



Leaving to save ourselves

Recruitment realities faced by Burmese non-domestic workers in Singapore



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I. Summary of findings

This online survey was restricted to Work Permit holders of Myanmar nationality, working in non-domestic industry sectors. We had 172 valid responses. Although men formed the majority of respondents, 16% were women, nearly all of whom worked in the service sector. The men, by contrast, were spread across many different industry sectors, with the majority of them in construction.

A notable observation was that 10% of the 172 respondents came to Singapore from Thailand. We almost never observe third-country routing in the case of migrant workers of other nationalities, and this finding from among the Burmese workers is almost surely related to the political conflict ongoing in Myanmar. In the Discussion section, we will expand on this aspect and its implications on Singapore's policy responses.

On the other hand, just like other nationalities, a huge majority of Burmese workers rely on agents to find them jobs. We have strong hints within our data that at least some of these agents are unlicensed. Respondents also reported having to pay thousands of dollars to get work, with the majority of them paying by cash in Myanmar.

Our study found that about a quarter of respondents were asked to sign contracts after arrival in Singapore. Having paid large sums in agent fees, such a practice creates an unacceptable vulnerability; terms of employment in the contracts might be poorer than the terms that had been agreed to prior to their taking the jobs, yet workers are likely to feel they have no choice but to sign.

In addition, 11% of respondents reported that the job they eventually had to perform was different from what was stated in the official documentation issued by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). Doing a job different from the official documentation puts them in legal jeopardy.

II. Background

In the last three years, the number of Burmese low-wage workers coming to Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) for assistance has grown significantly. This is mostly the result of a concerted outreach effort initiated in the middle of 2023 through social media. Most of the Burmese workers coming to TWC2 work in non-domestic sectors such as construction, food service and other services.

“I love my country, but it has many problems. My mother said to me, ‘I want you to be safe, and you must leave.’

– A construction worker from Myanmar

TWC2 has been conducting research ever since we were founded in 2004, but much of our focus in the past two decades has been on Bangladeshi and Tamil Indian workers since these formed the great majority of our clientele. In the process, we have acquired deep knowledge of their circumstances and experiences coming to Singapore and working here.

We are acutely aware that it is not safe to map what we know of Bangladeshi and Indian workers’ experiences onto other nationalities. Burmese workers are not as concentrated in the construction, marine and process engineering sectors as those from South Asia; instead, they are often seen in the service and manufacturing sectors too. There are also many women among these non-domestic workers unlike the virtually male-only populations from India and Bangladesh.

Now that our social media (in the Burmese language) has reached a certain critical mass, we feel it is time to initiate some studies to better understand this population of migrant workers.

We know from our long years of working with low-wage migrant workers that the recruitment process often bakes in the vulnerabilities to exploitation and rights denial workers face through their period of employment. Lack of information, outright deception and large upfront payments deprive workers of autonomy after they have arrived in Singapore. This study therefore focusses on the recruitment stage of workers’ experience.

It should be noted that female domestic workers form perhaps the majority of Burmese workers in Singapore. However, they tend to seek help from another non-governmental organisation which is more experienced with domestic worker cases. TWC2’s client profile from the Burmese community is strongly skewed to workers in non-domestic sectors. For this and other reasons – and taking into account that recruitment pathways and worklife dynamics for domestic workers are significantly different from that for non-domestic workers – this study is restricted to the latter group.

III. Method

A survey form was put out on TWC2’s Burmese-language Facebook page and stayed up between 10 July and 18 August 2025 (slightly over five weeks). Participation was encouraged through an incentive: a \$10 mobile phone top-up for 50 participants drawn from among the participants. The survey closed on 18 August 2025 and the lucky draw was conducted on 28 August 2025 through Facebook Live.

Being an online survey, participants were self-selecting, but we had enough questions to be able to determine from cross-checking if the answers were likely genuine.

Dangling the incentive of a mobile phone top-up had the added benefit: minimising the risk of the same person responding more than once to the survey. To stand a

chance of winning the top-up, participants had to enter their mobile phone numbers, enabling us to cross-check for duplicates.

The survey made clear that it was meant for Work Permit holders from Myanmar, working in non-domestic occupations.

We had hoped to get 250 – 300 valid responses though we knew it might be ambitious. The non-domestic worker population of Burmese workers is visibly much smaller than that of Tamil Indians and Bangladeshis, even though no official data is published. Because it is more recent, the reach of our social media may also have less penetration into the Burmese community compared to other communities.

In fact, we did get 339 submissions, but we were quite ruthless in sifting out any that looked like they were outside our sampling criteria. After culling, we were left with 172 valid responses. The analysis to follow is based on these 172 valid responses.

Most of the survey questions were multiple-choice questions, but even when they were multiple-choice, there was room for some additional remarks. Respondents could write in both English and Burmese. When written in Burmese, TWC2 has translators in-house to translate them.

IV. Limitations

As an online survey with a medium-small sample size, we can make no claim about representativeness.

Moreover, the results are what the respondents say, rather than checked objectively.

Nonetheless, because TWC2 also handles cases, we are able to say that the data obtained are consistent with the individual reports from the clients who come to TWC2 for help.

It would be good if the government published statistical reports about population numbers, split by nationality, work pass types, industry sectors, gender, etc. Having such data will allow us to conduct more cross-checking about the reliability of our sample and their responses; unfortunately, such data is not available.

Under these circumstances, the way forward to be to conduct similar surveys from time to time to see if results are replicated.

V. Profile of respondents

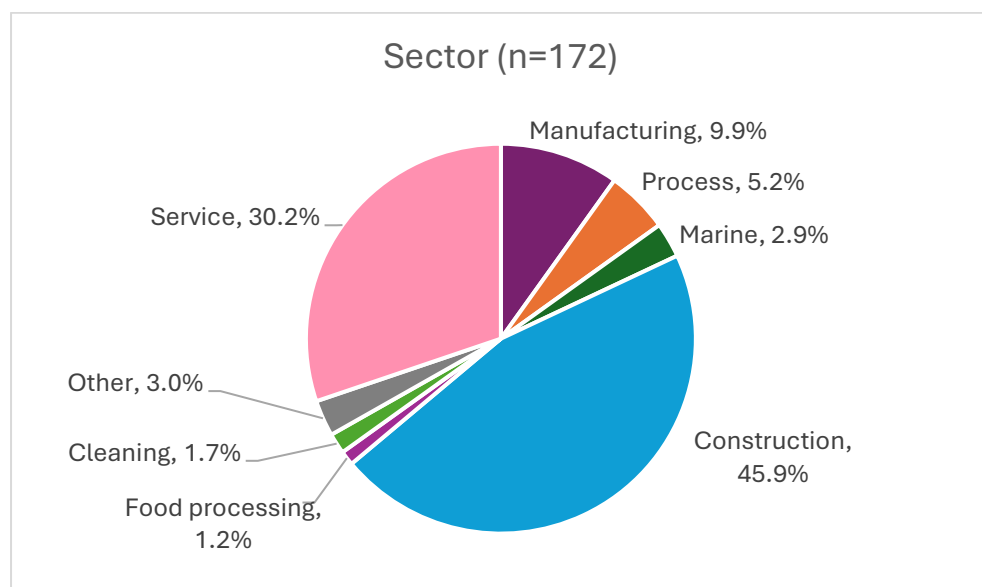
To be valid, a response has to be from a person of Myanmar nationality, holding a Work Permit in a non-domestic occupation. The great majority (84%) of 172 valid responses were men.

Gender	Persons	Percent
Male	145	84.3
Female	27	15.7
Total	172	100.0

The most common occupation was in the construction sector. At 46%, it is about half of what we would expect to see if we were surveying Tamil Indian or Bangladeshi workers, who are predominantly in construction. Also, unlike Indian and Bangladeshi workers, a substantial number of the Burmese were in the service sector (30%) with a notable minority in manufacturing (10%).

Inclusive of workers in the marine engineering and process engineering sectors, CMP workers (where C stands for construction, M for Marine and P for Process) make up 54% of the respondents, a slight majority. CMP is a term used by the Ministry of Manpower in their data, and this is the group of migrant workers that is nearly always housed in mass dormitories.

Sector	Persons	Percent
Agriculture	1	0.6
Aircon	1	0.6
Cleaning	3	1.7
Construction	79	45.9
Driver	1	0.6
F&B	1	0.6
Food processing	2	1.2
Landscape	1	0.6
Manufacturing	17	9.9
Marine	5	2.9
Process	9	5.2
Service	52	30.2
Total	172	100.0



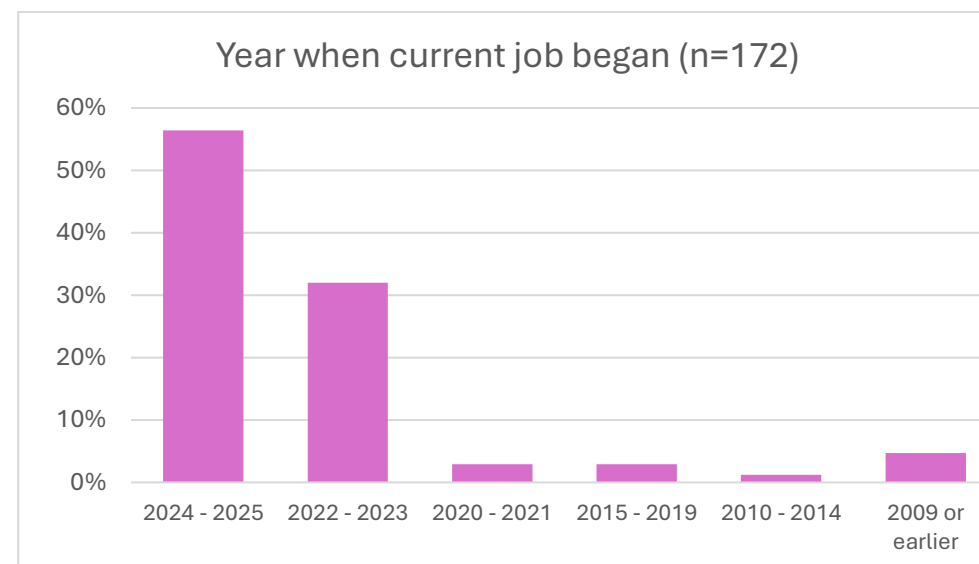
VI. Findings – all respondents

As mentioned above, 84% of our respondents were male. The most common industry sector they were in was construction (46%) with significant numbers in service (30%) and manufacturing (10%).

They had not been long in their current jobs. More than half (56%) only joined their current employers in either 2024 or 2025. A further 32% started in their current jobs in 2022 or 2023. Together, these two cohorts made up 88% of valid responses.

When current job began	Persons	Percent
2024 - 2025	97	56.4
2022 - 2023	55	32.0
2020 - 2021	5	2.9
2015 - 2019	5	2.9
2010 - 2014	2	1.2
2009 or earlier	8	4.7
Total	172	100.0

It should be noted that some of them could have worked in Singapore in previous jobs, so it should not be assumed that they were new to Singapore. However, we chose not to ask the question of when they first came here for their first job because we know from experience with Indian and Bangladeshi workers that many find the question (first job versus current job) confusing. It was also impractical in an online survey to ask about previous jobs and associated timelines, much as we wished to. Such enquiry is best asked in face-to-face contexts so that we can be sure the participant understands the question and gives a relevant response.

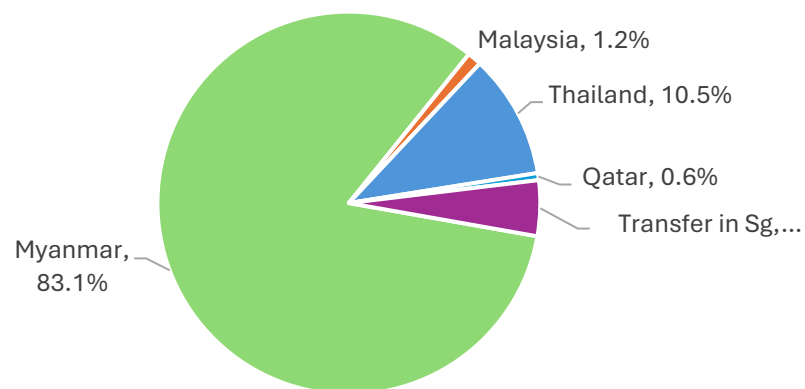


What we can say from this question is that only 12% of participants have been with their current employers for more than three-and-a-half years. It strikes us as a relatively low percentage.

A hint that few had worked in previous jobs here can be seen from the next question. We asked which country they came from to join their current employer. The percentage who transferred from one Singapore job to the current job is relatively low, at only 5%.

Where travelled from	Persons	Percent
Myanmar	143	83.1
Thailand	18	10.5
Malaysia	2	1.2
Qatar	1	0.6
Transfer within Sg	8	4.7
Total	172	100.0

Came to current job from where? (n=172)



Unlike Indian and Bangladeshi workers who, unless they are transfer workers, almost always come directly from their home country to Singapore for work, a notable minority of these Burmese respondents did not come directly from their home country. 12% came from Thailand or Malaysia. As Asean citizens, they get visa-free entry to Thailand, while Malaysia requires an e-Visa rather than a traditional visa. The e-Visa takes about 2 – 7 days to process. It is unclear if the rejection rate is high or low.

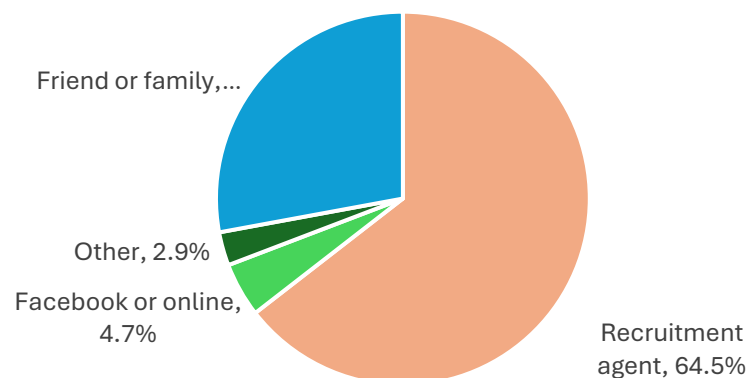
Political troubles in Myanmar have driven many Myanmar citizens to Thailand; this may explain why a noticeable number of respondents (18 persons, 10%) came from there. It is also consistent with reports from TWC2 clients who come to us for assistance; some of them too have travelled through Thailand to reach Singapore.

How knew of job	Persons	Percent
Recruitment agent	111	64.5
Through friend or family	48	27.9
Facebook or online	8	4.7
Jobstreet	1	0.6
Find myself	1	0.6
Job fair	1	0.6
Same company transfer from Yangon office	1	0.6
Worked with this employer before and knew this job	1	0.6
Total	172	100.0

Moreover, all 18 respondents in our survey who answered “Thailand” came to Singapore to take up their current jobs in 2024 or 2025. It appears that coming via Thailand is a relatively recent phenomenon.

65% of respondents said they came to know of their current jobs through recruitment agents. A further 28% said they learned about the job vacancy from family or friends. See pie chart on the next page.

How knew of job (n=172)



What is interesting, compared with Tamil Indian and Bangladeshi Work Permit holders, is the number who found their jobs online, something rarely reported by migrant workers from the subcontinent aside from scam victims. Even so, they were quite a small minority among our survey participants; there were only nine respondents (5%) who answered “Facebook or online” or “Jobstreet” (an online job advertiser). Four of these nine worked in construction, three in manufacturing and two in service industries. All were male.

Agents and intermediaries

78% of participants said they used an “agent” to find their current jobs. We left it open to each participant to apply his or her understanding of the term “agent”. From our casework experience, many report going through parties that do not hold any employment agency licence, neither in Singapore nor Myanmar. A better term would

be intermediary or middleman, but “agent” is less confusing to participants than these two terms, so we used it in the questionnaire.

We also know that it is quite common for there to be two levels of intermediaries (one of whom may be a licensed agency), despite the use of the singular “agent”, but there was no need to ask in the survey how many agents were involved.

Used an agent	Persons	Percent
Yes	135	78.5
No	36	20.9
Friend	1	0.6
Total	172	100.0

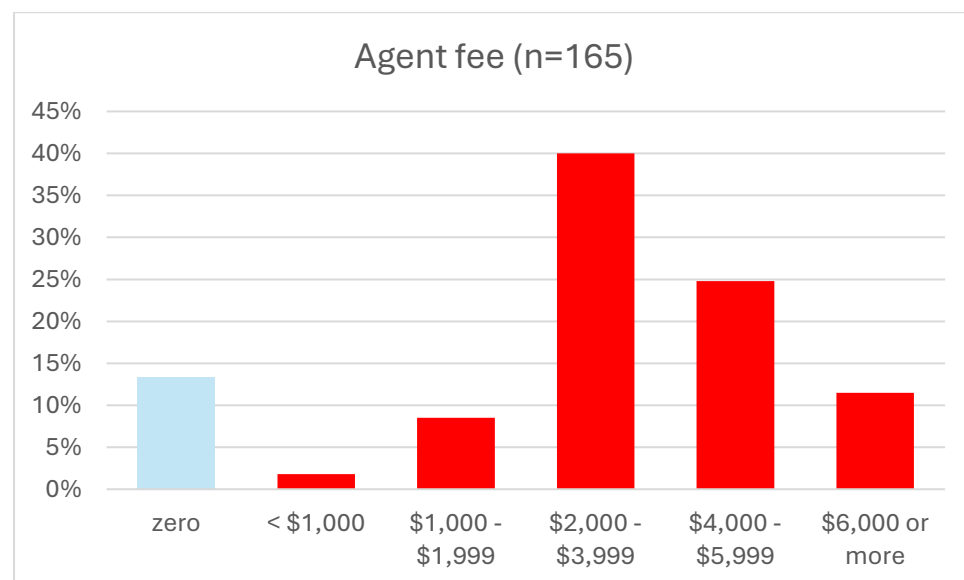
It is interesting that while 28% said they came to know of the job vacancy through a friend or family member, only 21% said they didn’t use an agent. What it means is that even if a personal connection may be the source of information, actually getting the job may still involve going through an agent.

Agent fee	Persons	Percent
zero	22	13.3
< \$1,000	3	1.8
\$1,000 - \$1,999	14	8.5
\$2,000 - \$3,999	66	40.0
\$4,000 - \$5,999	41	24.8
\$6,000 or more	19	11.5
Total	165	100.0
Unclear	5	
No answer	2	

A large majority of respondents (87%) said they had to pay for their jobs. While the above table and the bar chart below show their responses in bands, the questionnaire

itself asked participants to state as exact a value figure as possible. Some provided replies in Singapore dollars, others in Myanmar kyats. We converted the kyat figures to Singapore dollars using the exchange rate prevailing at the time that they took up their current jobs.

Among the 143 respondents who reported a figure more than zero, the average fee paid was \$3,733. The mean was \$3,100.



It will take a separate survey to establish what the average monthly salary is for Burmese workers before we can determine what multiple of monthly salary the average and mean agent fee represents. We chose not to include a question about salary in this survey primarily because we expected the Burmese to be spread over a wider range of occupations unlike the Tamil Indians and Bangladeshis, and typical salaries will vary considerably from one sector to another, adding a level of complexity to the study.

We also asked how they paid their agent fee. 69% said they paid within Myanmar, 28% paid within Singapore. A small number paid partially in Myanmar with the balance paid in Singapore. Especially in the latter group, more than one agent may be involved.

How agent fee paid	Persons	Percent
Via bank in Myanmar	22	14.7
Cash in Myanmar	77	51.3
Cash & bank in Myanmar	5	3.3
Subtotal Myanmar	104	69.3
Via bank in Singapore	28	18.7
Cash in Singapore	14	9.3
Subtotal Singapore	42	28.0
Via banks both countries	1	0.7
Cash Myanmar & bank SG	2	1.3
Cash paid both countries	1	0.7
Subtotal mixed countries	4	2.7
Total	150	100.0
No answer	22	

Nearly three-quarters of those who paid within Myanmar paid in cash, whereas two-thirds of those who paid in Singapore paid via bank transfer.

The next questions asked whether airfare and training were included in the agent fee. Participants were given checkboxes. If the relevant box was not checked, we took the answer to be No.

From our casework, we often hear of Burmese workers buying their own tickets unlike the majority of Bangladeshi migrant workers. That 75% of respondents said the fee did not include airfare is consistent with our observation.

Was airfare included in agent fee?	Persons	Percent
Yes	43	25.0
No (checkbox not selected)	129	75.0
Total	172	100.0

13% of workers said that their agent fee included training. We did not enquire what kind of training – this is better investigated through a qualitative study since there are so many possibilities – so not much can be read from this result.

Was training included in agent fee?	Persons	Percent
Yes	23	13.4
No (checkbox not selected)	149	86.6
Total	172	100.0

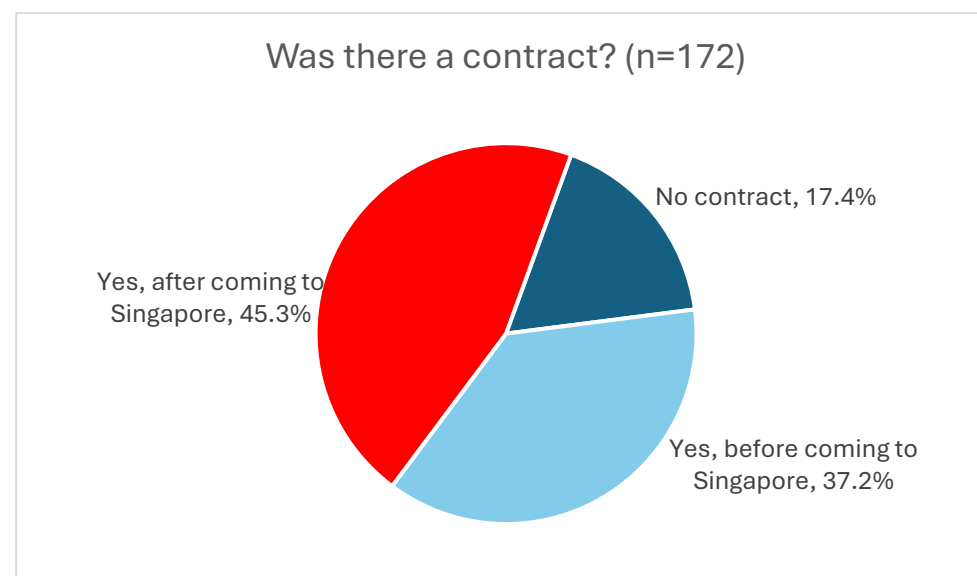
Of these 23 persons who said their agent fee included the cost of training, 16 were construction workers (over two-thirds). Four were in the manufacturing sector, and one each in process, cleaning and service sectors.

Contracts and the eventual job

Unlike Tamil Indian and Bangladeshi workers who seldom have written contracts, 83% of survey respondents said they did. Even if one adjusted for the fact that Tamil Indian and Bangladeshi workers are predominantly in the construction sector which is notorious for the lack of written contracts, it is notable that 65 out of the 79 construction workers in this survey (82%) said they had contracts. That said, there

remains the possibility that at least some respondents understood the term “contract” to mean only the In-Principle Approval (IPA). Thus, this finding should be read with caution until replicated in a future study.

Was there a contract?	Persons	Percent
No	30	17.4
Yes, before coming to SG	64	37.2
Yes, after coming to SG	78	45.3
Total	172	100.0



However, we know that IPAs are issued before the worker comes to Singapore. The worker needs to have it in hand when he enters Singapore. One can therefore be fairly certain that those who replied that they received a contract after they came to Singapore were referring to a written contract separate from an IPA. Of the 79 construction workers in our study, 30 said they had contracts after arrival. That is 38%

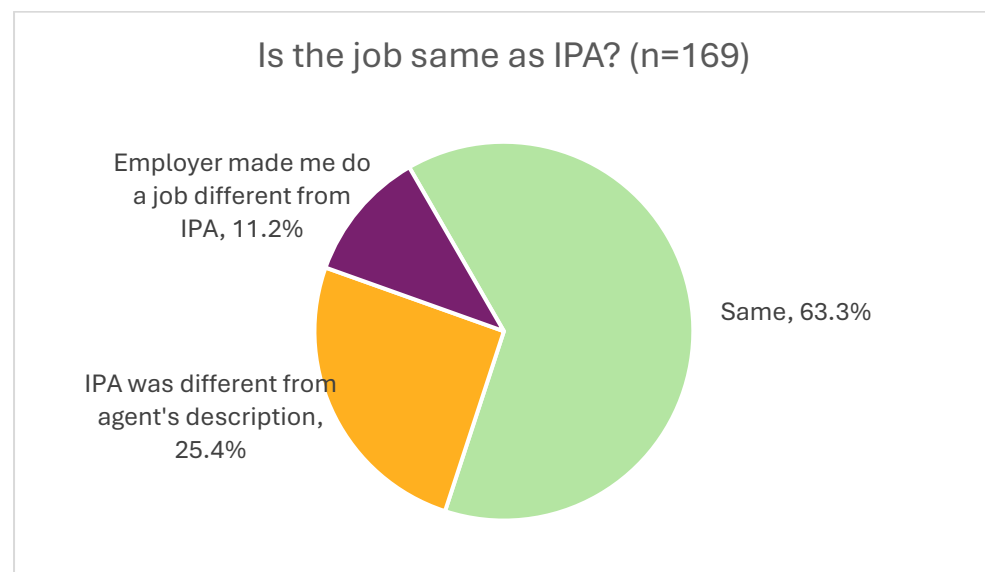
of our sample, a percentage much higher than Indian and Bangladeshi construction workers.

It's all very well to have an IPA that sets out the job and outlines the terms of employment. But did the actual job align with the IPA?

Is the job same as IPA?	Persons	Percent
Same	107	63.3
IPA was different from agent's description	43	25.4
Employer made me do a job different from IPA	19	11.2
Total	169	100.0
No answer	3	

One in nine respondents (11%) said they ended up doing a job that was different from what was stated in the IPA which raises the question of illegal deployment. However, it turned out that the more common problem was that the IPA they received did not even conform to what they had agreed with the agent in the first place. One in four (25%) said the IPA was different from the originally offered job.

Although our question was about the job, respondents might have understood the question a bit more broadly. In their answers, they might not only have been referring to discrepancies about the nature of the job, they could also have been referring to discrepancies between the salary promised by the agent and what was ultimately shown on the IPA. Nevertheless, whether about remuneration or nature of work, this shows a worrying degree of deception.



VII. Findings – by gender

Unlike Tamil Indian and Bangladeshi workers in Singapore who are almost exclusively male, both genders can be found among Burmese migrant workers. Women are visibly the majority, but most of them are in domestic work which is outside the scope of this study. However, even in non-domestic occupations, there are measurable numbers of women, as reflected in our sample.

Of 172 valid respondents, 27 of them (16%) were female. All but one were in the service sector.

Other than the difference in where they work (see the table ‘Sector’), there does not seem to be any other striking difference in their experiences, as seen from the rest of the tables in this section.

Sector	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
Agriculture	1	0.7	0	0.0
Aircon	1	0.7	0	0.0
Cleaning	3	2.1	0	0.0
Construction	79	54.5	0	0.0
Driver	1	0.7	0	0.0
F&B	1	0.7	0	0.0
Food processing	2	1.4	0	0.0
Landscape	1	0.7	0	0.0
Manufacturing	16	11.0	1	3.7
Marine	5	3.4	0	0.0
Process	9	6.2	0	0.0
Service	26	17.9	26	96.3
Total	145	100.0	27	100.0

In terms of how long they have been in their current jobs, the data for men and women are distributed in a similar way. A slight majority of each gender has only been in their jobs since 2024.

When current job began	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
2024 - 2025	81	55.9	16	59.3
2022 - 2023	46	31.7	9	33.3
2020 - 2021	4	2.8	1	3.7
2015 - 2019	4	2.8	1	3.7
2010 - 2014	2	1.4	0	0.0
2009 or earlier	8	5.5	0	0.0
Total	145	100.0	27	100.0

Nor is there much difference as to the route they took to get to their current jobs. For men and women, a large majority came directly from Myanmar, but a noticeable minority came via Thailand.

Where travelled from	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
Myanmar	122	84.1	21	77.8
Thailand	14	9.7	4	14.8
Malaysia	1	0.7	1	3.7
Qatar	1	0.7	0	0.0
Transfer within SG	7	4.8	1	3.7
Total	145	100.0	27	100.0

Again, in the next question – about how they came to know of the job – we could see no real difference between the experiences of male and female Burmese workers.

How knew of job	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
Recruitment agent	93	64.1	18	66.7
Through friend or family	41	28.3	7	25.9
Facebook or online	8	5.5	0	0.0
Jobstreet	1	0.7	0	0.0
Find myself	0	0.0	1	3.7
Job fair	1	0.7	0	0.0
Same company transfer from Yangon office	1	0.7	0	0.0
Worked with this employer before and knew this job	0	0.0	1	3.7
Total	145	100.0	27	100.0

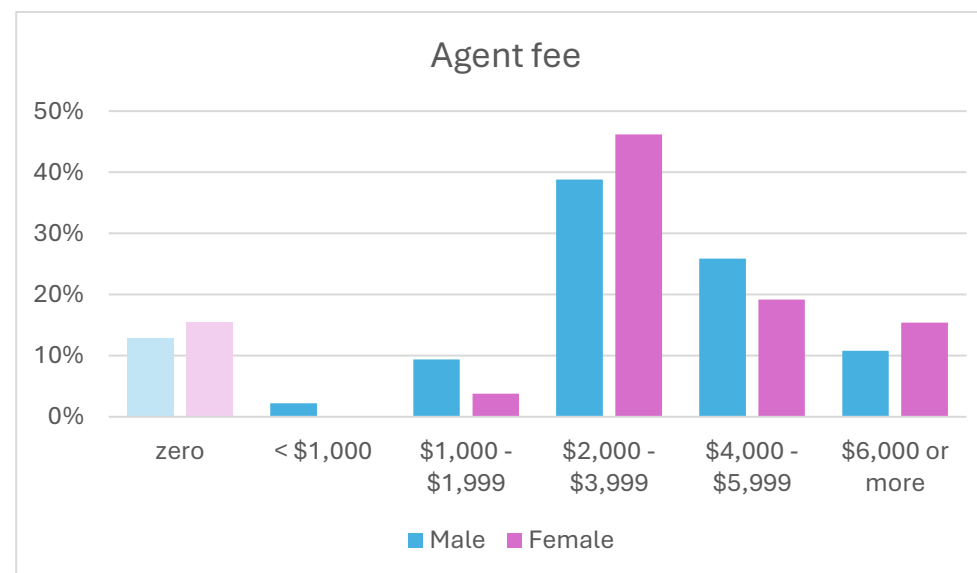
By gender: agents and intermediaries

With respect to the three questions we had about agents, their fees and how payment was made, no meaningful difference can be seen between male and female respondents. A large majority of each gender used agents to find their current jobs.

Used an agent	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
Yes	111	76.6	24	88.9
No	33	22.8	3	11.1
Friend	1	0.7	0	0.0
Total	145	100.0	27	100.0

For both men and women, roughly the same small percentage didn't have to pay an agent or intermediary, and among those who paid, the amount peaked in the band \$2,000 - \$3,999.

Agent fee	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
zero	18	12.9	4	15.4
< \$1,000	3	2.2	0	0.0
\$1,000 - \$1,999	13	9.4	1	3.8
\$2,000 - \$3,999	54	38.8	12	46.2
\$4,000 - \$5,999	36	25.9	5	19.2
\$6,000 or more	15	10.8	4	15.4
Total	139	100.0	26	100.0
Unclear	4		1	
No answer	2		0	



Most workers paid their intermediaries in Myanmar but about a quarter to a third paid in Singapore.

How agent fee paid	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
Via bank in Myanmar	19	15.0	3	13.0
Cash in Myanmar	67	52.8	10	43.5
Cash & bank in Myanmar	4	3.1	1	4.3
Subtotal Myanmar	90	70.9	14	60.9
Via bank in Singapore	21	16.5	7	30.4
Cash in Singapore	12	9.4	2	8.7
Subtotal Singapore	33	26.0	9	39.1
Via banks both countries	1	0.8	0	0.0
Cash Myanmar & bank SG	2	1.6	0	0.0
Cash paid both countries	1	0.8	0	0.0
Subtotal mixed countries	4	3.1	0	0.0
Total	127	100.0	23	100.0
No answer	18		4	

Was airfare included in agent fee?	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
Yes	38	26.2	5	18.5
No (checkbox not selected)	107	73.8	22	81.5
Total	145	100.0	27	100.0

When we asked what was included in the agent fee, we found that all 23 of those who answered with “training” were men. None of the women checked the appropriate box.

Was training included in agent fee?	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
Yes	23	15.9	0	0.0
No (checkbox not selected)	122	84.1	27	100.0
Total	145	100.0	27	100.0

This is almost surely related to the finding that nearly all the female respondents were in the service sector, a broad term that includes retail, food service, hotels, etc, and structured training programmes may be rare for low-level jobs in this sector.

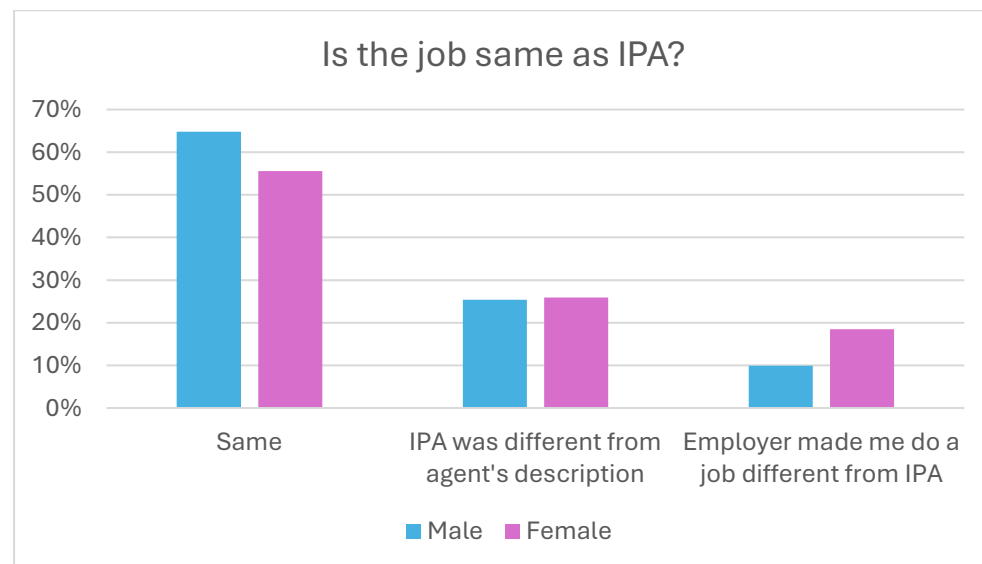
By gender: contracts and the eventual job

There is a hint from our data that women were more likely to be presented with contracts after they arrived in Singapore, but because the sample size of female respondents was small, we do not have confidence in this observation.

Was there a contract?	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
No	27	18.6	3	11.1
Yes, before coming to SG	56	38.6	8	29.6
Yes, after coming to SG	62	42.8	16	59.3
Total	145	100.0	27	100.0

For both genders, a majority reported that the job they ended up doing was what they had agreed to be doing, but a fair number of them reportedly differently. Either the IPAs had details different from what had been agreed with their agents or their employers made them do a different kind of work after employment began.

Is the job same as IPA?	MALE		FEMALE	
	Persons	Percent	Persons	Percent
Same	92	64.8	15	55.6
IPA was different from agent's description	36	25.4	7	25.9
Employer made me do a job different from IPA	14	9.9	5	18.5
Total	142	100.0	27	100.0
No answer	3		0	



VIII. Findings – construction sector

The three most common industry sectors that participants belonged to were construction, manufacturing and service. They warrant a closer look. This section looks at workers in the construction sector.

There were 79 respondents in this subsample. All were male.

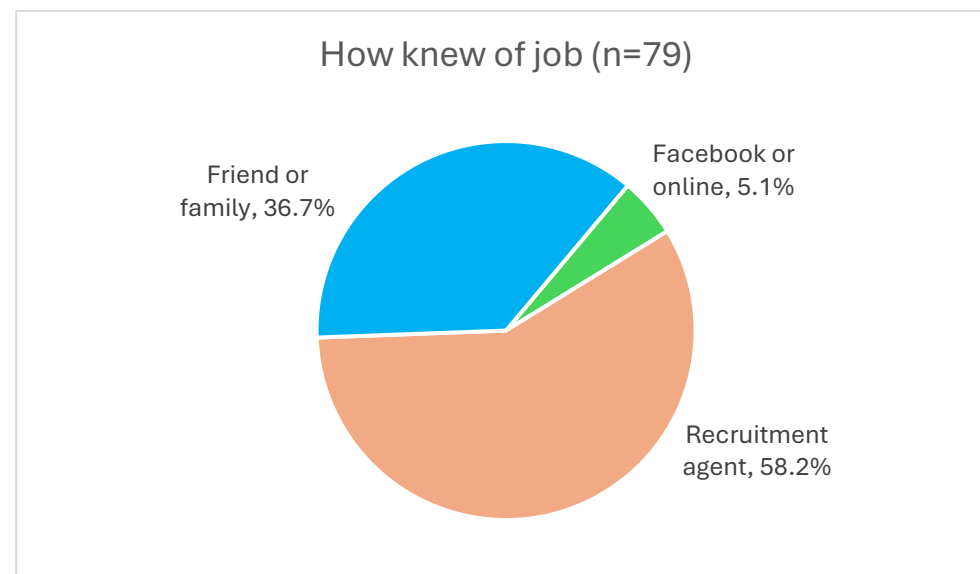
When current job began	CONSTRUCTION	
	Persons	Percent
2024 - 2025	37	46.8
2022 - 2023	32	40.5
2020 - 2021	2	2.5
2015 - 2019	3	3.8
2010 - 2014	1	1.3
2009 or earlier	4	5.1
Total	79	100.0

87% of them started on their current job in 2022 – 2025, but four men (5%) said they had been with the same employer for over 15 years.

Where travelled from	CONSTRUCTION	
	Persons	Percent
Myanmar	71	89.9
Thailand	3	3.8
Malaysia	1	1.3
Qatar	0	0.0
Transfer within Sg	4	5.1
Total	79	100.0

There is a hint that among construction workers, the use of agents is lower than for the larger sample (58% among construction workers vs 65% in the whole sample) and the reliance on friends or family to find the job is higher (37% among construction workers vs 28% in the whole sample). This is consistent with our observation from casework that the construction industry has a higher tendency to use informal channels in recruitment.

How knew of job	CONSTRUCTION	
	Persons	Percent
Recruitment agent	46	58.2
Through friend or family	29	36.7
Facebook or online	4	5.1
Jobstreet	0	0.0
Find myself	0	0.0
Job fair	0	0.0
Same company transfer from Yangon office	0	0.0
Worked with this employer before and knew this job	0	0.0
Total	79	100.0



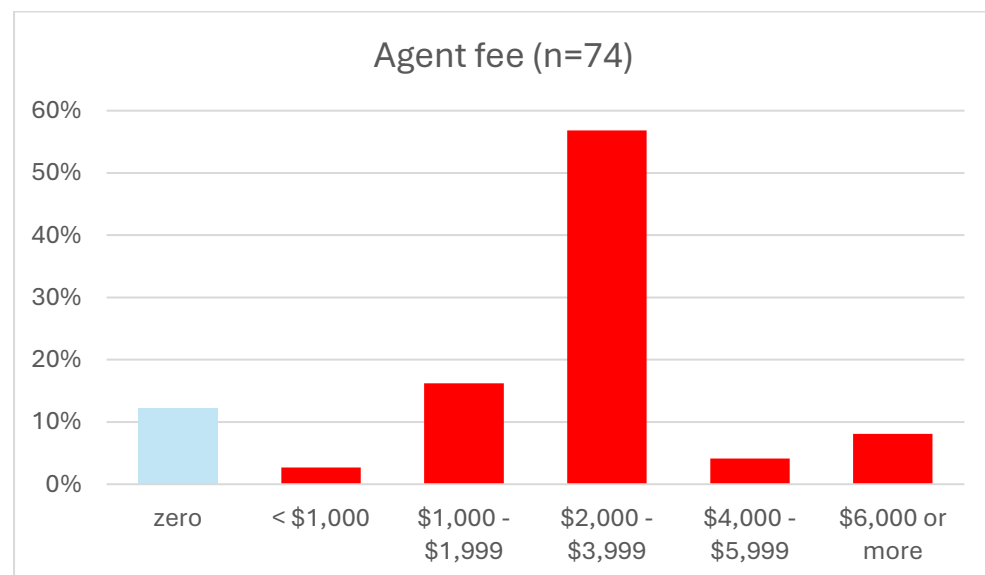
Construction – agents and intermediaries

Despite 37% saying they found the job through friends or family, only 27% said they didn't need to use an agent or intermediary. It appears that while personal contacts helped, in at least some cases, the contacts (or referred intermediaries) still expected to be paid.

Used an agent	CONSTRUCTION	
	Persons	Percent
Yes	58	73.4
No	21	26.6
Friend	0	0.0
Total	79	100.0

As with the larger sample, the most common agent fee band in the construction subsample was \$2,000 - \$3,999.

CONSTRUCTION		
Agent fee	Persons	Percent
zero	9	12.2
< \$1,000	2	2.7
\$1,000 - \$1,999	12	16.2
\$2,000 - \$3,999	42	56.8
\$4,000 - \$5,999	3	4.1
\$6,000 or more	6	8.1
Total	74	100.0
Unclear	3	
No answer	2	



It is quite noticeable that one in eight (12%) said they didn't have to pay anything at all. While this is very similar to the whole sample (13%), it is dissimilar to what we know of the experiences of Indian and Bangladeshi construction workers, among whom not having to pay an agent would, from our experience, be rare among the South Asian population in this industry.

Note too that besides the nine Burmese construction workers who said they paid zero dollars, two more said they paid less than \$1,000.

As for the country and mode of payment, there was no surprise in the results. The great majority paid agents in Myanmar.

CONSTRUCTION		
How agent fee paid	Persons	Percent
Via bank in Myanmar	3	4.3
Cash in Myanmar	48	68.6
Cash & bank in Myanmar	3	4.3
Subtotal Myanmar	54	77.1
Via bank in Singapore	7	10.0
Cash in Singapore	7	10.0
Subtotal Singapore	14	20.0
Via banks both countries	0	0.0
Cash Myanmar & bank SG	1	1.4
Cash paid both countries	1	1.4
Subtotal mixed countries	2	2.9
Total	70	100.0
No answer	9	

The percentage of construction workers who had airfare and training cost included within the agent fee seems higher than for the whole sample, but because the absolute numbers are relatively small, this should be read with caution.

	CONSTRUCTION	
Was airfare included in agent fee?	Persons	Percent
Yes	26	32.9
No (checkbox not selected)	53	67.1
Total	79	100.0

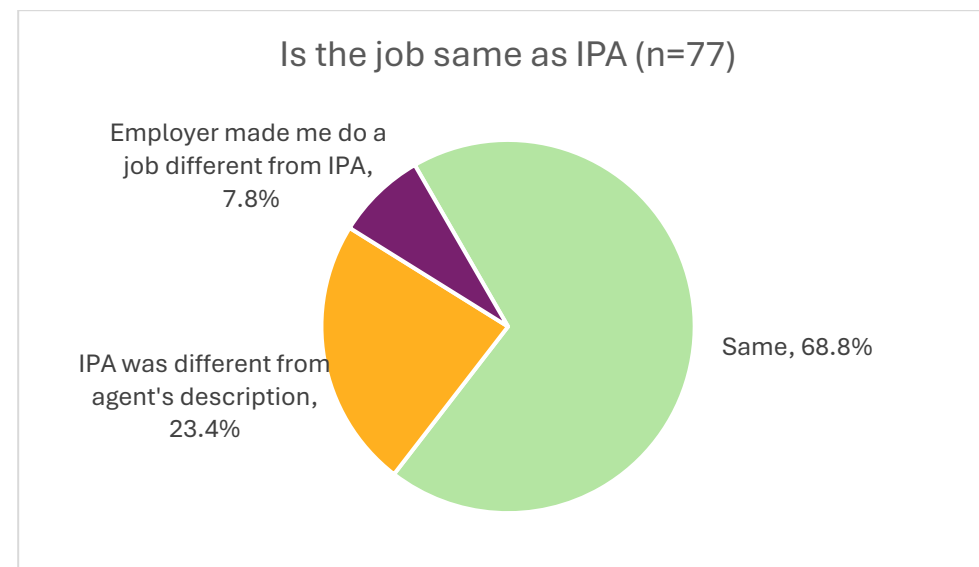
	CONSTRUCTION	
Was training included in agent fee?	Persons	Percent
Yes	16	20.3
No (checkbox not selected)	63	79.7
Total	79	100.0

Construction – contracts and the eventual job

Unlike the situation with Indian and Bangladeshi construction workers, the majority of the Burmese men in this industry said they had contracts.

	CONSTRUCTION	
Was there a contract?	Persons	Percent
No	14	17.7
Yes, before coming to SG	35	44.3
Yes, after coming to SG	30	38.0
Total	79	100.0

	CONSTRUCTION	
Is the job same as IPA?	Persons	Percent
Same	53	68.8
IPA was different from agent's description	18	23.4
Employer made me do a job different from IPA	6	7.8
Total	77	100.0
No answer	2	



Similar to the percentages in the whole sample, a smallish minority of the construction subsample reported being asked to do a job different from the IPA, (8% of construction workers vs 11% of larger sample).

IX. Findings – manufacturing sector

With only 17 respondents from the manufacturing sector, only the most tenuous of conclusions are possible. Nonetheless, there is more virtue in presenting the data than excluding them, even though commentary will be limited.

	MANUFACTURING	
When current job began	Persons	Percent
2024 - 2025	15	88.2
2022 - 2023	2	11.8
2020 - 2021	0	0.0
2015 - 2019	0	0.0
2010 - 2014	0	0.0
2009 or earlier	0	0.0
Total	17	100.0

	MANUFACTURING	
Where travelled from	Persons	Percent
Myanmar	12	70.6
Thailand	4	23.5
Malaysia	0	0.0
Qatar	1	5.9
Transfer within Sg	0	0.0
Total	17	100.0

	MANUFACTURING	
How knew of job	Persons	Percent
Recruitment agent	12	70.6
Through friend or family	2	11.8
Facebook or online	2	11.8
Jobstreet	1	5.9
Find myself	0	0.0
Job fair	0	0.0
Same company transfer from Yangon office	0	0.0
Worked with this employer before and knew this job	0	0.0
Total	17	100.0

Jobstreet is a well-known jobs advertising portal, yet we do not often hear of migrant workers getting jobs through it. Here, we have one respondent among the 17 manufacturing workers who did.

Manufacturing – agents and intermediaries

	MANUFACTURING	
Used an agent	Persons	Percent
Yes	14	82.4
No	3	17.6
Friend	0	0.0
Total	17	100.0

MANUFACTURING		
Agent fee	Persons	Percent
zero	3	17.6
< \$1,000	0	0.0
\$1,000 - \$1,999	0	0.0
\$2,000 - \$3,999	1	5.9
\$4,000 - \$5,999	11	64.7
\$6,000 or more	2	11.8
Total	17	100.0
Unclear	0	
No answer	0	

It is striking that about two-thirds of manufacturing workers paid in the second-highest band (\$4,000 - \$5,999) for their jobs. This is higher than the peak band for construction workers (\$2,000 - \$3,999).

MANUFACTURING		
How agent fee paid	Persons	Percent
Via bank in Myanmar	4	28.6
Cash in Myanmar	4	28.6
Cash & bank in Myanmar	0	0.0
Subtotal Myanmar	8	57.1
Via bank in Singapore	3	21.4
Cash in Singapore	1	7.1
Subtotal Singapore	4	28.6
Via banks both countries	1	7.1
Cash Myanmar & bank SG	1	7.1
Cash paid both countries	0	0.0
Subtotal mixed countries	2	14.3
Total	14	100.0
No answer	3	

MANUFACTURING		
Was airfare included in agent fee?	Persons	Percent
Yes	2	11.8
No (checkbox not selected)	15	88.2
Total	17	100.0

MANUFACTURING		
Was training included in agent fee?	Persons	Percent
Yes	4	23.5
No (checkbox not selected)	13	76.5
Total	17	100.0

Manufacturing – contracts and the eventual job

MANUFACTURING		
Was there a contract?	Persons	Percent
No	4	23.5
Yes, before coming to SG	4	23.5
Yes, after coming to SG	9	52.9
Total	17	100.0

More than twice as many received contracts after arriving in Singapore compared to those who received contracts before coming here. It may well be that the terms of the

contracts were consistent with what had been discussed prior to the worker taking up the job, but post-employment contracts always present the risk of the worker being presented with poorer terms of employment after he or she has borne the hefty recruitment costs. This is what the International Labour Organisation terms as “contract substitution” which is a serious indicator of forced labour.

	MANUFACTURING	
Is the job same as IPA?	Persons	Percent
Same	6	37.5
IPA was different from agent's description	8	50.0
Employer made me do a job different from IPA	2	12.5
Total	16	100.0
No answer	1	

It is potentially concerning that only 38% of manufacturing respondents answered “Same” to this question, compared to a much higher 63% in the whole sample. The main reason for this seems to be that 50% of manufacturing workers said the IPA turned out to contain details at variance with what had been agreed with the agent or intermediary (50% of manufacturing workers vs 25% in the whole sample).

A close investigation, with a larger sample of manufacturing workers, may throw more light on this potential problem.

X. Findings – service sector

There were 52 respondents who said they were in the service sector, nearly one-third of our total valid sample. Most of them started working for their current employer in 2024 or 2025.

	SERVICE	
When current job began	Persons	Percent
2024 - 2025	32	61.5
2022 - 2023	15	28.8
2020 - 2021	1	1.9
2015 - 2019	2	3.8
2010 - 2014	0	0.0
2009 or earlier	2	3.8
Total	52	100.0

As is the other industry sectors, some of them came to Singapore via Thailand and even Malaysia for their current jobs.

	SERVICE	
Where travelled from	Persons	Percent
Myanmar	40	76.9
Thailand	8	15.4
Malaysia	1	1.9
Qatar	0	0.0
Transfer within Sg	3	5.8
Total	52	100.0

There were a few interesting replies to the question how they came to know of the job opportunity. One respondent said she had worked for this employer before and

rejoined her in 2024. The respondent then came in from Malaysia; she did not have to pay any agent fee or intermediary charges.

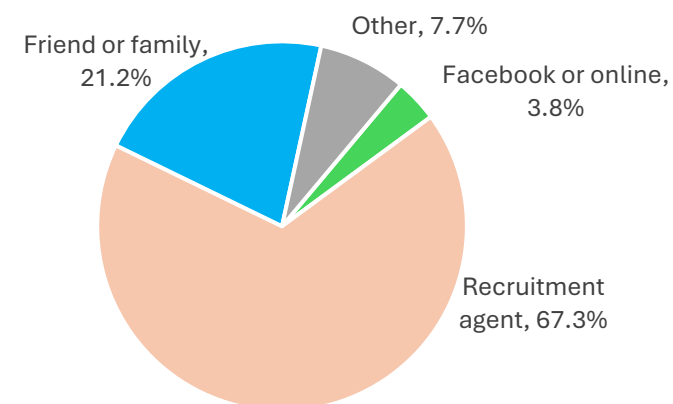
How knew of job	SERVICE	
	Persons	Percent
Recruitment agent	35	67.3
Through friend or family	11	21.2
Facebook or online	2	3.8
Jobstreet	0	0.0
Find myself	1	1.9
Job fair	1	1.9
Same company transfer from Yangon office	1	1.9
Worked with this employer before and knew this job	1	1.9
Total	52	100.0

Another respondent said he was previously working in the Yangon office of the same company, and in 2022 was transferred to Singapore. There was no agent or intermediary fee either.

The third interesting case was a guy who said he found the job at a “job fair” in 2025 and then came over from Myanmar. This is intriguing. We would have loved to find out more about the job fair but alas there was no additional information. He too said he did not have to pay anything to any intermediary.

However, not everything is roses. While the second and third of the three interesting cases (the men) said that their jobs turned out to be what they had expected, the woman (first case above) reported that the job was different in some way from what was declared in the IPA document. This was even though she was returning to an employer she knew from before.

How knew of job (n=52)



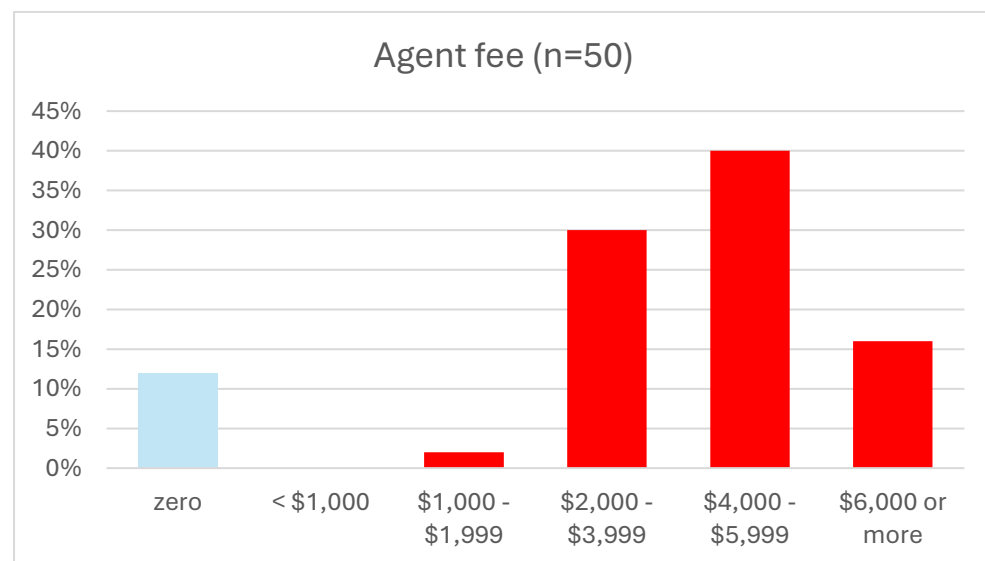
Service sector – agents and intermediaries

The three interesting cases were among only six who did not use an agent. Like in other sectors, a great majority of service sector workers needed one to secure their jobs.

Used an agent	SERVICE	
	Persons	Percent
Yes	46	88.5
No	6	11.5
Friend	0	0.0
Total	52	100.0

Agent fee	SERVICE	
	Persons	Percent
zero	6	12.0
< \$1,000	0	0.0
\$1,000 - \$1,999	1	2.0
\$2,000 - \$3,999	15	30.0
\$4,000 - \$5,999	20	40.0
\$6,000 or more	8	16.0
Total	50	100.0
Unclear	2	
No answer	0	

Unlike construction workers and manufacturing workers, each sector having a clear peak band with respect to their agent fees, service workers' agent fees are more spread out across different ranges.



Among construction workers, 57% of whom paid in the range of \$2,000 - \$3,999 – this being what we term as their peak band. Manufacturing workers also had a peak band; 65% paid in the range of \$4,000 - \$5,999. However, for service workers, the peak is not as sharp. Their highest band (\$4,000 - \$5,999) only comprised 40% of this subsample.

How agent fee paid	SERVICE	
	Persons	Percent
Via bank in Myanmar	9	17.3
Cash in Myanmar	16	30.8
Cash & bank in Myanmar	2	3.8
Subtotal Myanmar	27	51.9
Via bank in Singapore	15	28.8
Cash in Singapore	4	7.7
Subtotal Singapore	19	36.5
Via banks both countries	0	0.0
Cash Myanmar & bank SG	0	0.0
Cash paid both countries	0	0.0
Subtotal mixed countries	0	0.0
Total	46	88.5
No answer	6	

Like other sectors, more workers paid agents in Myanmar than in Singapore. However, the numbers get very interesting when seen in relation to the previous table showing the amounts paid.

It's like this:

43 out of 50 respondents (86%) said they paid more than \$2,000. In fact, most of this subgroup paid more than \$4,000.

However, under the Employment Agencies Act, there is a cap for agent fees at two months' basic salary. From our casework, there are virtually no Work Permit holders with over \$2,000 a month in basic salary. Most have basic salaries closer to \$1,000.

At such salary levels, no agent should be able to legally charge more than \$2,000 or \$4,000, depending on whether we're referring to a basic salary of \$1,000 or \$2,000 a month. Yet, nearly all who reported having to pay an agent said they paid over \$2,000, and the majority of them paid more than \$4,000.

Some of them paid in Myanmar, so it is outside Singapore jurisdiction, but 19 of them paid in Singapore. There is therefore a strong suggestion that illegally high amounts are being charged by agents operating in Singapore.

There are at least three possibilities: (a) it's a licensed agent who is charging above the legal maximum, (b) it's an unlicensed agent who does not feel bound by law, or (c) it's an unlicensed agent and a licensed agent working together, both collecting a fee and which, together, adds up to a figure exceeding the two months' cap.

	SERVICE	
Was training included in agent fee?	Persons	Percent
Yes	1	1.9
No (checkbox not selected)	51	98.1
Total	52	100.0

Service sector – contracts and the eventual job

The great majority of service sector workers had contracts. However, half of them were asked to sign contracts only after arrival in Singapore.

	SERVICE	
Was there a contract?	Persons	Percent
No	7	13.5
Yes, before coming to SG	18	34.6
Yes, after coming to SG	27	51.9
Total	52	100.0

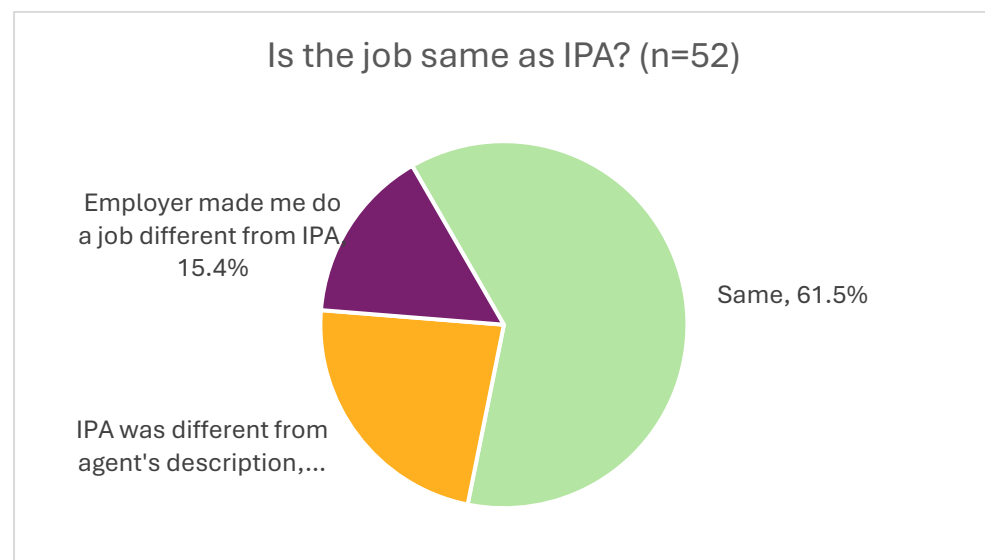
As in other sectors, a notable minority said that the terms of employment stated in the IPA was different in some way from what the agent had promised.

	SERVICE	
Was airfare included in agent fee?	Persons	Percent
Yes	13	25.0
No (checkbox not selected)	39	75.0
Total	52	100.0

Is the job same as IPA?	SERVICE	
	Persons	Percent
Same	32	61.5
IPA was different from agent's description	12	23.1
Employer made me do a job different from IPA	8	15.4
Total	52	100.0

No answer

Another minority said that the job they ended up doing (at the direction of the employer) was different from what the IPA letter said. This is always cause for concern as there are clear rules about illegal deployment.



XI. Findings – agentless recruitment

The subgroup that said they found their jobs without going an agent or intermediary warranted a closer look because we noticed inconsistencies in their replies. Out of 172 valid respondents, 36 answered “No” to the question whether they used an agent.

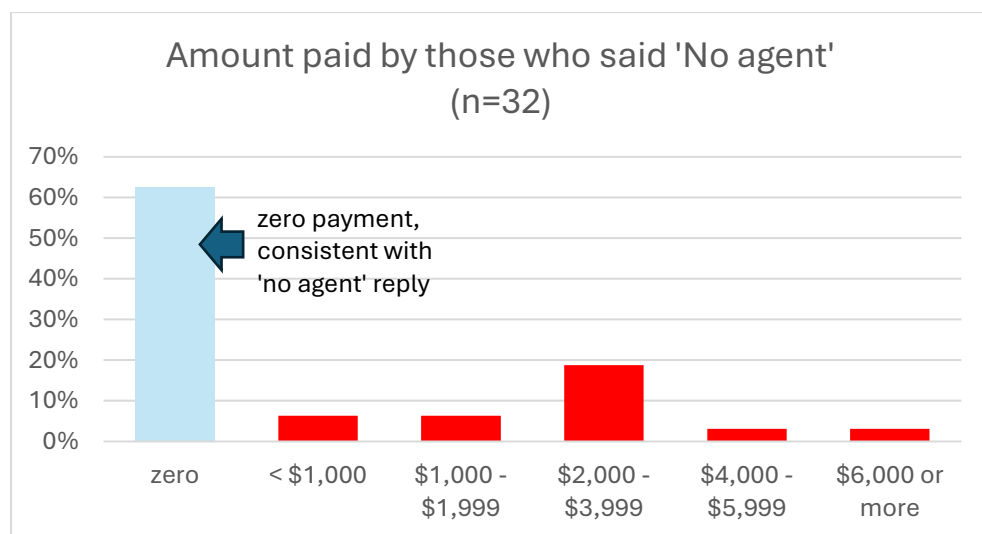
More than half (21 out of 36) were from the construction sector.

Sector	NO AGENT	
	Persons	Percent
Agriculture	1	2.8
Aircon	0	0.0
Cleaning	0	0.0
Construction	21	58.3
Driver	0	0.0
F&B	0	0.0
Food processing	0	0.0
Landscape	0	0.0
Manufacturing	3	8.3
Marine	2	5.6
Process	3	8.3
Service	6	16.7
Total	36	100.0

Yet, only 20 of these 36 workers gave a “zero” answer to the question of how much they paid. Zero would have been the consistent answer since they said they didn’t use an agent. Twelve participants gave a figure larger than zero (inconsistent answer) while four others either gave unclear answers or no answer.

fact that they answered “No” to the agent question yet gave a figure for how much they paid.

Agent fee	NO AGENT	
	Persons	Percent
zero	20	62.5
< \$1,000	2	6.3
\$1,000 - \$1,999	2	6.3
\$2,000 - \$3,999	6	18.8
\$4,000 - \$5,999	1	3.1
\$6,000 or more	1	3.1
Total	32	100.0
Unclear	3	
No answer	1	



Among these 16, the amounts involved were quite substantial. It would appear that they did use an intermediary to secure their jobs except that they didn't see the intermediary as an agent. Or maybe they knew that their intermediary was not a licensed agent and went by the legal meaning of the word. This would account for the

How agent fee paid	NO AGENT	
	Persons	Percent
Via bank in Myanmar	0	0.0
Cash in Myanmar	10	62.5
Cash & bank in Myanmar	1	6.3
Subtotal Myanmar	11	68.8
Via bank in Singapore	1	6.3
Cash in Singapore	4	25.0
Subtotal Singapore	5	31.3
Via banks both countries	0	0.0
Cash Myanmar & bank SG	0	0.0
Cash paid both countries	0	0.0
Subtotal mixed countries	0	0.0
Total	16	100.0
Zero: no fee paid & no answer	18	
Unclear	0	
No answer	2	

The above table shows the mode of payment for these 16 persons. It is notable that 14 of them paid entirely in cash. This is a strong hint that the jobs had been offered through unlicensed intermediaries.

In view of this, the datapoint regarding percentage who found jobs without using agents needs to be qualified. Prima facie, 36 respondents (20% of 172 valid respondents) said they didn't use an agent. In the light of the above, the real number is likely to be only 20 persons, or only 11.6% of 172 responses.

In short: close to 90% of Burmese Work Permit holders needed to go through intermediaries to find their jobs.

XII. Discussion

There are six notable observations from this study:

- Gender and sectors;
- Coming via Thailand;
- High reliance on agents;
- High agent fees;
- Contracts after arrival;
- Risk of deception and contract substitution.

Each of these is discussed below.

Gender and sectors

The Burmese migrant worker community resembles the Filipino in there being workers across many industry sectors, with a large number in domestic work. Even among those in non-domestic sectors, they are spread across different sectors such as manufacturing, service, and construction. However, unlike the Filipinos who, outside of domestic work, are more centred on the service sector, the Burmese are more weighted towards the construction sector.

Nonetheless, 30% of respondents came from the service sector and half of these service-sector respondents were female.

In fact, female Burmese workers seem particularly concentrated in the service sector (in addition to domestic work which was outside the scope of this study), whereas the men reported themselves to be in many other kinds of work. Respondents included those working in agriculture, cleaning, landscaping, food processing, among others.

Coming via Thailand

It was striking that a visible minority of respondents (10%) came to Singapore via a third country (mostly from Thailand). This is not what we observe from other nationalities.

There is obviously a political crisis in Myanmar that has caused an outflow of its citizens to its neighbour.

Beyond this 10%, we can perceive that instead of first fleeing to Thailand, Myanmar citizens may be coming to Singapore directly for a similar reason: to escape the dangers back home.

This observation is not merely of academic interest. It points to a situation where, when their employment in Singapore ends, workers feel it extremely risky for their own safety to return to Myanmar.



Our regulatory regime, mandating that employers of Work Permit holders repatriate their former employees back to their home countries, is too rigid for the prevailing circumstances and has serious humanitarian consequences. It is essential to see how we can tweak policy, if not across the board, at least for Myanmar citizens while the conflict in their country lasts. The simplest tweak would be to allow a much longer period for them to find new jobs here before repatriation, followed by a looser rule allowing repatriation to any other Asean country where they enjoy visa-free entry.

High reliance on agents

Nearly 80% replied “Yes” to the question whether they used an agent, but when we adjusted for payments to agents and intermediaries, we believe a more accurate reading would be close to 90%.

Construction workers seemed at first glance to rely less on agents, and because construction workers were all male, it created a gender difference in the rate of reliance on agents.

However, when we adjusted for actual payments, we found that construction workers were not particularly free from having to pay for agents’ or intermediaries’ fees.

58 of 79 construction respondents (73%) answered “Yes” to the question as to whether they used an agent. But 74 of the 79 workers also gave answers about how much they paid and 65 of them (87% of 74) said they had to pay something.

As discussed earlier, the most likely explanation is that the respondents who at first said ‘no agent’ but later gave a figure about how much they paid knew that the intermediaries they used were not licensed agents; instead they were introducers connecting them to jobs (in return for payment).



As experienced by Indian and Bangladeshi workers, there appears to be a thriving shadow business of unlicensed agents making money off migrant workers in the Burmese community too.

High agent fees

The amounts that our respondents had to pay in agent fees do not seem consistent with what one might expect if the Employment Agencies Act were adhered to. Work Permit salaries are mostly in the \$1,000 range, rarely getting close to \$2,000. Under the law which sets a cap on agent fees (must not exceed the equivalent of two

months’ salary) this implies that workers should not have to pay more than \$2,000 or \$3,000.

Yet, 40% of respondents paid in the range of \$2,000 - \$3,999 (which already looks suspiciously high) and another 36% paid \$4,000 or more (almost surely out of alignment with a Work Permit salary).

Partly, the explanation lies in the reliance on unlicensed agents or intermediaries who feel no obligation to follow the law with respect to fee limits when they feel no need to even get a licence. The weak enforcement of the Employment Agencies Act is surely the root cause of this situation.

The more important reason for the high fees is the result of employers not using Singapore-licensed agents altogether; working instead with Myanmar agents and intermediaries – who are naturally not bound by Singapore law. Our data shows that 69% of respondents paid in Myanmar and a further 3% paid partly in Myanmar and partly in Singapore.

Or course it is unrealistic to enforce Singapore law on intermediaries operating out of Myanmar but that does not mean that nothing can be done.



TWC2 has long proposed making it mandatory for all employers with Work Permit quota to only advertise their job vacancies and transact the hiring through a centralised, Singapore-based portal. No unlicensed agent should have access to the portal, and therefore all hiring conducted through it must conform with Singapore law.

We have also long proposed that employers should be held accountable for the total amount paid by their employees to get their jobs, wherever payments were made. Surely employers cannot deny responsibility; after all, they consciously chose to work with unlicensed and foreign parties.

Contracts after arrival

It never looks right, in this day and age when electronic communication across distances and borders is no hurdle, that workers are presented with contracts to sign after they have paid their agents (often incurring debt as a result), flown into Singapore and otherwise committed to the job. Contracts should be offered to prospective employees in advance with ample time given for them to consider, and before they are asked for any payment.

Yet 45%, nearly half our sample, said they were presented with contracts to sign after arrival in Singapore.

Our survey did not ask whether the terms of employment shown in these post-facto contracts were in alignment with the terms of employment priorly agreed and shown on the IPA document – a level of detail that would be impractical for this study – but there certainly is a risk that they were not, in which case the worker would find himself or herself in an unenviable position.

Risk of deception and contract substitution

In addition to the risk that contract terms differ from previously agreed terms of employment, our study had a more direct question touching on variance. Whilst roughly two-thirds of respondents (63%) said that the jobs turned out to be the same as what they applied for and were expecting, one third reported variation at some point.

25% said that the IPA document differed in some way from what had been agreed between them and the agent. It is unlikely (given the power balance) that the variance would have been in the worker's favour.

From our casework, one common variance would lie in the salary. A certain level of salary would have been agreed beforehand, but on the IPA, a different salary is shown.

More concerning is that a further 11% said that after they started on the job, the employer directed them to do a different kind of job. This is not allowed under the regulations.

It also puts the worker in legal jeopardy if the worker, faced with little choice (prepaid agent fee, debt, no freedom to switch employers, no right to remain in Singapore if job is lost) reluctantly agrees to do the different job. The worker could be liable for prosecution for violating the terms of the Work Permit.

This is inherently unjust under such circumstances of power imbalance.

In addition, should any work injury occur, the insurer may refuse to cover it, since the job actually being performed might be outside the parameters of the policy.

It is therefore important to address the issue. Better enforcement may appear to be the obvious response needed, but enforcement (generally triggered by complaints) would be stillborn if workers (disempowered enough as they are) do not whistle-blow.



A big part of the solution must lie in reducing the disempowerment of migrant workers, so they are more likely to speak up. This means active measures to combat burdensome agent fees and rethinking the rules that tie workers to employers. TWC2 has long argued that improved job mobility is crucial in addressing a variety of issues; this is one of them.

XIII. Conclusion

This is the first of a series of studies TWC2 hopes to conduct to get a better understanding of the Burmese migrant worker in Singapore.

In many ways, they face similar vulnerabilities as migrant workers of other nationalities. However, it is where their situation differs that studies like this may contribute – it is our hope – to shaping the service and regulatory responses needed to ensure that their specific vulnerabilities are appropriately addressed and that they are fairly treated.