TWC2
transient workers count too

# Risks and escape

A quick look: Burmese migrants looking for jobs in Singapore and the realities of work and life here

November 2026



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[1] https://twc2.org.sg/2025/11/27/leaving-to-save-ourselves/

# I. Introduction

This small piece of research looks into the issues faced by Burmese workers when journeying to Singapore for employment. The main research questions explore how Burmese workers find employment in Singapore and how they navigate and settle into life here. For example, do they usually find work through employment agencies and if so, how much in agent fees do they pay? Who showed them the ropes of using the MRT or getting a SIM card or opening a bank account? In this report, we interviewed 19 Burmese workers to find out.

This study is a sort of qualitative twin to another study conducted around the same time. Leaving to save ourselves[1] was a survey of Myanmar workers' recruitment experiences, giving us a sense of the numbers involved even though it was a medium-small sample. It was published in November 2025.

This report aims to add some colour to the survey report through interviews with workers themselves; along the way, it may be useful for highlighting ways where Burmese migrant workers looking for employment can be left vulnerable.

Due to the coup d'etat in Myanmar in 2021 and the enactment of military conscription for working-age men and women in 2024, many young Burmese are desperate to leave the country in order to find stable working and living conditions elsewhere. A report by East Asia Forum (2024)[2] has found that after the enforcement of the conscription law in 2024, many people were seen queuing at a foreign embassy in Yangon, in order to get visas to leave the country. Others were crossing into neighbouring countries illegally.

Whilst exploitation during employment of migrant workers in Singapore has been well-documented, e.g., short-payment of salaries, long working hours and no overtime pay, the issues are not always the same across nationality groups. In the case of the Burmese, the political situation at home lends an urgency to escape that

[2] https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/10/26/myanmar-faces-manifold-crises-as-military-conscription-drives-mass-exodus/

may not be present in other nationalities' decisions. In turn, this urgency may expose them to a risk of a bad job placement. Not being a quantitative study, we cannot compare how Burmese workers fare in comparison with other nationalities, but this study points to certain issues they raise (e.g. long working hours) which, from TWC2's experience with other nationalities of migrant workers, aren't as often raised by the latter.

# II. Aim and method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Burmese workers who came into TWC2's office for help with their employment problems. The interview questions were designed to gather the experiences of workers in the process of looking for employment in Singapore and settling into life in Singapore. The interviews were conducted in Burmese – the researcher's native language as well.

The way interviewees were recruited and the small size of the sample must mean that we can make no conclusions about how representative our findings are. Nonetheless, we wanted this exercise to tap the top-of-mind issues that even a small sample will surface; we wanted to see how these top-of-mind issues might differ from other nationalities' top-of-mind concerns – which we would be familiar with from our many more years of engagement with those other nationalities.

Burmese migrant workers are a relatively new group among TWC2 clients. They only began to appear in numbers about three years ago, and this may be related to the political crisis in their country starting from 2021.

Prior to that, the Bangladeshis were the predominant group of migrant workers coming to TWC2, and TWC2 became very familiar with their situation and background context.

We wanted to have a quick assessment whether there were any material differences between the top-of-mind issues raised by Burmese migrant workers and other nationalities, and although our sample was small and skewed, we believe it was good enough.

The interviews had two main parts: the first centred around the paths they took to get to their jobs. The second centred on what realities they faced living and working in Singapore.

# III. Profile of respondents

Nineteen interviews were conducted over a span of five months. TWC2 saw far more Burmese workers than nineteen during that period but because the researcher was coming to TWC2 on only some days, the interviewees were those clients who happened to come to TWC2 to consult with their case officers on those days.

Although we interviewed nineteen workers, altogether we have information regarding 35 job journeys ("data points") because most of the workers had worked in Singapore before, and our interviews covered their journeys to each job they held.

The interviewees were 15 male and 4 female workers, with most of them working in the service sector as kitchen helpers, shop assistants, or dishwashers. This gender split is consistent with the gender split among Burmese workers (in non-domestic sectors) coming to TWC2 for help.

Table 3a

| Gender | Persons |
|---|---|
| Male | 15 |
| Female | 4 |
| TOTAL | 19 |

The fact that so many were in the service sector was already a point of difference from South Asian workers, the impact of which will be discussed below.

The majority of the 35 job journeys saw the interviewees holding Work Permits. Smaller numbers held S-Passes where the minimum monthly salary should be above $3,000 a month (the exact threshold increases year by year), and a handful said they held Training Employment Passes (minimum monthly salary $3,000).

Table 3b

| Type of work pass | Jobs |
|---|---|
| Work Permit | 25 |
| S-Pass | 6 |
| Training Employment Pass | 3 |
| Unclear | 1 |
| TOTAL | 35 |

As we will later discuss below, in actual fact, many were not paid their official salaries – which was the chief reason why they sought help from TWC2.

# IV. Limitations

Due to a limited sample size, we make no claim about applying our findings to all Burmese workers in Singapore. The aim was simply to surface some considerations that informed the choices our interviewees made as they sought to find work here.

The interviews were conducted at the TWC2 office during working hours so the workers we could interview were limited to the workers who were out of work, or who had leave from work. These workers' working arrangements and experiences could be different from the workers who are unable to leave work during working hours.

However, the responses of the interviewees were not markedly different from other research we have done with Burmese workers, and workers of other nationalities. What differences we unearthed were relatively subtle.

All of the interviewees came to TWC2 for help with their active cases or for consultation about their situation. However, since our interviews did not touch on their current problem but instead enquired into the recruitment journey and other experiences before their current problems arose, we do not think our findings were much skewed by using this convenience sampling.

# V. Findings: Employment in Singapore

The study covered three areas:

- employment, including agent fees and salary;
- why choose Singapore;
- living in Singapore.

In this section, we discuss employment.

## 5.1. How workers found their first job in Singapore

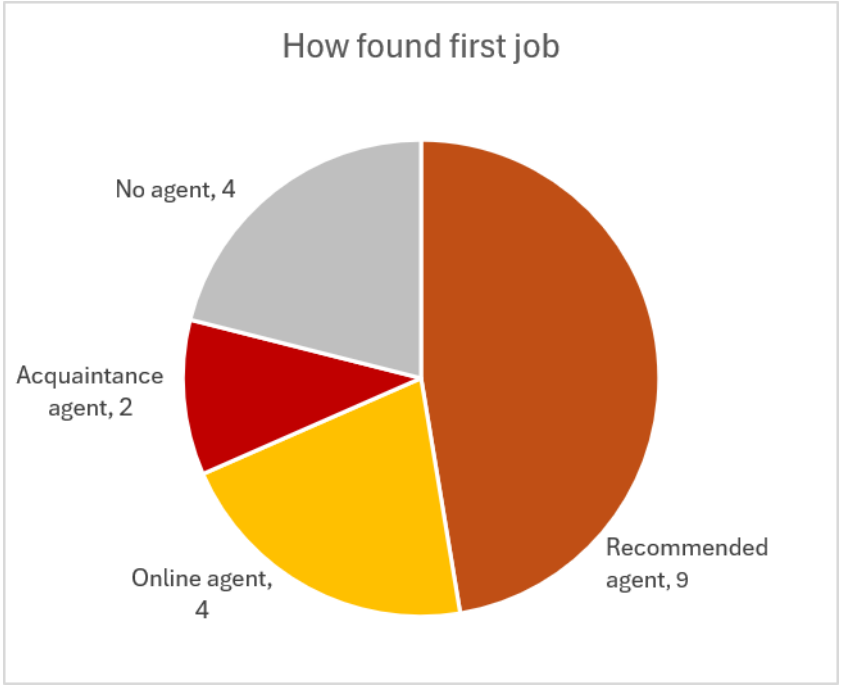
For their first job, most of our interviewees used Myanmar agents to help them find employment in Singapore. The descriptor “Myanmar” here refers to the nationality or ethnicity of the person, rather than the geographical location of the country, based on the way the interviewees spoke. The person might be operating in Myanmar or it could be a Burmese emigré operating out of Singapore. Whatever the location, the person was almost surely not a Singapore-licensed employment agent.

The word “agent” was also used loosely in our conversations. It appears that none of the 15 interviewees who mentioned using an “agent” actually used a Singapore-

licensed one. We came to this view by looking at their In-principle Approval (IPA) letters; only licensed agents can be named in this document which is issued by the Ministry of Manpower. The fact that the parties that our interviewees dealt with and whom they referred to as "agents" were not named in their IPAs strongly suggests that these were all operating informally (and illegally, if they were based in Singapore).

Table 5.1

| How found agent | Persons | Persons |
|---|---|---|
| Agent: | | |
| Agent recommended by friends | 9 | |
| Found agent online | 4 | |
| Knew agent as an acquaintance | 2 | |
| Subtotal | 15 | 15 |
| Job recommended by friends or relatives (no agent) | | 4 |
| TOTAL | | 19 |




Four of the 19 interviewees relied on their personal relationships (either friends or relatives) to secure their first jobs in Singapore.

As can be seen from the Table 5.1, we enquired how they found their agent. About half our interviewees said the agent was recommended to them by their friends or family whilst some others said they found the agent online or they had known of the agent from before (agent acquaintance).

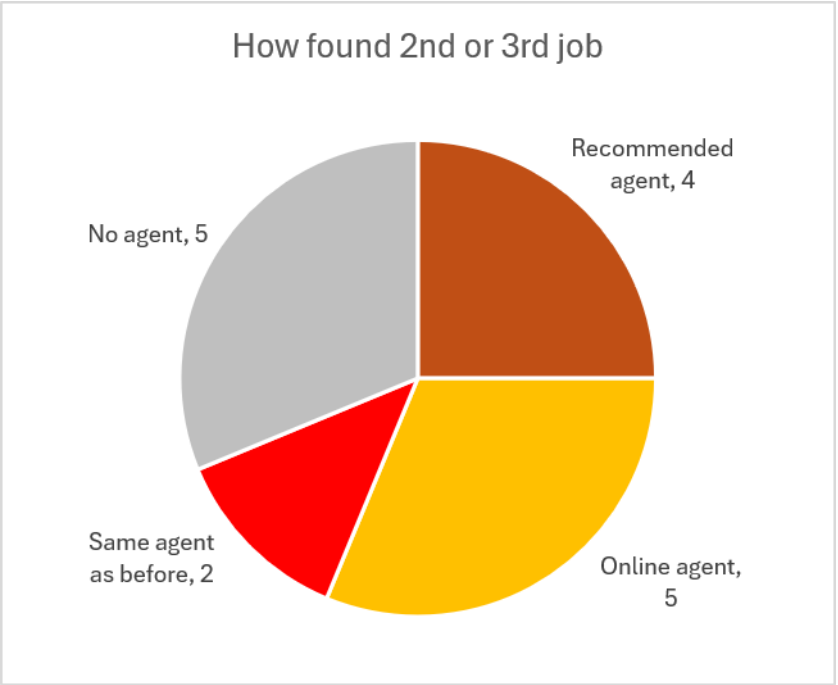
Interestingly, even though a few found agents through online searching, none found their jobs directly from online searches. This may simply be because very few jobs open to Work Permits are advertised online, whereas agents may be more aggressive in promoting their services over social media.

## 5.2 How workers found their second or third job in Singapore

Sixteen out of 19 interviewees were on their second or third jobs at the time of the interviews or had just exited their second or third jobs. Most departures from their jobs were involuntary, which explains why they were at TWC2 seeking help.

Table 5.2

| How found agent | Persons | Persons |
|---|---|---|
| Agent: | | |
| Agent recommended by friends | 4 | |
| Found agent online | 5 | |
| Same agent as for previous job | 2 | |
| Subtotal | 11 | 11 |
| No agent: job found through work network | | 2 |
| No agent: job recommended by friends or relatives | | 3 |
| TOTAL | | 16 |




As can be seen from the above table, only two of the 16 used the same agent as their previous job. This suggests a less than satisfactory experience with those agents. Whilst a few of them managed to find their new jobs through their own networking from their work or social contacts, several still needed agents, choosing new agents they had not used before.

That finding new jobs through networking was not common suggests that their social capital was weak. This is more a reflection of the Burmese community's relative isolation from the stratum of Singapore society where employers are concentrated, such that even their friends and work colleagues have few contacts to share. It is possibly also related to the fact that our interviewees have not been in Singapore for many years and might not have had the time to build a large enough network.

## 5.3 Agent fees

Out of 35 job journeys, nine did not involve agents. Yet only eight did not have to pay "agent fees". One still had to pay despite relying on his social network to find the job.

The amount paid varied considerably. Our table and graphs show a concentration in the $4,000 to $6,000 band. Excluding the interviewees who did not pay anything, the workers paid, on average, $4,190.

Table 5.3a

| Agent fee band | Persons | Jobs |
|---|---|---|
| Below $1,000 | 0 | |
| $1,000 - $1,999 | 4 | |
| $2,000 - $3,999 | 6 | |
| $4,000 - $5,999 | 15 | |
| $6,000 or more | 2 | |
| Subtotal | 27 | 27 |
| No agent fee | | 8 |
| TOTAL | | 35 |

Unacceptable though any payment of agent fees may be – it is considered by the International Labour Organisation to be an indicator of forced labour – what is striking is how much lower these ranges are compared to what Bangladeshi workers have to pay for their first jobs, and in many cases, even for their subsequent jobs. Bangladeshi workers often cite amounts above $10,000 for their first jobs, and $5,000 or more for their second.

It is unfortunately outside the scope of this study to understand how the market for Burmese migrant labour arrives at fee levels for this community and why the levels differ from other nationalities, but it is certainly a good question for further study.

One possible factor may simply be that, unlike Bangladeshi workers who are concentrated in the construction and shipyard sectors, most of our Burmese interviewees were from the service sector. The far more numerous South Asians are generally not permitted to work in the service sector, and perhaps for this reason, the labour supply-demand imbalance that produces the ecology of agent-fee demands does not work as brutally against Burmese workers as they do against Bangladeshi workers.



Another way to look at the burden of agent fees on workers is to assess the ratio of fee to monthly salary. In the table below, we only include the 27 job journeys that involved payment.

Table 5.3c

| Ratio of agent fee to official salary | Jobs |
|---|---|
| Around one month's salary | 5 |
| 2x to 3x monthly salary | 17 |
| 4x to 5x monthly salary | 1 |
| 6x to 7x monthly salary | 4 |
| TOTAL | 27 |

This, when compared to the burden borne by Bangladeshi workers, is even more striking. The biggest group from among our 27 job journeys involved an agent fee that was "only" two to three times their official salary. Bangladeshis typically pay a fee equivalent to 20 or 24 times their monthly salary.

There appears to be two factors that produce a lower ratio for the Burmese. The first was discussed above: the Burmese seem to be paying less in agent fees. The second is that their monthly salaries in the service sector are significantly higher than those for Bangladeshi workers in the construction and shipyard sectors. With a higher denominator, the resulting ratio is lower.

However, service sector salaries are structured differently from construction salaries. The former tend to include a big component called "allowance" that is meant as money for the employee to pay for his or her own accommodation. In the construction sector where workers are typically housed in dormitories, employers bear most of the cost. Construction workers' salaries are not buffed up by the addition of allowances.

What this means is that the lower ratio of agent fees to monthly salaries among our interviewees can be deceptive. After huge monthly outlays for rent, they may not be left with much that they can save to offset what they had earlier paid to agents, or to service whatever loans they may have taken out to afford the agent fees.

It gets worse. We scrutinised the workers' IPAs in 18 of the 35 job journeys and found that in a great majority of cases, workers were not paid their IPA-stated salaries. This being the case, the ratio of agent fee to (official) salary is not in reality what it appears to be.

Out of these 18 job journeys, only three reported an actual salary that matched the IPA-stated salary. A little surprisingly, in two cases, the actual salary was higher.

However, for most (13 job journeys) the actual salary paid was lower than stated in the IPA.

> Among Work Permit holders, the monthly shortfall averaged $360, about 30 percent below what they should have been getting.
>
> Among S-Pass holders, the monthly shortfall averaged $1,575, or about 45 percent.
>
> Among the Training Employment Pass holders, the average difference between their IPA and actual salary was $1,100 or about 36 percent. The minimum salary for this type of pass is $3,000.

That said, this is surely not representative. Our sample was drawn from workers who came to TWC2 for assistance, mostly over salary disputes. Even so, it would be too simplistic to assume that other Burmese workers, not appearing at TWC2, have no salary issues. Our conversations with our clients often suggest that they were not alone in being short-paid. Their Burmese co-workers were often in similar situations, except that being fearful of losing their jobs and being repatriated (possibly to face conscription) they were not coming forward.

# VI. Findings: Work and life in Singapore

This section brings together replies to our questions about Singapore more generally, not specific to their employment.

## 6.1 Why Singapore?

We asked our 19 interviewees why they chose to seek work in Singapore, as opposed to other ASEAN countries like Thailand or Malaysia. By using thematic analysis, we found three major themes for why workers chose Singapore: safety, ease of entering Singapore for work and having existing connections.

**Safety**

Many workers highlighted their view that there exists a strong rule of law in Singapore as a reason to look for work here, compared to Thailand or Malaysia.

Kyaw (pseudonym) said "My mum doesn't want me to stay at home because of the conscription law. She wanted me to go to a safe country and Singapore is safe."

The same sentiment was shared by other workers who felt that Singapore was known to have good rule of law and was generally safe when compared to other countries.

Safety is one of the main concerns for Burmese workers when choosing a work destination; fearing for their lives as they escape strict conscription laws in Myanmar can be a traumatising experience.

It proved difficult to tease out what exactly they meant by "safe" because interviewees often used the term "rule of law" or just "law" in relation to this topic. Safe can mean free from petty crime or street crime, but why they would imagine Thailand and Malaysia to be comparatively unsafe by this metric is a head-scratcher.

The mention of "rule of law" suggests that Singapore would be a place where employment standards are high and protections for migrant workers maintained, and there would be peace of mind.

However, this initial sentiment shared by most workers stands in stark contrast to the reality of their lives in Singapore. As mentioned above, many of the workers' salaries are less than what is written on their IPA and many are subject to long working hours with no overtime pay and sometimes no break and holiday allowances. Filing any claim almost always means a long period of unemployment. Getting another job often means having to pay agents, and often in amounts that exceed legal limits.

With the cost of rent and living expenses to high here, financial problems are never far away.

They may not face physical danger in Singapore, but the stresses resulting from these financial and psychological factors raise serious questions about mental wellbeing.

There is a third possibility why Burmese workers think of Singapore as safer than Malaysia or Thailand, and it may have to do with the fact that many Burmese in those neighbouring countries end up in undocumented status – common knowledge in the Burmese community. Naturally, when one is undocumented, risks of victimisation by employers, landlords and just about anybody one encounters in daily life, multiply. By contrast, the work pass process in Singapore is a relatively smooth-running machine. At the least, it gives a semblance of order and protection even if reality falls short.

**Entry requirements**

A major consideration for Burmese workers, due to the conscription laws, was to leave the country as quickly as possible. Other countries, like Japan and South Korea, require language requirements for work. In contrast, many workers highlighted only the need for basic language skills to enter Singapore i.e., low entry requirements.

Soe Yo (pseudonym) who initially wanted to go to South Korea said this: "I wanted to go to Korea but they had very high language requirements and because of the

conscription law I needed to leave the country quickly. Singapore was my second choice because I knew basic Mandarin and there were also plenty of Singapore agents in Myanmar."

Likewise, Kaung (pseudonym) responded by saying that for him, Singapore was the second choice after Japan: "I was already looking to leave for Japan. I've taken classes to learn Japanese language but because of the high influx of Myanmar workers in Japan, they increased the passing mark of the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test). That's why I chose to come to Singapore. It had less entry requirements."

Even so, getting out of the country may not be as quick as they might hope. They would still need to find an agent, give the agent time to find a job vacancy, go through the recruitment process and hope that everything leads to actually getting the job. This may take a month or more.

Those who cannot even wait this long have been known to first go to Thailand (as an ASEAN citizen, Burmese can enter Thailand visa-free for up to a month) while the job search continues. However, because time is always working against them, they may find themselves accepting jobs with unsatisfactory terms of employment or accepting jobs without getting sufficient information what the job entails. This may set them up for exploitation later.

**An ecology of agents specialising in the Singapore corridor**

From among the interviews, there emerged a hint that some agents in Myanmar specialise in finding work in Singapore. There is a longstanding Burmese diaspora in Singapore, and some of these members of the diaspora act as the Singapore contacts.

Zaw (pseudonym) mentions an example of such corridor specialisation when he said, "Family business was not doing so well, and I needed to look for work to take care of my parents. I knew other people from my village going to Singapore with agents and got referrals."

Aye and Thein (pseudonyms) said, "I saw reviews from my friends and others online about how to get work in Singapore. I asked them for agent recommendations and contacted the agents to find work."

## 6.2 The reality of life and work in Singapore

The main concerns for workers – most of our interviewees were in the service sector – were long working hours, which affected their sleep and contributed to a constant feeling of stress. Most of the workers were asked to work 12 hours per day, with no rest breaks in between and only enjoyed two days off days in a month.

Min (pseudonym) explained: "Working in Singapore is not good. I have to work 12 hours per day. This is true for most Burmese workers here. And there are only 2 off days per month. I'm only working in Singapore because I am scared of the conscription mandates back home."

Similarly, Nyi (pseudonym) responded, "Work is very tiring. I don't have enough time to sleep and not enough time to eat. Sleeping is poor, living is also poor."

That last remark points to another issue: that of money. Workers also feel that the salary they are earning does not adequately cover their living costs.

Moreover, workers also spoke about deceit and kickbacks. Deceit takes the form of a stated salary in the In-principle Approval (IPA) that is lower than what had been agreed. In the event of any dispute, the stated salary is the figure enforceable by law.

Many workers were told by agents that the agreed salary was for 12-hour days, when this is against the law too. Workers should be entitled to overtime pay for hours in excess of eight hours per day. Our interviewees often reported not being paid any overtime wages at all.

As for kickbacks, we had an account from Nwe (pseudonym) in which she said that although she was paid the stated IPA salary through her bank, she was forced by her

supervisor to withdraw money from an ATM and return that sum. She only got to keep a portion of her official salary.

# VII. Discussion

This is a small study involving only 19 interviewees, and a convenience sample drawn from workers who sought help at TWC2. The aim of the exercise was to gain a picture of why Burmese were looking to work in Singapore and what their journeys here involved.

The internal conflict in the country is a major driver, especially its conscription law, which exacerbates the problem by making it essential to find a way out of the country as quickly as possible. Many of our interviewees mentioned conscription in their conversations with us.

Singapore is seen as a desirable destination, and placement agencies seem quite experienced in facilitating job search. From accounts here, these agencies are run by Burmese persons at both the Myanmar and Singapore ends. Unfortunately, they do not operate within Singapore's employment agency licensing framework, which may be related to the many dissatisfactions voiced by interviewees about misrepresentation.

The employment experience after coming here does not appear to be a happy one, although we would stress again that this study makes no claim to representativeness. Interviewees spoke of salary shortfalls and excessive hours, with impact on their sleep and stress levels.

We found noticeable differences between the experiences of Burmese workers and the other main group of non-domestic migrant workers, the South Asians, e.g. the Bangladeshis. Whereas Bangladeshi workers are nearly all in the construction, marine shipyard and process sectors, the Burmese are spread across different sectors; most of our interviewees were in the service sector.
Salary structures differed, agent fees differed and housing arrangements differed.

This is a cautionary indication that in any study of migrant labour, segmenting findings by nationality is critical when their experiences can differ significantly.

This study also suggests additional avenues of enquiry. For example, a more detailed understanding of the networks of employment agents working in the Myanmar-Singapore corridor may be needed. A closer look at salary structures and employer demands specific to the service sector may also prove useful.

And whilst this study did not touch on it, there must surely be huge issues relating to repatriation when jobs come to an end. If workers are here to escape conscription, how can they possibly countenance going back home?