

Migrant domestic workers and Covid-19: Risks facing front-line care workers

Dr Joyce Jiang¹
The Voice of Domestic Workers

The Covid-19 pandemic is affecting the lives of all, but experiences of it differ greatly according to age, gender, ethnicity, employment and income level. It is likely that the pandemic will expose and expand existing inequalities, creating significant new forms of vulnerabilities and hardship. The modern slavery risk of domestic workers in private households, mostly done by migrant women from low-income countries in advanced economies, have dramatically increased during the Covid-19 crisis. Each year the Home Office issues approximately 19,000 Overseas Domestic Worker visas under its ‘domestic workers in private households’ scheme, which allows foreign employers to bring domestic workers to the UK. Domestic workers include cleaners, chauffeurs, cooks, nannies and those providing personal care for the employer and their family in private households. Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) are often from The Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and other Asian and African countries. Being enmeshed in class, gendered and radicalised structures of oppression coupled with legal precarity², MDWs experience greater exploitation than do workers in most occupations. They are not only subject to non-compliance of the National Minimum Wage and long working hours, but also to verbal, physical and sexual abuses. A survey with 539 MDWs conducted by The Voice of Domestic Workers in 2018 reveals that 69% of MDWs did not have their own room in employers’ houses and only 49.4% had enough food to eat. The abuse is prevailing in this sector as 76.5% of respondents had experienced abuse at work, including verbal (54.4%) physical (18.9%) and sexual (7%) abuse. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the already-high economic, physical as well as psychological risks facing MDWs have dramatically increased. Care economy acts as a ‘shock absorber’ during the pandemic. The policy and media response often only recognises health-care workers while neglecting the positive impact of domestic workers during the pandemic. In the UK, there remains a significant gap in national responses to the abuses, exploitations and risks facing MDWs.

Economic risk

Many live-out MDWs are experiencing a steep decline in work which leads to a devastating loss of income. Approximately 20 live-out MDWs from The Voice of Domestic Workers reported that they have lost jobs and financial income since the outbreak of Covid-19. Most MDWs do not have resources to public funds³. They were not able to afford food and rent. They also face long-term uncertainty with many reporting that they are unsure if their employer will resume their jobs after the

¹ Dr Joyce Jiang, University of York, UK. joyce.Jiang@york.ac.uk.

² In 2012, the government imposed restrictions on the Overseas Domestic Worker visa. The new visa lasts for a 6 month term maximum and is non-renewable.

³ Those MDWs who have entered the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and received a positive reasonable grounds decision after their Overseas Domestic Worker visa has expired do not have permission to work. They are able to receive the minimal government aid-£35 a week under the Victim Care Contract.

pandemic. Due to the lockdown and school closure, live-in MDWs' workloads have sharply increased while their salaries have been cut by employers who are also experiencing income loss during the Covid-19 crisis. For example, one live-in MDW was paid £450 per week before the outbreak of Covid-19. However, her salary was reduced to £350 per week despite the increasing workload since the lockdown. Another live-in MDW was only paid two weeks' salary within a month. Some live-in MDWs have become jobless and homeless while some have been forcibly confined to their workplaces, not given salary, enough food or even a proper place to sleep. The Voice of Domestic Workers has been allocating hardship fund (cash or food) to about 50 members who were financially struggling and/or confined to their workplaces without enough food since March 2020. Due to the financial loss, many MDWs are not able to send money back to support their children and family.

Physical risk

Regulations related to social distancing and hygiene measures are often not enforced at their workplaces. As the director of The Voice of Domestic Workers commented, it is widely reported by their members that there is a lack of protective equipment at work which poses a real threat to their health. Many employers have not provided MDWs masks and gloves. Some MDWs were forcibly confined to their workplaces by their employers, and thus they were not able to go out to purchase masks and gloves. They may also be required to take care of anyone who may fall ill, including someone with Covid-19. Currently MDWs are excluded from the health and safety regulation in the UK. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, increasing number of MDWs from The Voice of Domestic Workers have reported exploitation and abuse at their workplaces and asked to be referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) -a framework for identifying and supporting the victim of human trafficking and modern slavery. Undocumented MDWs are unable to access healthcare and other public services. Being separated from their family and forcefully confined in their workplaces, MDWs have few resources and 'outlets' to seek help and keep themselves safe.

Psychological risk

Exploitative working conditions, the threat of abuse, and deteriorating living conditions also have a devastating impact on the mental health of MDWs. Many members from The Voice of Domestic Workers have reported increasing level of stress and frustration. Internet is not always available in the accommodation that MDW rent. MDWs are often not allowed to use wifi in their employers' houses. Lack of access to internet has reinforced social isolation. Some MDWs are not able to communicate with their families and friends virtually on a regular basis.

Case one: My employer asked me to leave the house. I became jobless and homeless

At first in mid-March, my American employer asked me to leave the house because of Covid-19. They told me that I can leave my things in the house and they will give my job back after the lockdown is lifted up. But in April, they texted me that they can't afford my salary and won't give my job back. I became jobless and also lost my accommodation. I'm a live-in domestic worker. I tried to look for new jobs, but it's very difficult. I had one job interview, but they asked me to work from 7am to 9pm, very similar to my job in Qatar. It's too harsh. The other employer asked me to present my document. My passport was still kept by my first employer from Qatar. I don't have a passport. I have received a positive reasonable grounds decision from the NRM, but the employer didn't understand what the NRM means. It's too difficult to explain what the NRM is. So I'm jobless without any income now and staying with one friend. I receive £35 per week from the government because I have received a positive reasonable grounds decision from the NRM. That's it, no other income. I don't have extra money to send back to my family. It's very difficult. **(Pilipino, female, 26 years old, 9 months in**

the UK, has entered the NRM and received a positive reasonable grounds decision, live-in domestic worker in London)

Case two: I thought I caught Covid-19 from my employer, but I can't go to hospital because I'm undocumented

I'm a live-out domestic worker. I worked for three employers before the lockdown. One of my employers was a doctor. He was very sick and hadn't been to work for long time. I was there to clean the house. They didn't tell me what was going on with him. 16th March was last day of my work. When I was back, I started feeling unwell. I lost my appetite, had low fever and body ache and coughed a lot. These are symptoms of Covid-19. I was so scared. Because I'm undocumented, I have never registered GP. I can't go to hospital. For a month, I was unwell. I took care of myself. I also lost all jobs since the lockdown. I don't have any income. My family asked me, 'when are you going to send money back?'. I said, 'I can't. I don't have jobs now.' I feel very stressed. I don't know when I will have my jobs back. I started looking for new jobs. Last week I had an interview. They said they could offer me a live-in job, but the conditions are so hard. I have to do the Covid-19 test first. If I'm negative, I have to stay in one room of their house for 14 days. After 14 days, I have to do the Covid-19 test again. If I'm negative again, I could start working for them. However, I will not be allowed to go out at all before September. It is too hard. I feel like I'm in jail. I didn't accept the job offer. The stress has made my asthma even worse. I can't get any help from doctors because I'm hidden. I'm staying with my friend. There is no internet in the house. I feel very lonely. I can't even talk with my family and friends online. **(Pilipino, female, 6 years in the UK, undocumented, live-out domestic worker in London)**

Case three : No pay for two weeks, no days off, locked inside

I felt like I'm in a cage. I'm in prison. Since two weeks before the government announced the lockdown, I have been forbidden to go out by my employer. I'm not allowed to go out to buy food or take exercise. It reminds me of my days in Riyadh. My life evolves in this flat. I'm locked inside. My employer is the elderly people from Iraq. I only received two weeks' salary last month. I asked my employer why they only gave me two weeks' salary. They just ignored me. Before the lockdown, I had one day (Sunday) off a week. Now I don't have days off. I work from 8am to midnight everyday (She was paid £450 a week. The hourly rate was far below the National Minimum Wage). They allow me to do online classes with The Voice of Domestic Workers, but no days off. I don't have enough money to send back home to support my children. I have three children. They are 17, 13 and 5 years old. I borrowed money from ** (a member of The Voice of Domestic Worker) and she helped me to arrange remittance. I feel very sad. **(Pilipino, female, 38 years old, 2 years in the UK, has entered the NRM and is waiting for a conclusive grounds decision, live-in domestic worker in Kensington, London)**

Case four: I lost all my live-out jobs

Since mid-March, I have lost all my jobs. I'm a live-out domestic worker. Before the lockdown, I had three part-time jobs, two employers in Holland Park and one in Ealing. They all cancelled my service. I don't have income at all. It has become difficult to pay my rent and food. I don't have any access to public funds. Overseas Workers Welfare Administration of Philippine Overseas Labour Office has given me \$200. The Voice of Domestic Workers is going to provide me £250. They are good, but I don't have any other income now. I'm really worrying about my children and family back home. I have 4 children. I'm the only source of income for my family. If I don't work, who will feed my children and family? Some friends gave me cash. It's difficult. We don't know when this is going to end. I don't know whether my employers will give my jobs back. They say they will, but I don't know when. Social distancing is not possible in our workplaces. So I don't know when I can have my jobs again. I have started looking for new jobs and asking people I know, but I haven't got any response. I feel stressed very day. **(Pilipino, female, 46 years old, 7 years in the UK, undocumented and is waiting to be referred to the NRM, live-out domestic worker in London)**

Case five: No one will take care of me

I felt very weak in mid-March. I could't breath sometimes. It lasted for 2-3 weeks. I was very scared. I thought I might have caught Covid-19, but I'm scared of calling NHS. I'm here on my own. If I'm tested positive, no one will take care of me. My family is so far away. I was also worrying about them. I don't know what will happen to them. My employer provided me an accommodation. It is separate from their house. I was there alone. They provided food to me. Except two person from The Voice of Domestic Workers, nobody else has called me. I felt frustrated. I took more water and followed the guidelines from the government. I cried a lot and prayed to God. I needed to send money back to my children in The Philippines. My daughter was sick and needed medicine then. A lot of shops were closed. I finally found a shop and they helped me to send the money back. Now I started working again (for the same employer). I work from 8am to 8pm, 5.5 days a week and get £350 a week (The hourly rate -£5.30 is far below the National Minimum Wage). **(Pilipino, female, 50 years old, 1 year in the UK, has entered the NRM and received a positive reasonable grounds decision, live-in domestic worker in Kennington, London)**