Informality during migration, 'conversion' within and across national spaces: eliciting moral ambivalence amongst informal brokers

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Abstract: Conditions of precarity, irregularity and illegality are often associated with informality. Yet the functional and analytical value of informality as a condition and process underpinning the migration industry and infrastructure has yet to be fully investigated. This paper considers first, how is informality constructed within national space and across national spaces during migration? Second, in the context of migration, what does informality reveal of the binaries associated with legality/illegality and morality/immorality? Third, what does inhabiting informality as a 'negotiated space' achieve for the various stakeholders who are involved in mediating migration? We address these questions through a study of how foreign domestic workers (FDWs) migrate from Myanmar to work in Singapore. Although FDWs can secure legal documents from Singapore (the receiving country), the government of Myanmar (the sending country) considered migration for domestic work illegal until it lifted a ban on such migration in April 2019. Even so, the government will to formalise and enforce legal migration in Myanmar has been lagging, alongside a lack of traction for multi-stakeholder collaboration in this direction. Through discussing informality during the recruitment, training and deployment stages, we draw attention to how informal brokers experience "moral ambivalence", a condition which can be seen as a resource that illuminates new political and social subjectivities, as well as a means of managing risks and uncertainties during migration.

1 Introduction

San (aged late 30s), is a former foreign domestic worker (FDW) from Myanmar who had worked in Singapore for 14 years. After returning to Myanmar, she became an informal broker

who facilitates the migration of other FDWs. At San's request, we met at an airport hotel room where she had stayed with an FDW the night before. She proposed the hotel room as a private meeting place as she prefers not to share about her brokerage activities in a public space—at the time of our fieldwork, recruiting and deploying women for domestic work abroad were considered illegal in Myanmar. San had stayed at the hotel so that she could bring the FDW to Yangon airport for the earliest flight to Singapore—a process that involves bribing airport 'runners' and immigration officers, and training the FDWs to say they are going for tourism if quizzed about their departure reasons. The FDW had returned to Myanmar temporarily after completing her contract; a former employer wanted to renew her work permit but didn't want the FDW to be overcharged by unscrupulous agents who could ask for several months' salaries as fees. Through San's social networks, the employer contacted her for advice. Although San helped this FDW return to work in Singapore, she did not charge the FDW any fee out of personal goodwill. Throughout our fieldwork, despite the illicit operations they conduct, informal brokers like San would repeatedly emphasise their contributions towards helping vulnerable FDWs.

In the labour migration literature, conditions of precarity, irregularity and illegality are often associated with informality (e.g. Awumbila *et al,.* 2018; Deshingkar, 2018; Visser and Guarnizo, 2017). Yet the functional and analytical value of informality as a condition and process underpinning the production of the migration industry remains to be fully investigated. The concept is theorised more intensively in urban and development studies—including by geographers—as a condition, a process of urbanisation, an organising logic, mode of production, and negotiated space (e.g. Bayat, 1997; Hackenbroch, 2011; Inverardi-Ferri, 2018; McFarlane, 2012; Roy, 2005; Varley, 2013). Building on such debates about informality, we ask in this paper: first, how is informality constructed within national space and across national spaces (i.e. transnationally) during migration? Second, in the context of migration, what does informality reveal of the binaries associated with legality/illegality and morality/immorality? Third, what does inhabiting informality as a 'negotiated space' achieve for the various stakeholders who are involved in mediating migration?

We address these research questions by examining the care migration industry through which FDWs migrate from Myanmar to work in Singapore. Although they are able to secure legal documents from Singapore (the migrant-receiving country), migrating overseas for domestic work was considered illegal in Myanmar (the migrant-sending country) until the government lifted the ban in April 2019. Even so, the government will to formalise and enforce legal migration in Myanmar has been lagging, alongside a lack of traction for multi-stakeholder collaboration in this direction. The research that informs this paper is based on a wider multi-component project addressing how Singapore functions as a hub of care migration connections

to other parts of Asia, including Myanmar. We investigated how FDWs from Myanmar were recruited and trained for eldercare work in Singapore by conducting interviews and ethnographic observations in both countries from 2017-2019.[1]

The paper argues that formal migration channels to immigration countries are entwined with processes of informality that start in emigration countries. Whilst informality should not be conflated with illegality, informal brokers in Myanmar—many of whom are former FDWs—reconcile or bridge disparities in the regulations of the migrant-sending and -receiving contexts by participating in 'converting' irregular migration in Myanmar to regular migration in Singapore. Such conversion processes can be likened to Bourdieusian (1986) arguments on how different types of capital can be converted into one another (namely economic, cultural and social capital). Informal brokers leverage their social networks (i.e. social capital) and intimate knowledge of the migration industry (i.e. cultural capital) in both countries to convert illicit monetary exchanges in the informal economy of the migrant-sending country into legitimate monetary benefits that can freely circulate in the formal economy of the migrant-receiving country.

Their actions in the informal economy, however, render them scapegoats for when things go awry (e.g. employer-employee disputes over underaged employment, forged documents or poor training). The informal economy is one populated by moralising scripts (stipulating proper or improper conduct) narrated by actors operating in the formal economy, such as licensed agents or trainers and governments. Nonetheless, informal brokers enact counter-moralising scripts of their own, conveying distrust of a migration industry left in the hands of the aforementioned powerful actors that had exploited them or their peers when they were FDWs. They contend that they can better protect prospective FDWs, thus legitimising their actions in the grey zone even as they recognise their complicity in entrenching irregular migration. Through analysing the bridging and conversion processes that informal brokers enable, this paper unsettles binary framings of informality/formality, illegality/legality, and immorality/morality in a transnational context (i.e. rather than within a single country only). While acknowledging the self-interests of the informal brokers, the paper also elicits the 'moral ambivalence' (McNevin, 2013) that they experience which it conceptualises as a resource that can generate new political and social relations through one's act of making claims.

Section 2 discusses the key themes of brokerage, precarity and informality that inform this paper. Section 3 presents the study context and fieldwork design. Section 4 demonstrates empirically how informality facilitates 'conversion' from irregular to regular migration across countries and at various stages of migration. Section 5 then trains the analytical lens on informality during training, highlighting how poor training compounds the vulnerability of

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[1] The large grant commenced in 2018 but the lead author had conducted fieldwork in Myanmar prior to that period.

FDWs and presenting the views of different stakeholders towards training. This discussion segues into Section 6 where we argue that the dialectical relation between informality and formality generates the condition of "moral ambivalence". In conceptualising moral ambivalence, we draw inspiration from McNevin's (2013) writing that sees ambivalence as a resource which, not only illuminates new political and social subjectivities, but is also a means of managing risks and uncertainties. Section 7 concludes this paper by arguing for the importance of acknowledging the motivations and values of informal brokers, and enlisting their participation as governments and other institutional actors seek to regulate migration.

2 Conceptualising informality in relation to migration

Despite the inroads made by transnationalism scholarship, research on migrant recruitment and adaptation in immigration countries still tends to be treated separately from what happens in emigration countries (i.e. a compartmentalised approach). Formal migration channels to immigration countries are entwined with processes in the informal economy of emigration countries. Amongst labour migration scholars, the topic of informality has been considered by Visser and Guarnizo (2017) in the context of immigration countries. While the state's increasing role in regulation affords protection for some types of labour, migrant work might be marginalised and exploited through those same laws, restricting protection to those with documented or citizenship statuses. Disputing the assumed negative socio-economic outcomes associated with informality, Visser and Guarnizo's edited volume shows that informal strategies by workers and employers actually help the upward occupational mobility of migrants, despite departing from institutionally prescribed and sanctioned mechanisms. Citing Kudva (2009), Visser and Guarnizo (2017, p. 5) argue that "the experience of informality must be understood and approached as an 'everyday' and 'episodic' reality that takes places in specific localities".

Compared to immigration countries, the conditions, processes, experiences and outcomes of informality differ in emigration countries. Various studies have treated informality as a corollary to how brokerage operates within the migration industry.[2] Lindquist (2012), for example, underscores the role of informal brokers in Indonesia (a migrant-sending country) as intermediaries who enable migrants to navigate bureaucratic processes, a role that they are able to carry out not only because of their social networks and technical and cultural knowledge, but also by embodying purportedly ethical qualities. Wee *et al*. (2020, p. 10) observes a similar role played by formal brokers (as licensed employment agents) in Singapore (a migrant-receiving country), adding that brokers' decisions around "how and what to translate, reproduce or challenge particular forms of knowledge about migrants [can] have immediate

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[2] There is now a vast literature on the migration industry. Given word limits, we cannot address them in full here but useful overviews are found in special issues such as by Lindquist et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2017; Cranston, 2018; Shresta and Yeoh, 2018; Deshingkar, 2018.

consequences on how workers are presented as appealing laborers and docile subjects". Put differently, brokers embody different types of capital, namely social and cultural capital that can be converted to economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) which lubricates the migration industry (i.e. as fees to agents and trainers or salaries to the workers).

Although writing in a different context about poverty capital, Roy (2012, p. 142) likewise refers to Bourdieu's idea on the convertibility of capital to forward the argument that "the social world of the poor [can be converted into] monetised, profitable finance" through the value given to culture (citing Elyachar, 2012; also see 2005) or the social relations of the poor. Elsewhere, Elyachar (2010, p. 459) conceptualises women's practices of sociality as a form of 'phatic labour' that is central to producing and maintaining economic life by allowing for the flow of "goods and use values of various kinds". In similar vein, the social networks and cultural knowledge (acquired from *being* a former FDW and *becoming* a broker) of informal brokers take on a different and added value when these can be mobilised to align documentation and FDWs' conduct with what other stakeholders in the formal economy expect.

Several scholars have highlighted the Janus-faced role of brokers in co-creating precarity amongst migrants, namely by constructing for employers an idealised image of the foreign domestic worker—one that requires subservience from the employee (e.g. Åkesson and Alpes, 2019; Picherit, 2018). Nonetheless, such scholarship also observes that brokers offer protection in unfamiliar urban spaces, helping migrants to negotiate job changes or to improve their working conditions. Awumbila *et al*. (2018, p. 2) note that "recruitment agencies and brokers also play a range of multiple and often contradictory roles that straddle hazy boundaries between subjugation and empowerment".

Negative perceptions of informal brokers are based on images and regulatory projects constructed by states which sought to consolidate control over migration during the 19th Century (McKeown, 2012; Picherit, 2018). As Åkesson and Alpes (2019, p. 15) argue, "terminological choices carry assumptions and thus influence the perspective from which knowledge is constructed". In the wider research on informality, scholars have argued that practices that have been labelled 'informal' are considered such largely because they are "invisible to the bureaucratic gaze" (Hart, 2009, p. 11), adding that these practices should not be conflated with illegality (Chiodelli and Moroni, 2014). Several scholars have also urged for greater analytical attention to be given to the strategies that social actors operating in the informal domain use to circumvent government efforts to regulate informal industries or to creatively align themselves with the interests of formal authorities (Koenig, 2017; Njaya, 2014). Casting critical scrutiny on, not only how informality is constructed, but also how it operates is just as crucial for migration studies.

For example, brokers navigate migration pathways by drawing on "social networks, brokering services, helping hands, un/expected encounters and policy interventions" (Schapendonk, 2017, p. 665). This ability to navigate (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) becomes all the more important in countries where labour migration happens in a maze of regular/legal and irregular/illegal routes, spanning the formal and informal domains. Much of this practice relates to connections and trust relations that are forged between brokers and migrants, state actors, non-state actors and more, contributing to the "ongoing reworking of patron-client relationships" (Lindquist, 2017, p. 218; Picherit, 2018). Specific configurations of brokerage show how they are "productive of, and enabled by, their particular socio-cultural contexts as well as the limits and possibilities of the relational dynamics at play" (Shrestha and Yeoh, 2018, p. 665). Amidst the multiple pathways of social navigation (Vigh, 2009), informality emerges as a space in which negotiations take place between the various parties involved in migration, across different countries (i.e. transnationally), and at different stages of migration.

While considerable academic attention has been paid to labour recruitment, we highlight training as another key aspect of the care migration industry. Training is often regarded analytically as part of the brokerage process, but it has been subsumed by the greater attention given to recruitment. In Indonesia and the Philippines, government-mandated formal pre-departure programs provide departing FDWs with basic skills training. Such training also constitutes workers' subjectivities by instilling beliefs in resilience and docility (Chee, 2020; Rodriguez and Schwenken, 2013). In such ways migrant vulnerability and social inequalities are actively produced across transnational circuits and scale by a range of social actors (Chacko and Price, 2020; Polanco, 2017). Training also produces skills differentiation. Lan's (2016) comparative analysis of care workers' training in Taiwan and Japan observes that training for FDWs focuses on 'technologies of servitude' (p. 267) whereas training for nursing care focuses on professionalisation as 'safe and quality care' (*ibid*). Referring to Singapore, Ortiga *et al.* (2020) note that even as occupational barriers are lowered for citizens to encourage them to become professional caregivers, the training expectations of FDWs and foreign care workers have increased. The authors further refer to Myanmar as a case where pre-departure training reflects cross-boundary skilling (i.e. drawing on curriculum from Singapore). Our paper adds nuance to such observations of cross-boundary skilling, underscoring the variance of training in Myanmar where informality characterises and extends across the recruitment, training and deployment stages.

In sum, our paper engages critically with notions and practices of informality during migration. We show how informal brokers bridge immigration and emigration contexts, and carry out 'conversion' functions at various stages of migration using their social, cultural and economic

capital. Adopting such an analytical approach further draws out the moralising and counter-moralising scripts that extend across multiple stages of migration. We show how the dialectics of informality and formality produce "moral ambivalence". While ambiguity is associated with conditions that are unclear, ambivalence is an emic state associated with feelings of an opposing pull between purportedly dichotomous positions (Agergaard and Ungruhe, 2016). Giving attention to ambivalence avoids romanticising or oversimplifying complex social processes (Uehling, 2002). Ambivalence may be driven by social structures and processes (Smelser, 1998), but it also connotes ways of managing risks and uncertainties that regulation and professionalisation cannot fully eradicate (Thumala, 2011). Drawing from McNevin (2013), we consider ambivalence as a resource that can generate new political and social relations through one's act of making claims. For McNevin (2013), the condition of ambivalence provides a vantage point for researchers to be attentive to transformation, without pre-empting the terms of change. While McNevin (2013) expresses that ambivalence is preferable to agency because the latter oftentimes connotes victimhood (e.g. during irregular migration), Schwiter *et al*.'s (2018, p. 464) concept of "constrained agency" signals there are a diverse range of coping strategies and everyday resistance that workers in the social reproduction domain use. As former FDWs, the informal brokers in this paper draw on their past work experiences and knowledge of the migration industry to negotiate the constraints that prospective FDWs face migrating abroad, as well as relay knowledge of coping strategies and everyday resistance. Like McNevin and Schwiter *et al*., we find analytical purchase in further conceptualising how seemingly opposing feelings or conditions shape social worlds (also see Parreñas *et al*., 2020 on 'soft violence'). Our empirical findings draw out how, by converting irregular to regular migration, informal brokers see themselves as moral intermediaries intervening to extend social protection, mobility and empowerment to women (i.e. as rights-bearing subjects) who could be allegedly otherwise exploited by less moral stakeholders in the care migration industry.

3 Study context and methods

The number of FDWs in Singapore have increased exponentially from only 5000 in 1978 when the 'Foreign Maid Scheme' was inaugurated (Dodgson, 2016, p. 21) to 255,800 in June 2019 (Department of Statistics, 2019). An average of one FDW is employed in every five households in Singapore. They are considered a temporary labour force in Singapore and awarded a two-year work permit that is renewable on a case-by-case basis until the FDW reaches 60 years old. Subsumed under the work permit scheme is a distinct category of care workers known in Singapore as 'live-in caregivers' because they have basic nursing certification and are employed to do specialised eldercare work (but they still carry out light household chores). Live-in caregivers' monthly salaries start from USD430 (SGD600) onwards whereas FDWs are paid less. Both types of caregivers are required to live in their employers' homes. The work

permit system is a key regulatory mechanism for managing Singapore's low-wage migrant workers, with the responsibility outsourced to employers and employment agents. For example, employers have to purchase a mandatory $5000 security bond which can be forfeited if their FDW contravenes her work permit regulations. Employment agents are required by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) to check that the FDWs they bring into Singapore meet the minimum age and educational qualifications.

An increasing number of FDWs in Singapore come from Myanmar. They comprise roughly a fifth of the total population of domestic workers in Singapore or the third-largest nationality behind Indonesians (125,000) and Filipinos (70,000) (Kurohi, 2019). FDWs from Myanmar receive the lowest salaries and are charged the highest placement fees compared to their Filipino and Indonesian counterparts. The growing presence of Myanmarese FDWs taking care of seniors in Singapore led us to investigate the recruitment and training practices that characterise this migration stream. This research project is part of a wider study on Singapore's multi-faceted care connections to its regional neighbours. Information on care migration is extremely fragmented in Myanmar given the illegality associated with the ban on domestic work abroad, the multiple stakeholders operating illicitly, as well as weak laws, ambiguous policies and poor enforcement.

We started our fieldwork in Singapore in 2018 where we recruited 14 FDWs from Myanmar through religious groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that focus on migrant protection. We then interviewed 14 returnee FDWs in Myanmar. We travelled between Singapore and Myanmar for four rounds of data collection between 2018-2019. Some participants shared with us their contacts to employment agents and brokers in Myanmar and/or Singapore. We interviewed licensed agents and trainers in both countries, as well as informal brokers in Myanmar; in total 14 interviews were carried out in Myanmar and 7 more in Singapore. We augmented the interviews with ethnographic observations at the 'workplaces' of the licensed agents and informal brokers (these spaces include formal offices and training centres and the informal spaces in which recruitment, training and deployment are carried out). All names in this paper are pseudonyms. We discuss the care migration context in Myanmar below.

4 Informality and 'conversion' work during recruitment and deployment

This section examines how informal brokers bridge the migrant-sending and -receiving contexts as well as participate in 'converting' irregular migration in Myanmar to regular migration in Singapore. Despite the ban on domestic work abroad, women in Myanmar continue to opt to work abroad, inducing brokers to operate underground (i.e. recruitment and training that fall outside of the state's legal provisions). While overseas employment agencies that are licensed by the Myanmar government exist, these agencies deploy male migrant

workers for the construction or shipping industries, or if their clients are females, the women work as nursing aides and nurses with professional qualifications. The terminology around female care migration can be confusing on the ground with some agents and brokers in Myanmar describing their clients as 'caregivers' (suggesting they work as nursing aides) when in fact those clients are on a work permit for FDWs in Singapore. Interviewees also use the labels 'agent' and 'broker' interchangeably, muddling the licensed or unlicensed status of the intermediary. In this paper, we use 'agent' to refer to licensed employment agencies which operate in the formal domain of regulations and laws overseeing migration in Myanmar and Singapore, and 'informal broker' to refer to unlicensed individuals in Myanmar who operate outside of the legal domain.

Informality in Myanmar is integral to the process of securing formal employment in Singapore. As we will see below, informality operates as part of a dialectical relationship with formal bureaucracy (see Hart, 2009) and formal migration channels. Informal networks dominate the care migration industry, consisting of multi-scalar collaborations and operations extending across diverse stakeholders in Myanmar and Singapore (e.g. Singapore-based agents, religious groups, non-governmental organisations and employers). Collaboration between licensed agents in Singapore and informal brokers in Myanmar is based on flexible and small-scale networks. For example, Jasper is a Singapore-based agent who left non-governmental work to set up a recruitment agency. Prior to working as an agent, he had helped some FDWs through his own FDW's connections and felt motivated to do more for them. The Myanmar government's ban on domestic work abroad meant Jasper could not work with licensed agencies in Myanmar so he partners three unlicensed brokers with their own network of sub-brokers and works directly with more than 25 other informal brokers. The latter contacted him through their own networks; most were former FDWs in Singapore (in local parlance, 'ex-Singapore' FDWs). Jasper prefers working with them because they have experienced the challenges of being a domestic worker abroad whereas male brokers may prioritise "good money" rather than the FDWs' welfare. These types of moralising tropes, as we will see later, are common in the care migration industry.

Jasper used to run training centres clandestinely in Myanmar but closed them because of police spot checks. He now relies on informal brokers to recruit and train potential FDWs. Jasper pays about USD1000 (approximately SGD1360) for each FDW deployed to Singapore to cover the costs of training and other fees, an amount that is deducted from the FDWs' monthly salaries after they start work. The informal brokers usually do not have an office or a specific training centre, opting to be as 'footloose' as possible to evade spatial surveillance by the authorities. Informal brokers in Myanmar endure significant risks operating in the grey zone, as illustrated

in the article's opening vignette about San's work as well as the account of another informal broker below.

Former migrant Ohma (aged 51) became an informal broker after she returned to Myanmar. She had worked in Singapore for 16 years, of which four years was as an FDW. Prior to moving to Singapore, she operated as a licensed agent until the ban on domestic work abroad affected her business. Ohma now works with her husband to recruit potential FDWs through their personal networks and runs her business from home. During the interview, Ohma and her husband would answer questions selectively; once they perceive a question to be sensitive, they would respond dismissively or avoid it. On average, they send three domestic helpers to Singapore each month, collaborating with Singapore-based agents. Potential migrants contact Ohma through her family or their relatives and friends who work in Singapore. Before the ban she used to advertise her services on Facebook but no longer uses it for fear of drawing police attention to her work. Most informal brokers, like Ohma, turn to their social networks to disseminate information on migration to prospective FDWs and to identify avenues for circumventing the legal restrictions disallowing domestic worker migration.

Informal brokers like San and Ohma perform key 'conversion' work during the recruitment and deployment phases. They rely on their intimate knowledge of the migration industry (i.e. now construed as expertise) and extensive social networks—forms of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986)—to bridge the gaps between the actual status of the prospective FDW and the formal documentation required by migrant-receiving countries such as Singapore. To deploy an FDW from Myanmar, the informal broker may forge documentation so that an FDW meets the minimum age and educational criteria (23 years old and 8 years with certification respectively) required by the Singaporean government. Some also forge a return air ticket to pretend that the FDW is travelling to Singapore for tourism; they apply for a work permit only after arrival. According to the agents, informal brokers and FDWs we interviewed, the FDWs pay a "smooth departure fee" of USD70-140 (SGD$100-200) to 'airport runners' who arrange for their outbound documentation to be processed by immigration officers who have agreed to be bribed. These procedures do not contravene Singapore's regulations as long as an FDW holds the In-Principle Approval (IPA) letter issued by MOM or arrives under the Advance Placement Scheme[3] (APS). In other words, the cultural knowledge and social networks of brokers, along with the calculated risks that they undertake, make legible the information and render legitimate the processes required to convert irregular migration in the informal economy to regular migration for the formal economy across transnational space.

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[3] The Advance Placement Scheme (APS) allows employers to recruit an FDW who had arrived in Singapore earlier to be 'pre-trained' and is thus expected to be more knowledgeable and prepared for work.

The Singapore-based agents claimed they conduct additional checks to ensure compliance with MOM's regulations. They compare the documents prepared by the informal brokers in Myanmar with the FDWs' responses during online pre-departure or on-arrival interviews (by asking questions about their birth year, their schooling years and work experience). If the Singapore-based agents have doubts, they would make a video call to the informal brokers in Myanmar for clarification and even carry out family background checks. As a means of self-protection, some Singapore-based agents require the FDWs to sign additional documents to verify that the necessary checks have been done. Despite the checks by the Singapore-based agents and immigration authorities in Singapore, inconsistent bilateral government policies and poor enforcement over FDW recruitment leave a "negotiated space" (Hackenbroch, 2011) for the different stakeholders, including political and bureaucratic organisations in the formal economy, to benefit from informality (Elyachar, 2005; Hodder, 2016, p. 115).

The Myanmar-based licensed agents we interviewed opined that the Myanmar government's ban on domestic work abroad benefits the informal brokers and Singapore-based agents. Thida, a licensed agent, criticised the Myanmar government for turning a blind eye to the fully booked daily flights transporting FDWs to Singapore. To Thida, such inaction fuels informal recruitment and collusion between the informal brokers in Myanmar and employment agencies in Singapore. She stressed that informal brokers benefit from overcharging and sending underage women for domestic work abroad. Thida noted that when it was previously legal for licensed agencies like hers to recruit and deploy FDWs, she charged an amount equivalent to five months of salary deductions (around USD1400 or SGD2000), whereas informal brokers would charge the FDWs seven to eight months of their salaries. Another licensed agent, Aye Kyi, found it unfair that informal brokers can 'run away' to evade penalty if they breach the rules and regulations of Myanmar's Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population (MOL) and the Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Federation (MOEAF). In contrast, when licensed agents encounter any irregularity, they "have to settle [it] immediately" or risk losing their license rights which they have invested heavily to secure. She complained that informal brokers mislead Singaporean employers by claiming that is acceptable to restrict FDWs' use of mobile phones and not to offer rest days. The licensed agents believed that regulating informal recruitment is the first step towards improving protection for FDWs. However, such views could reflect their vested interests, such as removing smaller-scale competition from the informal brokers so as to bolster their monopoly over domestic worker migration when it is regularised.

The discussion above, drawing together accounts from the multiple stakeholders involved in FDW migration from Myanmar to Singapore, shows how formal licensed agents in Singapore rely on the cultural and social capital of informal brokers to convert irregular migration in

Myanmar to regular migration for legal employment in Singapore, thereby generating economic capital for the different parties. Key features of how the informal brokers operate include keeping a low profile, recruiting directly, and maintaining small-scale and flexible operations to reduce fixed costs (e.g. on office space and full-time staff) and to evade spatial surveillance. Informal recruitment provide channels for prospective FDWs, both in urban and rural areas, to access the labour market despite operating in the grey zone (also see Bayat, 1997; Yiftachel, 2009). Informality is integral to and underpins the formal employment system of FDWs in Singapore. The collaborations among informal brokers, the FDWs recruited and the Singapore-based agents are interdependent, enabling informal brokers to carry out 'conversion' functions (from irregular to regular migration) across migration sites.

5 Informality in training compounds the vulnerability of FDWs

Although the informal brokers in Myanmar collaborate with Singapore-based agents, the relationship is one that is characterised by trust and mistrust, accompanied by various 'checks and balances' at different stages of migration, including during pre- and post-departure training. A mismatch between the FDWs' work competencies and employers' expectations can compound the vulnerabilities experienced by FDWs who go through irregular migration channels. Most were trained by informal brokers who provide highly variable levels of pre-departure training, based on their own experience and preparation efforts. Informal training often takes place at the brokers' houses, rented apartments, hotels, or small businesses operated by the brokers. This practice means FDWs also provide 'free labour' for the brokers.[4] Their training covers basic language skills in English and/or Mandarin (commonly used in Singaporean households) and housekeeping duties. The training duration can vary from a few weeks to a few months. We illustrate these observations using the cases of informal brokers Ohma and San again.

Ohma usually hosts up to three potential FDWs at her home for training. As some FDWs come from rural areas which do not use modern household appliances, she purchased appliances similar to those in Singaporean homes for their training. She also buys ingredients that are used in Singapore to teach the trainees how to cook Singaporean or Chinese style cuisine. She gives additional training at her food stall which she operates outside of her house. Ohma emphasised the satisfactory quality of her training by giving an example of how an employer was impressed by her trainee's food preparation and cooking skills.

The other broker in our study, San, rents a house to host the FDW trainees. To avoid detection, the FDWs do not leave the premises until they are ready to be deployed to Singapore. San

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[4] A similar situation may happen in Singapore as some Singapore-based agents would host newly arrived FDWs or those transitioning to new jobs in their own homes. Such training practices reflect unequal power relations between the brokers/agents and FDWs.

recruited a former FDW trainee to help the new trainees learn English and housework skills. When we visited San's house, the trainees were learning English in the living room. While showing us around, San emphasised that the flooring material of the house is the same as those used in Singaporean homes (i.e. contrasting it with concrete or bamboo flooring which is more common in Myanmar). She added that the trainees can freely eat the food that she uses for training, unlike in other brokers' homes where their nutritional needs may be ignored. San incorporates eldercare techniques to her training program, drawing from her experience of caring for seven elderly Singaporeans during the 14 years she had worked in Singapore. She learned those skills from doctors or nurses when her care recipients were hospitalised or discharged for home care. San would also bring the trainees to her 98-year-old grandmother's house nearby to demonstrate different skills (e.g. bathing, moving, feeding, toileting and dressing) and let the trainees practise their skills on her grandmother.

Neither Myanmar nor Singapore enforces regulations for basic skills training amongst FDWs. A mismatch in Singaporean employers' expectations and the FDWs' skills can result in frustration or verbal and physical abuse. Employers who are highly dissatisfied may terminate the employment of their FDWs, leaving them to find work again through the agent who would charge additional placement fees. According to a report in 2014, Singapore-based agents estimated "the majority of Myanmar maids change employers at least twice in their first six months in Singapore" (Tan, 2014). Up to 53% of FDWs (not limited to Myanmar FDWs) were unable to complete a year in a single household and "most of them left in the first three months, usually the most challenging period" (Tan, 2017). The Singapore government encourages employers to send their FDWs for formal training (using government-approved syllabus), even providing subsidies, but employers may not avail time for their FDWs to receiving training (also see Ortiga *et al.*, 2020). Even if an FDW is keen to learn during her day-off, it may not fall on the same day as the training sessions.

Singapore-based trainer, Selina, shared that insufficient training is a common reason for strained employer-employee relations:

> Skills training is not mandatory, only SIP [Settling in Programme[5]]. If our government makes it mandatory, I can tell you that a lot of [FDWs] cannot come already… The Ministry of Manpower [in Singapore] does not mandate any kind of training before departure.

She further commented on the poor quality of pre-departure training in Myanmar and how brokers instil in FDWs the perception that they should obey their employers mechanically:

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[5] The SIP is a government-mandated one-day orientation programme for new FDWs.

[Brokers] trained these people to say "Yes, Ma'am. Yes, Sir". Regardless [whether they] better understand the instructions or not, just say "Yes, Sir. Yes, Ma'am".

This ill-advised practice, Selina added, does not guarantee the quality of care and effective communication by both parties. Observing the gap arising from the FDWs' earlier training, Selina noted that:

A lot of employers send their girls [to my centre] to [learn how to] look after babies [and some for] eldercare… We will try to use [the] time to keep them practising, making sure [of] the health and safety of themselves and the care recipients… If they do not [keep to] the safety [standards] for themselves, [the work for] care recipients will not be done well. We must ask them to repeat the same thing till they do it confidently and correctly.

As alluded in Selina's account, the failure to clearly define an FDW's basic abilities and job scope from those of a trained caregiver (especially for seniors with infirmities) might result in a situation where FDWs without relevant caregiving skills are expected to take on specialised eldercare duties (e.g. dementia care.). Unlike formal training in specialised eldercare, informal training emphasises FDWs' 'experience' rather than professional knowledge.

Without standardised training protocols, informal brokers can easily become the scapegoat for criticisms when things go wrong, as illustrated below by what a Myanmar-based licensed agent said:

We have a problem [with informal] brokers…. They do not train the girls…. We have a license for helping our people but the brokers want money. That's the difference… We have a plan on how to monitor, how to educate, how to [raise] awareness—like for the pre-departure process... Now [the Myanmar government is] thinking of [lifting the ban] because every month, every week there are so many accidents in Singapore caused by informal brokers. Those stories began from the illegal recruiting, sending.

However, the informal brokers dispute such accusations. Ohma emphasised that even the training standards of licensed agents in Myanmar vary, depending on the company's vision and trainers' experience. The other broker, San, was equally confident in her rich experience of domestic work and believed the training she provides is appropriate. She highlighted problematic cases—caused by other licensed agents or training centres—that she had helped resolve:

I taught [the trainees] how to turn [a bedbound senior], sometimes how to carry. I also demonstrated. I had experiences and all the demonstrations I would show…. Myanmar has lots of training centres. All their certificates are for three months, four months and

six months but when I [teach] something, they [the trainees who had gone to a centre] don't know [those techniques].

Training centres for FDWs were banned in Myanmar at the time of our fieldwork. The licensed agents in our study emphasised that their centres only run courses for nursing aides. We also interviewed returnees FDWs from Singapore who told us they were going for caregiver training in such centres. Most sought training to re-migrate and become nursing aides in nursing homes in Singapore or Japan—seen as an upward career move. But such coveted placements would mean paying higher fees to agents. Those who wanted to move to Japan, which pays better wages than Singapore, also need to learn the Japanese language (required by the Japanese government). The extended training period, high costs of training and recruitment fees, and disrupted employment continuity compound the challenges these women face. Inability to overcome any of those barriers means they would at best re-migrate to Singapore again, possibly to become live-in caregivers for the frail elderly if they successfully secure basic training certification. Live-in caregivers are employed under the same work permit scheme as FDWs, but their incomes are marginally higher and their workload focuses more on specialised eldercare and less on menial household chores.

This option of becoming a live-in caregiver is akin to what Lan (2016) refers to as the "politics of naming" wherein a change of labels for care workers does not result in substantive changes to the migration regime. As Ortiga *et al*. (2020) similarly observe, a differentiated skills regime does not facilitate an FDW's mobility out of transience work since they do not have the right to permanent residency in countries like Singapore. Nonetheless, our interviews with returnee FDWs in Myanmar suggest that their goal is to attain upward social mobility—not to remain overseas for the long-term. They aspire to earn enough to provide for their families and eventually return to Myanmar when they are older to marry and to look after their ageing parents. Meanwhile, being recognised as a 'live-in caregiver' or nursing aide surpasses being labelled as a 'domestic worker', which is considered one of the most abased types of work a woman can do in the context of Myanmar.

6 Dialectic of informality and formality as constitutive of moral ambivalence

The earlier sections had illustrated how informal brokers carry out bridging and 'conversion' work. Different practices by the various stakeholders operating between Myanmar and Singapore create a negotiated space for informal brokers to "traverse the boundaries between legality and illegality when navigating complex bureaucratic processes" (Goh *et al*., 2017, p. 410). Informal brokers are regularly blamed when things go awry, but as this section shows, informal brokers recuperate their self-worth and legitimise their work using counter-moralising scripts, despite recognising that they are facilitating irregular migration. The bridging and

'conversion' work they perform not only evokes recognition of the gap that exists between informality and formality (or irregular and regular migration), but is also a means of managing risks and uncertainties that regulation alone cannot fully eradicate. By conceptualising "moral ambivalence", we signal how the informal brokers' acts of claiming higher moral ground cast a different light on the social and political relations generated by their complicity in entrenching irregular migration, even as they try to mitigate the ills of such migration.

Potential migrants are mainly concerned with how they can make the journey abroad successfully rather than with notions of morality or (il)legitimacy (Åkesson and Alpes, 2019; Deshingkar, 2018). Yet informal channels are not homogenous and should not be easily conflated with stereotypes of irregular migration such as organised criminal smuggling groups or victimhood (Zhang *et al.,* 2018, p. 7). Several FDWs in our study indicated that their informal brokers were kinder than the licensed agents. As Alpes (2013) describes, "migration brokers are not 'other' to aspiring migrants, but rather 'allies' and 'helpers'" (p. 8). Many informal brokers used to be FDWs (or are current FDWs) who successfully made the journey and want others to secure employment too. The informal brokers we interviewed claimed their main purpose is to help women improve their livelihoods, invoking feelings of empathy to justify their work even though it is considered illegal.

Some licensed agents believe that the illicit operations of informal brokers put FDWs in precarious situations and violate human rights. However, the informal brokers asserted that falsifying the FDWs' age helps them meet the age criteria that would secure employment to escape the poverty trap. The brokers are aware they are operating in a grey zone but they also want to protect migrants from exploitation and to provide job opportunities for disadvantaged women. For example, most FDWs deployed by Ohma are from regions in Myanmar where villagers experience internal displacement due to conflict or natural disasters. San expressed that her motivation for being a broker is to secure fair treatment for FDWs (i.e. seeing them as rights-bearing subjects). She had witnessed how FDW trainees were treated badly by a friend who was a broker. Her friend had locked the trainees in the house and told them that the police would arrest them if they ventured outside. The trainees were banned from using phones and given poor quality food. San's friend would scold and shout at the trainees. San was proud of herself for helping many FDWs from disadvantaged conditions to find work in Singapore. She stressed that she had started helping FDWs who were abused by employers and sheltered by NGOs when she was still working in Singapore.

> I always visit [the NGO]. I donated some Myanmar food and medicines every three or four months... Because [it] is providing services for helpers whose employers [did not pay them] or whom were bullied by the employers. They have faced so many problems. I always go there. Because all are helpers, and all are my friends there. I [was] also a maid.

So, I'm helping the maids. Sometimes I bring all the foods, clothing and everything because in Singapore everything is expensive, so I donate.

San added that she would arrange jobs in Myanmar for trainees that had failed the medical check-up in Singapore and returned to Yangon. She occasionally offsets the debts of FDWs whose contracts had been terminated prematurely by their employers and she would make financial contributions to those whose families needed emergency medical or funeral expenses. Informal brokers like San see themselves as enablers who assist FDWs that have been or could be let down by the failure of state policies in both the migrant-sending and -receiving contexts, as well as the tyrannies of a labour market where employers and even licensed agents operating in the formal economy might withhold fair practices and protection from the FDWs. The informal brokers assert that they are providing alternative sources of social protection, mobility and empowerment to vulnerable women, expanding the limits of what is considered rightful behaviour.

Yet such overtures should not be conflated with normative demands for more just arrangements through a system overhaul (McNevin, 2013). Rather, the rights-based claims that the brokers assert (i.e. a form of political subjectivity) provides a language for them to articulate their worth and intervention, even if their practices of extending protection, mobility and empowerment are deeply controversial from other viewpoints. In such ways, the informal brokers are engaging in another level of 'conversion': transforming the abjectness of domestic work which they had previously carried out to an experience that informs and validates their new role as brokers, as well as empowering women in need.

The informal brokers legitimise their roles by using counter-moralising scripts that are similar to those found in Killias's (2018) research on the recruitment of Indonesian FDWs to Malaysia. Killias (2018) observed that "Indonesian recruitment agents often frame their activities as recruiters in terms of helping poor, rural women become independent, by turning them into transnational breadwinners" (p. 129). Likewise, informal brokers like Ohma and San emphasised the kindness they demonstrate to FDWs and claimed they only choose reliable 'partners' who will be responsible for the FDWs' welfare (e.g. airport runners, Singapore-based agents, other informal brokers, etc).

San also shared that she encourages the FDWs to be strong and endure their working conditions by using her own life story as an example. She advises them, "Your family is poor. In the past I was also poor… [if you] don't want to work so long, then work for 3-5 years, earn enough money and come back to do business in Myanmar". She also reminds them of appropriate workplace behaviours, such as "no cheating, no lying and no stealing" because they "can't hide

anything [i.e. wrongdoing]". Such teachings are akin to what Chee (2020, p. 5) terms "resilience training" wherein "the resilient subject is rather [sic] enjoined to align her dispositions and internal states, to become the constantly adjustable subject needed by neoliberal market logic". Paradoxically, the informal brokers' approach endorses subjection even as they claim to uphold the rights of FDWs, being complicit therefore in the "soft violence"—an unequal dependency that amplifies servitude—which employers inflict on the FDWs (see Parreñas *et al.*, 2020). The cycle continues as the brokers recruit promising new FDWs to become sub-brokers, paying them SGD100-150 for each FDW that is subsequently successfully deployed.

While informal brokers provide a negotiated space to avail job opportunities for disadvantaged women in Myanmar, they understate how they derive benefits by taking advantage of patron-client relations in the grey zone. The Janus-faced roles of informal brokers is a reflection of how informality is "embedded in formality" even as it is also seen as "a threat" (Hodder, 2016, p. 117). Across the recruitment and training phases, practices of informality entrench a nationality-based hierarchy of FDWs that rationalises the lower salaries that FDWs from Myanmar receive compared to those from the Philippines and Indonesia who go through formal recruitment channels and pre-departure training. The informal brokers in the study display moral ambivalence, self-justifying to legitimise their moral worth and credibility, even as they recognise the legal and moral ambiguities associated with how irregular migration is enabled by conditions of informality (Agergaard and Ungruhe, 2016; Picherit, 2018). Moral ambivalence mires notions of right or wrong, making policy decisions to formalise migration difficult—and in some cases, simply ineffective (Åkesson and Alpes, 2019; Deshingkar, 2018).

As Fernandez (2013) documented in her research on Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East, attempts at regulating irregular migration failed because of fragmented knowledge and interdependencies across multiple stakeholders in both the migrant-sending and -receiving contexts, as well the ungovernability of such stakeholders and systems. These conditions resonate with the case of Myanmar's care migration industry too. Citing Black (2002), Fernandez adds that diagnosing regulatory effectiveness or failures requires considering the underlying values of the different stakeholders implicated. The analytical lens of moral ambivalence that we deploy here captures "the dissonance between what may be emerging as thinkable and possible on the one hand and the limits of existing analytics […] on the other" (McNevin, 2013, p. 198). Moral ambivalence reminds us to be watchful for the ways in which regulatory regimes seeking to formalise informal practices could gloss over the complex, contradictory ways in which—not only migrants but also the multiple stakeholders in the care migration industry, including informal brokers—operate in the breach and seek recognition for their personhood.

7 Conclusion

This paper has examined the everyday ways in which informality is constructed through the bridging and 'conversion' work carried out by informal brokers in spaces ranging from homes and other semi-private spaces (which also function as a transactional space for recruitment, training and deployment), to the government offices where they secure fraudulent documents, and the airport where they use bribes to arrange for 'smooth transfers' as the FDW transitions through migration controls. We highlighted that by mobilising different types of cultural, social and economic capital in the informal sector, brokers change the use values of such capital, thereby facilitating the conversion of irregular migration in Myanmar to regular migration in Singapore. Successful conversion across national spaces (i.e. transnationally) also depends on the role of licensed agents in Singapore who are complicit in entrenching irregular migration by tacitly endorsing the work of informal brokers. Even though the operations of informal brokers are heavily contested by Myanmar-based licensed agents/trainers and Singapore-based trainers, weak government enforcement in Myanmar combined with inconsistent bilateral policies on recruitment and training makes it possible for informal brokers to continue their work. On the Singapore side, while the government upholds strict immigration controls, it outsources the responsibility for ensuring legal compliance to the Singapore-based agents and employers, resulting in slippages in practice.

Through our discussion of informality, the paper also troubled binary framings of how legality/illegality and morality/immorality are conceptualised. The moralising tropes articulated by licensed agents and trainers can be usefully juxtaposed against the counter-moralising narratives articulated by informal brokers. Informal brokers who were former FDWs see themselves filling a gap in social protection for other FDWS, the result of bilateral policies that tacitly contribute towards deepening the unfair migration and working conditions. Informal brokers argue that they are empowering the most vulnerable women from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds by providing skills training, advice and encouragement based on their personal experiences as former FDWs who succeeded in life. The brokers also expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of care and training given to FDWs by licensed agents, suggesting that they carry out 'damage repair' instead. The negotiated space they occupy is one that is characterised by what we term 'moral ambivalence'.

As discussed earlier, moral ambivalence refers to the emic state associated with feelings of being between seemingly dichotomous positions. Brokers operating within the grey zone recognise the legal and moral ambiguities their actions generate, but they also enact claims of upholding rights on behalf of other subjects (i.e. subjugated FDWs). Their moral ambivalence can be interpreted as a resource that generates new political and social relations, not only on

behalf of others (i.e. empowerment and 'damage repair'), but also for themselves. Notably, moral ambivalence lends to another layer of 'conversion', in this case transforming the informal brokers' own subjectivities as former FDWs who endured challenging and humiliating work circumstances to becoming newly empowered subjects who overcame those circumstances and are ready to emancipate other women. As the informal brokers engage in 'converting' irregular to regular migration across national spaces, they are also constructing personal subjectivities of transformation. Notwithstanding the potential for empowerment and transformation, we must still acknowledge the rough edges of the global political economy of domestic labour extraction which the informal brokers sustain through their bridging and 'conversion' work across nation-states.

We conclude this paper by revisiting Hart's (2009, p. 22) observation that "informality is a problem, for sure, but it must surely be part of any long-term solution". The construction, functions and processes of informality are deeply embedded in migration and undergird the formal and legal procedures of migration across countries. Punitive measures directed at informal brokers—or forbidding their participation altogether—are unlikely to be effective without taking into account how the underlying values of informal brokers, such as those discussed here, drive their actions. Measures by institutional actors to protect vulnerable migrants will need to allow for formalising migration channels as well as enlisting the participation of informal brokers in such regularisation (e.g. lowering costly barriers to registration, working alongside larger licensed agencies, and upholding the values of empowerment and rights that they deem important). Even so, incorporating informality into formality—as Elyachar (2005) reminds us—can generate social fields that create new subjectivities, modes of discipline and tensions; these aspects remain to be excavated by researchers as the dialectical relationship between informality and formality continues to evolve in care migration.

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