TWC2
transient workers count too

Oh, how the years pass

Migration duration and job longevity of Tamil migrant workers in Singapore

December 2025

0. Contents

Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2)

www.twc2.org.sg

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Cover photo: TWC2 staff, volunteers, ambassadors and interns posing a in group photograph; file photo of lorry with migrant workers.

I. Introduction

On Deepavali Day 2025, TWC2 conducted a simple survey of 391 Tamil Indian workers. There are three useful take-aways from this study:

The first is that on average, the time between the start of one job and the start of the next job was 5.1 years. However, after the end of one job, the typical worker may spend a few months back in India before coming to Singapore again for a new job. We estimate that the average duration of a job would be around 4.5 years.

This finding is similar to what we gathered from two previous surveys, as elaborated on in the Discussion section, giving us confidence in our results.

The second take-away is that the average age was 38 years. The typical Indian migrant worker is no longer the young man we imagine our migrant workers to be.

The third take-away is that our survey respondents first arrived in Singapore about 13 years ago. Some of them came in the 1990s, decades ago. This is related to their average age, but it also raises questions whether it is increasingly difficult to find new migrant workers from India to work for the low wages we pay.

II. Method

The latest survey was conducted on Deepavali, 20 October 2025. Another charity, Krsna's Free Meals, organised an event and invited us to participate, and we found it to be a great opportunity to conduct a poll. Since Deepavali is a Hindu festival and Krsna would be offering South Indian food, we expected migrant workers from Tamil Nadu to form the vast majority of the event's attendees. To keep the sampling clean, we restricted our study to Tamil-speaking workers from India.

Our staff and volunteers sacrificed their public holiday to carry it out, and under the hot sun too. We were also enthusiastically assisted by TWC2's Tamil ambassadors, migrant workers themselves, who also sacrificed their public holiday, but whose ability to speak Tamil was invaluable and made the survey a resounding success.

We designed the survey as simple as possible because the attendees would naturally be eager for other, much more attractive features of Krsna's event. Nonetheless, we obtained valuable data from even a simple exercise.

All the participants were men, and a huge majority of them were working in the construction sector (details below). This reflected the known fact that for migrant workers from South India, construction jobs are the main kinds of jobs available, governed by Singapore's nationality-fenced Work Permit rules.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by our volunteers and ambassadors, with the latter playing a critical role in establishing rapport, cultivating cooperation and translating the questions and answers. Since the conversations were largely in Tamil, this would have minimised any risk of misunderstood questions.

The survey asked only six questions:

- What type of work pass he was holding;
- Which industry sector he was working in;
- His current age;
- The year he first came to Singapore;
- The year he commenced employment with his current employer;
- The number of employers (including the current one) he had been working for over the years.

One of the goals of the survey was to arrive at the average length of time a worker stayed with an employer – what TWC2 calls "job longevity". However, none of our six questions asked this directly, because it is very difficult for workers to answer such a question. Many of them have had many jobs in the past and we'd be asking for dates from a very long time back.

Several migrant workers, volunteering as TWC2 ambassadors, helped with our survey

A migrant worker (black shirt) participates in the survey

Instead, the plan was to derive this average from the questions we had about (a) the time elapsed between the year of their first arrival in Singapore and the year they joined their current job, and (b) the number of jobs they held in those intervening years.

Even so, this would only give us an average time between the start of a job and the start of the next one. Since the typical worker may spend a few months back in India before coming to Singapore again for a new job, an adjustment would be needed to arrive at the job duration as opposed to the time between start-of-jobs.

For now, we apply an adjustment of six months back in the home country between jobs, a ballpark figure we get from our casework. This really needs to be checked through another study, another day.

III. Limitations

Since we were ancillary participants in a free meals event, we had no control over the attendees and consequently over our sample. However, this was a public holiday and a Hindu festival. Few employers would have denied their Indian employees the day off. The workers would have time on their hands and would have not been deterred from making the trip down to Little India where the event was held. In any case, Indian migrant workers often congregate in Little India on their days off.

The event was widely advertised, and having been running for several years, was well-known amongst Tamil migrant workers.

Our survey also had a relatively large number of participants (391 valid responses) and the profile of respondents (mostly Work Permit holders in construction) reflected the reality in Singapore where a huge majority of Tamil migrant workers were Work Permit holders in this sector.

The above suggests that, despite our lack of control over the sample, the circumstances and resulting profile of participants were such that we do not think there was any serious skewing.

Although there would be a risk of memory error when we asked respondents to recall which year it was that they first came to Singapore, TWC2 has observed through our daily casework that migrant workers seldom make mistakes in recalling the year. Coming to Singapore for the first time to embark on a new life is such a significant event that, even if long ago, workers don't forget.

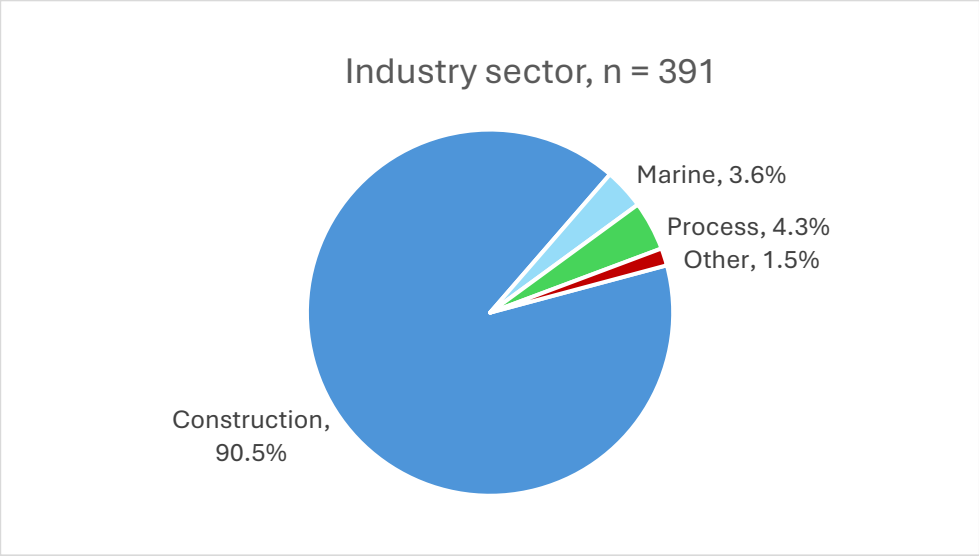
On the other hand, we have seen workers make mistakes in trying to recall how many employers they have been with over the years. Miscounting can happen if a worker has had more than five or six jobs. However, most workers have only been at fewer jobs than that, so the risk is confined to only a fraction of the respondents.

IV. Profile of respondents

We collected responses from 394 men, limiting our survey to Tamil speakers only. Of these, 373 held Work Permits and 18 held S-Passes. The three men who held neither Work Permits nor S-Passes were treated as invalid responses, leaving us with 391 valid responses for the analysis.

Construction workers made up 90.5% of our sample. In fact, the CMP sectors (construction, marine and processing) made up 98.5%, as can be seen from the table and pie chart.

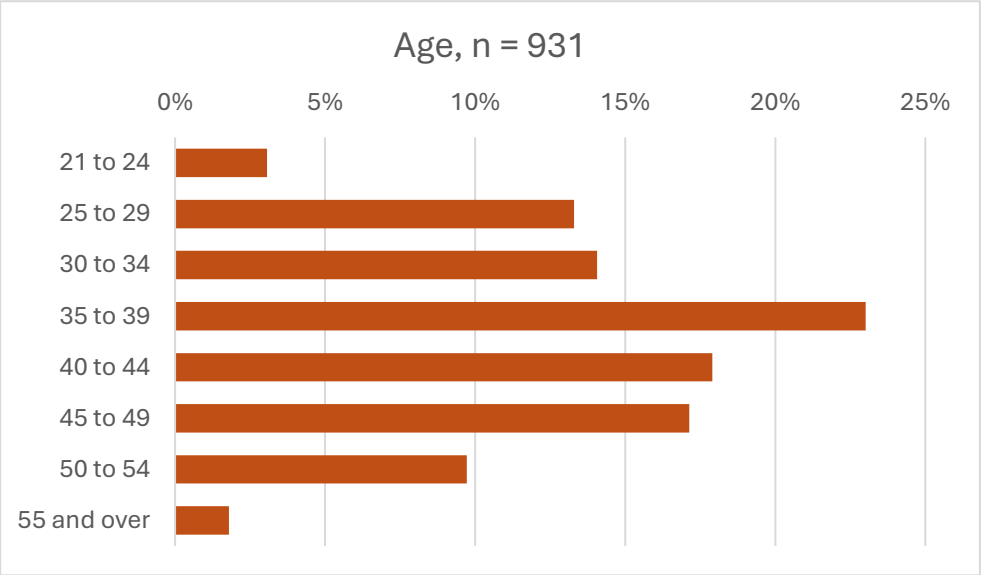
Industry Sector	No, of respondents	Percent
CMP: Construction	354	90.5
CMP: Marine	14	3.6
CMP: Process	17	4.3
Other	6	1.5
Total	391	100.0



V. Findings

There was a considerable spread in terms of age. The youngest was 21 years old and the oldest was 59.

The average age was 38.8 years; the mean was also around 38.

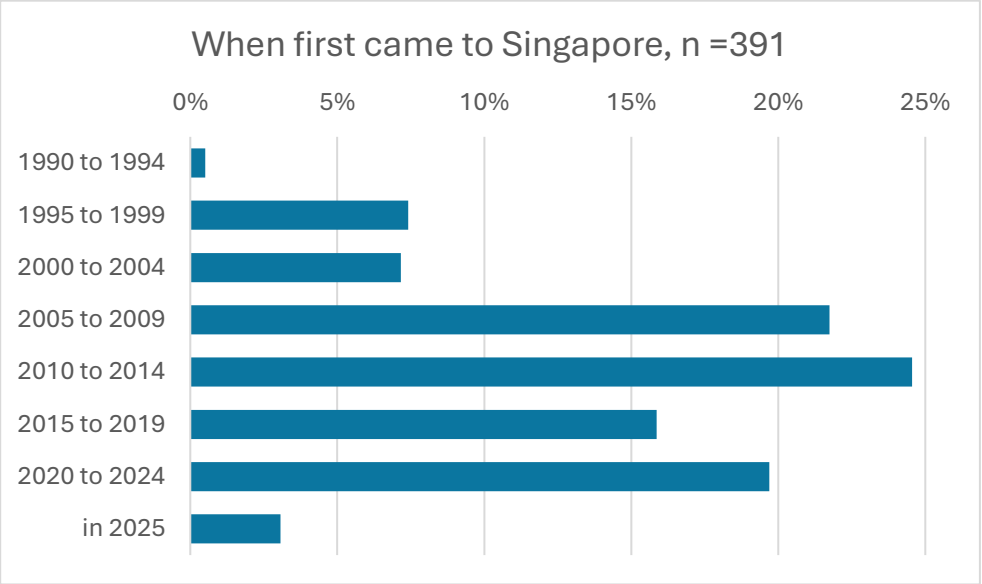


Age	No, of respondents	Percent
21 to 24	12	3.1
25 to 29	52	13.3
30 to 34	55	14.1
35 to 39	90	23.0
40 to 44	70	17.9
45 to 49	67	17.1
50 to 54	38	9.7
55 and over	7	1.8
TOTAL	391	100.0

When first arrived in Singapore?

We asked them which year it was that they first came to Singapore. The table and graph below show the spread.

When first came to Singapore	No, of respondents	Percent
1990 to 1994	2	0.5
1995 to 1999	29	7.4
2000 to 2004	28	7.2
2005 to 2009	85	21.7
2010 to 2014	96	24.6
2015 to 2019	62	15.9
2020 to 2024	77	19.7
2025	12	3.1
TOTAL	391	100.0



One man said he came in 1990 which was 35 years ago, and he was now 54 years old. He would have been 19 when he first came.

The man who was second-longest in Singapore came in 1992. He too was 19 when he came for the first time and was now 52 years old.

It turns out that being here for so long is not altogether unusual. About eight percent of our respondents first came to Singapore in the 1990s. They were part of the first wave of migrant workers from India (after British colonial times, that is) and are still here!

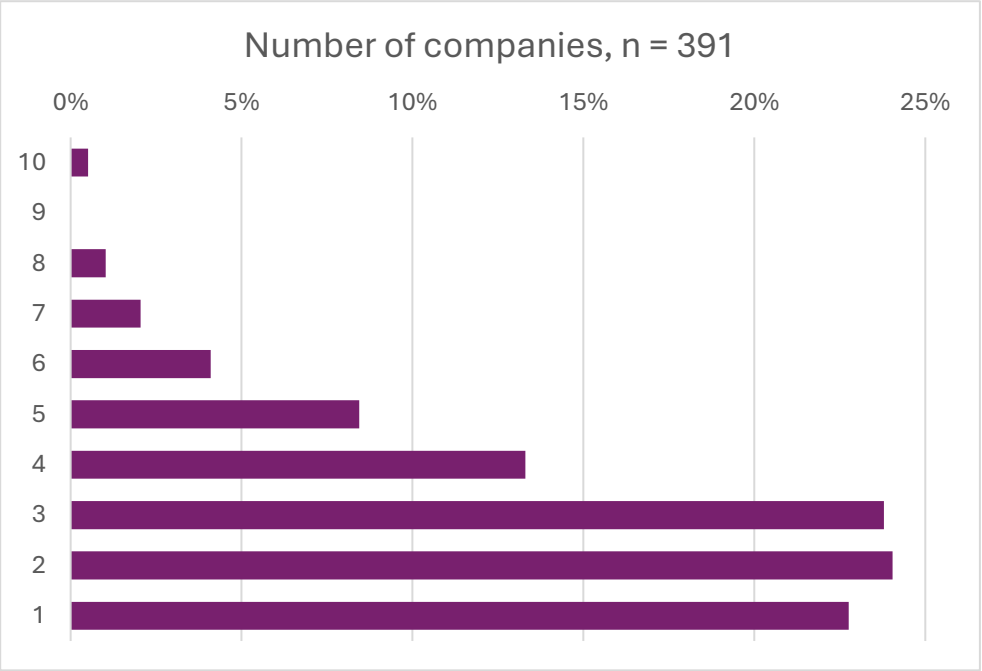
On average however, the men first arrived in Singapore 12.9 years ago. The mean is also around 13 years.

How many companies?

We asked each participant how many companies they have been employed by in the time they have been in Singapore.

How many companies have you worked for*	No, of respondents	Percent
10	2	0.5
9	0	0.0
8	4	1.0
7	8	2.0
6	16	4.1
5	33	8.4
4	52	13.3
3	93	23.8
2	94	24.0
1	89	22.8
TOTAL	391	100.0

* including current employer



Since first arrival, the men have worked in an average of 2.9 companies (including their present employment). Two men have been with ten employers each. These two came in 1998 and 2003.

Our longest-in-Singapore participant (the one who first came in 1990) reported that he was in his third job. Our runner-up (the one who first came in 1992) was in his fifth job.

On the other hand, 89 men (22.8%) were still on their first job, with the remaining 302 men (77.2%) having held at least one previous job.

TWC2's ambassadors (migrant workers themselves) helped conduct the survey

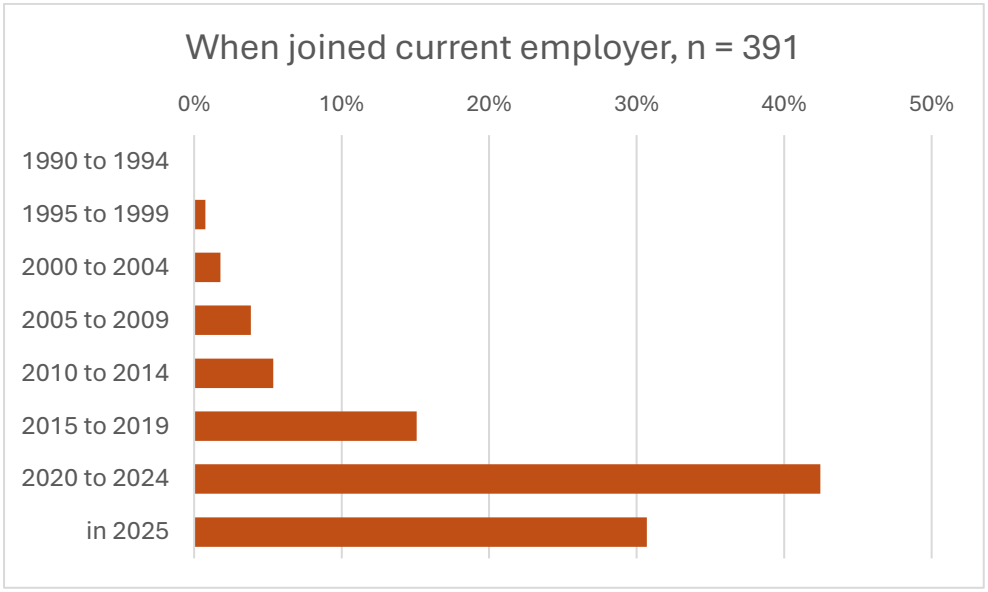
When did you join your current employer?

We asked each participant when they joined their present employer. As can be seen from the table and charts here, a majority of them (55%) joined in 2023, 2024 or 2025. They have been with their current employers for less than three years.

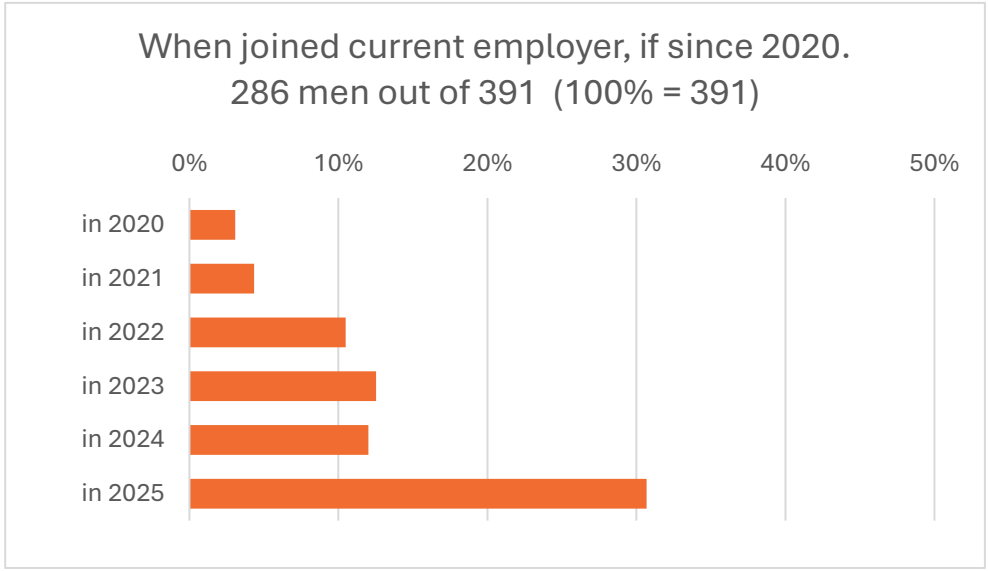
When joined current employer	No, of respondents	Percent
1990 to 1994	0	0.0
1995 to 1999	3	0.8
2000 to 2004	7	1.8
2005 to 2009	15	3.8
2010 to 2014	21	5.4
2015 to 2019	59	15.1
2020 to 2024	166	42.5
2025	120	30.7
TOTAL	391	100.0

	No.	%
2020	12	3.1
2021	17	4.3
2022	41	10.5
2023	49	12.5
2024	47	12.0
Subtotal	166	42.5

On the other hand, ten men (2.6%) have been with the same employer for over two decades.



The next chart shows only those who joined in 2020 or later, showing more detail from the category “2020 to 2024”:



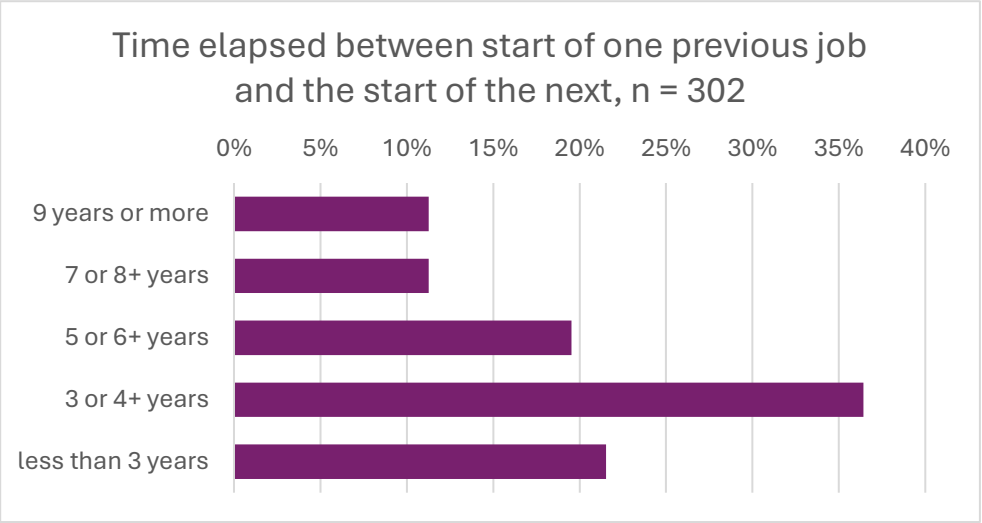
It is quite striking that nearly one in three respondents only joined their current employer this year (2025). This observation will be mentioned again in the Discussion section.

Time between one job and the next

In order to derive the average time between starting on one job and the next, we look only at those who have had at least one previous job; there were 302 men who met this criterion. For each man, we divided the number of years between first arrival and start of current job, with the number of previous jobs he has had.

Average number of years between start of one previous job and start of next job	No, of respondents	Percent
9 years or more	34	11.3
7 or 8 years	34	11.3
5 or 6 years	59	19.5
3 or 4 years	110	36.4
less than 3 years	65	21.5
TOTAL	302	100.0

The average was 5.1 years. The mean was 4.1 years. The average is higher than the mean mainly because there were 28 men (7% of our total sample of 391) who had stayed with their previous employers for an average of over ten years.



On the other hand, of the 65 men who averaged less than three years in their previous jobs, eight of them averaged less than a year in their previous jobs, indicating how, for some men, employment can be extremely precarious. One man stood out. He only came to Singapore in 2025, but by October when we interviewed him for this survey, he was already in his third job. His two previous jobs couldn't have lasted more than a few months each.

How much he paid in agent fees for three jobs in one calendar year is something to think about.

As mentioned earlier in the Method section, the time elapsed between the start of one job and the start of the next does not equate with time employed by an employer. Migrant workers, by choice or otherwise, often spend several months back in their home country after leaving a job and before they manage to find a new one. We have to make a rough adjustment in order to translate years-between-jobs into years-on-

the-job. From our anecdotal conversations with workers coming to TWC2 for assistance, we believe that an adjustment of about six months would be about right.

That said, this can be a highly complex matter. Some men spend well over a year back home between jobs, while others do not even go home; they switch to a new job without being repatriated and with hardly any downtime. It may be a topic for a future study. For now, we use our anecdotal estimate of about six months of home time on average.

So, netting off about half a year spent at home between jobs from the average 5.1 years that we found as the time between jobs, we estimate an average job longevity of about four-and-a-half years.

Migrant worker ambassadors and volunteers work together to interview participants for our survey

VI. Discussion

This study found that the average time between the start of one job and the start of the next job to be 5.1 years, a finding that is very similar to that from an earlier study, *Let this end with me*[1], conducted in 2023 also exclusively with Tamil-speaking migrant workers, where we found that

> on average, men start a new job 5.28 years after they had started on the previous job. This does not mean they stay an average of five years in a job, because we heard from our interviews of men staying significant periods back in India after a job had ended. We did not systemically collect data on these periods (not the aim of the study) but what mentions we came across, and TWC2's observations from casework, suggest that an average of four years on the average job is a more probable duration.

Our latest finding is also in the same ballpark as another previous study we did in 2021 which found an average of 4.2 years between jobs[2], although that study comprised both Indian and Bangladeshi workers in nearly similar numbers. It is possible that Bangladeshi workers have shorter periods between jobs, thus pulling down the average in this 2021 study. However, this needs to be tested in a future study focussed solely on Bangladeshi workers.

Nonetheless, the similarity in the results we are obtaining from three studies (separately conducted) gives us confidence in our findings.

Since many workers get repatriated after a job has ended and they then spend several months back in the home country before they return to Singapore for new jobs, the average job duration is generally a few months less than the time between the start of one job and the start of the next job. We estimate from our finding of 5.1 years between start-of-jobs that our respondents were spending about 4.5 years on average in any job.

4.5 years was largely an expected result, since we have found similar results in the past. To TWC2, this figure does not look too bad for the following reasons:

The construction sector – and a large majority of Tamil migrant workers are in this sector – is very cyclical. Unless one is working for a large company with stable project pipelines, one might find that the employer-company goes through periods of downsizing as they complete projects and have no further need for so many workers. Even if an employee may want to stay on, the employer may not be able to keep him when projects dry up.

Construction is physical work. We have heard anecdotal reports from workers that after five or six years, they come to the point where they do not want to continue this line of work anymore. They quit and go back to India to look for new kinds of work or maybe even to set up a small business. Sometimes, they do not succeed and they have to come back to Singapore, where again, the available jobs are in construction.

This accounts for the more striking finding that Tamil Indian workers have been here for an average of 12.9 years. There is a lot of coming back. The mean is also around 13 years. So, even though they may not be staying in any particular job for all that long, they do spend a big part of their working lives in Singapore.

How big a part? Consider this: the average age of our respondents was 38 years old. And the average number of years since their first arrival was about 13 years.

The issues raised by this finding regarding length of stay are twofold: skills upgrading and wage progression or stagnation.

[1] TWC2, 29 May 2024, https://twc2.org.sg/2024/05/29/let-this-end-with-me/

[2] TWC2, 18 October 2021, https://twc2.org.sg/2021/10/18/on-average-indian-and-bangladeshi-migrant-workers-stay-4-2-years-with-the-same-employer-our-survey-finds/

Our intern works the line. Survey participants get a fan to help them keep cool under the sun

Skills upgrading

How much skilling up occurs for the average worker over his career? Certainly, this length of stay in Singapore presents an opportunity to develop a highly-skilled and experienced workforce. It should be worthwhile to invest in training. But does it happen? Or is this a missed opportunity?

TWC2 has written articles on our website pointing out how few affordable resources there are for workers to undergo further training. As a country, we appear to be dead set against providing affordable training infrastructure for foreign workers. We want to extract their labour but don't want to spend public money investing in the quality of labour. And then, because productivity remains low, necessitating quantity to compensate for the absence of quality, we constantly have to square the circle between the numbers of foreigners needed and the political sensitivities that there are "too many" of them.

Moreover, how much of a barrier are employer attitudes to training? At TWC2 we regularly hear from workers that their employers do not look kindly on their taking time off. This needs to change if, after providing training infrastructure, we hope the training programmes are taken up and new skills utilised.

What this study has shown is that there is a good case for investing in training since the workers are anyway staying for quite a long time with us. This however must come with incentives or other regulatory nudges to change employer attitudes and behaviour.

Over the years, the Ministry of Manpower has been gently tapping the brakes on the Dependency Ratio (colloquially known as the "quota" for foreign workers) and tweaking the levy differential to encourage a more skilled workforce, but these measures may not be enough.

Other shortcomings – inadequacy of affordable training infrastructure, employer resistance to giving time off – also need to be addressed.

Wage progression/stagnation

Two studies we conducted in recent years have raised the question of wage stagnation. They are *Let this end with me*[3] (2023) and *Struggles and sacrifices as cost of living increases*[4] (2023). We also have a poignant story in *Two generations of migrant workers*[5] in which the son who came to work in Singapore a generation after his father did earned the same salary as what the father earned despite two decades of inflation.

This speaks volumes about Singapore's economic model and suggests a declining attractiveness for migrant labour.

However, this study did not look into earnings. This issue is only being mentioned here because the long career longevity we're seeing from our results inevitably brings up the question of how rewarding such longevity is for the workers concerned.

Nonetheless, there is one finding that hints obliquely at how wage stagnation may be playing out. We found that despite an average of nearly 13 years in Singapore, the majority of our respondents had only been with their present jobs for three years or less. The more acute finding is that one in three of them only joined their current employer this year (2025).

Such churn may be a symptom of several things: the cyclical nature of the construction industry and the precarity of jobs in this sector, employer behaviour (quick to hire and fire) for reasons seen as their own interests, but equally it is a symptom of workers responding to wage stagnation in their jobs. Many workers have shared with TWC2 that the only viable way to get better pay is to move to another employer.

This is a topic that cries out for further study.

Aging migrant worker

Seen from a macro angle, wage stagnation raises questions about our economic model's sustainability in light of the declining total fertility rate in source countries, which we have written about in *Twenty years from now, where will our cheap labour come from?*[6] (2023).

With specific reference to Tamil Nadu, its Total Fertility Rate in 2023 was only 1.3 children per woman[7], well below the replacement level of 2.1, which is needed to maintain a stable population.

One finding from this study resonates with this potential problem. We found that the average age of Tamil migrant workers was 38 years old. This is not very far from the median age of Singapore citizens, which in 2025 stood at 43.7 years[8].

[3] TWC2,29 May 2024, https://twc2.org.sg/2024/05/29/let-this-end-with-me/
[4] TWC2, 1 August 2023, https://twc2.org.sg/2023/08/01/struggles-and-sacrifices-as-cost-of-living-rises/
[5] TWC2, 27 January 2023, https://twc2.org.sg/2023/01/27/two-generations-of-migrant-workers/
[6] TWC2, 16 June 2023, https://twc2.org.sg/2023/06/16/twenty-years-from-now-where-will-our-cheap-labour-come-from/

[7] South First website, 8 September 2025, Tamil Nadu at 1.3 births per woman as south sinks below fertility transition. https://thesouthfirst.com/health/tamil-nadu-at-1-3-births-per-woman-as-south-sinks-below-fertility-transition/
[8] National Population and Talent Division, Population in Brief 2025, pages 11 and 25, https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/Population_in_Brief_2025.pdf

If we're still conceiving foreign labour as fit young workers doing the physical work that our aging citizen population cannot or do not want to do, then we'll soon be in for a rude shock.

As available labour from our usual source countries becomes scarcer, our stagnant wages decline in attractiveness. If incremental adjustments are not made now, the time may come when major ratchetting up becomes unavoidable, with disruptive economic effects. This will be especially so if there is still no training infrastructure that raises skills accordingly.

The value of a nationality-specific study

On feature of this study was its exclusive focus on Tamil Indian migrant workers. Perhaps this calls for a bit of discussion. TWC2 believes that nationality-specific studies have value, and if a nationality comprises different ethnicities, ethnicity-specific studies too.

The team get a well-deserved brunch after a morning of hard work in the hot sun

A drawback of research work on migrant workers that treat them as a homogenous whole is that it may invisibilise features that are linked to countries of origin. Yet, these can be important for a number of reasons. For example, TWC2 has observed that employers have quite strong preferences when it comes to the nationality of the employees they hire. So, employers that prioritise certain requirements may want workers from a certain country; whilst employers with different priorities (which may include unwholesome priorities such as kickbacks) may choose workers from other countries. Consequently, such preferences may translate into different employment experiences for workers of different nationalities.

Moreover, the economic, social and cultural dynamics operating within a source country have a huge impact on labour emigration. Immediately, what comes to mind, for instance, is the way recruitment networks and expected fees (and thus, indebtedness) may vary from one source country to another. Or, the availability (or non-availability) of domestic jobs for returnee workers might influence the length of stay in Singapore. These factors can similarly create different employment experiences and different decision matrices for migrant workers depending on which country they are from.

TWC2 hopes that we will be able to find volunteers in the months and years to come to conduct similar studies of workers of other nationalities. There may be some eye-opening differences.

As it is, this study alone has reminded us of the issues of career longevity, job duration, the aging of the migrant workforce and the possible drying up of labour sources in the decade ahead. They call into question current policies regarding upskilling and wage progression.

We hope these are addressed soon.