

An exploratory study to identify the challenges, expectations and needs of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) caring for seniors

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THIRD SINGAPORE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2024

FRI 7 JUN 2024, NUS SHAW FOUNDATION ALUMNI HOUSE

Caregiving to seniors is often performed by live-in foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore, one of the fastest-ageing nations with one of the world's lowest fertility rates and longest life expectancies.

The pilot study with social worker interviewers focused on four FDWs from SASCO's first caregiver support group. Data collection began with a Zarit Burden Interview (ZBI), a day in the life of a caregiver and a semi-structured interview.

Transcribed data was analysed through thematic analysis. Findings supported caregiver struggles with communication due to language barriers. They suggested caregiving expectations were met with financial support from employers who were not the care recipients nor living together with the caregiver FDW and senior. Lastly, the needs ranged from emotional and social dimensions to personal and professional development. The study highlights the lack of immediate assistance, coping with challenges alone and how the support group can provide psychosocial aid and facilitate learning.

Abstract



Motivation

Besides family, caregiving to seniors is often performed by live-in foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore, one of the fastest-ageing nations with one of the world's lowest fertility rates and longest life expectancies.

Apparently, “a lack of evidence-based literature on the well-being and perceptions of caregivers in Singapore” (NCSS, 2022, p. 8)

Most research has been on seniors, omitting the interrelation of their subjective state to the well-being of the primary caregiver (Gérain & Zech, 2019; NCSS, 2022).

SASCO initiated home-based caregiver training in 2023:
i) to increase caregiving competencies on daily needs and mobility &
ii) to influence quality of care.



Research question

What are the **challenges**, **expectations** and **needs** of foreign domestic workers (**FDWs**) who are **caregivers** of **elderly clients** attending SASCO's senior care centres?

Value add

1. Give **voice** to **caregiver FDWs** who are not often heard in Singapore society.
2. Help SASCO effectively **assist FDWs**
 - i. in **reducing caregiver burden** through training and peer support in the short term &
 - ii. the development of strategies for **empowerment, collaboration and sustainability** in the long run.
3. Contribute **new knowledge** to existing literature.



Outline of sharing



RESEARCH
DESIGN



DATA



RESULTS



LIMITATIONS



CONCLUSION

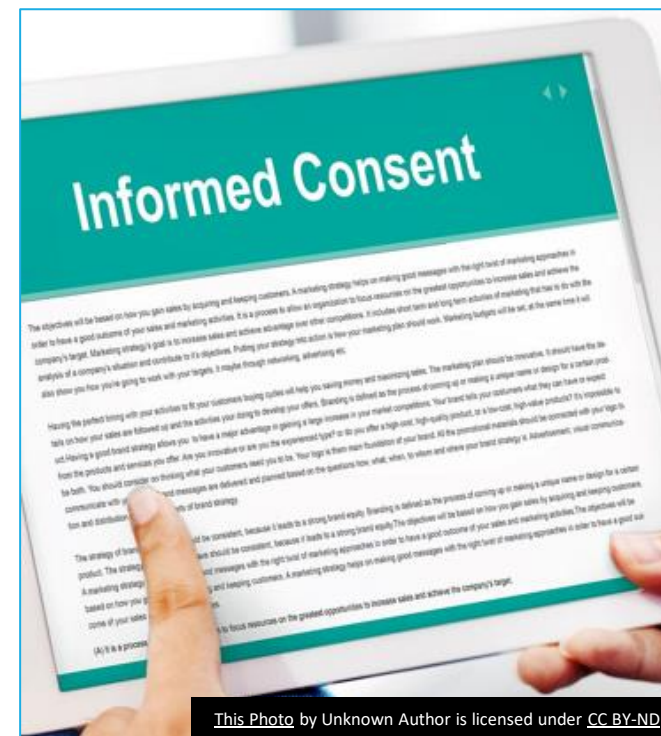
A. Research design

- To ensure that the **welfare** and **rights** of human study **participants** are **protected**.
- SSAs are encouraged to have their research studies undergo ethical review and approval before commencing.

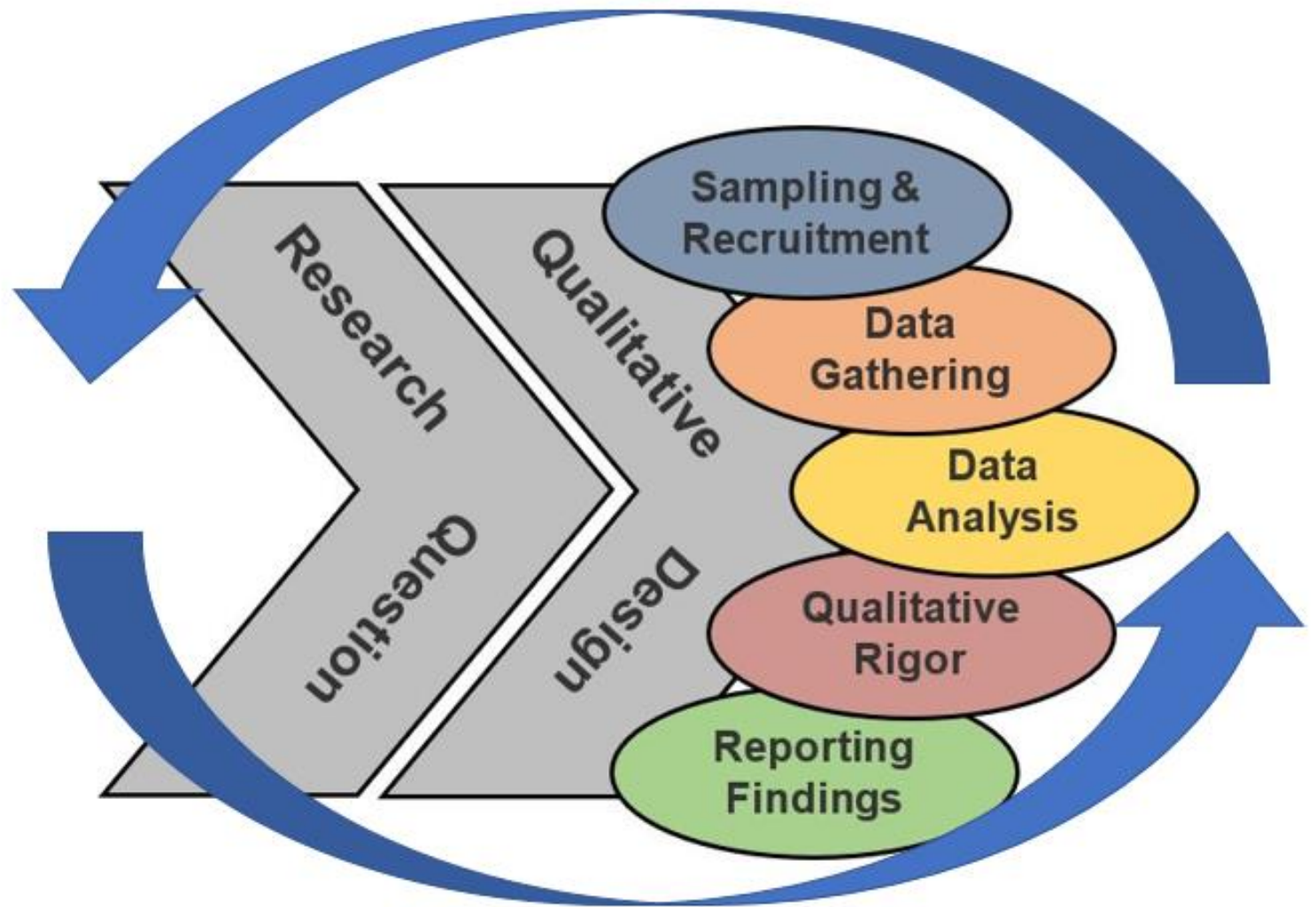


Informed consent

- Ethical approval granted by **NCSS Ethics Research Committee (ERC)**
- Informed consent obtained from both employers and **FDWs** for the **interview** and **audio recording**.
- **Anonymity** and **confidentiality** were assured.
- **Eligibility** conditions
 - FDWs who were **primary caregivers** of seniors for at least **3 months**, a **member of SASCO's Caregiver Support Group (SCGSG)** and had completed some **training**



B. Data



Data collection

The 22-item Zarit Burden Interview (ZBI) (Zarit et al., 1980)

A day in the life of a FDW (what a FDW did during a typical 24-hour day)

A semi-structured interview (gathering of qualitative data) based on the critical incident approach (Byrne, 2001; FitzGerald et al., 2008)



The Zarit
Burden
Interview (ZBI)
– first 10 of 22
items

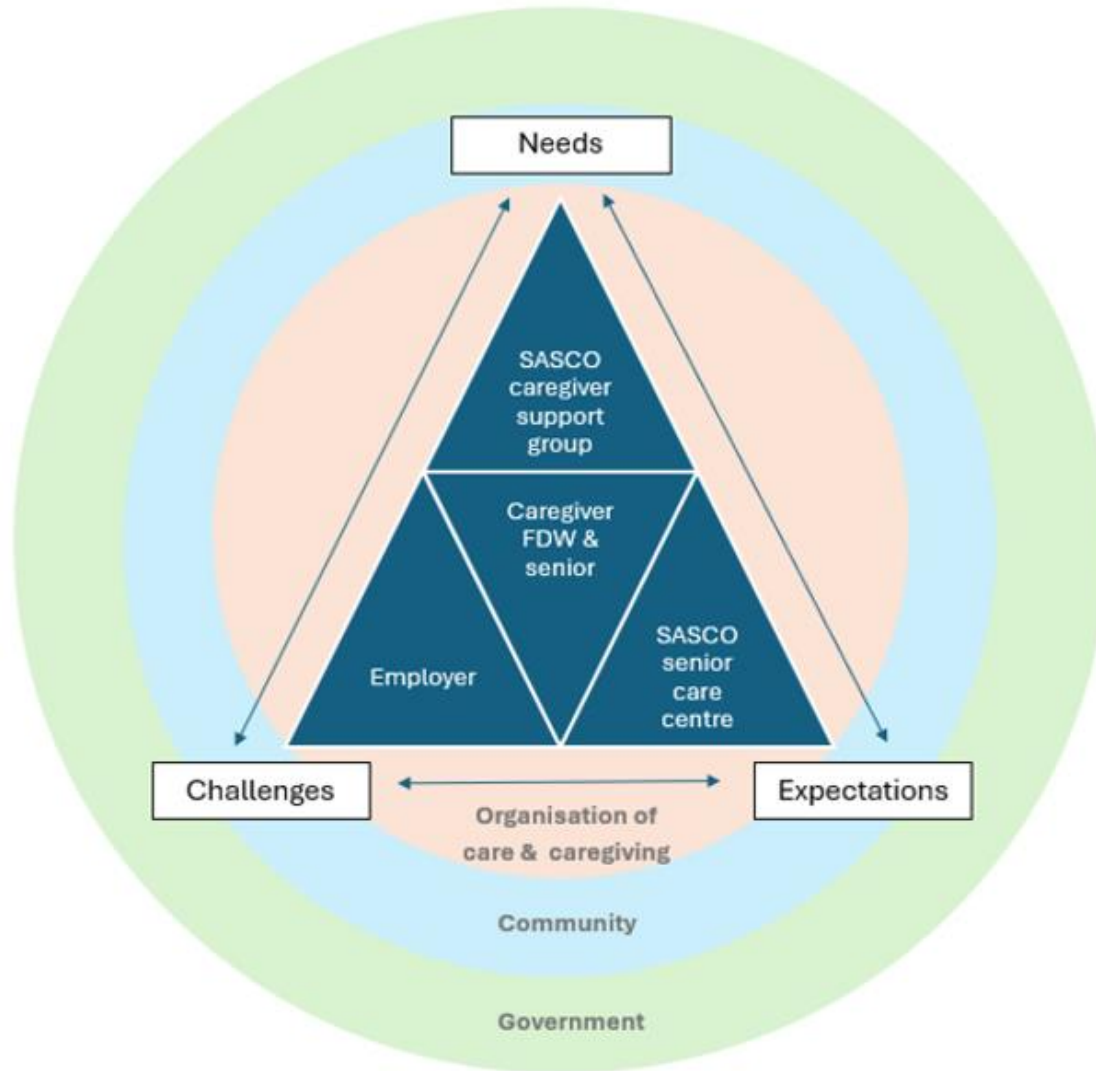
S/N	ZBI item	0 NEVER	1 RARELY	2 SOMETIMES	3 QUITE FREQUENTLY	4 NEARLY ALWAYS
1	Do you feel that the older person asks for more help than he/she needs?	0	1	2	3	4
2	Do you feel that because of the time you spend with the older person that you don't have enough time for yourself?	0	1	2	3	4
3	Do you feel stressed between caring for the older person and trying to meet other responsibilities for your family or work?	0	1	2	3	4
4	Do you feel embarrassed over the older person's behavior?	0	1	2	3	4
5	Do you feel angry when you are around the older person?	0	1	2	3	4
6	Do you feel the older person currently affects your relationships with other family members or friends in a negative way?	0	1	2	3	4
7	Are you afraid what the future holds for the older person?	0	1	2	3	4
8	Do you feel the older person is dependent on you?	0	1	2	3	4
9	Do you feel strained when you are around the older person?	0	1	2	3	4
10	Do you feel your health has suffered because of your involvement with the older person?	0	1	2	3	4

Interviews

- Interviews were conducted in **January 2024** at **three SASCO's senior care centres**.
- **Four social workers interviewed four female FDWs**. A research team member was **present** for each interview.
- **Interpreters** assisted for **three** interviews.
- All interviews were completed, lasting about an **hour** each.
- **Transport allowance** of **SGD40.00** in the form of shopping vouchers was presented to each FDW as a token of appreciation.



FIGURE 1: The context and organisation of care and caregiving



Summary:

- i. **Three** were **Burmese** between **23-30 years** and **one Indonesian 31-40 years**.
- ii. All caregiver FDWs lived with the senior whom they were caregiving to in a **two-member household unit**.
- iii. **Employers** (sibling, daughter or son of the senior) **did not live in the same household**.
- iv. Their caregiving was in **direct care** related to age and ailments.
- v. **Domestic chores** were undertaken alongside **caregiving**.
- vi. Three **seniors** were female and one male with ages ranging from **66 to 84 years**.
- vii. All seniors attended a **SASCO senior care centre**.

TABLE 1: Profile of participants

FDW	Age range (23-30; 31-40; 41-50 years)	Country of origin	Number of years in caregiving	Number of seniors caregiving to	Training completed	Off days	ZBI scores
P01	23-30	Myanmar	3 years	1 female (66 years) in Maintenance Day Care*	Caregiver training in Myanmar	None	22
P02	31-40	Indonesia	10 years	1 female (84 years) in Dementia Day Care#	Centre for Education and Training for Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore	Once a month	32
P03	23-30	Myanmar	6 months	1 male (66 years) in Integrated Home & Day Care^	Caregiver training in Myanmar	None	27
P04	23-30	Myanmar	9 months	1 female (81 years) in Maintenance Day Care	Caregiver training in Myanmar	Once a month	25

The ZBI scores

Stag & Larner (2015)

ZBI version	Number of items	Score range	Suggested cutoff scores
Full ^{6,7}	22	0-88	0-21 little or no burden 21-40 mild to moderate burden 41-60 moderate to severe burden 61-88 severe burden ⁷ [hence >40/88 = high burden]
Short ⁸	12	0-48	≥17/48 severe/high burden ⁸
Screening ⁸	4	0-16	≥8/16 severe/high burden ⁸

Table 1. Zarit Burden Interview (ZBI) versions: number of items, score range, and suggested cut off scores

The 22-item Zarit Burden Interview (ZBI:) 0-88 and suggested cut-off scores: 0-21 little or no burden, 21-40 mild to moderate burden, 41-60 moderate to severe burden and 61-88 severe burden.

A day in the life of a FDW

- Unveiled a **16-hour day, waking up between 5am to 7am and sleeping from about 11pm**, not unlike the AWARE (2020) report.



- Work for average of **14.5 hours** a day.
- Juggle **caregiving & housework** responsibilities
- **84%** did not have a weekly rest day &
- When granted time off, it never spanned a full 24 hours

<https://www.aware.org.sg/2020/11/migrant-domestic-workers-caregiver-burden-aware-home-study/>

aware
HOME



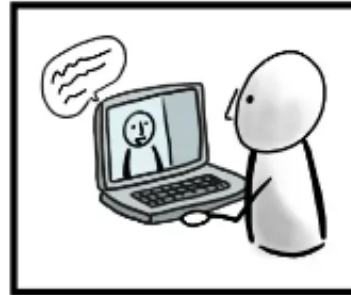
**Neither Family
Nor Employee:**

the caregiver burden of migrant domestic workers in Singapore

November 2020

6 Steps to Doing a Thematic Analysis

STEP 1
Gather your data.



STEP 2
Read all your data from beginning to end.



STEP 3
Code the text based on what it's about.



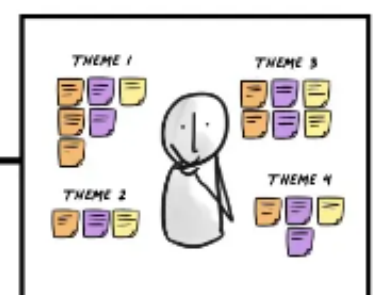
STEP 4
Create new codes to encapsulate potential themes.



STEP 5
Take a break for a day.



STEP 6
Evaluate your themes for good fit.



REPEAT AS NEEDED

C. Results

TABLE 2: Main themes and sub-themes

Keywords	Main themes (7)	Sub-themes (16)
Challenges (testing situations)	1. Communication issues	1.1 Communication challenges 1.2 Resourcefulness
	2. Caregiving challenges	2.1 Managing physical needs 2.2 Managing medical needs 2.3 Managing emotional needs
Expectations (beliefs upheld)	3. Contribution and competency	3.1 Positive outcomes of caregiving 3.2 Competence in caregiving
	4. Sources of support	4.1 Financial, informational and first line support from employer 4.2 Professional eldercare support from SASCO's senior care centre
	5. Relationship with senior and employer	5.1 Reciprocal trilateral support 5.2 Caregiver FDW-senior relationship beyond caregiving
Needs (physiological, psychological and growth fulfilment)	6. Ways of coping	6.1 Socio-emotional coping approaches 6.2 Contentions of day off 6.3 Wish for additional support
	7. Preparation for future needs	7.1 Aspirations and barriers 7.2 Expectancy of personal and professional support from SASCO's caregiver support group

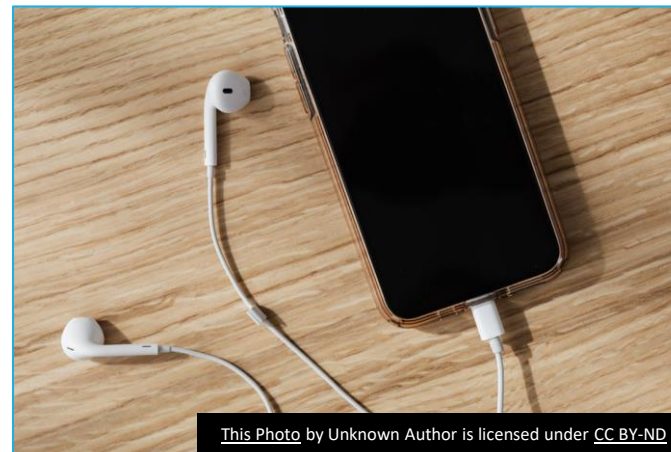
Thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017)

Challenges (testing situations) – MT1: Communication issues

Language-associated communication challenges well documented in studies situated in Singapore and various country contexts (Huang et al., 2012; Basnyat & Chang, 2017; Wang & Wu, 2017; Ha et al., 2018, Heng et al., 2019; Troy et al., 2022).

Resourcefulness to overcome communication barriers through observation, motivation and self-directed learning:

I will observe the gestures to understand what the elderly wants ... I will bring the food options to her so that she can point and select.



Through self-sponsored and self-study of both English and Chinese online for about a month, I understood better.

Challenges (cont'd) – MT2: Caregiving challenges

Changes in the physical and mental condition of the seniors led to FDWs expressing how they coped with self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 2002; NCSS, 2022), provision of relief and care through empathy and mindfulness.

Managing physical and medical needs:

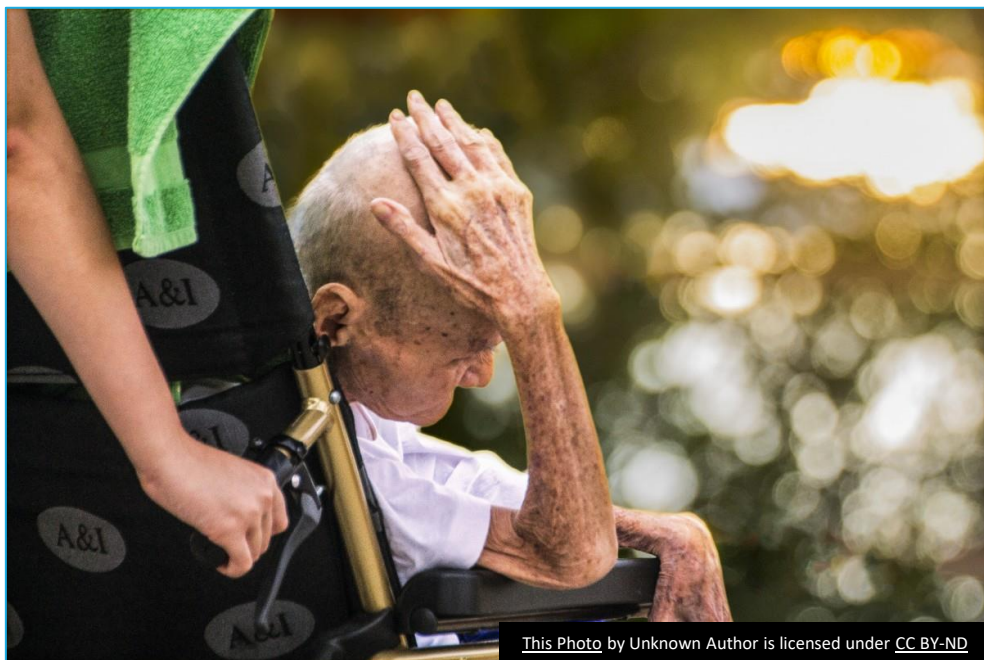
I am coping well with transferring skills learnt during training though I feel some difficulty due to Uncle's weight.



Ah Ma has a breathing problem. With the technique learnt during training, I was able to reposition Ah Ma and enabled Ah Ma to breathe better.

Challenges (cont'd) – MT2: Caregiving challenges

Managing emotional needs:



Uncle was unhappy about being “controlled” by his brother and expressed his unhappiness by taking it out on me. Uncle verbally rebuked me but did not hit me. I felt helpless as I did not know how to handle Uncle’s emotional outbursts.

Expectations (beliefs upheld) – MT3: Contribution and competency

Unlike AWARE (2020), where the effects of caregiver burden were the “limited ability to provide high-quality eldercare, compromised self-efficacy and fear of being blamed for incompetent caregiving” (p. 10), FDWs in our study affirmed their contributions and were satisfied with the outcomes.

Positive outcomes of caregiving and competence:

After I helped Madam with regular exercises and massage, she was able to walk better and without the walking cane. I feel very satisfied with my contribution.

I am able to carry out instructions and tasks with no mistakes made. Ah Ma is happy. Both Ah Ma's daughter and son who are my employers also acknowledge that they are happy with me.



Uncle's family members commented that I did well as caregiver and Uncle's health has improved. The family thanked me for a job well done. I felt encouraged that I am able to contribute to Uncle's well-being.

Expectations (cont'd) – MT4: Sources of support

Previous literature on caregiving by FDWs in Singapore had uncovered themes such as “mutual support” (Basnyat & Chang, 2017) and “seeking support” (Heng et al., 2019). The main sources of counsel and caregiving support for FDWs in our study were from i) the employers and ii) SASCO senior centre healthcare professionals.

Financial support from employer:



Uncle’s brother gives me \$800 every month to buy the groceries. I am able to budget well by purchasing items that are on special promotion. In the event of insufficient funds, I will inform Uncle’s brother and he will give me additional funds. I am thankful that Uncle’s brother is very supportive. This makes my job easier.

Expectations (cont'd) - MT4: Sources of support

Informational and first line support from employer:

My employer who is the daughter and a teacher will teach me English once a week. She also teaches me IT skills such as how to use Google, Internet and English pronunciation.



I will seek help from Ah Ma's daughter and son as they attend to my calls fast. Their instruction is to message them first and await their reply. Only for urgent matters, I am to call them.

Expectations (cont'd) – MT4: Sources of support

Professional eldercare support from SASCO's senior care centre:

I get support from the caregiver training in the centre and learnt how to use the wheelchair and how to use the walking aid properly.



<https://www.dperceptionritz.com.sg/sasco-hong-kah-north-senior-daycare>

I understand my role as a caregiver and ask the senior care centre staff when in doubt.

Expectations (cont'd) – **MT5: Relationship with senior and employer**

The relationship between seniors and their caregivers was unique and dynamic relying on mutual trust and respect. While there could be strain, there was also fulfilment (Montgomery et al., 1985; Mehta, 2005; Ng, 2016).

Reciprocal trilateral support:

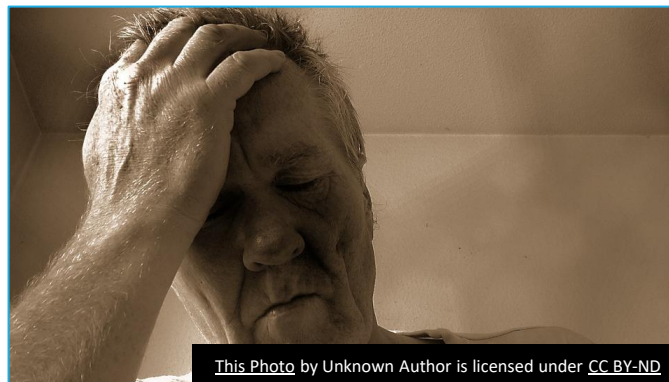


My employers, Ah Ma's daughter and son, have never shown their anger or unhappiness because they do not stay together with Ah Ma and me. Maybe if they were staying together, they might show anger or unhappiness.

Expectations (cont'd) – MT5: Relationship with senior and employer

Caregiver FDW-senior relationship beyond caregiving:

Uncle responded to me well when I offered him a cigarette. He calmed down and resumed normal conversation. I felt that I was able to reduce the tense situation and wanted more training in communication with Uncle.



Madam's sister tried to stop her from transferring money or opening online or internet banking accounts.



Needs (physiological, psychological and growth fulfilment) – MT6 Ways of coping

In the process of care delivery, FDWs experienced burden and inherited stress. They too acquired coping strategies to fulfil their socio-emotional needs, consistent with literature on the effectiveness of social support and self-efficacy in lessening stress (Bandura, 2002; Heng et al., 2019; Ho et al., 2023).

Socio-emotional coping approaches:

I will recite Buddhist prayers to be calm, listen to Burmese music and journal in a diary.



I am able to receive support from my friend who is also a Burmese caregiver whom I meet at the senior care centre.

Needs (cont'd) - MT6 Ways of coping

As for respite, two caregiver FDWs received one off day a month and two others none at all. Of the latter, their responses diverged.

Contentions of day off:

I do not have off days. When Madam visits the senior care centre, I will go out to see friends.



I do not have an off day as I would like to save the money in lieu of the off day.

Needs (cont'd) - MT6 Ways of coping

Living with just a senior meant limited immediate or on-hand aid within the household. Distressed, the FDW sounded the alarm to the next of kin and SASCO's senior care counsellor stepped in to assist upon learning the predicament.

Wish for additional support:

Telephone scammers
have threatened
Madam many times.
I have informed
Madam's sister.
I feel sad.

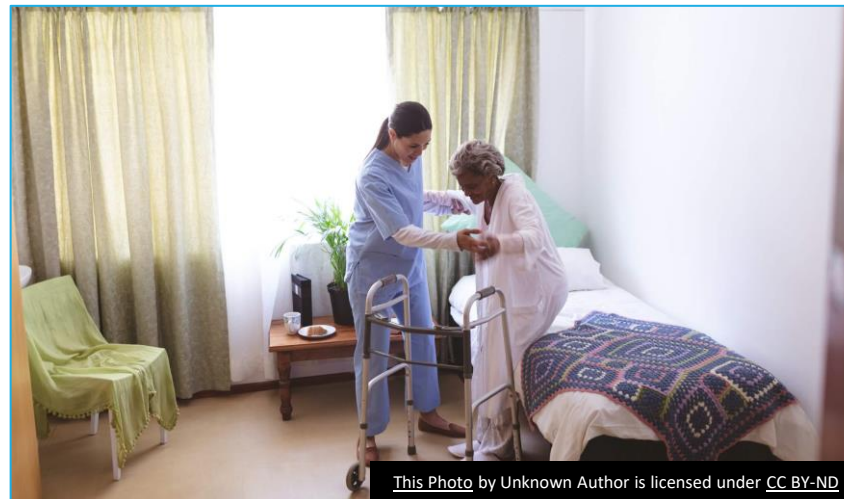


Needs (cont'd) – MT7 Preparation for future needs

While not specifically voiced, implications that caregiving in a domestic environment lacked personal growth and professional advancement were alluded to.

Aspirations and barriers:

I would like to work in a daycare setting or a nursing home.



My contract would end in two years and I would like to return to Myanmar to be with my family. I would like to start a small business with my savings.

Needs (cont'd) – MT7 Preparation for future needs

Participation in SASCO's caregiver support group served three purposes - i) sharing and listening to connect and alleviate burden among fellow community caregivers; ii) peer learning and receiving practical training and professional development to achieve future goals; and iii) relief from caregiving by suggesting recreational outings and learning activities.

Expectancy of personal and professional support from SASCO's caregiver support group:

The experience at the caregiver support group session was good. We share freely and there is a listening ear making me feel better and less burdened.



Personal improvement and healthcare courses that can help support my future career plans of working in a daycare or nursing home setting will be good. I would also like to know how to operate the blood pressure machine in the future and look forward to more training.

D. Limitations



Translation is a limitation when collecting and interpreting data in the **cross-language qualitative research study** (Squires, 2009).



While observation notes were taken during the interviews, there is the possibility of having **missed non-verbal cues** (sentiments and emotions) due to limitations in **cross-cultural understanding**.



The number of participants is **small**, though forming 50 per cent of SASCO's inaugural caregiver support group and might **undermine internal and external validity**.

E. Conclusion

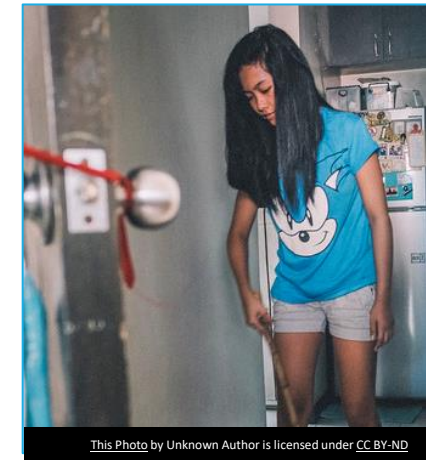
The foreign domestic worker is a caregiver who does not belong wholly to the “public” or “private” realm but instead occupies an “in between” space where she is often treated ambivalently, neither as a rightful family member nor a trained employee (let alone a professional). (Yeoh & Huang, 2009, p. 78)



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Burden, positivity & employer support

- FDWs experienced both **objective** (events, happenings and activities) and **subjective burden** (feelings, attitudes and emotions) (Montgomery et al., 1985).
 - Provided positive responses mostly. Only when **probed** did they mention the physical and emotional challenges of caregiving, expectations of additional caregiving support and their preparation for the future.
- Findings confirmed the **positive self-perception** and **overall satisfaction** among FDWs were correlated with adequate levels of **employer, professional and social support, personal efficacy** as well as stress management approaches (Bandura, 2002; Raina et al., 2004).
 - Of course, their acceptance and contentment with the live-in caregiving arrangement to seniors in a home environment could also be interpreted as the domestic employment in Singapore was seen as a **desirable option** juxtaposed to living and work conditions in their home countries.
- Importantly, **employers** provided **adequate financial support** followed by **informational** and **first-line assistance** to FDWs.
 - That, in turn, translated to **better caregiving outcomes** to seniors such as control, health, finance and family support (Cho, 2007; Østbye et al., 2013).



Negotiation of constraints & future plans

- The FDWs managed caregiving relief and respite through various **intrapersonal** and **interpersonal coping** approaches consisting of **personal faith**, **social networks** and **community support** rather than voice.
- To the best of knowledge, there was **limited research** on the **future plans of FDWs**.
 - The study found that while employment and environmental conditions, wages and any increase, in addition to own time and off days, were viewed optimistically, the **primary motivator** among the three **Burmese FDWs** was **learning** as much now and for the future.
 - They did **not** see the **current nature of employment** as long-term or **sustainable**.
 - Notwithstanding that most did **not** have much **savings** impacting on self-actualisation, they spoke of the end of contract and visualised their return to family with **clear aspirations** in their **home country**.



Findings on challenges

- The SCGSP could organise basic workshops facilitated by industry practitioners and healthcare professionals to address immediate and short-term needs.
 - The training curriculum could cover language, cultural adaptation, burden coping, behavioural management, financial accountability and cooking.
- Facilitators recruited should be able to communicate in Burmese or Bahasa Indonesia besides English.



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Findings on expectations

- The FDWs appeared **satisfied** with their current level of **contribution** and their **relationship** with **seniors** and **employers**.
- The SCGSP could fill the gap for supplementary support by providing **self-help information** and **caregiving resources** that could be in the form of **physical** or **virtual** materials in the **languages** of their **home countries**.
- Additionally, both **online counselling and in-person professional support** could be offered since seniors' emotional shifts and vulnerability to external factors were unpredictable.
- For **emergencies**, a **hotline** or **chatgroup** could be created to render resources quickly.



Findings on needs

- The SCGSP could consider rejuvenating strategies to relieve stress and educational activities to advance personal and professional development in the medium term.
- Stretching from sewing and art classes to tailored training for advanced knowledge and skill acquisition on operating healthcare equipment, use of measurement devices and dementia management, learning activities geared towards planning for the future of both seniors and FDWs could be organised.



The authors express appreciation for all [participants](#) who shared their caregiving experiences and [employers](#) for their support. We extend thanks to [Howard Tan Say Haow](#), [Teo Hui Ying](#), [Mary Hui](#) and [Jason Rodrigo](#) for their assistance in conducting the interviews and [Nilar Soe](#), [Myo Min Thu](#) and [Yoon Thaw Tar Htet](#) for helping to interpret. Finally, we would like to acknowledge [Seah Lay Hoon](#) for mentoring the research team and [Eric Song](#) and [SASCO](#) for organisational support.

Acknowledgements

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Q&A

Thank you.

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Full text paper available upon request.

Citation:

Koh, A., Rodrigo, J. & Ratnam, U. (2024, 7 Jun). *An exploratory study to identify the challenges, expectations and needs of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) caring for seniors*. [Conference presentation]. Third Singapore Social Work Practice Research Conference 2024. <https://fass.nus.edu.sg/swk/lcgconf2024/>