



CARE AND HOME: New Study On Covid-19 Behaviours Reveals Systemic Challenges Low-Facing Wage Migrant Workers Experience

The Center for Culture-Centered Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University and Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) are deeply concerned about the wellbeing of migrant workers who are confined in their dormitories amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. In the last few weeks, qualitative reports about poor quality food, lack of safe distancing measures and substandard living conditions have been reported by NGOs and the media. CARE also released a qualitative study reflecting these concerns earlier this month which interviewed 45 workers since the outbreak began.

CARE and HOME are jointly releasing the second white paper on the health of low-wage migrant workers in Singapore to understand the realities of the affected workers better. The study was conducted by CARE and draws on 101 usable survey responses. The white paper outlines the specific challenges experienced by the migrant workers in staying safe, such as practising responsible social distancing, and offers recommendations for solutions.

The study highlights the high level of awareness among the migrant workers of the importance of preventive measures of the spread of Covid-19. Such measures include hand washing, maintaining physical distance, and limiting their movements outside the dormitories.

Behaviourally, the workers report practicing the recommended physical distancing behaviors outside the room, including not intermingling with other workers outside the room, not leaving the room unless necessary, and not going outside the dormitory.

Simultaneously, the findings suggest structural barriers for the implementation of recommended preventive measures to curb the spread of Covid-19. To name a few, safe distancing is almost impossible due to the overcrowding in the rooms (because of the number of workers in the rooms). There is a lack of cleanliness of the toilets, shortage of water and soap. Moreover, in the absence of



adequate space to practice physical distancing inside the rooms, it increases the risks of exposure, and exacerbates hygiene issues.

In addition to the structural context, the participants are uncertain of whether their wages will be paid to them during the lock-down period.

Participants highlighted fears of speaking up, a lack of effective channels for them to articulate their needs, a sense of fear of retaliation if they raise issues, and not knowing how to raise issues to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM).

Finally, the white paper draws attention to the overarching sense of depression reported by the participants.

Based on the survey, the following short-term and long-term solutions are outlined:

Short-term solutions

- Reduce overcrowding by limiting the number of workers to 3-4 per room.
- Ensure the residential infrastructures have adequate toilets and showers, limiting the numbers to 3-4 workers per toilet and shower.
- Ensure availability of basic cleaning supplies, running water and adequate waste disposal.
- Ensure workers that raise concerns are able to do so freely without fear of punishment. Particularly, foster a climate of open communication which encourages workers to speak freely to their employers, dormitory operators and to the authorities, and which strengthens workers' voices.
- Create mental health support and counselling services for workers.
- Ensure workers are able to communicate with their families.



- Make communication such as wifi and phone calls accessible so migrant workers can stay connected with their networks.
- Ensure worker wages/salaries are paid on time. Transfer wages/salaries directly to accounts of workers. Reassure workers that their salaries/wages will be paid.
- In the climate of fear, civil society organizations ought to be particularly careful about securing informed consent in representing issues. Care needs to be taken to protecting the security, health, and wellbeing of the workers. For civil society, it is vital that the same power differentials that exist between authority figures and the workers are not reified through behaviors that further silence workers.

Long-term solutions

- Legalize a framework for worker-led, and worker-owned unions and groups that represent the needs of low-wage migrant workers.
- Conduct a review of all laws pertaining to the employment, wellbeing and living conditions of migrant workers and ensure that they comply with international standards