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FEMINIST IMAGINARIES OF EQUITABLE,
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LOUDER THAN WORDS

Lynn Ng

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FEMINIST IMAGINARIES OF EQUITABLE, JUST CARE: OUR PICTURES SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

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Abstract

Globally, not just in the case of Singapore, which is the focus of this paper, migrant care workers are a devalued and unappreciated workforce. Long before the pandemic, issues of migrant rights and care shortages were major topics of concern for feminist adult education and care work scholars, who advocate for the importance of critical hope and the transformative potential of imaginations. As human communication pivots online, physical face-to-face encounters dwindle while digital solidarities thrive. In this hybrid scenario, I narrate the structurally oppressive circumstances of live-in employment alongside an online (Facebook) support group that asserts its members' rights to receive, not simply provide, care. For my migrant worker activist research participants, care and digital activism are mutually interactive social processes that challenge Singapore society's dominant market mentality in the educational, learning, and socialization practices of family care. Power asymmetries often prevent migrant worker activists such as foreign "maids," as they are often disparagingly called in the local parlance, from mobilizing their transformative feminist imaginations into policy change. Based on my findings, I call for a reciprocal approach to reconfiguring care ethics and practice that centres migrant perspectives. I invite colleagues to join me in storytelling about resilient groups and individuals who embrace the imaginative power of critical hope to rewrite the status quo of public knowledge.

Résumé

À Singapour, lieu faisant l'objet de cet article, et mondialement, les travailleurs en soins migrants représentent une main-d'œuvre dévaluée et peu appréciée. Avant la pandémie, les questions concernant les droits des migrants et la pénurie de soins représentaient des préoccupations majeures pour les spécialistes en éducation féministe des adultes et en soins, vu que ces spécialistes défendent l'importance essentielle de l'espoir et le potentiel de transformation de l'imagination. La communication se numérise, et les interactions en personne diminuent tandis que les solidarités en ligne fleurissent. Dans ce scénario hybride, je narre les circonstances structurelles oppressives des employés qui vivent sur leur lieu de travail, me basant également sur un groupe de soutien en ligne (Facebook) défendant le droit de ses membres à recevoir et non seulement à fournir

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des soins. Pour les participants de mon étude, travailleurs migrants activistes, les soins et l'activisme en ligne sont des processus sociaux interactifs et mutuels qui remettent en question la mentalité de marché dominante à Singapour en ce qui a trait aux pratiques d'éducation, d'apprentissage et de socialisation en soins familiaux. L'asymétrie des pouvoirs empêchent souvent les travailleurs migrants activistes, par exemple les « maids » (domestiques), comme les habitants les appellent souvent avec dédain, de mobiliser leur imagination féministe transformationnelle pour entraîner des changements aux politiques. Vu mes conclusions, je préconise une approche réciproque qui permettra de repenser l'éthique des soins et les pratiques axées sur les perspectives des travailleurs migrants. J'invite mes collègues à raconter les histoires de groupes résilients et de personnes utilisant le pouvoir de l'imagination et de l'espoir essentiel pour réécrire les connaissances publiques dans le statu quo.

Keywords

care ethics and practice, digital activism, feminist imaginaries, migrant care workers, feminist adult education

Mots clés

éthique et pratiques de soins, activisme numérique, imagination féministe, travailleurs de soins migrants, éducation féministe des adultes

Migrant Care Workers as Intellectual Collaborators of Care Ethics

In this paper, I draw on research encounters and interview experiences with migrant care workers (hereafter MCWs) in Singapore to contemplate how collaborative feminist imaginaries of equitable, just care can be acted upon in feminist adult education and research. Particularly with the pandemic's onset, higher education institutions and university ethics review boards as a whole have leaned toward renewed initiatives to improve awareness and outcomes of "ethical" or "moral" research considerations in project design and practice (Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). Against this backdrop, I call on feminist colleagues in relatively privileged positions of analysis (vis-à-vis the majority of our interviewees) to mull over, at a deeper emotional and spiritual level, how our research participants are always already enacting change through storytelling habits. Due to their isolated live-in conditions, my research participants are often not understood as feminist intellectual partners and political activists who constantly reconfigure and reframe the meanings of domestic care work (Ng, 2022). It is indeed the case that many MCWs do not have access to regular days off and cannot afford the potential risks (e.g., losing income) of resisting authority figures. But in digital cyberspaces, such as the online support group where most of my research participants (amidst social distancing rules) came forward, transformative activism proliferates through imaginaries of equitable, just care. I frame the paper's account of feminist imaginaries of just care around three central questions:

1. What sort of creative artistic content and visual images do MCWs in Singapore upload to online support groups?

2. In what ways do these user-generated images resist the gendered and racialized assumptions about foreign “maids”?
3. How can feminist social researchers draw on opportunities for mutual learning and co-operative aspiration for collective social transformation?

Since May 2021, I have been a participant observer in MDW in Singapore (n.d.), one of the largest Facebook support groups started by MCWs, with more than 51,000 members as of April 2024. In contrast to highly publicized images of assembly marches and street protests, the photos shared by MCWs in online spaces usually reflect covert and “softer” strategies of pushback and resistance—for example, a small gathering with close friends that showcases the women simply being there for one another. Following colleagues who engage with MCWs globally, such as socially engaged researchers who advocate for storytelling through photovoice and/or related toolkits (Tungohan, 2023), I draw on emerging sentiments of support for interpretive, nuanced approaches to understanding people’s lived experiences. I analyze a selected range of photos and/or accompanying texts contributed by some MCWs I interviewed, including a woman named Sha, who is introduced below (with her consent for public dissemination), and draw on some feature stories of their grassroots activism. In my view, MCWs’ artistic and creative interventions present a critically engaged, significant ideological resistance against their host societies’ derogatory treatment of foreign “maids,” including its gendered and racialized attitudes of domestic care work. In this sense, my framing of the women’s diverse user-generated content as a photo-essay of sorts draws on emerging invitations from social movement scholars to conceptualize online activism, including shows of mutual care and shared support in migrant writing or literary communities (Mintarsih, 2019; Platt et al., 2016), as a form of humanistic imagination. The connecting theme of their diverse photos, images, and storied posts/snippets of daily life (i.e., photo-essays) is an attempt to be understood as full, complicated human beings who deserve to receive, not just provide, care. That said, the extent to which these feminist imaginaries can impact immigration policies relies largely on the co-operative efforts of privileged state actors and ordinary citizens (domestic employers). I invite colleagues in care work studies and adult education to think relationally about the concrete potential of humanistic imaginations, but also about how accompanying narratives are enmeshed in the scary wider structures of academia. Across our diverse empirical topics of interest (Brigham et al., 2018; Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023; Guo & Liu, 2021; Shan, 2015), the connecting theme is a power-attentive understanding of research encounters as part of the broader power dynamics in knowledge production. A longer-term aspiration for adult educational outcomes is to mobilize the numerous stories of critical hope and imaginations of alternative care relations to disrupt the normalized acceptance of modern live-in servitude (Cattapan et al., 2024; Ng, 2022). Adult education scholars have much to gain from a stronger integration with their feminist counterparts in care labour migration more broadly, and vice versa.

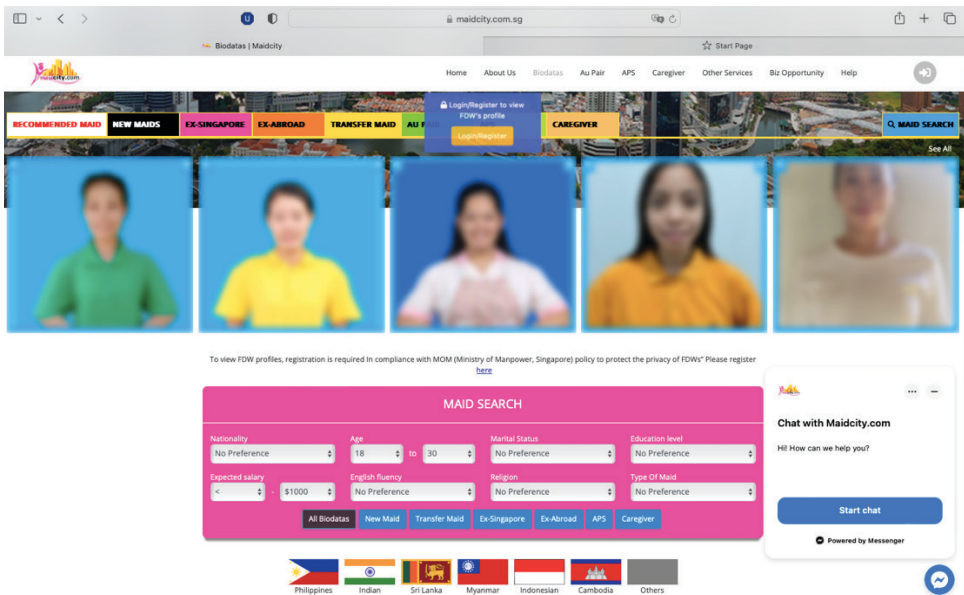
With this invitation, I weave together the perspectives of feminist scholar activists in both adult education and care work studies who are imagining an otherwise world, or alternatives to the existing oppressive status quo of gendered hierarchies of social norms and practices. At a glance, there are numerous commonalities and overlaps between their core aspirations of co-operating to dismantle patriarchal demands of feminized domesticated work, such as care activity. Most importantly for my article’s purposes, I see feminist social researchers who advocate for diverse and dynamic approaches to care relations (Raghuram, 2012; Tungohan,

2023) as adult educators who strive for reimaginings of care ethics and practice (Shan, 2015). In particular, where migrant worker activists are concerned, there is a long feminist tradition of photovoice—photos/images combined with captions—as a mode of storytelling for political resistance (Brigham et al., 2018; Guo & Liu, 2021, p. 148; Mintarsih, 2019; Platt et al., 2016; Tungohan, 2023). In Singapore, where one in five households hires a live-in “maid,” mostly to “liberate” female citizens from household chores and family care responsibilities (Peng, 2018), there is a crucial need to reconfigure the contours of educating and learning about social sustenance processes. From May 2021 to July 2022, I interviewed almost 30 MCWs in Singapore and Taiwan. This doctoral fieldwork also included some digital ethnography in the Facebook group mentioned above. I combine a few selected photos and images from the group’s members with an interview vignette from Sha that showcases creative imaginations of alternative care ethics and practice.

Madam and Maid: “No Matter What, We Must *Tahan* (Endure) Our Employer”

Figure 1

Maidcity website (<https://maidcity.com.sg/biodatas>)



The majority of Singaporean citizens subscribe to a cultural belief in Confucian values of filial piety, which manifests in a dominant preference for live-in (stay-at-home) care for elderly persons (Basu, 2016; Ng, 2022; Peng, 2018). Some of my research participants, however, recognize the ageist consequences of a migrant-in-the-family solution. As widely circulated screenshots of popular “maid” agency websites (see Figure 1) show, at the national level, having “foreign maids” in the household has become an entrenched entitlement of middle and upper-middle classes in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong (Ong, 2011, p. 39). Singapore and Taiwan, as exemplary cases of “Asian Tiger”

industrial success stories and what is now widely known as the developmental state, have achieved record post-war economic growth but not without significant human costs, especially to populations who are deemed to be from “less developed” countries belonging to “other Asias” (Chakrabarty, 2005). So entrenched is this normative sense of entitlement to “modern-day slavery” in the comfort of one’s home, as an anonymized MCW from the MDW in Singapore Facebook group told me during an interview, that even the more so-called progressive citizens who are domestic employers often do not recognize when their behaviour looks patronizing. As this interlocutor summed up the power relationship between a “maid” and her “madam,” at the end of the day, migrants of financial need have no choice on whether to tough it out: “We must *tahan* [endure] our employer for the good record (or risk the unthinkable scenario of unemployment or deportation).” To make matters worse, the Singapore government, by no means alone in taking a masculine hands-off stance of finding it impractical to regulate domestic work, continues to maintain that every household’s needs are specific and unique, hence a matter for negotiation between employer and employee in each case (AWARE & HOME, 2020).

Figure 2

Cover image of Facebook support group MDW in Singapore



Unlike the romanticized market view of pragmatic policy makers, the MCWs in the MDW in Singapore Facebook support group (see Figure 2) understand first-hand the hypocrisy of “all in the family” logic. Far from being a safe sanctuary, the home is a hotspot of abuse and exploitation that the women go to great lengths to protect one another from. In a context

of normalized micromanagement, Singapore's mainstream society does not view foreign "maids" as full human beings who are inherently worthy of dignity and respect (Kantachote, 2023; Ng, 2022). The offhand casualness with which many employers use the derogatory term "maid" is telling of MCWs' exclusion from the common (national) body politic—an overbearing ethos of "an employer can do no wrong."

From a feminist adult education perspective, my research participants hope that their political efforts, no matter how clandestine or covert, will disrupt the status quo by triggering some sort of ideological transgression, pushing past the boundaries of a self-congratulatory attitude to East Asia's post-war "miracle" trajectory of economic development (Truong, 1999, p. 158). In that sense, the state of adult education in terms of people's aspirations to achieve higher standards of living leaves many ethical conundrums to be unpacked. We can start by asking: To what degree is it acceptable for the ordinary middle-class household to require the 24/7 in-house services of a foreign "maid" to socially reproduce its own members? Despite having neither the material means nor the influence to enact structural change, ideologically, MCWs raise some of the most difficult but necessary prompts for collective reflection in their host society.

Among other issues in this pedagogical space, the women pose questions about how care activity should be valued and understood beyond narrow economic benchmarks, as well as raising the question of whether living the "good life" should come at the expense of others' life opportunities. The regional and local context of feminist adult education, such as broad concepts of women's rights (often preferred over "feminist" terms due to the latter's perceived imperial connotations) and female "liberation," is necessarily imbricated with the inconvenient truth of society's overreliance on foreign "maids" (AWARE & HOME, 2020; Yeoh & Annadurai, 2008). Feminist researchers cannot ignore the asymmetrical playing field on which the women's pedagogical contributions take shape, most notably exploitative cycles of debt bondage and emotional blackmail by predatory recruitment agencies (labour brokers) that use migrant workers' painful circumstances of extreme poverty against them (Chang, 2018; Chee, 2020). The role of creative imagination in relation to ethics and practices of just care then becomes all the more salient in scenarios where mounting resistance against oppressive structures often does not seem rebellious at face value and may in fact look submissive—for example, the act of "voluntarily" giving up rest days embodies both agency and victimhood (Schumann & Paul, 2020). MCWs assert that their madams shoulder more responsibility over the politically necessary work of consciousness raising against a deficit mentality of foreign "maids." Indeed, the majority of ordinary citizens and public opinion endorse celebratory economic views of the "Asian miracle" that does not get to the root of gendered attitudes imposed on women of all classes (Truong, 1999). Still, compared to state power structures and macro-policy variations, what remains understudied are the interpersonal scales of affective and emotional dynamics that shape people's everyday choices. Some interview anecdotes suggest, for example, that MCWs do feel that their host societies have a misplaced sense of liberal market feminism and righteousness that dismisses global power asymmetries in economic development and life opportunities (Ng, 2022). These migrant women are a diverse and dynamic group of individuals with different formative educational, social, and family backgrounds. Not all have been through the sort of intellectual training that aligns with conventional academic vocabularies; Filipino MCWs, for instance, tend to be more articulate, confrontational, and verbally expressive in English (Palatino, 2016;

Paul, 2017). What do these dilemmas and tensions in envisioning equitable, just care mean for adult education practice?

Feminist Imaginaries of Just Care: Everyone Is Equal in Reciprocal Criticism

The rich “herstories” of feminist intellectual thought in adult education have long recognized that sexual and gender oppression have deep colonial foundations and are imperial ideological legacies that exacerbate contemporary social inequities (Ong, 2011; Shan, 2015; Tungohan, 2023). Modern capitalist forms of the social and economic devaluation of care activity worsen gendered divisions of labour and its associated class inequalities in new ways while relying on familiar age-old social imaginaries and the ingrained customs of hierarchy in the community that constitute the raw ingredients (background conditions of possibility) for ongoing capitalist extractions of human capacities to care and socially reproduce (Chin, 1998; Federici, 2016). The dominant social narrative in Singapore and Taiwan, which are post-war industrial role models in the East Asia region, is a social Darwinian view of the “necessary evil” of hiring foreign “maids.” Although admittedly falling short of an ideal (Western-influenced) human rights principles framework, the migrant (“maid”)-in-the-family model is an economic no-brainer for the majority of middle-class households (Ochiai, 2011; Peng, 2018). But in contrast to their privileged, entitled “madams” (*lao ban niang*, or female boss), the MCWs who participated in my research have complex, layered emotions about outsourced family care that caution against the assumed unity of women’s experiences in a broader, romanticized global sisterhood narrative (Cattapan et al., 2024; Shih, 2014). In a dramatically inequitable status quo of care labour migration, where the daily maintenance of certain families relies on the coerced, low-cost labour of (mostly Global South) migrant workers, ethical reflections about care policy and practice come to the forefront.

As a great number of my MCW research participants from the Facebook group surmised, their most needed but also unlikely allies are actually (mostly female) domestic employers who are themselves trapped by the patriarchal demands of marital domesticity. Often blindsided by class privilege, the material attractions of intense consumption lifestyles typically entice a great many Singaporean and Taiwanese female working professionals to view foreign “maids” not as feminist comrades reconfiguring the contours of domestic and care work, but rather as “less civilized” beings from the Global South who require the help of economically privileged host society members. My conversations with MCWs, in line with other migration ethnographic studies in East Asia (Amrith, 2023; Chung, 2021; Liang, 2021), reveal that married couples often see hiring a “maid” as their solution to otherwise irresolvable conflicts about how to split the share of social reproduction duties at home. This is a dominant, mainstream sense of entitlement among adult citizens who rarely question the dark side of their economic class privilege and the implications (or lack thereof) for a gendered division of labour enabled by relying on foreign “maids.” Humorously, some wives joke that their “maids” have literally been lifesavers in terms of saving their marriage from divorce (due to falling out over whose turn it is to do the chores). MCWs assert a protagonist positionality as feminist political activists, civil educators, and rightful participants in the host society’s national moral community, where they express aspirations and dreams of care that go beyond their identities as workers.

Figure 3

Photos: Screenshots of posts in the Facebook support group MDW in Singapore



The Figure 3 images, shared in the MDW in Singapore Facebook group, are examples of socially engaged literary events and publications for migrant workers, where emotional support and care for one another are valued over instrumental, demand-and-supply debates of care work (for example, in Mintarsih, 2019). To draw on Butterwick and Lawrence's (2023) insights, "imagination is at the core of feminist theory; it is radical, rigorous, disruptive, and subversive" (p. 56). A serious consideration of imagination's disruptive potential to alter the status quo of care labour migration policy and practice is relatively distant to care work studies,

which is heavily informed by economic frameworks of global political economy (for example, in Raghuram, 2012; Williams, 2018). The research questions posed at the outset underscore the importance of contextualizing MCWs' user-generated content in this Facebook support group from a probing perspective of complicating, diversifying, and unpacking care as a (Eurocentrically laden) concept (e.g., Raghuram, 2012). Generally, care work is approached from functional, economic, or instrumental perspectives of cost minimization and resource allocation at the expense of ethical or moral discussions over its valuation. A key example is the framing of eldercare training regimes (for example, in Ortiga et al., 2020), which tend to follow productivity-driven constructs of "skills" measurements and standards of valuation. The preference for so-called hard (rational/technical) skills over soft (affective/emotional) skills is a trend worth unpacking. The so-called administrative, technical aspects of caregiving skills are valorized in metrics of medical professionalism over the emotional dexterity, patience, and resilience required to cope with dementia patients (HOME, 2023; Liang, 2021). Numerous interview anecdotes reveal, time and again, that MCWs offer transformative alternatives to care activity that recalibrate the meanings of productive work and labour; challenging ageist relations in care organization is a key case in point (Amrith, 2023; Federici, 2016; Ng, 2022).

My research participants felt ambivalent about the contradictory care goals that seem to define their life circumstances. They have critical views of Singapore's highly marketized approach to eldercare, which they perceive as uncaring and unfilial at times (Amrith, 2023). Ideally, they would have been by their own elderly parents' side to care for them, yet they had to leave their hometowns to obtain a sufficient wage to support their loved ones. As I heard from Sha below, many migrant women's economic circumstances of poverty in a Global South or less-developed location positioning, leave them little choice but to migrate overseas to ensure their loved ones' basic needs, especially children's higher education prospects (Paul, 2017), are met. Approaching the topic of care ethics and practice from migrants' circumstances and life foundations, in that sense, gives a different conceptual starting point for imaginations and framings of care work that directly inform people's attitudes, learning, and perspectives of its enactments. Crucially, as a collective, MCWs strive to overcome their physically isolating circumstances by disseminating, sharing, and organizing community bonding or solidarity events among their "sisters" (as MCWs often refer to one another) that showcase an autonomist claim on the right to receive, not just provide, care resources. In making this observation from my research interviews (Ng, 2022), I join a small but significant group of care anthropologists, ethnographers, and cultural sociologists who advocate for complicating and reading between the lines of dominant economic productivity framings of care work that constrain the common layperson's understanding of migrant worker personas. From my particular scholar activist researcher's standpoint, the Figure 3 images showcase a few instances of creative artistic spaces where MCWs partake in storytelling methods such as photovoice, oral narratives, independent filmmaking, and literary experiments in an ongoing endeavour to express their voice (Mintarsih, 2019; Tungohan, 2023). The connecting theme is an underlying desire to be recognized as full, complicated human beings with vibrant aspirations and dreams. The following is one Facebook interaction on July 20, 2021:

Forum post: I am okay with being called a helper, a maid, an auntie, a nanny, you can call me anything you want as long as it fits my job. But to ask a helper or a maid "What or who is your owner?" That's always puzzled me: owner? Nobody owns me.

Comment: Same sentiments! I still encounter some people using the term "owner and master" instead of boss or employer.

In my observation, at least a few MCWs in the Facebook group take an affective approach to subjective feelings in the hope of catalyzing ethical disruptions to the normative derogatory language of "maids" in the local parlance. At a deeper spiritual level, the women beg for stronger commitments to alleviating power asymmetries that go beyond surface validations of affirmative action—for example, sincere transformations in the banal, everyday forms of speech acts that are used to address MCWs in our midst. As Sha confided, "more understanding from our employers" about their pains of family separation and financial precarity are appreciated (and needed) for more equitable, just outcomes of care to emerge. To take the inspirational lead of Taiwanese author Shu-mei Shih's (2002) comparative relational perspective, an ethics of transnational encounter is at heart an emotionally delicate instance of evening out historical inequities in the power to use name-calling upon others, where some speakers have more responsibility than others to, for instance, actively relinquish positions and privileges of power. Specifically, one thinks of global ideas of "modernity" undergirded by a certain sense of "cultural difference" between a (superior) "West" and an (inferior) "East"—themselves ideologically laden social, not actual geographical, hierarchical constructs of human difference (see Chakrabarty, 2005). The international post-war climate of "catch-up development" pervading African and Asian fledgling nations at that time, as numerous social scientists have observed, can hardly be understated for its affective and material roles in crystallizing middle-class consumption identity. As Chin (1998) illustrated in the context of the Malaysian developmental state, it is not uncommon to hear people refer to "maids" with a chattel mentality reminiscent of a feudal "master/slave" relationship that MCWs push back against. It is important to underscore that the vectors of modernity, a general social problematic of everyday life, are ambivalent and fraught with contradictory practices of family care. For example, one of my participants pointedly stated that "being apart is not easy but we have no choice for the future of our family, if we want to survive, especially for education and all."

Several MCWs are remote madams to internal rural-to-urban migrant housekeepers in their home countries (Paul, 2017). Still, compared to the majority of Singaporeans and Taiwanese, researchers have found that MCWs, as mobile carers on the frontlines of caregiving, embody a unique sensibility of diverse and dynamic forms of care ethics and practice that lend a critical nuance to simplistic endorsements of industrial meritocracy: "Such discourses code temporal movement in terms of progress and development, always implying that what came after is superior to or an improvement over what came before" (Shih, 2002, p. 98). The women who I and other care work researchers encounter do not necessarily disagree with ideas of modern hygiene, technological convenience, and elevated material standards of living. Yet they walk a complex intellectual tightrope with the imposed assumptions of "developed" and "undeveloped" categories, especially between an employer's cosmopolitan urban background and a "maid's" rural village upbringing, that colour their social treatment. That is, migrant women recognize the false binaries in negative, stereotypical labels but must choose if, and when, they can afford to push back against employers (Federici, 2016; Kantachote, 2023; Ng, 2022; Schumann & Paul, 2020). One of my research participants (Sha), an active member of the Facebook group, was sympathetic toward the lifestyle transitions between city and village environments. Still, in front of employers, she felt that one "must

show that you are not scared . . . if you look poor, your employer will think that you don't know anything, like blind and stupid." As she lamented during our interview, lifestyle habits that display commercial norms are a key interactive domain where subjective expressions of difference become political categories.

Even though you [employers] see me as just a maid, what you eat, I also can eat. It's just we are [have] different [amounts of] money but in my place I can eat rice three times a day! I can eat what I want! I have everything, what you have, I have too. You have a fridge, a washing machine, a TV, aircon, me too! I have a lot! So why don't you treat me equally? (personal communication, June 2, 2011)

As Sha laments, the everyday civilities and habits imbued in modernity's chase for the "good life" are fraught with ambivalent contradictions and mixed feelings. The majority of MCWs in this instance are not against, or disagreeing with, material improvements to standards of living, but when it comes to care ethics and practice they have a transparently rawer view of the ethical dilemmas that stretch beyond economic concerns—for instance, questions about whether a "good life" can or should rely on migrant worker exploitation. Liglav A-Wu, an indigenous Taiwanese woman of the Austronesian Paiwan tribe, articulates a notion of "reciprocal criticism" following a sort of culturally sensitive "women's sympathy" that is attentive to indigenous-settler dynamics in the particular case of (Han) Chinese ethnic majority Taiwan (Shih, 2014, p. 185). In her view, government policies that commodify the gendered experiences of women, in particular, of all classes and races, as well as anti-indigenous tendencies, are interconnected in the broader umbrella of capitalist exploitation. Turning this realization into a shared basis of action, regardless of the gaps in socio-economic privilege among differentially positioned actors, "no party is exempt from criticism by the others as well as self-criticism" (p. 186). The potential for mutual learning and forging co-operative aspirations between domestic employers (madams) and MCWs ("maids"), who are long used to antagonizing each other rather than jointly confronting the state, has plenty to draw from the critical potential of storytelling approaches.

Ageism in Sha's Eyes: Learning From a Diverse and Dynamic Migrant World of Care

In this section, I contemplate how one impassioned MCW and research participant, Sha from the Philippines, attempts to reconfigure the meaning of eldercare in her host society of Singapore. From an adult education perspective, she reframes the assigned lowly social status given to foreign "maids" by presenting as a full, rights-bearing human being and political participant in the community. Sha's conversation with me was one of the over 20 interviews I had with MCWs as part of my doctoral project research (Ng, 2022), but her perspectives and views provide important pushback against mainstream society's (negative) stereotypical images of foreign workers (Ortiga et al., 2020; Yeoh and Annadurai, 2008). Contrary to how the majority of Singaporean citizens tend to view migrant workers in 3Ds (dirty, dangerous, and difficult or demeaning) occupations (for example, in Palatino, 2016), Sha feels that ageism against elderly persons in the family is widespread yet goes mostly ignored, if not downright dismissed, in highly advanced industrial societies—a sign of ethical failure. Care itself is written out of the picture as principles of economic pragmatism and cost efficiency come to the fore when justifying the necessity of a migrant ("maid")-in-the-family model

for social welfare (Peng, 2018). At the interpersonal level of everyday conversation, ordinary citizens tend to reduce the humanity of MCWs by referring to the women as "only here to work" and nothing else (for example, in Amrith, 2023; Liang, 2021; Paul, 2017).

The Singapore state is hardly alone in its instrumental emphasis on the functional role of MCWs as social reproducers of the national population and, indeed, an extra pair of hands around the house that will assist female working professionals, in particular, with work-life balance (Ochiai, 2011; Teo, 2018). According to this state-endorsed narrative of the ideal Singaporean nuclear family, a married couple with both young children and elderly persons to take care of would do best to hire an MCW who can provide 24/7 service. At a cultural level, Singapore society predominantly upholds values of filial piety that prioritize at-home (live-in) care for elderly persons. Opting for nursing homes, for instance, is frowned on (Basu, 2016). Be that as it may, Sha's views reveal a darker side of an apparently harmonious picture of eldercare propped up by MCWs who are subject to predatory recruitment agencies (labour brokers) and poorly managed training systems that put both themselves and elderly patients at risk. Sha questions the normalized urban lifestyles of working adults who seem rather dismissive of an elderly person's emotional and physical care needs:

Her children don't bother. Always too busy, cannot come, this and that.
Ah ma [grandmother or elderly patient] pain until cannot sleep at night!
 They only kept saying just give her Panadol Extra, every morning and night give her Panadol. Normal painkiller, you know. You see, Lynn, they are very rich. Big boss in office and bank, that type. But their mother, don't want to bring to see a doctor. She's suffering so much from the pain (deep sigh). (personal communication, June 2, 2011)

Sha is a 35-year-old single mother of two teenage daughters who migrated overseas because she "married early, had a child, and needed money for their education" (personal communication, June 2, 2021). When we first met through a WhatsApp video call during my doctoral fieldwork in June 2021, I learned that her stellar list of skills certificates came from resisting, not abiding by, her employer's instructions to do the bare minimum. To elaborate, according to Sha, her elderly patient's adult children had turned a deaf ear to her concerns about the old lady's worsening health complications; "they kept telling me to just give her Panadol [painkiller] and don't want to bring her to see the doctor or arrange appointments. . . always not free, very busy." When Sha suggested enrolling in dementia courses, even at her own expense, she received dismissive and lukewarm reactions because "they felt that the extra effort was unnecessary, like [ah ma's condition is] not a big deal." Sha's *ah ma*, as MCWs often address their elderly patients, was dealing with severe leg pains and complications from the early onset of dementia at that time. Sha was in tears as she vented about (what she perceived as) elder abuse and neglect on the part of *ah ma*'s four adult children (her employers) and the general inadequacy of social supports for eldercare training. Her hard-won accolades are not the result of supportive employers but a combination of personal compassion for *ah ma* and a resilient work ethic. Sha's employers had forbidden her ("they don't allow") from leaving the house on weekdays to go for paid courses, even when she suggested doing so at her own expense to cope with *ah ma*'s worsening symptoms. But precisely because "they don't care what I do with *ah ma* at home," she was able to attend free online webinars ("I just listen in while doing my work") and spend most Sundays, her only rest day of the week, at church-based courses. Still, her elaborate efforts to document *ah ma*'s symptoms were met

with indifference and rudeness: “They don’t appreciate what I did. To them, it’s just ‘I pay you a salary, do your job and that’s it.’ I am like a reporter, you know. Shouldn’t you be happy when I tell you how your mother is doing? But no!” (personal communication, June 2, 2021).

Sha’s enormous sacrifices of what little personal time she has to achieve these certification feats showcase a tenacious dedication to caregiving enrichment and learning in the community. During our video call, I noticed a cabinet that contained well over ten certificates from a variety of caregiver training programs, including a few from Singapore’s most prestigious hospitals: Khoo Teck Puat Geriatric Ward, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, and Singapore General Hospital. Sha’s contract was due to expire in two weeks when the events described here were happening. Feeling unappreciated, she had been planning to switch to another employing household that one of her acquaintances was familiar with, as they did not require in-house eldercare and offered a higher salary. But when I caught up with Sha on Facebook several weeks later, I learned that she had not made this long-awaited transition because “I just can’t bear to leave her like this . . . they [adult children] will probably put her in a nursing home” (personal communication, June 2, 2021). Sha’s skills-training experience had included several stints in nursing homes, where she shadowed institutional care workers. It was clear that she did not like what she saw and teared up at the thought of *ah ma* possibly being left in this “sad situation” (see Basu, 2016 for an ethnography of nursing homes). Despite her peers’ strong disapproval, Sha decided to renew her contract because the thought of *ah ma* in this bleak scenario was too uncomfortable to bear. As she said:

If she stays there? *Ah ma* cannot watch her favourite TV show. Cannot control the lights. She will get nightmares. If she’s thirsty, I cannot immediately give her water. One nurse take care of five old people, sometimes more. How can it be good? (personal communication, June 2, 2021)

Sha’s story is but one among numerous other examples of learning from diverse and dynamic MCWs what care can mean to them. The intention of raising this vignette is not to point fingers at anyone but rather to underscore that MCWs are fully capable of showcasing an intellectual appetite for subjective constructions of care that has much to offer the host society. Our role as feminist imaginative researchers of care work, and as socially engaged scholar activists more broadly, is to open up to those fleeting moments in care relations and practice that disrupt, however momentarily, the confined commercial lifestyles of modern care organization. Although the women lack the material means and social influence to enact policy change, their opinions and views of care ethics and practice (for example, in Raghuram, 2012) ought to be taken seriously as substantial contributions to care organization in pandemic circumstances. In that vein, I invite colleagues in care work studies to continue bringing to light the emerging forms of digital activism and online supports that MCWs and other groups of migrant workers partake in with one another. Such virtual communities are often an expression of personal autonomy and dignity by marginalized migrants themselves, and constitute a sort of “mobile commons” that relies on mutual aid principles where formal institutions fall short (Ng, 2023).

Parting Thoughts: Toward a Power-Sensitive Approach to Imaginations of Just Care

What lessons can we draw from the above as socially engaged researchers, scholars, educators, policy makers, and community activists? In closing, let us revisit the central questions posed

at this article's outset by drawing out some reflections for adult education on care ethics and practice from the few vignettes above. Sha's story and experiences of resisting ageism as a migrant care worker are but one among numerous regional and global examples of feminist imaginaries of equitable, just care ethics and practice struggling to come to fruition. Where aspirations for the feminist imagination—in its diverse and dynamic varieties—are concerned, I wish to point to edited volumes such as *Feministing in Political Science* (Cattapan et al., 2024) in the disciplinary context in which my socially engaged research occurs. Similar to feminist colleagues who underscore the vital role of imagination (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023), its contributors share personal and professional stories of gendered, racialized discrimination in and outside academic settings that give empirical flesh to broader feminist theoretical contours. For feminist adult educators and care work researchers, the Facebook photos and images in this article go a long way toward the arduous educational imperative of complicating and unpacking care itself in a highly successful wealthy nation. Can and should a comfortable "good life" rely on the global exploitation of migrant workers forced to choose between poverty and a liveable wage? Rather than an economic, functional, and instrumental perspective of valuing care's resource organization, my research participants allude to collective, mutual, and non-discriminatory care ethics and practice in the community. Plenty of the women hope for reciprocal approaches to reconfiguring care ethics on the part of ordinary citizens in Singapore, who could shoulder more social responsibility in being attuned to their positions of power and privilege.

By no means is the MDW in Singapore Facebook group and its members the only situation of digital activism that social researchers can engage with. But at least in the context of my fieldwork experiences, building on previously elaborated frameworks of migrant autonomies in online settings (Ng, 2023), it is clear that MCWs believe strongly in the emotional power of storytelling as a means of communication and connection. The women contribute a gamut of creative content, such as humorous posts and short videos, that mimics errant employers, as well as photos with accompanying captions that express feelings of attachment (see Figure 4). As subjective as user-generated digital content is, in all cases my research participants reframe dominant narratives of foreign "maids" as "lesser beings" who are fortunate enough to be hosted by a nation more "advanced" than the one they hail from (for example, in Ng, 2022; Tungohan, 2023). That said, this critical consciousness of global inequalities in the division of care work is nonetheless irrelevant to the majority of privileged citizen employers whose interests are protected by state officials and recruitment agencies alike. For the MCWs I encountered, imaginations of just care is often the only source of critical hope and the only means of coping with an asymmetrical (live-in) working relationship long entrenched in national family planning and immigration policies. For that reason, the third question above—How can feminist social researchers draw on opportunities for mutual learning and co-operative aspiration for collective social transformation?—is perhaps of most interest to MCWs and researchers who are keen on leveraging care ethics and practice as a conduit for forging co-operative partnerships of care. Crucially, as necessary as continuing research on digital spaces of activism in pandemic circumstances is, more often than not migrant protagonists require physical spaces to enhance solidarity building. However, not all MCWs are engaged with grassroots organizations in ways that enable regular networking and the continuous accumulation of social capital in migrant communities. For instance, in cases such as Sha's, where eldercare is the priority, MCWs often do not get to take regular days off as their patient requires 24/7 company. In this sense, being attentive and sensitive to the power

dynamics of research encounters is necessary to contextualize the style of resistance. But it is also in these apparently bleakest of scenarios that speculating about the actual, tangible potential of imaginations is most imperative.

Figure 4

Photograph posted by Sha in the Facebook support group MDW in Singapore



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