

Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers Navigating Precarity and Possibility in Pakistan

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Abstract

Rooted in feminist political economy, critical migration theory, and scholarship on intimate labour, this article explores how gendered, racialised, and class hierarchies, recruitment agencies, bilateral labour arrangements, and shifting regulatory frameworks shape migrant Filipina domestic workers' experiences in Pakistan. Drawing on seven interviews in Islamabad and Lahore, the article asks how intersecting harms linked to labour informality, migration status, employer power, and household intimacy are negotiated through individual and collective agentic practices. It argues that migrant Filipina domestic workers' experiences cannot be understood through victimhood or empowerment alone. Rather, their lives are shaped by the interplay between structural precarity and situated agency, expressed through migration decisions, employer changes, community networks, religious and familial negotiations, entrepreneurship, and strategies of relative upward mobility. The article concludes with policy and practice implications for labour law recognition, recruitment regulation, improved data collection, migrant women's associations, and intersectional gender and migration policy.

Keywords: migrant domestic work, Filipina migrant workers, Pakistan, labour regulation, South–South migration, bilateral labour agreements, women's agency

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Introduction

The growing entry of women into labour markets, and the resulting reconfiguration of care regimes, has fuelled demand for migrant domestic workers (MDWs), often recruited from neighbouring or regional countries.¹ This pattern has intensified since the early 2000s, particularly in the households of the expanding middle and upper classes,² and migrant women now constitute a significant share of the global domestic workforce.³

Domestic work encompasses all paid work, ‘within an employment relationship’, which is ‘performed *in* and *for* the household’, as per the definition in the International Labour Organization (ILO) *Domestic Workers Convention* of 2011.⁴ Tasks range from cooking and cleaning to caring for children and adults. Domestic work is characterised by the space where it occurs, i.e. the household; it also has the peculiar feature of not being oriented to the production of goods but the reproduction of the family and the workforce, which underpins an unequal gender-based division of labour of capitalist societies.⁵ The globalisation of social reproduction is, in fact, based on an unequal international division of reproductive labour which informs domestic work performed by migrant women.⁶

In this article, we explore Filipina migrant domestic workers in Pakistan as a distinct case for unpacking migrant domestic work within the framework of South–South migration flows and of a configuration different from *kafala*-like systems. In fact, scholarship on MDWs has largely focused on South–North

¹ L Izaguirre and M Walsham, ‘South–South Migration from a Gender and Intersectional Perspective: An Overview’, Working Paper, *MIDEQ: Migration for Development & Equality*, 2021.

² H Lutz, ‘Care as a Fictitious Commodity: Reflections on the Intersections of Migration, Gender and Care Regimes’, *Migration Studies*, vol. 5, issue 3, 2017, pp. 356–368, <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnx046>.

³ K Pandey, R S Parreñas, and G S Sabio, ‘Essential and Expendable: Migrant Domestic Workers and the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 65, issue 10, 2021, pp. 1287–1301, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211000396>.

⁴ ILO, *C189 – Domestic Workers Convention*, 2011.

⁵ S Marchetti, ‘Introduction’, in S Marchetti (ed.), *Migration and Domestic Work: IMISCOE Short Reader, IMISCOE Research Series*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2022, pp. 1–11.

⁶ E Kofman, ‘Gendered Labour Migrations in Europe and Emblematic Migratory Figures’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 39, issue 4, 2013, pp. 579–600, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.745234>; R S Parreñas, ‘Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers and the International Division of Reproductive Labor’, *Gender and Society*, vol. 14, issue 4, 2000, pp. 560–580, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124300014004005>.

flows,⁷ specific migration corridors, and certain national groups. Much attention has also focused on *kafala*⁸ and other sponsorship systems where MDWs are similarly tied to their employers, such as the UK's Overseas Domestic Worker visa.⁹ Migrant Filipina domestic workers (MFDWs) in Pakistan are also positioned in a specific way with respect to local domestic workers. They are preferred to Pakistani workers, but they share with them—as well as with the majority of MDWs worldwide—structural conditions of vulnerability, such as the informality of domestic labour, the home as workplace, and the privileged position of their employers. Yet, MDWs' experiences are also shaped by an array of other elements, including their positioning vis-à-vis local domestic workers, such as the practices of recruitment agencies; racial, religious, class, and gender discrimination; inconsistent labour regulations; and forms of collective organising and networking. Precarious conditions as workers and possibilities for resistance thus differ across countries and regions.

Based on research with seven MFDWs in Islamabad and Lahore,¹⁰ this article investigates how MFDWs respond to weak labour protection and employer power while forging support mechanisms. It asks how intersecting harms linked to labour informality, migration status, recruitment, employer power, gendered household relations, and racialised/classed hierarchies are negotiated by workers through individual and collective strategies of mobility, care, community-building, and resistance. In doing so, it examines how gendered labour migration is lived through the intertwined registers of work, care, social reproduction, mobility, and situated agency.

⁷ E Kofman and P Raghuram, 'The Implications of Migration for Gender and Care Regimes in the South', in K Hujo and N Piper (eds.), *South–South Migration*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, 2010, pp. 46–83.

⁸ A Pande, '“The Paper That You Have in Your Hand Is My Freedom”: Migrant Domestic Work and the Sponsorship (Kafala) System in Lebanon', *International Migration Review*, vol. 47, issue 2, 2013, pp. 414–441, <https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12025>.

⁹ D Demetriou, '“Tied Visas” and Inadequate Labour Protections: A Formula for Abuse and Exploitation of Migrant Domestic Workers in the United Kingdom', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 5, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121555>; S J Tan, 'When the Home Is Also the Workplace: Women Migrant Domestic Workers' Experiences with the “Live-in” Policy in Singapore and Hong Kong', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 20, 2023, pp. 75–91, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201223205>.

¹⁰ This article draws on a larger multi-country study of gendered labour migration across the Global South, which included refugee women as well as highly skilled migrant professionals. E Kofman, R Lazzarino, and C Passaniti Mezzano, *Gendered Dynamics of Labour Migration – Migration and Displacement Stream of the Gender Justice and Security Hub. Analytical Snapshot*, Middlesex University and Gender Justice and Security Hub, London, 2023.

Intimate Labour and the Governance of Migrant Domestic Work

Migrant domestic work illustrates the hierarchical texture of the global political economy of labour migration, revealing pronounced intersecting post-colonial and post-slavery inequalities. These inequalities create a divide between women employers and employees and their socio-cultural, racialised, and class positioning, as well as along age and religion axes.¹¹ Furthermore, women MDWs often work under unprotected labour conditions, making them structurally vulnerable to exploitation.¹²

Compounding these structural and regulatory configurations, domestic work—occurring inside a private household—can be conceived as intimate labour. In this article, we understand intimate labour as work that takes place in close proximity to bodies, households, emotions, and family life, and that often blurs the boundaries between paid work, care, affective availability, and social reproduction.¹³ The home is simultaneously a workplace and a living space, making the boundaries between employment, care, dependency, and control especially difficult to separate.¹⁴ This means that the harms associated with domestic work do not sit neatly within conventional labour categories. They emerge across the public/private divide, where employment, migration status, household dependency, gendered expectations, and employer discretion intersect. An intimate labour lens therefore helps examine not only wages, contracts, and recruitment but also how hierarchy, care, surveillance, belonging, emotional labour, and constrained mobility are organised within the household and mediated by wider migration systems.

¹¹ S Marchetti, D Cherubini, and G Garofalo Geymonat, *Global Domestic Workers: Intersectional Inequalities and Struggles for Rights*, Bristol University Press, Bristol, 2021.

¹² J Dalton *et al.*, *Addressing the Trafficking of Women Migrant Workers in Poorly Regulated Sectors*, Policy Brief, UN Women, 2025.

¹³ E Boris and R S Parreñas (eds.), *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010.

¹⁴ Tan.

Recruitment agencies have become key actors in facilitating labour migration.¹⁵ Some are registered businesses; others are informal and operating at the level of transnational communities and families; while others are illegal, lucrative businesses trafficking migrants into exploitation and forced labour.¹⁶ Agencies manage the logistics of the migration process, from visas and permits to contracts and travel arrangements. They also contribute to the stratification of the migrant labour market based on racial and gendered criteria.¹⁷ In migrant domestic work, recruitment agencies do more than arrange migration logistics. They help produce the conditions under which workers enter private households as carers, cleaners, nannies, and companions, often on the basis of racialised and gendered assumptions about trustworthiness, obedience, care, English-language competence, and emotional availability.¹⁸ Their role is therefore not merely administrative but constitutive of the labour relation itself: they match workers to employers, frame workers' value, mediate expectations of care and availability, and may become the first point of recourse when harms occur inside the household. This makes the delegation of worker protection to for-profit intermediaries particularly problematic, because the same actors who profit from placement and circulation are often expected to safeguard workers' rights and wellbeing.

Bilateral labour agreements (BLA) are another element of the global labour migration system. While, on paper, they set out the procedures for hiring migrants between two countries, the critical literature suggest that BLAs should be understood as ambivalent governance instruments: they may create a framework for safer recruitment and standard contracts, but they can also consolidate temporary, gendered, and tightly managed labour mobility.¹⁹ Additionally, BLAs are often confidential and weakly enforceable, and they serve shared interests of sending and receiving states in policing migrant workers' mobility and regulating the migration industry as much as—or more than—securing migrant workers' rights.²⁰

¹⁵ P Deshingkar, M Awumbila, and J Kofi Teye, 'Victims of Trafficking and Modern Slavery or Agents of Change? Migrants, Brokers, and the State in Ghana and Myanmar', *Journal of the British Academy*, vol. 7, issue s1, 2019, pp. 77–106, <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/007s1.077>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ K Jones, 'Brokered Discrimination for a Fee: The Incompatibility of Domestic Work Placement Agencies with Rights-Based Global Governance of Migration', *Global Public Policy and Governance*, vol. 1, issue 3, 2021, pp. 300–320, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43508-021-00017-8>; Marchetti, Cherubini, and Garofalo Geymonat.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Boris and Parreñas.

¹⁹ K Amirthalingam *et al.*, 'Bilateral Labour Agreements as a Tool for Managing Gendered Migration from Sri Lanka', in J Crush, A Chikanda, and S Ramachandran (eds.), *New Directions in South–South Migration*, Springer Nature, Singapore, 2025, pp. 133–153.

²⁰ Y Livnat and H Shamir, 'Gaining Control? Bilateral Labor Agreements and the Shared

At the same time, MDWs' capacity to react, resist, and pursue life-planning strategies have remained understudied,²¹ although recent perspectives have demonstrated their agency and activism.²² Agency has been identified in women's decision to migrate in response to gender discrimination, domestic violence, and limited employment opportunities in their home countries, deploying migration as a potential solution.²³ Post-migration, they may adopt various individual coping strategies, such as changing employers or even countries, to improve their working conditions and seek higher salaries.²⁴ It is important to recentre the perspective closer to migrants' experiences and their own sense of agency in order to move away from stereotypical victimising view²⁵ and appreciate the interplay, rather than just the opposition, between agency and lack of agency.²⁶

Gender, Labour, and Migration in Pakistan: Filipinas and local domestic workers

Pakistan is primarily viewed as a receiving country of international refugees—mainly Afghans—and low-skilled migrants from South and Central Asia, the Middle East, China, and the Philippines.²⁷ Women's labour and labour migration have been actively discouraged via legal barriers and cultural norms

Interest of Sending and Receiving Countries to Control Migrant Workers and the Illicit Migration Industry', *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, vol. 23, issue 2, 2022, pp. 65–94, <https://doi.org/10.1515/til-2022-0011>.

- ²¹ P Deshingkar and B Zeitlyn, 'South–South Migration for Domestic Work and Poverty: A Review of the Literature in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa', *Geography Compass*, vol. 9, issue 4, 2015, pp. 169–179, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12200>.
- ²² B Fernandez, *Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers: Migrant Agency and Social Change*, Springer, Cham, 2019; Izaguirre and Walsham.
- ²³ G Ferrant and M Tuccio, 'South–South Migration and Discrimination Against Women in Social Institutions: A Two-Way Relationship', *World Development*, vol. 72, 2015, pp. 240–254, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.03.002>.
- ²⁴ R S Parreñas, *Unfree: Migrant Domestic Work in Arab States*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2021.
- ²⁵ D Mulinari and K Sandell, 'Exploring the Notion of Experience in Feminist Thought', *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 42, issue 4, 1999, pp. 287–297, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000169939904200401>.
- ²⁶ D Isik, 'On Sabır and Agency: The Politics of Pious Practice in Konya's Carpet Weaving Industry', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 10, issue 4, 2008, pp. 518–541, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740802393908>.
- ²⁷ A Cibeá *et al.*, *Pakistan Migration Country Report*, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Vienna, 2013; International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Pakistan Migration Snapshot', 2019, retrieved 28 May 2026, <https://pakistan.iom.int/resources/pakistan-migration-snapshot>.

that discriminate between activities of men and women,²⁸ as well as along social classes and castes that are responsible for the social undesirability of women's employment in formal work outside the home.²⁹ This socio-cultural norm is referred to as *purdah* (Urdu for 'curtain' or 'veil'), and 'denotes the spatial segregation of women's and men's spheres of circulation in the name of family honour'.³⁰ Accordingly, regular immigration of women workers to Pakistan has remained under-researched in both academic³¹ and policy debates.

Nonetheless, over the past two decades, Pakistan has become an employment destination for MFDWs amid rapid urbanisation and economic expansion.³² These dynamics have driven the growth of the middle class and created rising demands for domestic help, with a preference for MFDWs as a distinct status symbol.³³ However, paid domestic work remains a significant and difficult-to-measure segment of employment accounting for 8.5 million workers in the informal economy, predominantly local women, boys, and girls.³⁴ The latest Labour Force Survey³⁵ shows that 81.7% of paid employees are classified as informal. Domestic work remains difficult to quantify because it is largely hidden and unregistered.³⁶ To monitor the sector, the National Database and Registration

²⁸ K A Siegmann, 'Strengthening Whom?: The Role of International Migration for Women and Men in Northwest Pakistan', *Progress in Development Studies*, vol. 10, issue 4, 2010, pp. 345–361, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146499340901000406>.

²⁹ S Ahmed, 'Women Left Behind: Migration, Agency, and the Pakistani Woman', *Gender & Society*, vol. 34, issue 4, 2020, pp. 597–619, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243220930698>.

³⁰ J Grünenfelder and K A Siegmann, 'Laboring Practices: Pakistan', in S Joseph, *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures Online*, Brill, Leiden, 2016.

³¹ H A Shahid, 'Migrant Filipino Domestic Workers in Pakistan: Agency, Rights and the Limits of the Law', in S Mullally (ed.), *Care, Migration and Human Rights: Law and Practice*, Routledge, Abington, 2015.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*; A Majid, M Anwar, and Z Tariq, *The Growing Trend of Hiring Philippine Nannies in Pakistan: Causes and Consequences*, Lahore School of Economics, Lahore, 2015.

³⁴ S Asrar, 'Safeguarding Pakistan's Domestic Workers Will Take More Than Just Laws', *South Asian Voices*, 14 March 2023, retrieved 12 May 2026, <https://southasianvoices.org/safeguarding-pakistans-domestic-workers-will-take-more-than-just-laws>.

³⁵ Government of Pakistan Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives and Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, *Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2024–25*, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Islamabad, 2025.

³⁶ M M Ali, S Mukhtar, and A Ghaffar, 'Protecting Rights of Domestic Workers in Pakistan: An Analysis of Existing Laws and Need for Comprehensive Legislation', *Al-Aasar Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2025, pp. 689–703; N Shafeeq, F Naz and R-N Awan, 'Doing the Dirty Work: The Experiences of Female Domestic Workers in Pakistan', *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2022, pp. 171–182, [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2022\(3-II\)17](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2022(3-II)17).

Authority (NADRA) has issued registration forms to Islamabad households, collecting information on nationality, type of work, and other details. However, reliable statistics remain scarce. It has been calculated that MFDWs constitute one of the largest groups among the estimated over 2,000 Filipinos living in Pakistan and of the over 1,000 holders of a working visa.³⁷

Migrant domestic workers—particularly Filipinas—typically live with their employers and are hired through recruitment agencies. Compared with Pakistani domestic workers, they tend to earn higher wages, experience better treatment, and have written employment contracts within the framework of bilateral agreements between the two countries. Nonetheless, neither Pakistani nor Filipina domestic workers are protected by national or international legal frameworks regulating their employment conditions and rights as workers. The lack of labour protections, workers' economic and migrant status, and employers' stronger bargaining position force MFDWs to navigate and strategise within conditions of structural precarity.

MFDWs and Shifting Regulations

Pakistan's legal framework for domestic work and migrant work is fragmented. The country has not ratified key ILO conventions protecting migrant and domestic workers.³⁸ There is no comprehensive national law to regulate migrant domestic work; instead, a patchwork of provincial and territorial statutes³⁹ and bilateral and consular arrangements apply. In the early 2010s, when the most comprehensive available study was conducted,⁴⁰ the country had merely concluded a BLA with the Philippine Government to regulate recruitment.⁴¹ The contents and details of this agreement are unknown, as is often the case.⁴² However, details of

³⁷ Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in Manila, 'An Overview of Pakistan Philippines Relations', 2022, retrieved 28 May 2026, <https://pakembmanila.org/bilateral-relations>. Shahid reported that there were around 3,000 to 5,000 documented and undocumented MFDWs in Pakistan, with only 700 to 800 registered with the Philippines Embassy. Shahid.

³⁸ These conventions include: ILO, *C097 - Migration for Employment Convention (Revised)*, 1949; *C143 - Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention*, 1975; *C181 - Private Employment Agencies Convention*, 1997; *C183 - Maternity Protection Convention*, 2000; and *C189 - Domestic Workers Convention*, 2011.

³⁹ *Punjab Domestic Workers' Act 2019* and *Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Act 2022* (see below).

⁴⁰ Shahid.

⁴¹ RM Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World*, University Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2010.

⁴² Livnat and Shamir.

contractual terms and conditions of MFDWs employment at the time the BLA was in place are known.⁴³

As Shahid reported, most Filipinas were employed as *mayordoma* (head of staff), often supervising local cooks, cleaners, chauffeurs, gardeners, and security guards. Recruitment was largely mediated by agencies.⁴⁴ The recruitment process typically took six months to one year and required workers to complete a 15-day training programme and pre-departure seminar in the Philippines. For a fee of 350,000–400,000 Pakistani rupees,⁴⁵ Pakistani agents covered visa costs, airfare, paperwork, and commissions. Agencies market MFDWs as trained and English-speaking, catering to elite households, and MFDWs' employment contracts often included better benefits than were typical in the local labour market.⁴⁶

The BLA was suspended in 2018, and the Philippine authorities interrupted the deployment of 'household service workers' to Pakistan. This was reiterated by the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) in 2023, which stated that the suspension would continue until a new BLA was signed.⁴⁷ At the end of that year, the suspension was partially lifted for returning MDWs, with further consultation needed for newly hired workers.⁴⁸

At the time of writing this paper—over five years after data collection—discussions are moving towards a possible memorandum of understanding between the Philippines and Pakistan, which would include Pakistan-specific pre-departure orientation, strengthened pre-employment screening, enhanced employer commitments, and insurance coverage.⁴⁹ Thus, it appears that the Philippines is reinforcing the protection of overseas domestic workers by combining a higher wage floor (minimum USD 500) with contract-based recruitment, monitoring,

⁴³ Shahid.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ In the early 2010s, PKR 350,000–400,000 were approximately equivalent to USD 3,750–4,700, depending on the exact year and exchange rate used.

⁴⁶ As reported by Shahid, these benefits included a monthly food allowance, usually paid directly for grocery purchases; one month of annual paid leave; and airfare for family visits every two years.

⁴⁷ Republic of the Philippines Department of Migrant Workers, *Deployment of Workers to Pakistan*, 9 March 2023, <https://dmw.gov.ph/archives/v1/resources/dsms/DMW/ISN-EXT/2023/DMW-ADVISORY-09-2023.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Republic of the Philippines Department of Migrant Workers, *Clarification on the Deployment of Household Service Workers Bound to Pakistan*, 11 September 2023, <https://dmw.gov.ph/resources/issuances/advisories/legacy-Advisories-2023-22>.

⁴⁹ K A Ojeda, 'Pakistan Deployment Ban Easing Seen', *Daily Tribune*, 19 November 2025, <https://tribune.net.ph/2025/11/18/pakistan-deployment-ban-easing-seen>.

and welfare safeguards.⁵⁰ These developments are aligned with recent ILO programming in Pakistan,⁵¹ but they remain programmatic and enabling rather than establish fully enforceable protections for MFDWs.⁵²

Advancements in Organising and Regulating Domestic Work in Pakistan

Both local and migrant domestic workers did not have any formal organisational representation in unions and associations in Pakistan, and there has been a stark absence of supportive alliances and networks that could fight for their rights.⁵³ Some organising, largely NGO-initiated,⁵⁴ dates back to 2005 and was later institutionalised through the establishment of the Domestic Workers' Union by the Pakistan Workers Federation with support from the ILO.⁵⁵ More recent projects and interventions include the *Punjab Domestic Workers Act* of 2019,⁵⁶ the

⁵⁰ C Borbon, 'Philippines Raises Minimum Pay for Filipino Overseas Domestic Workers to \$500', *Gulf News*, 24 August 2025, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/philippines/philippines-raises-minimum-pay-for-filipino-overseas-domestic-workers-to-500-1.500243396>.

⁵¹ ILO Country Office for Pakistan, *Decent Work Country Programme for Pakistan (2023–27)*, ILO, Islamabad, 2023.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ The right to form trade unions is recognised and guaranteed, not only in the main human rights instruments but also in ILO Conventions No. 87 and No. 98. Given the regulation to constitute unions in the country, only 2.4% of the labour force are unionised and have access to collective bargaining for their wages and working conditions. Shahid.

⁵⁴ Among the most notable examples, HomeNet Pakistan is a network of organisations formed to raise awareness about the working conditions of home-based women workers who comprise 70% of the informal workforce behind the country's economic activities. HomeNet has been working for the recognition and support of home-based workers since 2005. 'HomeNet Pakistan – HNP', PakNGOs, retrieved 12 May 2026, <https://pakngos.com.pk/ngo/home-net-pakistan-hnp>.

⁵⁵ See 'Domestic Workers' Union', n.d., retrieved 12 May 2026, <https://dwupakistan.org>; ILO, 'First Domestic Workers' Trade Union Registered in Pakistan', 16 January 2015, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/first-domestic-workers%E2%80%99-trade-union-registered-pakistan>.

⁵⁶ The *Punjab Domestic Workers Act 2019* was the first provincial legislation to define domestic work as work performed 'within or for the household' and to regulate the employment relationship through written employment contracts, registration with the Punjab Employees Social Security Institution, minimum wage protection, weekly rest, sick leave, maternity leave, public holidays, and other basic workers' rights. Ali, Mukhtar, and Ghaffar.

Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Act of 2022,⁵⁷ and the intervention to develop a sustainable, gender-responsive model for extending social security coverage and benefits to domestic workers in Punjab.⁵⁸

Given the long-standing lack of comprehensive labour laws protecting domestic workers, these sub-national developments mark an important, though still partial, shift from the earlier legal invisibility of domestic work in Pakistan. At the same time, these reforms should not be overstated: they are constrained by weak implementation, low registration rates, lack of awareness among workers and employers, resistance to formalisation, limited inspection capacity inside private households, and uneven territorial coverage across the country.⁵⁹

MFDWs' written contracts, linked to the BLA, were promising for Pakistani workers. Similarly, these developments, which target primarily local domestic workers, could also be positive for migrant workers. However, they would not fully resolve migrant workers' vulnerabilities unless they also address migrant status, recruitment mechanisms, embassy registration, and accessible complaint mechanisms. This improving yet still unresolved regulatory gap is central to the article's question of how MFDWs' space for manoeuvre and life-planning strategies are negotiated within conditions of structural labour and migration precarity.

Methods

Our study adopted a collaborative design between the Pakistan and the UK teams. Research participants were approached and recruited by two Pakistani organisations—Laajverd Interdisciplinary Collective and PAIMAN Alumni Trust⁶⁰—from within their own networks. Recruitment targeted migrant women over 18 years of age working in Pakistan; sampling was purposeful, combining convenience and snowball strategies. All participants received information about the project and provided verbal informed consent before participating.

⁵⁷ The *Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Act* 2022 extended legal recognition to domestic workers in Islamabad by prohibiting forced, bonded, and child labour as well as discrimination in recruitment and wages, and by establishing dispute resolution mechanisms, among other protective measures. Ali, Mukhtar, and Ghaffar.

⁵⁸ ILO, 'Expanding Social Protection to Domestic Workers in Pakistan', 2021, <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/Contribution.action?id=858>.

⁵⁹ Ali, Mukhtar, and Ghaffar; AM Paul, 'Unpacking Cross-Country Variations in Domestic Worker Protection Regimes: Adopting a Policy Regime Perspective', *International Labour Review*, vol. 163, issue 3, 2024, pp. 377–96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12432>.

⁶⁰ See 'Laajverd', <http://laajverd.org/laaj>; and 'PAIMAN Alumni Trust', <https://paimantrust.org>.

The study employed qualitative semi-structured interviews (30-60 minutes) conducted in Islamabad and Lahore between December 2020 and June 2021. The interviews were conducted by staff of the two organisations and covered drivers and motivations for migration, family and gender dynamics in countries of origin, experiences of work and life in Pakistan, and the use of urban spaces. Questions also addressed agency, coping strategies, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five interviews were conducted face-to-face in outdoor spaces, such as public parks or malls, and two remotely using WhatsApp and Zoom. No interview was conducted at the employer's home. Ensuring compliance with Laajverd's ethical guidelines and code of ethics,⁶¹ interviews were audio-recorded, anonymised, and transcribed verbatim with participants' consent.

In total, seven interviews were conducted with MFDWs. Among those who had resided in Pakistan for more than ten years, one interviewee was an ex-MFDW running a recruitment agency, and two had married Pakistani men and moved out of domestic work. The remaining interviewees were live-in workers whose accounts illuminated the specific challenges and opportunities of migrant domestic labour in Pakistan. They were relatively well-educated, often with agency-provided work permits. Four were divorced or separated, three were married, and six had children.

The analysis of the interview transcripts followed a directed hybrid approach of deductive and inductive thematic analysis, meaning that the interview questions were used to code the data, while simultaneously allowing new, unexpected themes to emerge directly from the participants' responses.⁶²

As with all qualitative enquiry, this study's insights are shaped by the selectivity and scope of its methods. The small sample size, dictated by the relative invisibility of MFDWs in Pakistan, compounded by the exceptional circumstances of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, limits broader generalisations. The diversity of circumstances—duration of stay, legal status, and relational contexts—cannot be fully captured in a single study. In addition, as much of MFDWs' work is still hidden from regulatory oversight and formal enumeration, there remain inherent gaps in quantitative data and in tracking long-term trajectories.

⁶¹ R Lazzarino, E Kofman, and S Kapadia, *Migrant Women Working in Pakistan: Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration*, Middlesex University and Gender Justice and Security Hub, London, 2024.

⁶² J Fereday and E Muir-Cochrane, 'Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 5, issue 1, 2006, pp. 80–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107>.

This study, therefore, is best read as an invitation to further research and sustained engagement with the lived complexities and shifting landscapes of South–South women’s care work in migration and structural precarity.

The Experiences of Filipina Migrant Domestic Workers in Pakistan

In this section, we frame the voices of migrant Filipina domestic workers against the background of a multi-faceted and shifting migration corridor between the Philippines and Pakistan, shaped by interconnected socio-economic, political, cultural, and personal factors. The analysis foregrounds how participants experienced overlapping forms of labour, migration, and household-based harm within intimate labour relations, while also organising everyday strategies of support, refusal, mobility, and self-making. Accordingly, we look at: MFDWs’ positioning between national and regional stratifications; migration as life planning and situated empowerment; the protective role of recruitment agencies and its limitations; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; and other forms of collective and individual strategising.

MFDWs’ Positioning Between National and Regional Stratifications

The tasks of the MFDWs in this study varied—for some they were restricted to cleaning, for others to babysitting, including caring for a child with disabilities. These tasks locate MFDWs within intimate labour because their work involves proximity to employers’ domestic routines, children, bodies, emotions, and family relations; it requires trust, bodily presence, affective attentiveness, and access to private family spaces.⁶³ This helps explain why MFDWs’ positioning in Pakistan was ambivalent. Their foreignness, English-language skills, and association with professionalism could elevate them above local workers in elite households, yet the intimate location of their labour also exposed them to occupational devaluation, dependence on employer discretion, and expectations of availability within the household. The lens of intimate labour therefore sharpens the analysis of stratification: MFDWs were valued not only as migrant workers but as workers entrusted with the intimate reproduction of elite family life.

⁶³ Boris and Parreñas; Tan.

In Pakistan, as elsewhere,⁶⁴ the demand for MFDWs has been driven by the growth of an affluent urban middle class for whom hiring Filipina domestic workers carries the symbolic value of elite status. In our study, we found that these socio-economic changes within the country appeared to be aligned with geopolitical factors of the region, as well as with racialised stratifications. Several participants described being warmly welcomed and positively seen by Pakistani society, sometimes because they were misidentified as Chinese. As one 43-year-old MFDW explained:

Pakistani employers, and people in general, are very welcoming and look at us with respect—sometimes assuming that we are Chinese, and for this more respected.

Pakistan's multi-tiered and strategic alliance with China, and the subsequent implications for MFDWs' social positioning within Pakistani households and society, reflect a unique combination of local class dynamics and broader regional relations in which Pakistan is enmeshed.

Interviewees neither described this misrecognition as a source of discomfort or distress, nor did they experience it as disrespect. In accordance with this sense of being respected as foreigners, none of the study participants reported harassment or discrimination based on their ethnic and cultural background. However, they sometimes felt devalued due to their occupation as domestic workers, as a 31-year-old participant expressed:

Yes, sometimes I do feel discriminated against. But that was in the past when I was working as a caregiver. It was probably because I was just a servant and obviously not of their social standing.

The apparent contradiction of feeling both respected and devalued speaks to the usefulness of adopting an intersectionality lens to untangle the intricacies of the experiences of discrimination and privilege along the different social positioning that each MFDW occupies.⁶⁵ Along racialised and social class lines, they are positioned above Pakistani workers, who are legally unprotected and socially devalued. Local workers suffer from what has been described as a 'triple

⁶⁴ N Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers (2nd Edition)*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2017; R S Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001; Majid, Anwar, and Tariq; Shahid.

⁶⁵ M J Gill, A Aqeel, and B Dogra, *Stories of Resilience and Resolve: An Intersectional Study on the Plight of Non-Muslim Women and Girls in Pakistan*, Centre for Law and Justice & Minority Women's Forum, 2022.

discrimination' at the intersection of religion, caste, and gender.⁶⁶ MFDWs are not part of a caste-based hierarchy, though they may share a devaluation based on religion (as they are often Christian, unless they are misrecognised as Chinese and assumed as non-Christian) and on their job role,⁶⁷ as indicated above.

Migration as Life Planning and Situated Empowerment

The participants in this study confirmed that financial needs and limited employment opportunities in the Philippines were a central driver for their migration. Many were mothers who wanted to provide for their children, either because they were unemployed housewives or because they sought better-paying jobs than those available at home. Yet, financial necessity was frequently intertwined with personal motivations. Several women recounted leaving the Philippines to escape unhappy or abusive marriages, or seeking in migration economic independence, the chance to provide for their children, and to rebuild their lives. A 40-year-old participant shared:

In the Philippines, I'm just a plain housewife. I have four kids, and I am a single mum. I decided to come to Pakistan because I don't have a job in the Philippines. I am jobless there, so I need an income to raise my kids. My mother takes care of my kids and I provide money. They don't have a choice. Otherwise, I don't have a choice also. Because if I will not come here for work, I don't have any job in the Philippines. So how can I raise them? How can I send them to school? How can I buy the food, how can I buy them a roof also?

While expressing a sense of 'no choice' in having to migrate, the same participant also expressed pride and a sense of being rewarded for her hard work and of emancipation from needing a husband:

But what will I do with the husband without any help from him? He didn't even support my dream to support my kids. I raised my kids on my own. So, it's useless. No need [for] a husband. If you must raise your kids alone, you can do it.

⁶⁶ Anon, 'Cut Us Open and See That We Bleed like Them': *Discrimination and Stigmatization of Sanitation Workers in Pakistan*, Amnesty International, London, 2025.

⁶⁷ B Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work?: The Global Politics of Domestic Labour*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2000.

Remittances play an important part in Filipina migration strategies. As discussed above, on average, Filipinas' salary is USD 450–500 per month.⁶⁸ Higher salaries enabling remittances, payments in foreign currency, and contractual benefits may contribute to job satisfaction, as expressed by most participants. While participants did not mention any past or upcoming BLA between the two countries, what they described in positive terms were conditions resonating with those found when the BLA was in place, prior to 2018.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, MFDWs' advantages should not be overstated. Neither Pakistani nor Filipina domestic workers are covered by labour legislation, and MFDWs' precarity can also only be partially mitigated by the role of the recruitment agencies.

The Protective Role of Recruitment Agencies and Its Limitations

Recruitment agencies play an important role in facilitating Filipinas' migration to Pakistan. Participants spoke of their agents as supportive of their visa, residence and work permits, and other contractual terms; however, it remained unclear if their contract covered health insurance and social assistance.

Acting as intermediaries between workers and employing families, these agencies mobilise state interests in labour supply while deploying marketing strategies. They advertise Pakistan as a safe and profitable alternative to more established destinations such as Hong Kong or Persian Gulf states. As already noted, in the context of intimate labour, agencies do not simply move workers across borders; they mediate workers' entry into private households where employment is difficult to monitor and where harms may be hidden behind the language of family, trust, and care. Agencies may provide contracts, documentation, employer matching, and limited avenues for complaint, as participants' accounts suggest. As one 44-year-old participant explained:

In Pakistan, it's very nice because you only spend to travel to Manila for your papers. The agency will find you an employer, who sponsors you and is responsible for our visa and for us if anything happens.

⁶⁸ Information based on first-hand knowledge of co-author Kapadia and also confirmed in the media and on social media; see e.g. Borbon or S Naqvi, 'Can I Sue an Agency for Breach of Contract and Mental Anguish?', *Vakeel Online Facebook Group*, 27 December 2021, retrieved 12 May 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/vakeelonline/posts/622455115666794>.

⁶⁹ Shahid.

Some participants reported being able to complain to their recruitment agencies about employers or their agent and even change jobs if dissatisfied, suggesting a margin of negotiation.⁷⁰ Specifically, contract rotation gives workers the possibility to re-evaluate their economic and familial situation and re-plan each time if they wish to go back home or embark on another employment, in another city, or even in another country.⁷¹ However, unique to the MFDWs in Pakistan is the ability to change employers before the termination of the contract. A 49-year-old participant changed an employer via a battle with the recruitment agency, showing a considerable level of perseverance.

I was a direct hire through an agent. I paid 20,000 pesos for my paperwork and ticket. To arrange this amount, I had to sell my cow. [...] When I decided to leave, the employer complained that he paid for visa and paperwork and tickets, and I needed to pay all the money back before leaving. I told the employer that I myself paid for everything. When the matter was taken up with the agent, it was found that the agent charged both of us, which is nothing short of swindling. Finding no help, I wrote to the overseas employment agency in the Philippines and complained against my agent.

Yet, this space of manoeuvre is limited. Agencies' business models depend on maintaining relationships with employers and sustaining labour circulation, and they cannot be assumed to act as independent rights-protecting actors. This is especially significant for intimate labour, where exploitation may involve not only unpaid wages or contract breaches but also overwork, isolation, emotional pressure, restricted mobility, dependence on employer goodwill, and vulnerability inside the private household.⁷²

Agencies therefore navigate a contradictory role: they are asked to resolve harms that arise from the very household arrangements they helped broker, while lacking both the legal authority and structural independence to guarantee workers' rights and wellbeing. Indeed, MFDWs remain vulnerable to deportation due to having their visa cancelled and are dependent on the response of the employer, which is a highly problematic aspect of migrant domestic work. In this respect, a 40-year-old MFDW recounted:

⁷⁰ Lazzarino, Kofman, and Kapadia.

⁷¹ R Silvey and R S Parreñas, 'Precarity Chains: Cycles of Domestic Worker Migration from Southeast Asia to the Middle East', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 46, issue 16, 2020, pp. 3457–3471, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1592398>.

⁷² Jones; Tan.

The agency helped me before the first time without any expenses. [...] But after three failed placements, I refused to go through an agency for the fourth time. The agency blacklisted me, and the Ministry cancelled my visa. [...] So, what I did is I found an employer. They helped me get a visa.

Evidently, recruitment agencies cannot intervene legally on the workers' behalf: given the absence of legal protection, all disputes remain an agency-employer-employee matter, as the participant above explains. For this, she also recounted how she took the risk of falling outside the agency system altogether, relying instead on personal connections.

While showing the limited room for manoeuvre they can have in Pakistan, the case of these MFDWs corroborates also the structural precarity of agency-mediated migration—both within and outside of BLAs and the existence of written contracts—and the strategies women employ to regain control when official channels fail and threaten them. In intimate labour, such failures are particularly consequential because the worker's vulnerability is not confined to the contract but embedded in the everyday household setting in which she lives, works, cares, and negotiates access to mobility, privacy, and rest. MFDWs' vulnerability was further exposed during the pandemic.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and deepened the vulnerabilities of MDWs, revealing the systemic undervaluation of care labour and the fragility of their legal protections as well as exacerbating precarity while highlighting households' reliance on their labour.⁷³ Similar to findings from other studies,⁷⁴ some participants experienced intensified workloads, while others faced reductions in income. Post-pandemic recovery demands a rethinking of how care work is valued, emphasising the urgent needs for rights-based policies and gender-responsive economic frameworks.⁷⁵ This makes the pandemic a critical lens for this special issue's concern with how gendered labour, care, and mobility are reorganised during moments of crisis.

All our participants reported facing fear of job loss, compounded by isolation from families abroad. Such worries negatively affected their mental health and impacted their capacity to exercise resistance. For one participant, ending her contract with an employer that she found exploitative became more difficult

⁷³ Pandey, Parreñas, and Sabio.

⁷⁴ L Foley and N Piper, *COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers: Impacts and Implications*, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva, 2020.

⁷⁵ Pandey, Parreñas, and Sabio.

due to the pandemic:

My first employers were not nice. Because they are not giving my salary on time, ma'am. In my last two months, they didn't give me my salary. That's why I complained to the agency. And overworked also, until 3 a.m. and until dawn, we were working. It was not easy to end the contract, because of the pandemic. They give them one month notice so that they can get me the money from my previous employer. [...] Now, it's very normal because my employer allowed me to go out. But I will just be careful: wear a mask and use sanitiser and go home at night. Yes, I was scared to lose my job, that's why I'm doing my job very good.

During the pandemic, there were variations from employer to employer in relation to the possibility of leaving the house. The founder of a community-based organisation expressed concern for a situation whereby many Filipino migrant workers faced significant job insecurity, restricted mobility—within the city and to visit their home country—and reduced rest.

The COVID-19 [pandemic] affected us too much because in Pakistan, Filipina are not only in the house, but many Filipinas are also working in a spa, as a therapist, another Filipina is working as teachers, another Filipina is working in some offices, they all [faced] problem in the work. Because no work, no pay. [...] But this Filipina that work in the house of the employer, they don't have a problem, but they didn't have a day off for nine months! They cannot go out because, you know, it depends on the employer.

This example shows how, during crisis, intimate labour can become intensified precisely because the household is both the workplace and the site where care, control, isolation, and employer discretion converge.⁷⁶ The words of this participant turn palpable the implications of the absence of protective labour regulations for MDWs, and migrant workers more broadly, as well as of unions or similar organisations able to advocate for their rights as workers and migrants.

Forms of Collective and Individual Strategising

Though unionisation rates remain very low nationally, MFDWs have built forms of solidarity through both formal and informal networks, as they have done in other destination countries.⁷⁷ All the women in this study stated that they greatly enjoyed their urban life in Islamabad and Lahore, as well as their neighbourhoods.

⁷⁶ Tan; Pandey, Parreñas, and Sabio.

⁷⁷ A Gordo, *Women's Labour Migration from the Philippines*, GAATW, Bangkok, 2020.

This may be linked to the fact that they were working for elite families and residing in more liberal urban spaces where women's mobility is relatively easier than in other parts of the country. They spoke about going out to malls, restaurants, social events to celebrate holidays, and to church—with both their Filipino and Pakistani friends. Their stories are a testimony to the increasingly recognised importance of such practices for reshaping urban life and migrant women's visibility in public spaces.⁷⁸

Emblematic of both individual and collective agency is the aforementioned case of the 35-year-old participant, who left domestic work and became a community leader. In 2017, she founded a Filipino association in Islamabad to help her community in fields ranging from medical to financial aid as well as organising celebrations to keep a sense of community.

We need to be active in the community because we need to tell this Filipinas, all the Filipinas here, we need to guide them, open their mind. [...] I go to the embassy, I talked to the Philippine Ambassador, then I spoke to and I discussed with him that I want to have an active community here, which can guide and care for these people. [...] I talked to some doctors who can give us free services for a one-day checkup. After that we make a sports day, we go to Halloween party, Christmas party, Valentine's—almost every month we had a meeting.

Another form of agency involved leaving domestic work and moving into other roles, family arrangements, or community leadership. For two participants, this shift was closely linked to marriage with Pakistani men and conversion to Islam. The younger one left domestic work to become a coach in her children's school, while the 35-year-old stopped paid domestic work after marriage but developed small entrepreneurial activities and founded the Filipino association.

I'm married here to a Pakistani man. I married in November 2016. So, my husband is not allowing me to work this time. So, I'm fully in the house and doing some entrepreneurial work. Like I'm selling some crochet items handmade like that. And I'm getting some Filipino food for Filipino people. I am the founder and president of this Filipino association.

Her account shows that MFDWs' agency did not always take the form of open resistance or full independence. It was often exercised through adaptation to local norms, selective refusal, community-building, and the creation of alternative spaces for self-realisation within the constraints of marriage, religion, migrant

⁷⁸ D Caillol, 'The Spatial Dimension of Agency: The Everyday Urban Practices of Filipina Domestic Workers in Amman, Jordan', *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 25, issue 5, 2018, pp. 645–665, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1472555>.

status, and household expectations. Their foreignness, paired with the conversion to Islam, seemed to release them from domestic work—which, as noted, is normally carried out by lower-caste women.

However, marriage introduced new gendered expectations, including pressure to leave paid work altogether or conform to Pakistani family and gender norms. Yet, participants did not simply assimilate. Some resisted patrilocality and the expectation that they should move into their husband's family home and care for in-laws. Many verbally contrasted Pakistani family obligations with Filipino norms, which they described as closer to a nuclear family model and more supportive of women's independence. MFDWs' strategising therefore lay in selective compromise: accepting some restrictions while resisting others that threatened their autonomy and dignity.

Finally, a third long-term migrant woman, aged 49, had moved from domestic work into entrepreneurship, managing an MDW recruitment agency herself. As other participants, she strongly acknowledged her migration experience as overall empowering, at a personal and socio-economic level:

Moving to Pakistan was the best thing that happened to me because it changed my life completely. I moved up on the social ladder and that to me is a big achievement. Life in Pakistan is very comfortable.

Read through an intimate and affective labour lens, these collective and individual practices suggest that community building functioned as a vital form of care work beyond the employer's household: MFDWs mobilised affect and emotion as a strategic currency to survive isolation, build solidarity, and navigate the realities of live-in employment.⁷⁹ These trajectories reveal the complex interplay of constraint and resistance. While MFDWs remain structurally vulnerable in Pakistan, many simultaneously carve out spaces of independence, reshape their identities, and establish families and organisations, based on new gender terms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has examined how MFDWs in Pakistan negotiate intersecting forms of labour, migration and household-based precarity while developing situated forms of agency. The study is exploratory and based on a small number of interviews, but it illuminates a largely overlooked South–South migration corridor in which domestic workers are neither simply victims of globalisation nor straightforward beneficiaries of labour migration. Their experiences are shaped by recruitment

⁷⁹ A R Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983; Boris and Parreñas; Parreñas.

agencies, weak labour protections, immigration status, employer power, household intimacy, and racialised, classed and religious hierarchies.

The findings challenge simplistic western-centric and victimising accounts of Global South migration by foregrounding how women navigate, adapt to, and sometimes transform conditions of constraint.⁸⁰ Migration is both an outcome of structural violence and an ongoing process of incremental negotiation and self-making. Straddled between two social worlds, MFDWs embody the interstitial spaces where racialised, gendered, and class-based differences are constantly negotiated.⁸¹ Their circular mobility and agency-mediated recruitment reveal diverse and strategic trajectories of renewal and, for some, upward mobility.

At the same time, the Pakistan case must be situated within the wider political economy of Filipina domestic labour. Critical work on Filipina domestic workers shows that their global demand is built around a marketable image as English-speaking, educated, adaptable, caring, humble, and reliable. These attributes can create labour-market value, relative mobility, and opportunities for remittances, but they also reproduce gendered, racialised, and postcolonial hierarchies by associating Filipinas with subordinate care and domestic labour. This helps explain the ambivalent positioning of MFDWs in Pakistan: they may be valued above local domestic workers and associated with professionalism, foreignness, and status, yet their value remains tied to a feminised and socially devalued form of labour.

The Pakistan case complicates dominant accounts of migrant domestic work centred on *kafala*-like regimes. MFDWs remain formally excluded from robust labour protections, yet their access to written contracts, agency mediation, and some mobility between employers distinguishes their experiences from more restrictive sponsorship systems. They are also positioned differently from Pakistani domestic workers, who remain more deeply embedded in caste, class, religious, and gendered devaluation. At the same time, these relative advantages should not be overstated: dependence on employers, agencies, and weakly enforceable contracts continues to expose MFDWs to exploitation, job insecurity, limited redress, and isolation.

This article contributes to debates on domestic, care, and intimate labour by showing how intersecting harms are negotiated through both individual and collective practices. An intimate labour lens reveals why these harms cannot

⁸⁰ A Khan, *Women and Paid Work in Pakistan: Pathways of Women's Empowerment*, South Asia Research Programme Pakistan Scoping Paper, Collective for Social Science Research, Karachi, 2007.

⁸¹ K Kia Tehrani, 'Inhabiting Her Space: Lived Experiences of Iranian-American Women', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 8, issue 3, 2006, pp. 413–427, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740600793051>.

be only understood through wages, contracts, or migration status: they are also produced through the household as workplace, the blurring of care and employment, emotional availability, employer discretion, and workers' proximity to family life. Participants changed employers, mobilised recruitment agencies, drew on church and community networks, founded associations, moved out of domestic work, entered entrepreneurship, negotiated marriage and religion, and selectively accepted or resisted Pakistani family norms. Read through this lens, MFDWs' agency was rarely expressed as open resistance or full independence; rather, it emerged through everyday practices of mobility, care, community-building, refusal, and self-making within unequal infrastructures of social reproduction.

Significant knowledge and policy gaps remain. Women's immigration to Pakistan is poorly documented, reflecting the wider assumption that Global South countries are not important destinations for migration. Yet this study shows that Pakistan is receiving women migrants whose legal, occupational, and family statuses can shift over time. Their presence has implications for labour regulation, gender norms, migration governance, and the future of domestic work.

This exploratory study points to areas that require more comprehensive research and policy attention, including the labour-law recognition of domestic work, regulation of recruitment agencies, improved data on women migrant workers, support for migrant women's associations, and intersectional gender approaches that account for class, religion, nationality, migration status, and employment position.

The case of MFDWs in Pakistan therefore highlights the need to analyse South–South migrant domestic work through structural precarity, situated agency, and intimate labour. Filipina domestic workers' trajectories show how global care markets, state migration regimes, household hierarchies, and women's own life projects become entangled. In doing so, the article speaks to this special issue's concern with the gendered organisation of labour, care, and mobility by showing how domestic workers' agency is forged within—rather than outside—the unequal infrastructures of social reproduction. Attending to this interplay is essential for advancing debates on gender, labour, migration, and social reproduction in the Global South.

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