singapore salary is about four times what I used to earn in Bangladesh. Every month, I can send at least half of my earnings home. My family is happy and living a great life. We have gained a higher social status now with my earned money. My children are going to English-medium schools, which was a dream come true for me. And Singapore has only given me this social position".

In Singapore, Nasir was earning way more than what he used to earn in Bangladesh. Therefore, he could remit at least half of his income to his family. This money was used to buy a TV, refrigerator, oven, washing machine, and some other electronic devices for his family. Also, their children were sent to English-medium schools. This led to the upward shift in the social status of Nasir's family, who are now considered

"well-to-do" in their neighbourhood. It is evident from this part that the families of MWs in Bangladesh established collective constellations and a sense of commonality by forming a group who are regarded as "well-to-do".

Shribas, a 34-year-old MW who migrated to Singapore in 2010, was interviewed in his dormitory September 2020. He espoused his aspirations to a better future: "Singapore is a well-developed and successful country. People here, have good jobs and earn a lot of money. My cousin came here some years back and is earning quite a good amount to lead a good life and for his family back home. Seeing him, I also wanted to try my luck if I could do something for myself and my family".

The invisible expenses[8] migrants pay to seek migration should never be overlooked when assessing migration benefits (Ullah and Haque 2020: vii). This argument supports the MWs' status in Singapore as well. Though they were well aware of their costs, they accepted it as an unavoidable part of their working conditions.

Commonalities in Their Life in the Dormitories

"We are all really scared. COVID-19 can happen to any one of us. Look at the condition of our dorms and tell me why we will not fear COVID-19?", said Minhaz, a 43-year-old MW who was in Singapore since 2016. A pertinent and serious issue that most of the MWs faced was overcrowded and cramped rooms. To prove his point, Minhaz—interviewed in July 2020—described his dorm room, "My room is 3 m by 10 m where 12 of us stay together. All are from Bangladesh. We have 6 bunk beds and there is no extra place in the room where we can sit. Two of us cannot stand together in our room, it is so small!". Additionally, the kitchen is shared, so it would be crowded if they started cooking simultaneously. For them, in the cramped and unsanitary living conditions, "social distancing is a luxury" (Ullah et al. 2020a). In view of this, an outbreak was inescapable. Since the first confirmed case on 9 February 2020, numerous clusters of COVID-19 developed in the dormitories despite efforts to identify contacts and disinfect the sites (Yi et al. 2021).

By 9 March 2020, 25 PBDs were designated as isolation areas. Since the first case, all other dorms were placed under effective lockdown to reduce the possibility of further spreading of the infection. Saibul, a 29-year-old dorm resident staying in Singapore for the last eight years, who was interviewed in March 2021, described the moment when he heard about the circuit-breaker: "MOM came to our dormitory and announced

that there would be full lock down, with no one allowed to come or go out. Due to our lack of food stockpiling, we panicked. But they said, MOM will provide food, and we are asked to stay inside our rooms and not crowd in the common area". He further added that, "It is our responsibility to notify the dormitory operator if we are unwell so that a doctor can be arranged".

There was often a lack of water to supply showers and toilets in the dormitories, causing MWs to wait in long lines to use the shared bathrooms. "Every day we have to wait for long hours (sometimes 2 to 3 hours) before going out to work. We get up at 4 a.m., [but] still find the bathrooms crowded".

Commonalities in Their Experiences with COVID-19

When asked about the experiences with COVID-19, several of the respondents, interviewed between June and December 2020, replied, "It was the worst. We were quarantined for over a month, stayed alone in a hotel room; no one was there to talk. During the whole month, we saw no one. We looked like we were in luxurious prison cells. If we had died there, no one would have known".

During the circuit-breaker period, the restrictions lasted for two months, but since June 2020, they began to ease, while the movements of the MWs remained restricted since they were only allowed to leave their dorms to work: "We stay in the dorm on our off days. What to do? We are not allowed to go out. We need exit pass and can go to the (same) recreation centre only for four hours to go out. So, it's better to stay back […]. We mostly watch movies or play cards or board games between shifts. Our biggest enemy is boredom. […] We are frustrated".

"I just want to go out and spend some time in the fresh air, do not want to go to the recreation centre […]" – the most common answer heard from the MWs in the dormitories who were interviewed between March and July 2021. The MWs were barred from going outside and engaging with loved ones when all other residents of the city-state were allowed to. "What else do we need to wait for? We are fully vaccinated now. Still, we are in the same situation as we used to be in 2020?" asked one of the frustrated workers.

When COVID-19 broke out, MWs in Singapore faced the worst of times. They could not go out, had to get tested every two weeks and so on. Their only hope was that vaccines would enable them to lead a normal life again, so going out and getting vaccinated was the only thing they could look forward to. As the vaccines arrived in Singapore in early 2021, the MWs

awaited their turn. They were administered the first dose but told to wait until the second dose to ease the restrictions. Although they received their second doses in July–August 2021, they were still sent back to quarantine as cases in the island continued to rise.

"What's next?" asked the MWs who were interviewed between August and September 2021. They were at the time fed up with the rules and regulations. Two years had passed, and they were deprived of celebrating Hari Raya because of the restrictions: "In 2020, we were ok that our Hari Raya was cancelled because of the circuit-breaker. All of us understood it. This year (in 2021), when cases were decreasing, and restrictions were almost eased, we thought we could celebrate Hari Raya. We started to plan […]. Unfortunately, in early May 2021, cases started to increase, and everything got cancelled yet again. We were heartbroken, devastated".

Boredom became another experience of commonality among the workers. They had been going through the same routine life since April 2020, going to work and returning back. In their minds, social life became a thing of the past. It is no longer possible for them to enjoy themselves at their favourite restaurant or spend hours hanging out outside in Little India or in Mustafa (a famous shopping centre in Little India).

Commonalities in Their Daily Experiences: Living with COVID-19

"Every day is the same […]". MWs confined in their dormitories, interviewed between November and December 2020, said they had been going through the same mundane routine of heading straight to their work sites each morning and returning to their living quarters in the evening. While they typically had little time or energy for leisure after work before the pandemic struck, the big difference during COVID-19 was that they were unable to go out freely during their days off or on public holidays. For most of the MWs interviewed, their typical workday started as early as 6 a.m. to 6.30 a.m. They generally took the company bus or the lorry and arrived at their workplaces around 7 a.m. to 7.30 a.m. They began their work at 8 a.m. They were done at around 6.30 p.m. to 7 p.m. and reached their dormitories at around 8 p.m. Then, they freshened up and ate dinner, while some spoke to their families via video call. Furthermore, several MWs, interviewed between April and June 2021, stated that due to the scarcity of manpower, they had to work overtime more frequently and therefore returned to the dormitories at around 10 p.m.

During pre-COVID-19 times, Sundays used to be a fun-filled day of the week when they could go to various places to catch up with friends or do some shopping. However, that became history. "I say [it's like] jail because I do not have the freedom to go out", said Nasid, a 34-year-old MW from Bangladesh who was interviewed in April 2021. "I am very appreciative of what Singapore has done for me in this crisis time, but I am only human to feel trapped […] I long for the freedom that other people have where they can go out and dine in".

The workers, who were interviewed between October and December 2020 and February and April 2021, appreciated the use of the recreation centre once a week for four hours beginning from August 2020; however, they believed these visits were not a perfect alternative for eating or shopping in Little India or Mustafa. Also, it was time-consuming to undergo rapid antigen testing (ART).[9] They usually had around one and a half hours to complete their other tasks. Because of this rush, they believed it is better to stay in the dormitory than go to the recreation centre. This led many workers to work longer hours to earn more money. Despite the ups and downs of the restrictions in Singapore since early 2020, especially with the tightening and loosening of community restrictions, little did change for the millions of migrants living in dormitories.

Fear of Loss: Another Commonality in Times of COVID-19

Besides, there were many respondents who had not seen their families for more than 3 to 4 years. They expressed their fear of not seeing them again due to COVID-19. Shohidul is a 39-year-old MW from Bangladesh who stayed in Singapore for the last 10 years; he was interviewed in March 2021. He had not seen his family, which included his parents, wife and three children, in Bangladesh in the last four years. He spent long periods of time away from them, but when so many around him got sick, he became genuinely concerned that he might not see them again. "My father is a heart patient. Mother cannot walk and is bed-ridden. In this COVID-19 time, the situation has deteriorated. Several of my relatives have been badly affected due to COVID-19. That is why I am really scared. I fear that I will never see my family again. My children always ask me to return home, but if I go back, who will feed them? […]. I also fear if I will be able to see my friends here in Singapore again. It has been more than six months that I am stuck in my dorm with little indication of when I will be free to go

out […]". Therefore, Shohidul's experiences suggest that a common fear of losing their loved ones existed amongst MWs. This also led to the formation of a group of concerned MWs which has been analysed through collective constellation.

"When can we travel to Bangladesh?" is another common question during the interviews with the MWs (especially in April–July 2021). Most of the workers, interviewed between February and August 2021, were waiting for the borders to reopen so they could travel to their homes to see their families and friends. Many among them had not visited for more than five or six years due to work pressure or the aim of having a bit of savings. Nevertheless, a few of the MWs in late 2020 and mid-2021 had shown their desire to return to Bangladesh by the end of 2021. For them, their lives had become meaningless as they were unable to do anything in Singapore. They missed their families, so they wanted to go back and start a new business over there with the amount they had saved. And when the situation became normal, they would again try to return to Singapore. Many also stated that even if they longed to return, they could not do so as they had huge amounts of loans which they needed to repay. So, no matter how difficult the situation was, they must stay in Singapore and continue working. The MWs also organised themselves into several groups, depending on whether they wished to either return home or continue staying in Singapore. This shows how these groups of MWs established the sense of collective constellation among themselves.

Being Grateful: Commonality in Getting Due Attention

The MWs also experienced Singapore's "not-so-great" way of life. Depending on their nation of origin, they formed groups and remain separated from the rest of the country. Thus, an ethnic border was formed by everyday interaction between MWs and other residents (Ullah and Chattoraj 2018). As such, the MWs were truly surprised by the amount of attention given by the Singapore government. As Shakil, a 26-year-old Bangladeshi worker interviewed in June 2021, said, "We are the ones most affected by the crisis […]. And we are the ones with the least entitlements because we are migrant workers. However, the Singapore government's level of caring amidst of COVID-19, is a big surprise for all of us".

He further added that as "second-class residents" in the country, which reflected their sense of collective constellation as a "deprived class", he was quite certain that he and his co-workers would disproportionately be

affected by the consequences of the pandemic. As a general rule, MWs were not eligible for healthcare subsidies in Singapore. It is confined to satisfying immigration procedures and occupational safety compliance norms. They were only covered for acute care, not for specialist outpatient treatments, allied health (e.g., physiotherapy), rehabilitative, preventative, or mental health services.

Nonetheless, the manner in which the government handled the COVID-19 was considered more than sufficient. In addition to massive mass testing efforts and quarantine orders, free food, free data cards, masks, and hand sanitisers were also distributed. "Until today (June 7, 2021), none of us need to buy any mask or hand sanitiser. All our needs are being met by the government. Even today, when I return home from work, I remember that (it was in mid-January 2020, I think) I saw a pair of masks, and a hand sanitiser was lying on my bed".

Shakil added, "[…] there was food, and we got 50 GB of data so we could talk to our relatives and friends. We were overjoyed about the fact that we're at least in the government's thoughts". The gratitude felt by workers during the pandemic is therefore largely subordinated to larger felt systemic flaws that originally made them susceptible, so the attention given to them was entirely different from their everyday experience. Similarly, another worker Nisho, aged 29, who was interviewed in October 2021 and was in Singapore from 2016, expressed his gratitude to the Singapore government and his employer in the following manner: "Allah Almighty deserves my gratitude. Both doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine were taken successfully. I would like to thank the Singapore government and my employer for making sure I was taken care of".

Aamir, a 40-year-old worker, interviewed in November 2021, had been in Singapore from 2014. He echoed the same sentiment as Nisho: "I received the second dose of the Moderna vaccine. My sincere thanks go out to Allah and to the Singapore government. Thank you Almighty for keeping me healthy. But we should be very much careful. To prevent COVID-19, we should strictly follow all the rules and regulations as given by the WHO and execute them in our personal and professional lives […]".

The government also gained the trust of the MWs during this crisis by providing all kinds of assistance: "[…] I do not want to work in this company as they pay me very less (SGD15/day) compared to the hard work I do. I told them to give me transfer. But my company threatened me that they would send me back home (Bangladesh) and will make sure that I cannot return here again. But I want to work here (Singapore). […] If I go back,

my family will die because we have no one to help us. I don't want to return. […] I am now in quarantine, so I cannot go out. Otherwise, I am confident that MOM would have surely helped me as they did to so many of my friends". This quote was from Rubel, who was quarantined in July 2020, and because of salary issues, he did not want to renew his current contract with his company. His company, therefore, threatened him to send him back to Bangladesh and he would not be able to return again if he did not comply. I interviewed him in April 2021. He, however, believed MOM would provide some support if his problem reached them.

Additionally, workers like him felt immensely appreciative of the frontline medical personnel who treated them during the outbreak in the dorms. In many instances, medical professionals working with MWs proved to be reassuring and pleasant. Hakim, another MW aged 28, was interviewed in August 2020. He spoke highly of the medical staff there:

"The doctor was very nice to me and comforted me greatly. I had an incredible experience with the medical teams working tirelessly for us. Other countries would not have treated their workers this well". Singapore was also compared by several respondents favourably with other countries: "Some of my friends and relatives are working in the Middle East or other South East Asian countries. When I hear their stories, I feel really lucky to have come to Singapore. Though I agree that their living conditions are far better than us, yet the support, in terms of monetary and emotional, we receive here is much better than them. And during the COVID-19, we cannot thank enough".

Finally, in response to the pandemic, NGOs and the government worked more closely together to deal with the MWs. There was an increase in the demand for NGO services among MWs as a result of outbreaks of infections. Hakim mentioned how some NGOs provided direct support to their dormitories in 2020: "[…] there are several NGOs who supported and helped us in the troubled times. They provided basic necessities, like dry foods during Ramadan, clothes and many more. They even provided relevant information and helped us to resolve many of our issues with our employers". Shakil, complemented Hakim's statement and said, "The government is trying their best to help us through all these steps. I am, at least, confident of receiving proper medical treatment here". Another MW, Shribas, added, "In Singapore, even though the citizens are given priority, we as migrant workers were given access to the COVID-19 vaccine before them, which is unbelievable, but true". Here, the respondents are categorised as "grateful MWs" who had established their own collective constellation of being

grateful to the government of Singapore because of their support and help throughout COVID-19.

Notably too, the MWs' sense of collective constellation is heightened by their shared belief and trust in the Singapore government instead of their own Bangladeshi government. During the interviews, every single one of my respondents stated that they felt comfortable staying in Singapore because they had faith in the government's ability to contain the virus. Even one of my respondents laughed and said, "My family is glad I'm here. They are unconcerned about me. Because it is now safer to stay in Singapore than to return home". Respondents who had previously been critically ill and hospitalised expressed immense relief that the government had reimbursed their hospital expenditures for COVID-19. They were pleasantly surprised by the city-state's effectiveness in dealing with the pandemic and were grateful for all the support and assistance (Chattoraj 2021a). Especially compared to their country, many workers considered Singapore as the best alternative. "What did the Bangladeshi Embassy give us? Out of the large amount of money [that the Embassy has], only one packet of snacks [is given] but that is also not for everyone!" As a result, the workers are disappointed with their own national government. "We do not get any kind of help from our Embassy. Let me tell you, we only have holidays on Sundays, but our Embassy remains closed. So, if we need help, where should we go?".

CONCLUSION

This study showed that Bangladeshi MWs in Singapore shared a wide range of common experiences, collective constellations and aspirations regarding migration to Singapore, living and working in the city-state. They have experienced inequities from the locals with regard to medical assistance and living in dire conditions in the dormitories. Also, the MWs remained completely isolated from the rest of the residents. During times of COVID-19, the workers faced discrimination from the locals or other residents when their COVID-19 cases were labelled as "dormitory cases" whereas the cases of the locals were termed as "community cases" (McDonald 2021; Chattoraj 2021b). Over the past few months, COVID-19 has evolved into a flu in Singapore, and as over 96% of the population has been immunised, the city-state has begun reopening its borders and making life easier for the MWs. Since March 2022, as more than 90% of the workers are already vaccinated, they can enjoy spending time with their

friends and relatives outside the dorms (MOM 2022). Therefore, the creation of a sense of commonality and collective constellation was evident from the narratives of the respondents.

The MWs narrated their common long-standing issues which affected their quality of life: overcrowded rooms, poor ventilation, and dirty and insufficient toilets being the most common. However, COVID-19 saw several improvements in the dorms. During the time of COVID-19, the MWs also lived alone during quarantine, fearing that they might lose or be unable to see their dear ones. It is the desire to earn more money and have a better life that drives all MWs to migrate to Singapore, leaving behind their families and friends in Bangladesh. Though they face precarities in many aspects, they do not regret their decisions. The way Singapore treated them during the COVID-19 made them even more reliant upon the city-state. As long as Singapore functions effectively and efficiently, MWs will continue to respect its good governance.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Consent was obtained from all the respondents for participation in the interview process.

NOTES

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1 For details see: https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/sector-specific-rules/work-permit-conditions (accessed 6 April 2022).

2 For details see: Foreign Worker Dormitories: Building and Construction Authority (BCA) website.

3 According to MOM (Singapore). Based on data as of 18 March 2021 (accessed 24 May 2021).

4 These include, as emphasised by Wong et al. (2020: 1243), "the construction of a new purpose-built National Centre for Infectious Diseases and National Public Health Laboratory; significant expansion in the number of negative-pressure isolation beds

throughout the public hospital system; stockpiling of personal protective equipment (PPE) and masks; establishment of formal platforms for multi-Ministry and cross-agency coordination; development of a strong capability to perform contact tracing quickly and at scale; training of health professionals including in the correct use of PPE; and building more biosafety level 3 laboratories".

[5] Recreation centres are facilities such as supermarkets and food centres where the workers can go out and spend some time. There are eight recreation centres island wide, with the workers assigned to a fixed centre.

[6] For details see: https://www.mom.gov.sg/COVID-19/advisory-for-employers-to-submit-essential-errands (accessed 26 May 2021).

[7] FASTs are teams with nine officers from MOM, police, and SAF.

[8] Invisible expenses mean the emotional toll that the migrants endure upon leaving behind their loved ones and friends at home. These expenses are intangible to others.

[9] For details see: https://www.moh.gov.sg/COVID-19/selftestart (accessed 30 August 2021).

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