

Help-seeking behaviours among migrant domestic workers in Singapore

An exploratory research report

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In partnership with:





Research aims

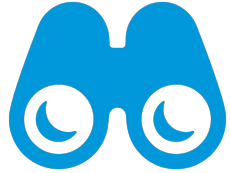
What are the different **types of help-seeking behaviour** MDWs can undertake?

What are the **barriers and enablers** to help-seeking behaviour among MDWs?





We conducted four main activities



Observations of
HOME help desks at
Lucky Plaza &
Peninsula Plaza



Interviews with
representatives from
HOME & FAST



Interviews with
20 MDWs



Literature scan on
help-seeking behaviour
in vulnerable
populations



Our MDW interviewees

Time period: Feb 2020 - Jun 2020

Recruitment: Interviewees were recruited through (i) posting recruitment calls in Facebook/ WhatsApp groups; (ii) in-person requests at known gathering areas on Sundays; (iii) contacts of MDW support organisations (HOME and FAST).

Fluency in English was mixed; translators (volunteers with HOME and FAST) were available at all interviews.

Nationality	Indonesian	Filipino	Myanmarese	Indian
Number of respondents	4	5	5	6
Regular days off per month	0 - 2	1.5 - 2	0 - 4	0 - 4
Length of time working in SG	3 years - 12 years	3 years - 15 years	6 months - 6 years	3 years - 13 years



Executive summary (1/2)

- Although we had deliberately sampled MDWs of different nationalities, we found that **different nationalities' help-seeking experiences were more similar than different.**
 - This does not necessarily mean that MDWs of different nationalities have equal access to help -- it is possible that (i) experiences may differ among those we could not interview because their access is more restricted; (ii) the proportion of individuals who need help differ between nationalities, which we would not be able to assess from qualitative interviews.
- MDWs came to Singapore to work because **they trust that the law and government here will protect them. However, they did not always know the details** of the protections to which they were entitled, or where to find help if they need it.
- The **primary behavioural barriers to help-seeking** were:
 - Lack of awareness about when and how to seek help,
 - Uncertainty and fear about the consequences of seeking help,
- These barriers were often compounded by high risk aversion; because MDWs depend on their income from work to pay off debts and support their families, they were reluctant to take actions which might affect this ability to do so.



Executive summary (2/2)

- **People most often sought help informally, from their social network.**
 - Problems for which they sought help ran the gamut from the everyday to the serious and urgent.
 - People generally progressed to seeking formal help because of encouragement from their social network -- without it, MDWs might wait until it is too late and when they have reached a breaking point.
- **Our findings suggest that the best way to increase help-seeking among MDWs would be to tap on informal help-seeking through social networks.**
 - We could encourage informal help-seeking by:
 - Providing experienced MDWs with resources to help others in their network;
 - Help MDWs who are new to the country build more social connections.

What are the different types of help-seeking behaviours?

Interviewees highlighted both formal and informal channels of seeking help



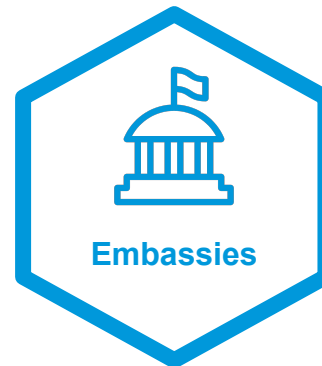
Friends and
family



Employers



Employment
agencies



Embassies



Strangers



NGOs
(e.g. FAST, HOME)



Ministry of
Manpower
(MOM)



Police

Legend

 Formal

 Informal

Friends and family played an ubiquitous role in providing support



- Almost all interviewees spoke to family members in their home country and friends (often other MDWs in Singapore) about the challenges they faced, regardless of whether they also sought formal help.
- The support provided by family and friends was both emotional and practical, and was frequently the primary facilitator promoting further help-seeking via formal channels.
- As well as providing emotional support, these conversations would often also include advice on handling conflicts with employers to resolve a negative situation.
- Where MDWs had contacted MOM, an NGO, or the police, someone in their network had often played a key role.
 - For example, telling them about the services available, lending them a phone to do so, or going through the process with them.

"I have a few friends from my village, and I know a few MDWs who live near me. I meet them when I go to buy groceries, and they are walking the dog or taking care of children."



Practical support came from **Singapore-based contacts**, but not all interviewees had them



- While friends and family from interviewees' home countries could provide them with emotional support, knowledge of support services available and the ability to provide practical help (e.g. providing a phone) came from Singapore-based contacts.
- The scale of these local networks varied substantially, and was often dependent on interviewees having at least one local contact when they first arrived in Singapore.
 - MDWs from countries with a shorter history of migration to Singapore for domestic work (e.g. Myanmar, India) may be at a disadvantage as existing networks in Singapore are smaller.
- In some cases, **strangers** (e.g. neighbours with had no prior contact with the interviewee) have stepped in to provide support, but this typically only happens in the rare case when the need for help is highly visible.
 - For example, a neighbour offered to call the police on behalf of an MDW because they had overheard fighting.



Employers can be a source of help for disputes with other household members or employment agencies



- Households often have several members, and some interviewees would ask the one with whom they have a closer relationship for help to manage challenges with another.
- Some employers also provided help when interviewees had disputes with their employment agencies.
- In instances where interviewees had relatively strong relationships with their employers, they were able to raise issues they faced directly with the employer and work together to resolve these challenges without seeking help from third parties.
- In some cases, where a relationship was not working for either party, employers helped interviewees to be transferred.



Interviewees who were familiar with NGOs were likely to turn to them for help



- Interviewees who had previous interactions with NGOs (e.g. taking classes, visiting the clubhouse) were quick to seek help from these NGOs and refer their friends who needed help there as well. These interviewees felt comfortable turning to these NGOs as they were familiar with the staff and other MDWs there.
- Interviewees who sought formal help with NGOs even though they did not share prior interactions were often referred to NGOs via **friends**.

“My friends from [NGO] are like my family. We meet every Sunday to eat and talk...If anybody needs help, I will refer them to [NGO] because I know they will help.”





Some used the **NGOs** as a way to reach **MOM**

- NGOs have existing arrangements with MOM and refer cases of abuse and serious contractual disputes to them.
- The preference for NGOs amongst those familiar with them likely speaks more to the positive existing relationship with them, rather than negative expectations of MOM.



HOME helpdesk @ Peninsula Plaza

“I thought the process would be faster for me if I went to MOM through [NGO].”



MOM was seen as a potential source of help, but attitudes were mixed



- Many (but not all) interviewees knew that they could go to MOM for help.
- Some interviewees believed that the Singapore government can and would help them. However, they sometimes worried about the repercussions if they were to seek formal help (e.g. their employer getting into trouble).
- However, other interviewees had negative assumptions about how MOM would respond.
 - For example, one interviewee had a poor experience with their country's embassy, and was therefore reluctant to approach MOM.
 - Another felt that organisations in positions of authority (including MOM, but also employment agencies) would take away MDW's autonomy because these organisations have more power.

"Singapore is safe, they will protect you. Not all employers follow what MOM says, but that is still okay."



Employment agencies are often a first port-of-call for help, but experiences are mixed



- For some interviewees, their agent was the only contact they had when they first arrived in Singapore.
- Some felt well-supported when seeking help from their agents, while others had much more negative experiences.
- Not all interviewees knew how to contact their agencies; some got their contact details through friends.
- Some interviewees also feared the repercussions of seeking help from their agencies.
 - For example, one interviewee had her passport taken away after reporting issues to her agent.

"My agent said that they will help talk to my employer and that I can either transfer or go home."

"I told my agent that my employers don't pay me extra when I don't take off day, but my agent said that if I don't want to go back home then I shouldn't complain."



Earlier experiences with the employment agencies may affect the sense of support



- Some interviewees recalled negative experiences from when they first arrived in Singapore.
 - For example, that the agency had given them very little information, or misled them over the size of the family with whom they would be working for.
- Early negative experiences like this might reduce an MDW's willingness to ask the agency for help in the future.
- However, those with a good relationship felt that if they needed help, their agent would be there for them.

"My agent treats me like family. I sometimes even go to her house for meals"



Police may be contacted in cases of violence, but they are rarely a first port-of-call



- Of the interviewees who had had contact with the police, it had been in cases where their employer was violent.
- However, outside of those who had already had contact, other interviewees did not raise them as a likely channel through which to seek help.
- Some interviewees talk about having reached out to their **embassy**, but it appears that embassies are not perceived as reliable advocates for MDWs or helpful in times of need.

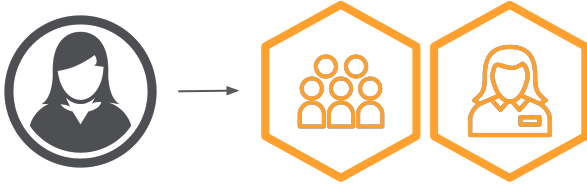
"I called my embassy but they told me to go back to MOM again. They took down my number, but never called me back."



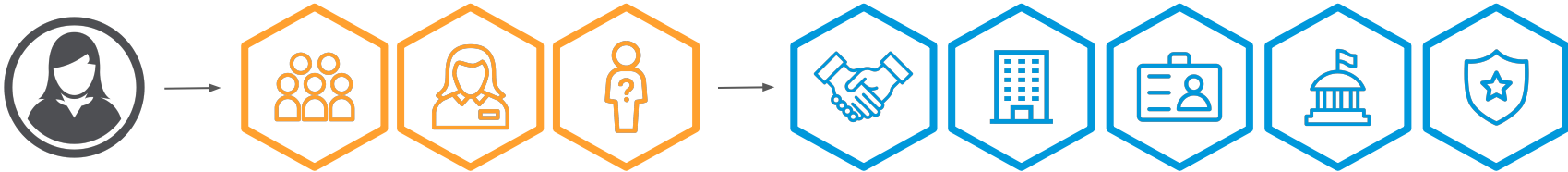


We identified three primary help-seeking journeys

Informal only



Informal to formal



Direct to formal





Journey: Informal only

- This journey has the lowest barrier to entry as it relies on existing social relationships that MDWs have.
- Even for MDWs in “good” employment circumstances, the experience of migrating to and working in a foreign country is a difficult one with inherent challenges (e.g., adapting to a new country, language barriers, being separated from family, feeling isolated and lonely).
- Help-seeking through informal channels - especially Singapore-based connections - is thus important to encourage and facilitate for the wellbeing of all MDWs.

Implications for encouraging help-seeking:

- How can we ensure that all MDWs in Singapore have access to local connections and networks?



Journey: Informal to formal

- For MDWs in situations of employment violations or abuse, the appropriate channel to seek help and recourse is a formal one. However, many MDWs may lack the knowledge or resources to do so.
- Amongst our interviewees who sought formal help, several did so upon advice and encouragement from friends and acquaintances. These informal contacts helped to share relevant contact details (e.g., for agencies, NGOs, MOM), or provide material support (e.g., phone).

Implications for encouraging help-seeking:

- How can we ensure that all MDWs in Singapore either possess knowledge of how to seek help through formal channels, or are in contact with someone with this knowledge?



Journey: Direct to formal

- Currently, this journey is often pursued only in situations that are more dire, or when MDWs have low access to informal channels and social networks. MDWs who see no other way out of their situation approach formal institutions like MOM and embassies, or run away to NGO shelters as a last resort.
- However, this does not have to be the case. NGO representatives we interviewed affirmed that their helplines are open to receiving calls for advice on less serious issues as well, and that addressing issues early could prevent further escalation.

Implications for encouraging help-seeking:

- How can we lower the perceived barrier to formal help-seeking?
- How can formal help-seeking be reframed as 'early intervention' rather than 'last resort'?

We identified three primary help-seeking journeys



Informal
only



Different situations call for different journeys

We aim to increase help-seeking for all MDWs, and encourage them to pursue the journey that is most suitable for their situation

Informal
to
formal



Direct to
formal



What helps or hinders help-seeking behaviour?



THE
BEHAVIOURAL
INSIGHTS
TEAM



Help-seeking in context

There is no universal story of what drives help-seeking.

- Some MDWs seek help because of verbal or physical abuse.
- For others it is because employers are restricting their freedoms and breaching contract (for example, docking pay, refusing days off, or stopping contact with family back home).

However, most help-seeking follows a succession of incidents.

- Of the MDWs to whom we spoke who sought help, it did not immediately follow a one-off incident, but was a response to multiple incidents.
- Based on studies in other contexts, people may go through more than 10 incidents before seeking help.¹

1. Wauchope, B. A. (1988). Help-Seeking Decisions of Battered Women: A Test of Learned Helplessness and Two Stress Theories.

There are many barriers to help-seeking, but the most significant enabler is strong social support



Many face **practical constraints** to seeking help:

- Lack of information/ awareness
- Financial obligations
- Language



Seeking help can be a fraught process, leading to **uncertainty aversion**:

- Fear of consequences/ repercussions
- Fear losing control



There are **social barriers** that must be overcome:

- Avoid 'burdening' others by sharing troubles
- Confidants encourage them to 'stick it out'



Many of the behavioural barriers can be overcome with **strong social support**:

- Day-to-day emotional support
- Source of information
- Triggers to escalate help-seeking



Practical barrier: Knowledge and awareness

- **Information asymmetry, lack of knowledge/ awareness limits domestic workers' ability to improve their situations.**
 - Easier for employers to take advantage of their employees (e.g., employers threatening to “put [them] on a blacklist” for being uncooperative).
 - Interviewees who have sought help in the past expressed that they would have acted earlier if they had known it was available.
- **Knowledge and awareness is low among domestic workers in Singapore.**
 - For example: Indonesian and Filipino MDWs (whom we might consider relatively more connected/ empowered) are not very aware of their workplace entitlements.¹
- **Low knowledge and awareness is generally reflective of settling-in process.**
 - Some MDWs reported receiving almost no briefing, and knew close to nothing about their employer or the work they would be doing.
 - Domestic workers who have been in a country longer are likely to be more well-informed,² likely from making more friends and being exposed to information on their days off.

“The first time I came here, I had no off days and I didn’t know anyone -- so the only person I could ask for advice was God.”

1. Yuen Xin Er, S., & Paul, A. M. (2020). The workplace-entitlements knowledge of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 18(1), 113-131.

2. Paul, A. M., & Neo, P. (2018). Am I allowed to be pregnant? Awareness of pregnancy protection laws among migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(7), 1195-1213.



Practical barrier: Financial obligations

- **Finances influence domestic workers' decisions about whether and what kind of help to seek.**
 - When money is involved, financial considerations are frequently the top priority.¹
- **Concerns about finances manifested in reluctance to terminate the employment relationship before two key points:**
 - When domestic workers finish paying off their debt to the agency (often at the 6-month mark);
 - When they ended their contract with their current employer (after two years).
- **Domestic workers were also worried that they would lose their job if they sought help.**
 - Practical worry: Family back home depends on their income.
 - Emotional debt: Sometimes when family members take out loans to cover agency fees, domestic workers feel determined to stick it out to show appreciation.

"I was afraid that if I did something wrong, I would be sent back home. If that happened, how will I pay for my son's education and pay back my loan? I think a lot of people experience this, but many won't speak up about it."

1. Dutton, M. A., Orloff, L. E., & Hass, G. A. (2000). Characteristics of help-seeking behaviors, resources and service needs of battered immigrant Latinas: legal and policy implications. *Geo. J. on Poverty L. & Pol'y*, 7, 245.



Practical barrier: Language

- **Language can limit domestic workers' ability to communicate to employers.**
 - This is of central importance because employers are most accessible to domestic workers, and employer can help with both personal and work problems.
 - Communication issues may also exacerbate problems due to frustration and misunderstanding.
- **Domestic workers who are not fluent in English also tend to be more hesitant about approaching external support channels:**
 - Fears that they would not understand what was going on, nor make themselves understood;
 - Worry that translation services would not be available or sufficient;
 - Increased uncertainty and fear of losing control.

"My employer was very angry with me, because she said do two loads of laundry but I thought she meant do one today and one tomorrow. She wanted two loads done on the same day."

"I'm interested to call the [NGO] helpline number... but will I have to speak English?"



Uncertainty aversion: Fear of consequences

- **Domestic workers who stayed in problematic employment relationships justified their choices by trading off abuses against the better parts:**
 - Focused on what they could tolerate, rather than what was right;
 - Driven by fears that (i) seeking help could make the current situation worse; (ii) the next employer could be worse.
 - This is also known as the status quo bias.¹
- **Uncertainty aversion exacerbated by multiple factors:**
 - Low awareness of entitlements, so domestic workers imagine more unfavourable outcomes;
 - Fears of repercussions by employers and/ or agents (e.g., withholding passport, phone use restrictions);
 - Limited margin for error because of financial obligations, so any missteps are potentially more costly.

“If people say they want to change employer, I will tell them: You know this employer -- but do you know the next one? This employer scold you, but maybe the next one will beat you.”

“I cannot say whether I will advise someone to come here to work or not. It depends on their luck. Maybe their employer is very good. Maybe very bad.”

1. Samuelson, W., & Zeckhauser, R. (1988). Status quo bias in decision making. Journal of risk and uncertainty, 1(1), 7-59.



Uncertainty aversion: Fear of losing control

- **Remaining in control is a high priority and important for well-being.**
 - Even in an unpleasant situation, having (or at least perceiving) that one's actions influence outcomes can make people feel better.¹
- **Relinquishing control requires a large amount of trust:**
 - Trust that the help they seek would not make the situation worse (e.g., make employers angry, lose their jobs);
 - Trust that if there is a language barrier, that they will be understood, that they would be represented accurately and fairly, and that options would be explained to them adequately.
- **Domestic workers trust MOM but still prefer agencies and friends in organisations.**
 - Agencies speak their language and trusted relationships already established with organisations; overall, these channels better able to meet specific needs.
- **Fear of losing control is tightly linked to fear of uncertainty.**
 - MDWs fear losing the ability to shape outcomes towards their needs.

"I think that if I call MOM, they will keep my problem private. But what if they visit the house and surprise my employers?"

"At the police station, the translator advised me not to make a police report because I won't be able to work if I did. I didn't really understand what was happening so I just signed papers they told me to sign -- in the end it turned out those papers were to open a police case."



Social barrier: Self-censorship



- **People might stop themselves from reaching out for help because of what other people might think:**
 - Project an image of strength;¹
 - Believe that troubles were a “private matter”.²
- **Domestic workers sometimes self-censored because they compared themselves unfavourably against others:**
 - “No right” to complain when others have it worse;
 - Did not want to burden others with their troubles;
 - Sense of obligation/ responsibility towards family.
- **Self-censorship can be especially damaging as it decreases likelihood that domestic workers access even informal help (e.g., receiving advice or emotional support).**

“Everyone has their own problems, you must learn to deal with yours.”

“That time, I didn’t know anyone in Singapore. But I also didn’t want to tell my family that I was sad or lonely, because they were the ones who borrowed money for me to come here.”

1. Ahmad, F., Driver, N., McNally, M. J., & Stewart, D. E. (2009). “Why doesn’t she seek help for partner abuse?” An exploratory study with South Asian immigrant women. *Social science & medicine*, 69(4), 613-622.

2. Green, O., & Ayalon, L. (2016). Whom do migrant home care workers contact in the case of work-related abuse? An exploratory study of help-seeking behaviors. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 31(19), 3236-3256.



Social barrier: Negative feedback from others

- **Negative feedback from others can severely set someone back on their help-seeking journey.**
 - Especially if the person giving negative feedback is someone trusted by the would-be helpseeker.¹
 - Example: One domestic worker's mother advised her to stick out her contract instead of look for help
- **Even negative feedback is given in good faith.**
 - People who discourage help-seeking believe that it is in the domestic worker's best interests;
 - Tends to discourage formal avenues (e.g., reaching out to agency or MOM) while encouraging or remaining neutral towards informal help-seeking (e.g., reaching out to friends for emotional support).
- **Three main themes in negative feedback:**
 - (i) Economic loss; (ii) uncertainty around consequences; (iii) appeals to virtue (e.g., patience, industriousness, forgiveness)
- **May deter future attempts to seek help, in addition to quashing immediate attempt.**

"It is not the employer[']s job to] adjust to you, you adjust to them [...] Don't run away because of hard work. You come to Singapore for what if not to do work?"

1. Dutton, M. A., Orloff, L. E., & Hass, G. A. (2000). Characteristics of help-seeking behaviors, resources and service needs of battered immigrant Latinas: legal and policy implications. *Geo. J. on Poverty L. & Pol'y*, 7, 245.



Social support is the single largest facilitator

- **Can be provided by multiple people:**
 - (i) Good relationship with employer; (ii) talking to other domestic workers; (iii) talking to family members.
- **Facilitates access to both formal and informal help-seeking avenues:**
 - Formally by encouraging and enabling domestic workers to access formal services e.g., MOM or agencies;
 - Informally by providing much-needed advice and social support.
- **Is trigger for seeking formal support was almost universally social support:**
 - Through encouragement and reassurance (“You should do this, they will protect you”);
 - By bridging practical access gaps (e.g., helping someone make a phone call);
 - Without this trigger, many wait until they reach their limit.¹
- **Formal support reserved for when domestic workers felt they were at their limit, informal support sought across the spectrum.**

“If I want to cry, I want to go home, any question I have -- I will call [domestic worker friend]. She is like my mummy.”

“On my way to bring the employer’s child to school, there was an Indonesian that I told my problems to. That lady helped me by calling the agency. When she said many people who work for my employer don’t stay very long, I had the confidence to leave instead of serving out my contract. Even till today I am so grateful to her.”

1. Ahmad, F., Driver, N., McNally, M. J., & Stewart, D. E. (2009). “Why doesn’t she seek help for partner abuse?” An exploratory study with South Asian immigrant women. *Social science & medicine*, 69(4), 613-622.



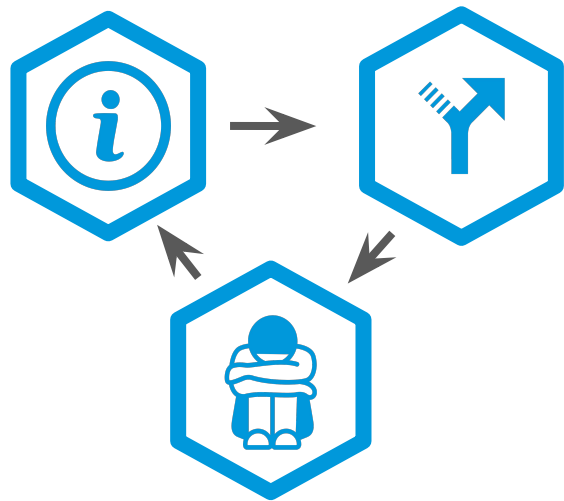
Tackling behavioural barriers

Uncertainty aversion and social barriers are highly behavioural -- these are more amenable to change, unlike systemic limitations (such as some practical barriers, which would be more adequately addressed through policy change).

To reduce behavioural barriers, we want to change the environment within which the decision is made, such as the informational or social environment. Some ideas we discuss in the next few slides include:

1. **Spread information about the (i) process, and; (ii) consequences of help-seeking widely** -- information would help to tackle multiple barriers including uncertainty aversion and self-censorship.
2. **Empower domestic workers to provide proactive social support to each other** so that they act as “triggers” for others’ help-seeking journeys.

Idea 1: Overcome multiple barriers by spreading information about the process and consequences of help-seeking



Each barrier feeds into another, and domestic workers often have to overcome a mix of barriers in order to seek help. For example:

- Less information creates greater uncertainty, which leads people to be less willing to seek help;
- People who fear losing control may avoid telling others about their troubles in case others try to provide unsolicited help;
- When people do not share their troubles, they reduce the likelihood of receiving helpful advice or information.

Increasing information around opportunities and consequences around help-seeking can have a knock-on effect on multiple other barriers.

- Clarity around what happens during the help-seeking process can reduce uncertainty aversion.
- Knowing that others have gotten help for similar problems may make help-seeking feel more acceptable and normal, thereby helping to overcome self-censorship tendencies.

Idea 2: Empower *all* domestic workers to provide proactive support



Women may be more likely to disclose problems to informal network contacts like friends and family first.¹

- Informal support is an important opportunity to advance domestic workers' help-seeking journeys by:
 - Providing emotional support and advice;
 - Forwarding important information from support organisations;
 - In severe cases, act as triggers for more formal help-seeking and bridge access gaps (e.g., by calling for help on the domestic worker's behalf).

We should maximise the likelihood that domestic workers receive the support they need by providing information to *all* domestic workers. This will support better informal help-giving.

1. West, C. M., Kantor, G. K., & Jasinski, J. L. (2005). Sociodemographic predictors and cultural barriers to help-seeking behavior by Latina and Anglo American battered women. *Race, crime & justice: A reader*, 161-173.



Barriers, facilitators, and help-seeking channels interact

Four case studies of help-seeking



Four case studies of help-seeking

In this section, we illustrate how the two sections above -- the choice of help-seeking channels and presence or absence of barriers/facilitators to help-seeking -- interact to shape an MDW's help-seeking experience.



“Aini”

Unreliable agencies can hinder the help-seeking process, as in “Aini”'s case. Social support helped her side-step the agency by providing her with crucial help-seeking information.



“Nira”

Reliable agencies, on the other hand, can make the help-seeking process much smoother. For “Nira”, social support was most important in prompting her to contact her agency by assuring her that it was okay to leave an employer.



“Thiri”

Fear of consequences and practical barriers were exacerbated by her employer's and agent's actions, preventing her from seeking help. Social support and information seemed to alleviate these barriers, although she had not yet sought help.



“Hayma”

Without any support to trigger earlier help-seeking, “Hayma” only sought help after she had reached her breaking point, by which time the most appropriate form of help and its consequences were very serious (police involvement and being out of work for a long time).

“Aini”: Overcome setback with additional information from social connections



STEP
1



Talked to her **agent**, but it resulted in her passport being taken away. She ended this step worse off than when she started.

Very little bargaining power with agents because they owe their agents a lot of money.

STEP
2



Tried to seek help again. On an off day, told her **friend** about her situation. Friend advised her to call an NGO.

Ended up calling an NGO because she trusted her friend, but was worried about how her employer and agent would react.

STEP
3



Called **an NGO**, followed their advice and took a taxi to the NGO.

STEP
4



The NGO helped her contact **MOM**. She successfully left her employer.

“Nira”: Social support was necessary to assuage uncertainty and kick-start the help-seeking process



STEP

1



Told her troubles to an **acquaintance** who took the same route when she brought her employer's child to school. The acquaintance told her that many people who came to work for that family did not stay for long.

Her employer did not allow her to use her phone, so she had to rely on opportunistic contact.

Being told that many other domestic workers had left the same family “gave [her] courage to leave before the end of [her] contract”.

STEP

2



The acquaintance helped her connect to her **agency**. The agency talked to her employer, and eventually she was transferred out.

Even when the agency was responsive and helpful, she still had to endure threats from her then-employer during the period between the agency speaking to her employers and her transfer out.

“Thiri”: Barriers exacerbated by employer and agent restrictions, alleviated by social connections



When she tried to speak to her **agent** about being paid for working on off days, her agent threatened her and said that if she did not want to go back to her home country then she should not complain.



When she wanted to take a course to improve her English, her **employers** did not allow her to. They thought improving her English would make it easier for her to talk to other people in Singapore, which they did not want.



She was afraid to report her situation to **MOM** as she did not want her contract to be terminated.



She had not heard of **NGOs** before, and was interested to hear more. However, she was worried that she would have to speak in English.

Her agent told her employers that it was not necessary to pay her.

Her employers are okay with her talking to friends in her home country, but are against her having any friends in Singapore.

Assuring her that translators would be available went a long way towards building trust.

Seeking help



She had a few **friends** who were from her village or live around the area. She could only talk to them when she left the house, or when her employer was not around. Accompanying one of those friends during a grocery run was how we came to interview her.



“Hayma”: No support to trigger earlier help-seeking

STEP
1



Used a public phone to call an **acquaintance** when she could not tolerate working for her employer anymore.

Endured multiple instances of abuse (both physical and verbal) before reaching a “breaking point”.

STEP
2



Acquaintance helped her call the **police**, who turned up at her employer’s home and removed her from the situation.

The person she called was not well known to her. It was another girl from her village who was also working in Singapore, and whose number her mother had given her before she left home.

STEP
3



As of the date of the interview, the domestic worker was staying in **an NGO’s** shelter.

Because it was a police case, she had to stay in Singapore without work for an extended period of time.

Conclusion



What have we learnt about help-seeking?

- There are **multiple channels** available for MDWs to seek help.
 - **Informal:** Friends, employers, strangers
 - **Formal:** Agencies, NGOs, MOM, embassies, police
- Help-seeking via **informal** channels (e.g. talking to friends) is common. Friends also sometimes provide resources to access formal channels. MDWs with good relationships with their employers sometimes seek help from them too.
- **Agencies** have a critical role as the main formal channel with whom MDWs have existing contact, but the quality of help provided by agencies varies significantly.
- MDWs with existing contact with **NGOs** are comfortable seeking help from them, and often refer others to them for help.



What have we learnt about help-seeking?

- **MOM, embassies, and the police** are often contacted only in the most dire situations, where MDWs perceive no other way out. Prior to seeking help from these channels, MDWs are often worried about the consequences of seeking such formal help on their ability to work and earn income in Singapore.
- **Help-seeking is beneficial to all MDWs**, but the ideal help-seeking journey depends on an MDW's situation. For some, it is sufficient to only seek help via informal channels, while others may benefit from reaching out to formal channels as well.



What helps or hinders help-seeking?

- With the exception of those who have no phone access or opportunity to leave the house, **practical** barriers to help-seeking are surmountable.
 - MDWs often keep in contact with friends via phone/ social media; NGOs provide clear helpline numbers and help desks are well-located
- However, **behavioural** barriers to directly access formal channels are high; MDWs who do so are often already in dire situations and see no other way out.
- The biggest behavioural barrier to help-seeking is **uncertainty aversion**-- MDWs cannot be sure of what will happen if they seek help, and some prefer to endure their situation than risk a worse outcome.
- Having a **social network** is crucial-- talking to friends is a form of seeking help in itself, and friends often refer MDWs who lack knowledge to formal channels, and provide them with encouragement and support.

What does this study tell us about how to increase help-seeking?



1. **Increase knowledge** around accessing formal channels.
 - a. Who is best placed to share this knowledge?
 - b. Are there already existing materials that should be circulated more widely?
2. **Reduce the uncertainty** MDWs experience prior to seeking help.
 - a. What information can we share that would allay MDWs' fears?
 - b. What safeguards or protections can be put in place to mitigate the worst outcomes?
 - c. How can we make responses to help-seeking (e.g., from agencies or friends) more reliable?
3. **Create social networks** for those with few existing connections.
 - a. How can we better promote the formation of social connections within channels where MDWs already have opportunities to meet others (e.g., at agencies or training programmes)?
 - b. Can we create new opportunities for MDWs to form social connections?
 - c. Are there any existing programmes we might want to scale up?

End

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