

Evidence from Malaysia: why a strong convention to protect migrant domestic workers is needed

Global migration has increased rapidly. In 2024, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs estimated 304 million international migrants, nearly doubling since 1990 (International Migrant Stock 2024). Asia hosts about 92.2 million, with 23.6 million from Southeast Asia living abroad (ASEAN, n.d.). Key migration corridors in Southeast Asia include Cambodia and Myanmar to Thailand, and Indonesia and the Philippines to Malaysia and Singapore. Women now make up 48 percent of intra-ASEAN migrant workers, up 2 percent over three decades, reflecting the feminisation of migration (Mega and Carl, 2022). Domestic work is a leading sector for migrant women, especially in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong.

In recent years, the digitalisation of jobs has fundamentally reshaped informal employment by both expanding access and increasing risks. Digital platforms – such as ride-hailing, food-delivery apps, online marketplaces, and home-service platforms – enable people excluded from the formal economy to find new forms of work. For many informal workers – especially women, youth, and migrants – these platforms offer easier job access, flexibility, and the potential for a more stable income. Yet, digitalisation blurs the line between formal and informal work: while some workers gain visibility and access to clients, most lack formal contracts, social protection, and labour rights, deepening the precarity of informal employment. Challenges like algorithmic management, obscure pay systems, and few chances for collective representation also emerge. In sum, digitalisation is not just changing how informal workers find jobs; it is restructuring informality itself by embedding empowerment and exploitation into digital infrastructures.

In 2024, Women in Informal Employment Globalising & Organising (WEIGO) worked with the International Domestic Workers Federation and local partners in Malaysia to carry out exploratory research. The study involved local, Indonesian, and Filipino domestic workers, focusing on their work experiences and engagement on Digital Labour Platforms (DLPs). The methodology included focus group discussions and semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews. The partnership between WIEGO and the local partners is based on building trust and safeguarding confidentiality throughout the process. Therefore, names used in this article do not reflect the real names of the interviewers.

This article draws on a specific case story of migrant domestic workers using DLPs to compare

their experience with those in traditional employment. Key differences are highlighted, along with the digital platform features workers desire, to show why robust conventions for decent work are needed.

It's Not an Easy Path: Stories of Our Migration Journeys

Transitioning to workers' personal accounts, most women in our study migrated to Malaysia seeking higher incomes to support their families, although the journeys proved difficult. They navigated various migration channels, with decisions shaped by conditions at home. For instance, while some individuals entered as tourists and relied on friends for job connections, most turned to recruitment agents, encountering different experiences, including abuse and mistreatment from agencies in both home and destination countries. For example, *Mariam* (not a real name) described her experience with a recruitment agency in Indonesia:

"I got a domestic work job through a recruitment agency in Bekasi, Indonesia. I entered Malaysia before the COVID-19 pandemic. I stayed a night at the agency's office in Kupang, Indonesia. In that office, I saw the physical violence done by the agency staff toward a domestic worker. They kicked and pulled her. That incident traumatised me. Besides that, the agency took my luggage and replaced my underwear and clothes with theirs. I lost the telephone number that I kept in my underwear. The next morning, my employer came and fetched me."

Building on this, another worker from Indonesia shared that an agent pressured her to lie about her age on her passport application, as she was underage when moving to Malaysia. *Umi* (not her real name) shared her experience:

"I decided to work abroad after having difficulty finding a job in Indonesia. I worked in the market at a clothes shop after graduating from high school. After 6 months, I went to Jakarta to look for a job, but I couldn't find one. Finally, I decided to work abroad. There was a recruiter who offered me to go abroad; at first, I requested to work in Taiwan, but they rejected me because I was small. My body was indeed tiny because I was still 18 years old at that time. Then the recruiter offered me to go to Malaysia, and I accepted it. Because I was underage, when I went to immigration to apply for

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a passport, the agent instructed me to fake my age and tell the employee about my false age”.

Upon arrival in Malaysia, treatment by recruitment agencies mirrored the actions of agents in Indonesia. The women said agency staff examined their bodies and asked them to change their clothes, including undergarments and pants. Agents confiscated personal belongings, restricted phone use, and took control of their contact details. One Indonesian domestic worker transferred between three agencies before meeting her employer. As *Umi* recounted her arrival in Malaysia;

“On our departure day, four of us, domestic workers, flew to Malaysia. Upon our arrival at the Malaysian airport, the local agency promptly collected all our documents. We stayed at the agency’s house because it was already evening, and we received instructions to clean his house. My employer was busy, and he could not fetch me. The next day, the agency brought us to his office. They searched our bags and clothes, but they did not strip us naked. They also prohibited us from using our mobile phones. We kept the phone number and hid it inside our shoes, but they found it. So, I ended up without a phone number. At the agency’s office, they put us inside the store and asked us to wait for our employers to fetch us”.

These women’s experiences show that abuse and mistreatment often began at the start of migration and continued after they arrived in the destination country. Another common problem involved salary deductions lasting three to six months to cover visa-related expenses, highlighting ongoing exploitation throughout the migration process.

The Realities of Workers in Traditional Employment

Workers who settle down in Malaysia experience varied outcomes, mainly because employers treat them differently. Employer treatment primarily shapes workers’ job conditions and their ability to settle, especially with regard to working hours and job satisfaction. Some workers describe positive experiences; others struggle to meet employer expectations. Almost half of the domestic workers in the study work full-time, while others work part-time. Notably, one Indonesian worker has worked both full-time and part-time. *Titi* (not a real name) shared that:

“I am a live-out domestic worker. I work with two employers. One employer gives me a working visa, allowing me to work for seven hours, while the other, which is part-time and operates without a visa, employs me for three hours. I got the part-time job through my friend’s recommendation. Each employer pays me US \$7 per hour, and I received cash every day from the part-time employer while I got monthly salary from my full-time employer”.

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We also noticed that workers share similar daily routines, such as common duties and responsibilities. The most prominent similarity is that all workers tend to work long hours, exceeding the national standard. Workers who care for elderly or infants report working nearly 24 hours a day, with duties extending into the night. For example, *Maria* (not a real name) from the Philippines cared for the grandmother, diagnosed with dementia. Her daily task is to keep the elderly woman company because she talks nonstop, and *Maria* completes other tasks only when the grandmother sleeps. At night, *Maria* often has her sleep interrupted because the grandmother comes to her room and knocks on the door. *Maria* then gets up to console her and make sure she is okay before going back to bed. *Maria* feels as if she works almost 24 hours a day. *Hati* (not a real name) also explained her experience caring for the elderly in the house:

“Most of my work is at night because I need to change the diaper for the grandmother. Also, I need to work while Grandma is awake because she loves to monitor me. If I do work while she is sleeping, she will not see it and assume that I never do it. I concentrate my work on caring for the grandmother”.

Almost all participants in the research reported working 13-20 hours per day, with intermittent daytime breaks. *Una* (not a real name) said she could only sleep three hours during the December holiday season. *Pini* (not a real name) shared:

“I work more than 16 hours a day, but on the weekends, I have to stay up until midnight because my employer would return home late after work”.

These women clearly work beyond the eight-hour workday or 45-hour workweek limit (as amended in 2022) set by the Employment Act, 1955 ('the Act'). The core reason for these excessive hours is that migrant domestic workers in Malaysia are not covered by the Act's working hour provisions or core labour protections. This means employer practices, which are central to the workers' experiences, allow shifts that can extend up to 20 hours, particularly when employers return home late.

Workers on the App: Realities of Labour in the Platform Economy

Most migrant domestic workers are employed as full-time workers when they arrive in Malaysia, but in some situations, workers choose to work part-time. During a preliminary survey with participants, some workers reported awareness of certain digital applications (Kleaner, MaidEasy, GrabMaid, CareGiverAsia, etc.), but indicated they had never used them. All workers were familiar with social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. This section presents two case stories

regarding workers' experiences with DLPs. The first case involves *Salmi* (pseudonym), who installed an app called "Sitly" on the recommendation of a friend who stated it was designed for baby care jobs. She registered by providing personal and employment information. The app required a monthly subscription of US \$9, which led *Salmi* to discontinue use due to the cost.

The following case story features *Rita* (not a real name) and her experience using an app called "Maid4U". Her story is shared below to provide a contrast in the use of DLPs.

■ Finding the digital labour app via social media platform

In 2015, my employer told me that he no longer wanted to use my service because his children had grown up, and I was told to stay outside and look for another job. However, my permit would still be under his name. So, I rented a room and started looking for another job.

■ One-time registration fee

As I scrolled through Facebook, I discovered an app named Maid4U. When I clicked the app link, they required a *one-time MYR 30 payment*. After I paid them via online banking transfer, they gave me a link to download the app on my mobile.

■ App download and registration and Worker profile

After downloading the app, I continued to register. The company app asked for my *name, telephone number, passport, and home address* in Malaysia. I filled out the registration form. I created my profile after completing the registration process. The profile includes my name and telephone number.

■ Job selection system

After registering with the app, I checked my mobile every night and scrolled through the job list. I had to compete for work with other app users. In the app, I only see the client's address in the job advertisements, with no job descriptions. I had to choose work that was near my place because the company app did not cover transportation. If I chose a distant location, I would spend more money on Grab cars and trains.

■ Pay rate, work conditions and Cancellation policy

The company app only paid me *MYR 15 per hour*. That amount did not cover transportation or food costs. Sometimes I had to take jobs at faraway addresses if the ones nearby were no longer available. *If I cancelled the job, they would deduct MYR 30 from my salary*. That's why I never cancel jobs. If the customer cancels, the app does not deduct my salary; the customer is responsible for paying the company app, not me. The company app will find a replacement job for me. The client informed me of the necessary work when I arrived

at their house. I did not know the client's name; I only knew their nationality and home address.

If I arrive late, the app company agent will inform the client about my late arrival. This also had an impact on my next client, as I had to complete the work at the previous house before moving on to the next.

In one day, I could only work on two or three houses. It was difficult to work on more than three houses because of the location. Sometimes, I would finish working late at night. If the houses were close to each other, I could do work at four houses. Sometimes, I would clean houses or offices.

The app sets the cleaning time for each house at three hours. If cleaning the house takes four hours, there will have to be two people to do it. I do this job every day except Sunday because I want to rest.

■ Communication and notifications & Company rules and penalties

I was not able to communicate directly with clients; only app agents could communicate with them. During the registration process on the app, there are several rules stated. For instance, *we cannot take the client's telephone numbers. If we discover that we have stolen a client's number, we will face a fine of MYR 1000*. The app companies were afraid that we would steal their clients. Another rule that I remembered was I must not arrive later than the time we had booked, and I was not allowed to work less than three hours for a house.

■ Booking and reminders

If I clicked on the client's address, the company app would know. For example, if I clicked on the clients' address for work tomorrow, the company app would remind me in the app that I have a job tomorrow through the notification. Every day there was a reminder to let me know when I had to go to this place for work.

■ Payment system and other benefits

My income was uncertain because the number of houses I needed to clean was not consistent. Sometimes I would get MYR 700 in a week. Sometimes it was less. I got my salary weekly. For example, if I work from Monday to Saturday, I would get payment on Tuesday. The company would not pay on Monday because they were scared that we would run away. The company would transfer the funds through the online Touch & Go banking system.

The company app did not provide any employment benefits. If the client was satisfied, they would give me a favourable rating. The company app would give me a *20 percent commission* based on the rating. This is similar to incentives on e-hailing Grab. When I received my salary, I could confirm that I received the commission as shown in the payment statement. I always got favourable ratings. I had a friend who often got bad ratings from clients. The company expressed dissatisfaction and

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reprimanded my friend because of numerous client complaints brought to the office.

■ Challenges working on the app

The first experience of working on the app was difficult because I didn't understand how to use the Grab application, and I had to learn to look at the map. I just left my previous employer, and when I worked full-time, I rarely used my cell phone, so I didn't know how to use the Grab application. Once, I lost my way and made a mistake when boarding the train, resulting in my late arrival at work.

I enjoyed this job because of its flexibility.

The Malaysian Senate passed the Gig Workers Bill 2025, which is a significant step for gig workers and businesses in Malaysia, but it is unlikely that migrant domestic workers will be covered

However, the income was insufficient and unpredictable. If I had a motorbike, it would be easier. But I did not know how to drive, and I did not have a license, so doing this job without my own transportation was challenging.

■ Some positive side of working on the app

I did not have negative work experiences, and the majority of clients expressed their satisfaction to me and made requests for return visits by contacting the company app. Agents communicated these client requests to the worker.

In both cases, *Salmi* and *Rita* incurred costs to use the apps. *Salmi* paid a subscription fee, while *Rita* paid an upfront registration fee. *Rita's* experiences include more detail due to her three years working with Maid4U, allowing her to compare full-time employment with working via an app.

Working in Traditional Employment vs. App-Based Work: Key Differences

Rita's story provides insights into differences between traditional employment and DLPs for migrant domestic workers, though her account may not represent the overall experiences of domestic workers in Malaysia. Prominent differences include:

- Salary and expenses** – workers do not need to purchase food or pay rent because their employers provide these. App workers must pay for their own food and rent, which reduces their earnings.
- Freedom and flexibility** – traditional employment often restricts workers' freedom of movement and does not provide flexibility in arranging working hours. Workers using the app have more autonomy regarding movement and scheduling, though some may choose to work longer hours.
- Benefits; income opportunities** – Workers in traditional employment may receive additional provisions such as airfare tickets if provided by employers, and employment security if a valid working visa and written contract are in place. The Social Security Organisation (SOCSO) scheme mandates employer registration for domestic workers. For app-based workers, there is typically less job security due to the absence of contracts or sponsorship visas, and the company do not provide insurance coverage for injuries sustained commuting to work. App-based workers are also

responsible for their own return airfare.

- Income opportunities** – Employment with a single employer provides a fixed monthly income. Although working hours may be irregular and there are no overtime benefits, workers continue to receive their monthly wages consistently. In some cases, workers have reported experiencing abuse, including the withholding of salaries by their employers. In comparison with the workers on the app, they have the potential to earn higher incomes if they have access to their own transportation, such as a motorbike.
- Accessibility** – in the traditional employment, workers have their time off only on weekends, depending on whether their employers provide it. Since workers are tied to their employers, changing jobs often involves several steps and requirements, while for workers on the app, app-based work is a useful option for those who are unemployed or living independently, due to its flexibility and constant job availability.

Emerging Themes: Traditional Employment vs. Digital Labour Platforms

Based on the finding of the study, there are two emerging themes that we can draw out from domestic workers' experiences in Malaysia;

1. Hidden cost

Migrant domestic workers endure hidden costs from the moment they start migrating. In the study, most paid the recruitment agencies' fee through salary deductions. When workers turn to DLPs, they also face costs; they must pay for the app before they can register. For example, *Salmi* was unable to keep working on the app because it required a monthly subscription. *Rita* had to pay an upfront fee just to download the app and register for jobs.

2. Forms of exploitation in both workers in traditional employment and DLPs

2.1 Long working hours

Both domestic workers employed by a single employer and those working on the app experience long working hours. However, workers on the app have some control over their schedules, unlike those with a single employer. Still, there is a tendency for app-based workers to work excessively to earn more income. All workers employed by single employers reported working more than eight hours per day.

2.2 Unstable income

Some domestic workers with single employers are satisfied with their fixed monthly income. However, they feel it does not reflect the amount of work they do. Domestic workers earn between MYR 1700 to MYR 2500 per month. Only one worker earns MYR 4000, as she has worked over ten years for her employer. Full-time workers earn an average of MYR 8 to MYR 19 per hour, based on 26 days and eight hours per day. However, this calculation does not

match reality, as workers often work more than eight hours daily and 26 days per month.

App-based workers like Rita feel they could earn more by working harder, but their capacity limits them. Rita typically cleans three or four houses, earning MYR 15 per hour. The company sets the working hours, allowing only three hours per house. This means Rita can earn up to MYR 180 per day and average MYR 3000 to MYR 4000 per month. However, the number of houses she cleans is not fixed. On some days, she cannot get even two houses, making her income unstable. Reliance on public transportation makes traveling between jobs difficult and limits her earning potential.

2.3 Lack of benefits and protection for both employment forms

Some domestic workers face abuse even during their migration journey. Several reported violence by agents, such as confiscating mobiles, stripping their clothes, and inspecting their bodies. In other cases, workers were confined with others and given minimal food. Some workers also suffered salary deductions to pay for visa processes. Workers generally lack social protection, even though the Malaysian government now requires employers to register workers for SOSCO. Some workers said the registration process is difficult and depends on employers. Additionally, most workers do not receive benefits such as insurance or medical coverage.

Conditions are even worse for workers on the app because DLPs such as Maid4U are highly unregulated. The Malaysian Senate passed the Gig Workers Bill 2025, which is a significant step for gig workers and businesses in Malaysia. However, it is unlikely that migrant domestic workers are included, since the Employment Act 1956 does not provide social protection for them. The irregular nature of the app and the lack of labour law protection make domestic workers' situations very precarious. For migrant domestic workers, app-based work is even harder because their legal status is tied to their working visa and employment contract. Since app companies do not provide formal contracts or visas, these workers risk being classified as 'illegal'.

What Workers Want: Key Design and Feature Preference

In the study, all workers want DLPs to be designed with features that enhance their access to fair and secure job opportunities. We clustered them into five features: (a) job access and opportunities; (b) platform legitimacy and security; (c) worker benefits and protections; (d) training and skill development; and (e) usability and support.

1. Job access and opportunities

Workers clearly indicate three key demands for DLPs: first, they want platforms that make it easy to find work matching their experiences and availabilities; second, they require salary payments

to come directly from clients, without interference by company apps; and third, they value platforms that provide clear job descriptions and reasonable wages for their services.

2. Platform legitimacy and security

The platform's legitimacy and security are equally important. Workers want tools that are user-friendly and reliable to verify whether a platform and its job postings are authentic and safe. Their key demand is features that help avoid scams, assess risks, and prevent being cheated.

3. Worker benefits and protections

Workers also seek stronger benefits and protections. They want rating systems to review employers fairly, without interference by company apps. They demand transportation allowances covered by the company because mobility costs contribute to income instability. Workers appeal for companies to provide accident insurance due to the nature of their work. They also request fair cancellation policies that do not penalise them for unavoidable cancellations. Workers want the app to connect them with reliable clients, who will not cancel orders unexpectedly.

Advocating for legal compliance from states and companies is important, but it is equally critical to organise workers within digital platforms

4. Training and skill development

Training and skill development features are highly desired. Workers want tailored content on cleaning, with clear descriptions. They demand the app provide guidance on time management with proper notifications or reminders for jobs. Most importantly, workers want their contributions formally acknowledged through a certification programme by companies operating DLPs. This would increase their credibility to find future job prospects online. Moreover, workers request on-the-job training from the company, which would help them make informed choices.

5. Usability and support

Workers emphasise usability and support. They prefer user-friendly interfaces that are easy to manage. Workers want an app that provides multiple languages beyond English. They also demand features to manage schedules, such as showing completed tasks and offering a more organised client communication system. They request easy access to customer service or a grievance platform for job-related complaints. Lastly, workers want a better payment tracking system to provide salary information.

The Way Forward Toward Decent Work in the Platform Economy

The evidence from this research highlights the urgent need for a strong convention on the digital economy to protect workers from precarious conditions. As preparations begin for the International Labour Conference (ILC) in 2026, it is

continued on page 19...

men in civilian clothes who told her that she should “cooperate” with them. The men drove a vehicle that CTUHRP says is linked to the armed forces. Alomia has previously reported the distribution of fabricated stories and insinuations aimed at discrediting her and undermining her integrity, and she has repeatedly called on the Human Rights Commission to investigate the incidents and ensure her protection.

On 30 October, men claiming to be military personnel entered the house of Fortuno, who is education and research program officer of the Sugar workers' union (SUGAR Batangas) as well as an executive member of the farm workers' association (AMK). The men reportedly said that they were keeping watch on Fortuno, and asked her to “surrender” as a combatant of rebel group New People's Army

On 23 October, CTUHRP says that CCTV footage shows two unidentified men on a motorcycle passing and photographing to offices of the KMU-SMR trade union. Earlier this year, Marvin Dacanay and Jeffrey Uypala, both union organisers with the KMU in the region, were harassed by members of the military and the police in July and August this year.

ICTUR welcomed Executive Order No. 97, which does instruct both police and military units to refrain from the practice of “red-tagging” against trade unions, but urged the authorities to have regard to the issues raised by the CTUHRP and to ensure that the Order is implemented in practice, noting the view of the ILO's CFA that, “blanket linkages of trade unions to an insurgency have a stigmatising effect and often place union leaders and members in a situation of extreme insecurity” (Freedom of Association, Para. 90).

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essential for workers and their organisations to unite in addressing the challenges and risks of working on DLPs. The study shows that both traditional and digital platforms expose domestic workers to abuse and violence. While it may be difficult to require companies to fulfil all worker protection obligations, domestic worker organisations must recognise the unprecedented risks and be prepared to meet these challenges. Advocating for legal compliance from states and companies is important, but it is equally critical to organise workers within digital platforms to understand and engage in this advocacy. To translate these insights into action, organisations could establish a dedicated task force to develop comprehensive worker education programmes and organise focused workshops on digital rights. Adding advocacy strategies like creating alliances with broader labour

coalitions and lobbying for legislative changes to prioritise digital worker rights can amplify their voice. Therefore, efforts should focus simultaneously on pushing for digital care economy policy reforms and strengthening worker organisation and awareness.

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Civil society networks – such as the UK ESCR Network¹⁸ in the United Kingdom – linking academics, trade unions, NGOs and civil society groups, workers and those with lived experience will have an integral role to play in that exercise to ensure greater use of available tools, such as ICESCR, to defend and protect the rights of trade unions and their members.

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