

A “Super-Aged Society”: Defusing Singapore’s Demographic Time Bomb

By 2050, one in four people in Asia and the Pacific will be over 60 years old.¹ This presents a “demographic time bomb”, disproportionately affecting developed nations with better healthcare systems.² Singapore is a country confronted with an ageing population. In his National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted how nearly one in four Singaporeans will be a senior by 2030.³ Singapore’s population is not just ageing, but doing so rapidly, making it a “super-aged” society.⁴ Consequently, this raises various concerns in the social, economic and health domains, presenting pressing needs to be addressed. This case study examines Singapore’s demographic time bomb, beginning with its history, causes and possible repercussions. Thereafter, mitigation strategies that have been implemented will be evaluated. Lastly, the final section analyses possible solutions, drawing on case studies from other countries and Singapore.

Background

Despite being a young nation, Singapore has a long history of family planning policies. Before gaining independence, the Family Planning Association (SFPA) managed family planning services from 1949 to 1966, amidst postwar shortages of food and housing.⁵ In 1966, the government-run Singapore Family Planning and Population Board (SFPPB) took over SFPA’s role of advocating for family planning.⁶ The National Family Planning Campaign and “Stop at Two” campaign were introduced in 1972, with financial penalties and housing policies that discriminated against couples with more than two children, as well as the provision of incentives for sterilisation.⁷ These policies were justified as regulating the population size, allowing the government to better address citizens’ needs.⁸

However, in the 1980s, Singapore’s demographic problem was no longer high, but low fertility rates, driven by the country’s rapid economic development, and Singaporeans’ prioritisation of career over family.⁹ This led

¹ Asian Development Bank, “Adapting to Aging Asia and the Pacific,” *Asian Development Bank*, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/topics/social-development/aging-asia>.

² Yeva Nersisyan, Xinhua Liu and L. Randall Wray, “The Unbearable Weight of Aging: How to Deal with the ‘Demographic Time Bomb’,” *Levy Economics Institute*, April 2023, https://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_1018.pdf.

³ Ang Hwee Min, “HDB Flats, Estates to be More Senior-Friendly to Prepare for Singapore’s ‘Super-Aged Society’: PM Lee,” *Channel NewsAsia*, August 20, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/national-day-rally-2023-hdb-flats-elderly-ease-upgrades-senior-citizens-3711426>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ National Library Board Singapore, “Family Planning Association is Established,” *National Library Board Singapore*, 2015, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=0f89c10a-0bdb-45c1-8652-d6efae6fb2c0>.

⁶ Irene Lim, “Singapore’s First Family Planning Campaign,” *National Library Board Singapore*, July 2023, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=e6a63c59-e56f-40df-83cc-5f695ebd063a>.

⁷ National Library Board Singapore, “Two-Child Policy,” *National Library Board Singapore*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=0613c852-aed1-4b29-81fb-faf7de447092>.

⁸ National Library Board Singapore, “National Family Planning Campaign is Launched,” *National Library Board Singapore*, 2014, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=eea3d96d-93aa-455a-ac8a-1564d1b6d215>.

⁹ Youyenn Teo, “Shaping the Singapore Family, Producing the State and Society,” *Economy and Society* 39, no. 3 (2010): 339, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2010.486215>.

This case was written by Hannah Pang Jing Xuan under the guidance of Dr Bititiandra Chand Somaiah, Yale-NUS College, National University of Singapore and has been funded by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. The case does not reflect the views of the sponsoring organisation nor is it intended to suggest correct or incorrect handling of the situation depicted. The case is not intended to serve as a primary source of data and is meant solely for class discussion.

to a shift in population policies, with slogans like “Life Would Be Lonely without a Family”.¹⁰ In 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong introduced additional policies that sought to increase the fertility rate,¹¹ including procreation incentives and tax rebates, to help Singaporeans “think of making babies as something... happy”.¹² The government also introduced the Grandparent Caregiver Tax Relief and jumbo flats catering to the three-generation family,¹³ promoting the family as the societal unit. Such narratives valorise marriage and childbearing as an ideal life trajectory.¹⁴

Even today, similar measures include the Proximity Housing Grant,¹⁵ paid maternity leave and prioritisation of nuclear families for public housing. However, despite the government’s historically paternalistic approach towards family planning, Singapore continues to grapple with an ageing population, with a constrictive population pyramid as of 2021 (Figure 1). Singapore’s government has raised concerns about elderly “frailty and ageing-related diseases” and Singaporeans being unable to “meet their basic needs... when they stop working”.¹⁶

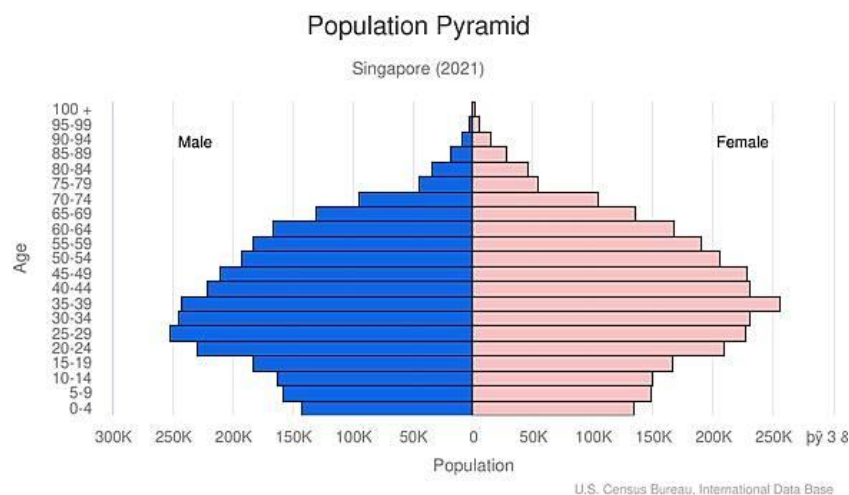


Figure 1: Population Pyramid of Singapore in 2021.¹⁷

Causes

The issue of population ageing has been attributed to increasing wealth in developed countries, leading to greater longevity and decreasing fertility rates.¹⁸ Consequently, a disproportionately smaller younger

¹⁰ Paulin Straughan, “Marriage and Parenthood in Singapore,” in *50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore*, ed. David Chan (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 65.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Al Jazeera, “Singaporeans Told to Make Babies,” *Al Jazeera*, January 26, 2004, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2004/1/26/singaporeans-told-to-make-babies>.

¹³ Straughan, “Marriage and Parenthood in Singapore,” 66.

¹⁴ Teo, “Shaping the Singapore Family,” 340-346.

¹⁵ Housing Development Board, “Proximity Housing Grant (Families),” *Housing Development Board*, accessed November 19, 2023, [https://www.hdb.gov.sg/residential/buying-a-flat/understanding-your-eligibility-and-housing-loan-options/flat-and-grant-eligibility/couples-and-families/proximity-housing-grant-families#:~:text=If%20you%20are%20buying%20a,parents%2F%20child%20\(within%204km\)](https://www.hdb.gov.sg/residential/buying-a-flat/understanding-your-eligibility-and-housing-loan-options/flat-and-grant-eligibility/couples-and-families/proximity-housing-grant-families#:~:text=If%20you%20are%20buying%20a,parents%2F%20child%20(within%204km)).

¹⁶ Forward SG, “Building our Shared Future,” *Forward SG*, accessed November 18, 2023, 106, https://www.forwardsingapore.gov.sg/-/media/forwardsg/pagecontent/fsg-reports/full-reports/mci-fsg-final-report_fa_rgb_web_20-oct-2023.pdf.

¹⁷ “Singapore,” *The World Factbook (2021 Archive)*, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/about/archives/2021/countries/singapore/images/7506a81e-9e60-5f6d-90f0-ee55cfec103>.

¹⁸ Nersisyan, Liu and Wray, “The Unbearable Weight of Aging,” 2.

generation bears the brunt of supporting the expanding ageing population, both financially and socially. Despite pro-family policies that portray parenthood and career advancement as mutually inclusive, the younger generation is prioritising self-actualisation and self-development.¹⁹ This section examines factors driving increasing life expectancy and decreasing fertility in Singapore.

Increasing life expectancy

Like other industrialised nations, Singapore’s life expectancy increased over the years, from 61.1 in 1957 to 83 in 2022.²⁰ This can be attributed to improvements in hygiene and standard of living, including the recently constructed Deep Tunnel Sewerage System.²¹ Research also highlights a correlation between better nutrition and healthy ageing.²² The Ministry of Health (MOH) conducts the National Population Health Survey (NPHS) annually, in conjunction with the Health Promotion Board’s (HPB) National Nutrition Survey (NNS), proactively and precisely monitoring Singapore residents’ diets according to different nutrients like sodium and sugar.²³ While these studies highlight existing areas for improvement, Singaporeans have gradually adopted healthier eating habits over time,²⁴ possibly driven by various initiatives introduced by HPB.²⁵ Singapore also possesses a technologically advanced healthcare system that has enabled early detection - and thus intervention - of conditions like tuberculosis and cancer,²⁶ lowering death rates.

Decreasing fertility rates

Simultaneously, Singapore’s fertility rate has experienced an overall decrease since 1960,²⁷ reaching a historic low of 1.04 in 2022.²⁸ This mirrors global trends of declining birth rates; rapid industrialisation and capitalism have increased living costs,²⁹ making it more difficult to have children, thus disincentivising increased fertility rates.

¹⁹ Straughan, “Marriage and Parenthood in Singapore,” 67-68.

²⁰ “Life Expectancy by Sex,” Department of Statistics Singapore, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/table/TS/M810501>.

²¹ Abhijit Visaria and Rahul Malhotra, “Live Long and Prosper? A Super-Aged Singapore Society Does Not Have to Be a Sad One,” *Duke-NUS Medical School*, August 26, 2023, <https://www.duke-nus.edu.sg/allnews/super-aged-singapore-society>.

²² Yan-Feng Zhou, Xing-Yue Song, An Pan and Woon-Puay Koh, “Nutrition and Healthy Ageing in Asia: A Systematic Review,” *Nutrients* 15, no. 14 (2023): 3153, <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu15143153>.

²³ Ministry of Health, “National Health Surveys Highlight Need to Focus on Healthy Diets and Lifestyles,” *Ministry of Health*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/national-health-surveys-highlight-need-to-focus-on-healthy-diets-and-lifestyles>.

²⁴ Health Promotion Board, “National Nutrition Survey 2018 Shows Gradual Improvements in Singaporean’s Dietary Habits,” *Health Promotion Board*, accessed November 19, 2023, <https://www.hpb.gov.sg/newsroom/article/national-nutrition-survey-2018-shows-gradual-improvements-in-singaporeans-dietary-habits>.

²⁵ Health Promotion Board, “Food and Beverage,” *Health Promotion Board*, accessed November 19, 2023, <https://hpb.gov.sg/healthy-living/food-beverage>.

²⁶ Teresa Cheong, “Why are Singaporeans Living Longer?” *HealthXchange*, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://www.healthxchange.sg/seniors/healthy-ageing/why-singaporeans-living-longer#:~:text=Medical%20advances%20improve%20early%20disease,have%20enabled%20longer%20life%20expectancy>.

²⁷ “Birth and Fertility Rates,” Department of Statistics Singapore, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/table/TS/M810091>.

²⁸ National Population and Talent Division, Strategy Group, Prime Minister’s Office, Singapore Department of Statistics, Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration & Checkpoints Authority, Ministry of Manpower, “Population in Brief 2023,” 15.

²⁹ Teo, “Shaping the Singapore Family,” 341.

Cost of raising children

According to a YouGov poll, most respondents (52%) below 35 years old do not have children as they "can't afford to raise children in Singapore",³⁰ despite the various financial incentives provided by the government. With Singapore's rapid economic development, the cost of living has increased over the years. As of 2018, economists estimated that a median-income woman would spend S\$560,000 to raise her first child.³¹ Given inflation trends after the COVID-19 pandemic,³² this number is likely to have increased while salaries remain stagnant. This cost constitutes a significant proportion of Singapore's average starting salary of S\$4,200, a figure which has been disputed for being an overestimate.³³ Beyond necessities like food, clothing and toys, Singapore's highly competitive education system leads to increased expenditure on extracurricular classes. Singapore's tuition industry had a total revenue of S\$1.68 billion in 2019, with some families with several school-going children spending thousands every month.³⁴ While the government considers the threat of a shrinking workforce and decreased economic growth in the long term, the financial cost to the individual is felt more immediately,³⁵ deterring them from having children and lowering fertility rates.

Sandwich generation

In the aforementioned poll, 39% of respondents under 35 years old also feared that having children "would impact [their] career and current lifestyle".³⁶ This emphasis on their career stems from their role as the "sandwich generation". If they form families, this age group of Singaporeans face the challenge of supporting both their elderly parents and young children, not just financially,³⁷ but also in meeting their caregiving needs. With these demands, younger people are thus defying traditional norms. Many have chosen to have children at an older age, with the median age of mothers at first birth increasing from 27.5 in 1990 to 31.4 in 2022.³⁸ This gives them more time to develop their careers and attain financial stability before forming a family. However, as revealed by the survey, many are unwilling to relinquish this "lifestyle", choosing not to form families entirely to avoid becoming "sandwiched", thus decreasing fertility rates. However, this decision aggravates challenges posed by the ageing population, further increasing the burden on the "sandwich generation" and future generations who bear the repercussions of the demographic time bomb.

³⁰ Ang Hwee Min, "The 'Declining Value' of Having Children in Singapore - and How to Fit It," *Channel NewsAsia*, March 18, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/birth-rate-fertility-rate-children-kids-marriage-parenthood-3354451>.

³¹ Chia Ngee Choon and Chia Han Mae, "How to Nudge Couples to Have More Kids, *The Straits Times*, September 26, 2018, <https://fass.nus.edu.sg/ecs/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/11/NUDGE-st-pA18-26sep.pdf>.

³² Monetary Authority of Singapore, "Understanding Inflation & Monetary Policy," *Monetary Authority of Singapore*, accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.mas.gov.sg/monetary-policy/economics-edu-inflation/inflation/inflation-was-high-in-2022#:~:text=The%20combination%20of%20demand%20pull,factors%20led%20to%20high%20inflation.&text=In%20su m%2C%20following%20the%20COVID,the%20world%2C%20including%20in%20Singapore>.

³³ Vanessa Lim, "'Feel A Bit Left Out': Higher Salaries for Fresh Graduates out of Reach for Some," *Channel NewsAsia*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/graduate-salaries-class-2022-employment-jobs-3371151>.

³⁴ Claudia Tan, "Lessons from the Business of Tuition: Are We Paying Attention?" *The Business Times*, September 17, 2021, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/opinion-features/features/lessons-business-tuition-are-we-paying-attention>.

³⁵ Straughan, "Marriage and Parenthood in Singapore," 68.

³⁶ Ang, "The 'Declining Value' of Having Children in Singapore."

³⁷ Firdaus Hamzah, "Sandwich Generation: How can Those Caring for the Elderly and Children Take Care of Their Finances," *Channel NewsAsia*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/sandwich-generation-money-elderly-parents-children-singapore-population-2970826>.

³⁸ "Median Age of Mothers at First Birth for Resident Births," Department of Statistics Singapore, accessed November 26, 2023, <https://tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/table/TS/M810741>.

Existing Policies and Measures

Both mitigation and adaptation strategies are adopted to manage population ageing in Singapore. Adaptation strategies seek to improve the elderly's quality of life, including infrastructural improvements like pedestrian-friendly zones,³⁹ as well as the establishment of dementia-friendly communities,⁴⁰ adjusting to the ageing population. In contrast, mitigation strategies work pre-emptively, seeking to broaden the base of the population pyramid. This case focuses on mitigation strategies and their preventive role in defusing the "demographic time bomb", largely by increasing immigration and fertility rates.

Increasing Care Labour

Due to a shrinking Singaporean population, the government heavily depends on foreign labour to meet gaps in its workforce. This includes dirty, dangerous and demeaning (3D) jobs,⁴¹ ranging from construction to care work. With only 1 in 10 nurses being male in Singapore,⁴² female migrants - rather than the male citizenry - shoulder a significant proportion of the nation's caregiving load.⁴³ Working as migrant domestic workers (MDWs) and nurses, their work is perceived as an extension of their daily responsibilities as wives, mothers and daughters, reflecting the gendered nature of care.⁴⁴ This section explores the repercussions of this phenomenon of migration.

Employment of MDWs

With the aforementioned emphasis on one's career and caring for one's family, MDWs enable Singaporean employers to balance their careers and families. The Foreign Maid Scheme was first introduced by the Singapore government in 1978, facilitating the employment of MDWs from neighbouring countries through designated immigration arrangements.⁴⁵ MDWs from less developed countries are part of the global care chain, filling care gaps in households in Singapore who have the financial means to employ them.⁴⁶ As of December 2022, 268,500 MDWs were working in Singapore.⁴⁷ The employment of MDWs is an attempt by

³⁹ Kok Yufeng, "Initiative to Create Pedestrian-Friendly Streets to be Trialled in 5 Neighbourhoods by 2025: LTA," *The Straits Times*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/initiative-to-create-pedestrian-friendly-streets-to-be-trialled-in-5-neighbourhoods-by-2025-lta>.

⁴⁰ "Dementia-Friendly Community," *Agency for Integrated Care*, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.aic.sg/caregiving/dementia-friendly-community/>.

⁴¹ Martin Greenwood, "Dirty, Demeaning and Dangerous: The Condition of Work for Migrant Domestic Workers," *Global Social Challenges*, April 16, 2021, <https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/global-social-challenges/2021/04/26/dirty-demeaning-and-dangerous-the-condition-of-work-for-migrant-domestic-workers/>.

⁴² Annie Tan, "This Male A&E Nurse Says It's a Meaningful Job Even if He's Called 'Missy': Taking Care of Others is Important," *Channel NewsAsia*, April 24, 2023, <https://cnalifestyle.channelnewsasia.com/women/male-nurse-emergency-department-national-university-hospital-353271>.

⁴³ Shirlena Huang, Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Mika Toyota, "Caring for the Elderly: The Embodied Labour of Migrant Care Workers in Singapore," *Global Networks* 12, no. 2 (2012): 199.

⁴⁴ Huang et al., "Caring for the Elderly," 198.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Dodgson, "Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore: Social and Historical Perspectives," *Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy*, 2016, 4.

⁴⁶ Premilla Nadasen, "Rethinking Care: Arlie Hochschild and the Global Care Chain," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 3 and 4 (2017): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2017.0049>.

⁴⁷ Tan Hui Yee, "Migrant Domestic Workers in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand Earn Below Minimum Wage: Study," *The Straits Times*, June 15, 2023, [https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/migrant-domestic-workers-in-malaysia-singapore-and-thailand-earn-below-minimum-wage-study#:~:text=As%20at%20December%202022%2C%20Singapore,Ministry%20of%20Manpower%20\(MOM\).](https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/migrant-domestic-workers-in-malaysia-singapore-and-thailand-earn-below-minimum-wage-study#:~:text=As%20at%20December%202022%2C%20Singapore,Ministry%20of%20Manpower%20(MOM).)

employers to outsource care work and redistribute the caregivers' burden.⁴⁸ Engaging MDWs enables employers to work with the assurance that their family's needs are cared for. This not only alleviates the stress of grappling with various demands, but also the load of emotional labour, as MDWs take over caregiving and domestic duties.⁴⁹

However, this takes a toll on MDWs, as highlighted by various non-governmental organisations. Due to cultural differences, a lack of specialised caregiving and eldercare training, and employers' expectations,⁵⁰ many MDWs experience poor well-being in their households of employment, which are simultaneously sites of rest and work. According to the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), MDWs face difficulties with forced labour,⁵¹ as well as emotional abuse.⁵² In recent years, Singapore has seen an increase in the number of abuse cases involving MDWs, aggravated by stay-home measures and the lack of off-days during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵³ Food provided by employers is often poor in quality,⁵⁴ or inadequate in quantity,⁵⁵ taking a physical toll on MDWs' bodies, particularly with the physically demanding nature of their work.⁵⁶

Beyond these more insidious practices, various abuse incidents have also been documented by the media.⁵⁷ Given the live-in nature of their employment, as well as employer surveillance,⁵⁸ it is difficult for MDWs to report their employers' abusive practices. Although one monthly, non-compensable off-day is now mandated

⁴⁸ AWARE and HOME, "Neither Family nor Employee: The Caregiver Burden of Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore," AWARE, November 2020, 4. <https://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Neither-Family-Nor-Employee-AWARE-HOME-Report-Nov-2020.pdf>.

⁴⁹ AWARE and HOME, "Neither Family nor Employee," 5.

⁵⁰ AWARE and HOME, "Neither Family nor Employee," 5.

⁵¹ Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics and Liberty Shared, "Behind Closed Doors: Forced Labour in the Domestic Work Sector in Singapore," January 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a12725612abd96b9c737354/t/5c3d7b534fa51aa111983e4a/1547533156689/FINAL+Forced+Labour+Report+V8.pdf>.

⁵² Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics, "Invisible Wounds: Emotional Abuse of Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore," June 2022, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a12725612abd96b9c737354/t/62b2ddfe66959024646ae56c/1655889416169/Invisible+Wounds+-+Emotional+Abuse+of+Migrant+Domestic+Workers+in+Singapore.pdf>.

⁵³ Laura Antona, "The New Normal or Same Old? The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Live-In Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore," *London School of Economics*, November 4, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/seac/2020/11/04/the-new-normal-or-same-old-the-impacts-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-live-in-migrant-domestic-workers-in-singapore/>.

⁵⁴ Julie Ham and Aaron Ceradoy, "'God Blessed Me with Employers who Don't Starve their Helpers': Food Insecurity and Dehumanization in Domestic Work," *Gender, Work and Organization* 29 (2022): 926.

⁵⁵ Shirlena Huang and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, "Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore: A Neglected Social Issue?" in *50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore*, ed. David Chan (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 174.

⁵⁶ Mohammed, "Indonesian Domestic Workers," 3-4.

⁵⁷ Lydia Lam, "Myanmar Maid Abused to Death was So Emaciated Her Muscles had Wasted Away," *Channel NewsAsia*, July 24, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/kevin-chelvam-cop-trial-maid-abuse-starvation-autopsy-3649941>.

⁵⁸ Desmond Ng and Cheryl Tan, "Spying on Maids with CCTV - Where do We Draw the Line?" *Channel NewsAsia*, October 6, 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cnainsider/maids-domestic-workers-cctv-cameras-abuse-employer-789361>.

by law,⁵⁹ there may be MDWs who do not receive it, particularly after social distancing measures.⁶⁰ Furthermore, many MDWs arrive in Singapore with fees owed to agents. If they report their employers' abuse, they risk being jobless, repatriated and losing their source of income to clear their debt, deterring them from doing so.⁶¹

As a result of such incidents, in 2014, Myanmar barred its citizens from working as domestic workers in Singapore, fearing that they would be abused.⁶² This not only disrupts the labour force that Singapore is heavily dependent on, but also impedes diplomatic relations between Singapore and migrant-sending countries, who are simultaneously regional neighbours. Fundamentally, the improvement of this phenomenon requires an acknowledgement of MDWs' position in Singapore as low-wage workers,⁶³ and the corresponding adequate attention that should be given to their welfare.

Healthcare workers

While MDWs meet household needs, Singapore's healthcare system is also a key infrastructure that supports the ageing population. Due to its small population and small healthcare workforce, Singapore employs foreign nurses, particularly from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. This practice first began in the mid-1980s, when Malaysian and Filipino nurses were employed to resolve the acute workforce shortage, subsequently expanding in the 1990s to include nurses from China, India and Myanmar.⁶⁴ Currently, Singaporeans and permanent residents make up about 72 per cent of Singapore's registered nurses, while the rest originate from other countries.⁶⁵

Various push and pull factors drive nurse migration to Singapore, including poor working conditions in home countries like the Philippines, and lucrative remittances from working overseas.⁶⁶ While this alleviates the burden on Singapore's healthcare system, the country's overreliance on foreign nurses is a liability, as revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the Philippines banned its nurses from working abroad to secure its healthcare system, attempting to curb the increasing outflow caused by poor working conditions and low wages.⁶⁷ This affected the availability of manpower in Singapore's healthcare system, reflected in Senior Minister of State for Health Koh Poh Koon's call for healthcare employers to diversify their recruitment

⁵⁹ Ministry of Manpower, "Rest Days, Health and Well-Being for Migrant Domestic Workers", *Ministry of Manpower*, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-domestic-worker/employers-guide/rest-days-and-well-being#:~:text=Your%20MDW%20is%20entitled%20to,that%20cannot%20be%20compensated%20away>.

⁶⁰ Laura Antona, "The New Normal, or the Same Old? The Experiences of Domestic Workers in Singapore," in *COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Insights for a Post-Pandemic World*, ed. Shin Hyun Bang, Murray Mckenzie and Oh Do Young (London: LSE Press, 2022), 144.

⁶¹ Cheryl L., "Food as Power Tools: How Food and Mealtimes Reflect the Power Dynamics of a Household," *Transient Workers Count Too*, July 2023: 25.

⁶² Priya Deshingkar, "Criminalisation of Migration for Domestic Work from Myanmar to Singapore - Need for a Radical Policy Shift," *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 27 (2021): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-020-09477-w>.

⁶³ Tan, "Migrant Domestic Workers."

⁶⁴ Gek Phin Chua, "Challenges Confronting the Practice of Nursing in Singapore," *Asia Pacific Journal of Oncology Nursing* 7, no. 3 (2020): 261, <https://doi.org/10.4103/apjon.apjon.13.20>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Megha Amrith, *Caring for Strangers: Filipino Medical Workers in Asia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017), 33.

⁶⁷ Rowalt Alibudbud, "When the 'Heroes' 'Don't Feel Cared For': The Migration and Resignation of Philippine Nurses Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Global Health* 12 (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.12.03011>.

sources.⁶⁸ Furthermore, amidst the pandemic, numerous nursing homes were COVID-19 clusters isolated from the rest of society.⁶⁹ This necessitated more manpower to care for the elderly and ensure public health measures, taking a toll on nurses. With fewer Filipino nurses, the remaining healthcare professionals faced higher stress and increasing rates of burnout.⁷⁰

In addition, as of 2021, the attrition rate for foreign nurses in the public sector was 14.8 per cent.⁷¹ Singapore's healthcare system is not perceived as ideal for many nurse migrants, due to factors like the aforementioned manpower crunch, insufficient protection against abuse,⁷² and poor work-life balance, with many nurses spending 80 per cent of their time on work.⁷³ Thus, nurses often leave the Singaporean healthcare system after some time, instead working as part-time nurses in agencies, or migrating to work as nurses in other countries. Nurse migrants - particularly those from Southeast Asia - perceive Singapore as a stepping stone, given its geographical proximity to their home countries, subsequently migrating to destinations like the US and Australia.⁷⁴ This results in a net loss in Singapore's nursing workforce, both in terms of manpower and the training invested in nurses, leaving the healthcare system less able to grapple with the ageing population. Despite governmental efforts, Singapore's nursing workforce remains insufficient. According to Health Minister Ong Ye Kung, Singapore needs 24,000 more nurses and healthcare staff by 2030, to meet the needs of its ageing population,⁷⁵ presenting a challenge to be addressed.

Expanding the Workforce

Beyond care workers, the Singaporean government seeks to attract migrants in various industries, including blue-collared workers in the construction, marine shipyard and process (CMP) sectors and white-collared industries like technology.⁷⁶ As of June 2023, Singapore had a total of 1.48 million workers in the foreign

⁶⁸ Jalelah Abu Baker, "Healthcare Employers should Diversify Recruitment Sources amid Filipino Nurse Permit Crunch: Koh Poh Koon," *Channel NewsAsia*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/diversify-healthcare-workers-employers-nurses-singapore-2060936>.

⁶⁹ Syarafana Shafeeq, "807 New Covid-19 Cases in S'pore; New Clusters at Two Nursing Homes," *The Straits Times*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/new-clusters-at-two-nursing-homes-807-new-covid-19-cases-in-spore>.

⁷⁰ Lim Boon Leng, "Commentary: Healthcare Workers are at their Breaking Point but Most Don't Want to Quit," *Channel NewsAsia*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/frontline-workers-burnout-covid-19-quit-leave-hospital-doctor-nurse-health-2553806>.

⁷¹ Charlene Goh and Janarthanan Krishnasamy, "Better Opportunities, Ease of Getting Residency among Reasons Foreign Nurses Leave Singapore to Work Abroad," *The Straits Times*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/better-opportunities-residency-foreign-nurses-leave-singapore-1966436>.

⁷² Christy Yip and Lianne Chia, "Why Some Healthcare Workers in Singapore's Hospitals have Quit - and Others Soldier On," *Channel NewsAsia*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/why-healthcare-workers-singapore-hospitals-resignations-2647746>.

⁷³ Y. Kowitlawkul, S.F. Yap, S. Makabe, S. Chan, J. Takagi, W.W.S. Tam, M.S. Nurumal, "Investigating Nurses' Quality of Life and Work-Life Balance Statuses in Singapore," *International Nursing Review* 66, no. 1 (2019): 65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/inr.12457>.

⁷⁴ Jalelah Abu Baker, "What Will It Take to Retain Foreign Nurses when Some See Singapore as a Stepping Stone to the West?" *Channel NewsAsia*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/nursing-foreign-manpower-retention-stepping-stone-3717776>.

⁷⁵ Joyce Teo, "24k More Nurses, Healthcare Staff Needed by 2030 as S'pore Ages," *The Straits Times*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/with-aged-care-critical-spore-will-need-more-foreign-nurses-ong-ye-kung>.

⁷⁶ MyCareersFuture, "The Talent Issue: Local and Foreign Employees Needed for Organisational Success," *MyCareersFuture*, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://content.mycareersfuture.gov.sg/talent-issue-local-foreign-employees-needed-organisational-success/>.

workforce, with 773,500 workers in sectors other than the domestic work and CMP sectors.⁷⁷ The government implements programmes to attract foreign investment, increase high-skilled migration and encourage the expansion of multinational companies.⁷⁸ This includes the Global Investor Programme, which grants Permanent Resident status to global investors who "intend to drive their businesses and investment growth from Singapore".⁷⁹ According to the Singaporean government, foreign talent "can contribute to Singapore",⁸⁰ not only by increasing Singapore's population and economy, but also through the transfer of expertise and skills to Singaporean employees.⁸¹ Thus, highly skilled and mid-skilled workers receive greater benefits, including the granting of a Dependant's Pass or Long-Term Visit Pass for their family members.⁸² Various policies have also been implemented to facilitate their integration in Singapore. For instance, the National Integration Council (NIC) was established in 2009, to "help... newcomers adapt to the Singaporean way of life" and "provid[e] platforms for Singaporeans and foreigners to interact".⁸³ One of NIC's key initiatives is the Singapore Citizenship Journey, a mandatory programme for Singapore citizenship applicants aged 16 to 60 years,⁸⁴ to "deepen their appreciation of Singaporean norms and values".⁸⁵

However, not all Singaporeans agree with the government's stance and immigration policies, believing that existing integration efforts are insufficient. In a survey conducted, Singaporeans recognised National Service and English language proficiency as integration markers.⁸⁶ Given that most high-skilled migrants arrive in Singapore at an older age and may not fulfil these markers, foreign talent is perceived as diluting the Singaporean identity.⁸⁷ Singaporeans are also concerned that foreign talent poses unfair competition in the job market and university admission system,⁸⁸ since they tend to be regarded as "cheaper" and "more

⁷⁷ Ministry of Manpower, "Foreign Workforce Numbers," *Ministry of Manpower*, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers>.

⁷⁸ MyCareersFuture, "The Talent Issue: Local and Foreign Employees Needed for Organisational Success," *MyCareersFuture*, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://content.mycareersfuture.gov.sg/talent-issue-local-foreign-employees-needed-organisational-success/>.

⁷⁹ Economic Development Board Singapore, "Global Investor Programme," *Economic Development Board Singapore*, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.edb.gov.sg/en/how-we-help/global-investor-programme.html>.

⁸⁰ National Population and Talent Division, "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore," January 2013, 3, <https://www.strategygroup.gov.sg/images/chart7.png.pdf>.

⁸¹ Darrelle Ng, "Skilled Foreign Employees can Help Strengthen Local Workforce, Transfer Expertise: Tan See Leng," *Channel NewsAsia*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/manpower-minister-tan-see-leng-employment-foreign-local-talent-strengthen-workforce-3318371>.

⁸² Ministry of Manpower, "Passes for Family of Employment Pass Holders," *Ministry of Manpower*, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/employment-pass/passes-for-family>.

⁸³ Mathew Mathews, Melvin Tay and Teo Kay Key, "Integral: A Report on Social Integration in Singapore for the 10th Anniversary of the National Integration Council," *Institute of Policy Studies*, 12, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.mccy.gov.sg/-/media/NIC/NIC-Integral-Report.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Singapore Journey, "What is the Singapore Citizenship Journey?" *Singapore Journey*, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.sgjourney.gov.sg/help/#question-148201>.

⁸⁵ Singapore Journey, "What is the purpose of the Singapore Citizenship Journey?" *Singapore Journey*, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www.sgjourney.gov.sg/help/#question-148201>.

⁸⁶ Leong Chan-Hoong, "Whither Integration? Managing the Politics of Identity and Social Inclusion," in *Immigration in Singapore*, ed. Norman Vasu, Yeap Su Yin and Chan Wen Ling (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 166.

⁸⁷ Catherine Gomes, "Identity as a Strategy for Negotiating Everyday Life in Transience: A Case Study of Asian Foreign Talent in Singapore," *Current Sociology* 67, no. 2 (2019): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392118792929>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

hardworking" than locals.⁸⁹ These feelings of hostility and displeasure persist despite the government's reassurance and clarification of policy intentions,⁹⁰ consequently sparking xenophobia towards migrants.

These anti-immigrant sentiments have also spilled into the political arena. There has been significant discussion in Parliament on the presence of foreign talent in Singaporean society.⁹¹ This "liberal pro-immigration policy", which was viewed as the cause of rising inequality, consequently contributed to the all-time-low vote share of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in the 2011 General Election.⁹² Immigration is a contentious issue, not just in Singapore, but also in other Asian countries like South Korea, where migrants are likewise perceived as socioeconomic threats.⁹³ It remains difficult for the government to juggle between mitigating the demographic time bomb through immigration, and addressing the sociocultural complications immigration policies pose.

Expanding the Population

Beyond expanding the workforce, the government seeks to expand the base of the population pyramid by increasing Singapore's population. In 2021, one in four Singaporeans married a non-resident,⁹⁴ highlighting the role of transnational marriages. Beyond contributing to Singapore's workforce, transnational marriage migrants increase the fertility rate upon forming families and having children. The government seeks to attract the transnational family to settle in Singapore, rather than relocating to the non-resident spouse's country of origin. Initiatives include easing non-resident spouses' application for a Long-Term Visit Pass (LTVP), allowing them to do so even before marriage.⁹⁵ The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) also introduced the Marriage Preparation Programme (MPP) and Marriage Support Programme (MSP) in 2014 to improve spousal communication, and the Friendship Programme in 2015, which pairs a trained volunteer with a non-resident spouse to facilitate their integration into Singaporean society.⁹⁶

Statistically, women constitute a significant proportion of foreign spouses.⁹⁷ While transnational marriages occur after Singaporeans work, study and travel overseas,⁹⁸ they are also facilitated by the Southeast Asian

⁸⁹ Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Theodora Lam, "Immigration and Its (Dis)Contents: The Challenges of Highly Skilled Migration in Globalizing Singapore," *American Behavioral Scientist* 60, no. 5-6: 647, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764216632831>.

⁹⁰ Gov.sg, "Why Do We Need Skilled Foreign Workers in Singapore? These Employment Pass Holders Compete with Singaporeans for Good Jobs," Gov.sg, July 6, 2020, <https://www.gov.sg/article/why-do-we-need-skilled-foreign-workers-in-singapore>.

⁹¹ Hariz Baharudin, "Parliament to Debate Two Separate Motions on Jobs and Foreign Talent Together," *The Straits Times*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/parliament-to-debate-two-separate-motions-on-jobs-and-foreign-talent-together>.

⁹² Elvin Ong and Mou Hui Tim, "Singapore's 2011 General Elections and Beyond: Beating the PAP at Its Own Game," *Asian Survey* 54, no. 4 (2014): 751-752. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2014.54.4.749>.

⁹³ Seungwoo Han, "An Analysis of Koreans' Attitudes towards Migrants by Application of Algorithmic Approaches," *Heliyon* 8 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e10087>.

⁹⁴ Ang Hwee Min, "1 in 4 Singaporeans Marrying Non-Residents, Increasing Proportion Involves Non-Resident Men," *Channel NewsAsia*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-citizen-marry-foreign-spouse-non-resident-236371>.

⁹⁵ Laura Elizabeth Philomin, "New Moves to Smooth Way for Transnational Marriages Here," *TODAY*, October 25, 2014, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/new-moves-smooth-way-transnational-marriages-here>.

⁹⁶ Ministry of Social and Family Development, "Transnational Marriages in Singapore," *Ministry of Social and Family Development*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/article/Transnational-Marriages-in-Singapore>.

⁹⁷ National Population and Talent Division, Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office, Singapore Department of Statistics, Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration & Checkpoints Authority, Ministry of Manpower, "Population in Brief 2020," 24.

⁹⁸ Theresa Tan and Goh Yan Han, "Foreign Brides who Marry S'poreans are Getting Older and More Educated: MSF Data," *The Straits Times*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/foreign-brides-are-getting-older-and-more-educated-msf-data-released-for-the-first-time>.

marriage market, which matches Singaporean husbands with Vietnamese brides,⁹⁹ who migrate in hopes of improved socioeconomic and gender status in Singapore.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, a capitalistic, unequal relationship tends to exist between both parties, with a matchmaker describing how "without money, there is no love".¹⁰¹ Vietnamese brides are often attracted by their Singaporean spouses' wealth.¹⁰² However, this perpetuates the hierarchy between them, as foreign spouses are dependent on their Singaporean partners for sponsorship,¹⁰³ rendering their residential status precarious in the event of a divorce.¹⁰⁴ Alternatively, if a foreign spouse is expecting, she is eligible for the LTVP+ with a longer validity period than the LTVP. However, this tends to compel the foreign spouse to spend most of her time in the household,¹⁰⁵ limiting her identity and freedom.

Transnational couples also face more financial and sociocultural stressors,¹⁰⁶ experiencing more disagreements and conflicts on practices of childrearing.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, children with foreign-born mothers tend to present more behavioural issues.¹⁰⁸ Such systemic barriers necessitate governmental intervention; without preventive measures, children of transnational couples may possess lower resilience and face social problems.¹⁰⁹ Given the increasing number of transnational marriages, this trend may aggravate the ageing population and already-strained, shrinking workforce. Thus, while transnational marriages are a possible solution for low fertility rates, it risks posing further complications to social welfare, particularly when the marriage is so highly unequal.

Policy Options

Various policies have been explored and implemented, both in Singapore and in other countries.

Increasing the Accessibility of Childcare

Affordable and accessible childcare services can alleviate the younger generation's concerns about having children and the implications on their lifestyles and careers. Japan is another rapidly ageing society in Asia,

⁹⁹ Yi'En Cheng, "Transnational Masculinities *In Situ*: Singaporean Husbands and their International Marriage Experiences," *Area* 44, no. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2011.01045.x>.

¹⁰⁰ Arul Chib and Hoan Nguyen, "Essentialist Identities as Resistance to Immobilities: Communicative Mobilities of Vietnamese Foreign Brides in Singapore," *International Journal of Communication* 12, 4036, <https://hdl.handle.net.10356.144843>.

¹⁰¹ Edoardo Liotta, "When Dating Apps Fail - Inside a Vietnamese Bride Matchmaking Agency," *RICE Media*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.ricemedia.co/a-singapore-vietnam-bride-matchmaking-agency/>.

¹⁰² Liotta, "When Dating Apps Fail."

¹⁰³ Immigration and Checkpoints Authority Singapore, "Spouse of a Singapore Citizen", *Immigration and Checkpoints Authority Singapore*, accessed November 30, 2023, [https://www.ica.gov.sg/reside/LTVP/apply/spouse-of-a-singapore-citizen-\(sc\)](https://www.ica.gov.sg/reside/LTVP/apply/spouse-of-a-singapore-citizen-(sc)).

¹⁰⁴ AWARE, "Migrant Wives in Distress," *AWARE*, June 2020, <https://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/AWARE-Report-1-June-2020-Migrant-Wives-in-Distress.pdf>, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Brenda S.A. Yeoh, Heng Leng Chee, Rohini Anant and Theodora Lam, "Transnational Marriage Migration and the Negotiation of Precarious pathways Beyond Partial Citizenship in Singapore," *Citizenship Studies* 25, no. 7 (2021): 909, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2021.1968681>.

¹⁰⁶ Theresa Tan, "Foreign-Born Mums' Kids Show More Behavioural Issues: Study," *The Straits Times*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/foreign-born-mums-kids-show-more-behavioural-issues-study>.

¹⁰⁷ Wei-Jun Jean Yeung and Shuya Lu, "Family Dynamics in Cross-National Families with Young Children in Singapore," *Journal of Family Issues* (2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X231156675>.

¹⁰⁸ Tan, "Foreign-Born Mums' Kids Show More Behavioural Issues."

¹⁰⁹ Marcus Y.L. Chiu, Corinne Ghoh, Gerard Chung and Kwok P. Choi, "Multistressed Families in Singapore: A Focus on Transnational Families," *Children and Youth Services Review* 101 (2019): 372.

with one in ten people aged 80 or older.¹¹⁰ Prime Minister Fumio Kishida called for "unprecedented steps" to reverse the declining birthrate, including improvements to childcare services, strengthened cash benefits and an expanded eligibility criteria for child care allowance.¹¹¹ These policies seek to reduce the financial burden on new parents, assisting them in affording the costs of having children. A similar approach has been adopted in Singapore. The Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) was established in 2013, with a series of goals, including the provision of subsidies and grants to secure the affordability of pre-school programmes.¹¹² ECDA also issues different classes of pre-school licenses, ensuring a variety of programmes nationwide - for children of ages 2 months to 7 years, and of full-day and half-day durations.¹¹³ Such policies not only improve the accessibility of childcare services, but also assure parents of the quality of care provided to their children, facilitating children's development and growth while parents are at work.

Diversifying and Improving Care Work

Increasing inflow of care workers

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a global shortage of 5.9 million nurses.¹¹⁴ With its economic ability, the Global North hires large pools of nurses from the Global South. The Philippines is a key migrant-sending country, possessing numerous bilateral agreements with countries like the United Kingdom, Norway, Spain, Bahrain and Japan,¹¹⁵ enabling these countries to supplement their care needs. However, Filipino nurse migrants continue to face multiple challenges, including racial discrimination,¹¹⁶ exploitative working conditions,¹¹⁷ and downward mobility,¹¹⁸ as they grapple with the mismatch between training received in the Philippines and work in their destination country.

To incentivise nurses to migrate to and work in Singapore, they are being given more upskilling and training opportunities. Recognising their need to adapt to changing healthcare needs, nurses working in Singapore are able to enrol in a 24-month part-time nursing degree programme.¹¹⁹ This allows them to improve their skills to better manage their workload in the long run. It also improves their credentials, benefitting future career

¹¹⁰ Kelly Ng, "Japan Population: One in 10 People Now Aged 80 or Older," *BBC*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66850943#>.

¹¹¹ Kathleen Benoza, "Japan Announces Outline of 'Unprecedented' Child Care Policy," *The Japan Times*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/31/national/child-care-measures-draft/>.

¹¹² Early Childhood Development Agency, "Who We Are," *Early Childhood Development Agency*, accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.ecda.gov.sg/who-we-are#:~:text=Officially%20launched%20on%201%20April,and%20is%20hosted%20under%20MSF.>

¹¹³ Early Childhood Development Agency, "Choosing a Preschool for your Child," *Early Childhood Development Agency*, accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.ecda.gov.sg/parents/choosing-a-preschool/choosing-a-preschool-for-your-child>.

¹¹⁴ Rebecca Jester, "Editorial - Global Shortage of Nurses - Rebecca Jester for May 2023 Issue," *International Journal of Orthopaedic and Trauma Nursing* 49 (2023): 101018, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijotn.2023.101018>.

¹¹⁵ Agnieszka Makulec, "Philippines' Bilateral Labour Arrangements on Health-Care Professional Migration: In Search of Meaning," *International Labour Organization* (2015): VI.

¹¹⁶ Anna Reyes, Gladys Martir and Alison Coutts, "A Survey of the Job Satisfaction of Filipino Nurses Working in the UK," *Nursing Times* 118, no. 3 (2022): 1, <https://www.nursingtimes.net/roles/hospital-nurses/a-survey-of-the-job-satisfaction-of-filipino-nurses-working-in-the-uk-07-02-2022/>.

¹¹⁷ Paulina Cachero, "From AIDS to COVID-19, America's Medical System has a Long History of Relying on Filipino Nurses to Fight on the Frontlines," *TIME*, May 30, 2021, <https://time.com/6051754/history-filipino-nurses-us/>.

¹¹⁸ Aslaug Gotehus, "Agency in Deskillling: Filipino Nurses' Experiences in the Norwegian Health Care Sector," *Geoforum* 126 (2021): 340-349, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.08.012>.

¹¹⁹ Jalelah Abu Baker, "Besides Opportunities to Upskill, Nurses Need Flexibility at Work, Say Industry Experts," *Channel NewsAsia*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/degree-programme-nurse-flexible-work-arrangements-3114891>.

development. As healthcare becomes more decentralised, nurses have also been granted more flexibility through part-time jobs in nursing homes, as well as recently-introduced assisted living eldercare facilities.¹²⁰ The government also provides financial incentives, including the Nurse Special Payment Package,¹²¹ and sign-on bonuses.¹²² Simultaneously, to decrease Singapore’s reliance on a foreign workforce, the government is increasing local nurse recruitment through sponsorships and scholarships for nursing studies in Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) and the Institute of Technical Education (ITE).¹²³

Beyond increasing manpower, the healthcare sector is being reorganised to grapple with the shortage of healthcare workers, maximising the efficiency of available manpower to meet the population’s needs. Primary care is essential in ensuring the health of the ageing population. However, this system has not been adequately established in Singapore, with more than 60 per cent of patients lacking a regular primary care physician.¹²⁴ Thus, the government recently introduced HealthierSG, encouraging Singaporeans to build a “trusted and lifelong relationship” with their family doctor who can provide personalised healthcare over time, adopting a preventive, rather than interventive, approach to healthcare.¹²⁵ With this consistent approach, healthcare becomes more effective and integrated through regional health clusters and local active ageing centres.¹²⁶

Beyond the healthcare sector, Singapore has also altered the nature of care work, expanding its definition and increasing its flexibility. Introduced in 2017 and formalised in 2021, the Household Services Scheme (HSS) allows MDWs to provide cleaning services on a part-time basis, rather than living with their employers.¹²⁷ From March 2023, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has expanded HSS’ scope through a pilot programme, allowing “basic child-minding and elder-minding services” to be provided on a part-time basis.¹²⁸ This job flexibility grants MDWs better work-life balance and reduced employer-imposed surveillance, which are present concerns of live-in domestic workers. Such flexibility improving working conditions incentivises more migrants, and even locals, to work as care workers, alleviating the burden of caregiving posed by the ageing population.

¹²⁰ Renald Loh and Navene Elangovan, “The Big Read: With More Seniors in Singapore Needing Care, is Assisted Living the Answer?” *Channel NewsAsia*, July 3, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/big-read-ageing-population-more-seniors-needing-care-assisted-living-3599786>.

¹²¹ Ministry of Health, “More than 25,000 Nurses to Receive 2022 Nurse Special Payment Package,” *Ministry of Health*, July 31, 2022, <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/more-than-25-000-nurses-to-receive-2022-nurse-special-payment-package>.

¹²² Priya Sunil, “Singapore Introduces S\$15,000 Sign-on Bonus to Incentivise Local Nursing Graduates,” *Human Resources Online*, July 20, 2023, <https://www.humanresourcesonline.net/singapore-introduces-s-15-000-sign-on-bonus-to-incentivise-local-nursing-graduates#>.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Chorh Chuan Tan, Carolyn S.P. Lam, David B. Matchar, Yoong Kang Zee and John E.L. Wong, “Singapore’s Health-Care System: Key Features, Challenges, and Shifts,” *Review* 398 (2021): 1095. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00252-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00252-X).

¹²⁵ Healthier SG, Ministry of Health, “What is Healthier SG?” *Ministry of Health*, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.healthiersg.gov.sg/about/what-is-healthier-sg/>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Sherlyn Seah, “Part-Time Home Cleaning Scheme Expanded to Include Basic Care for Children and Elderly,” *Channel NewsAsia*, March 14, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/part-time-home-cleaning-scheme-domestic-services-child-elder-care-mom-3345251>.

¹²⁸ Ministry of Manpower, “What is the Household Services Scheme,” *Ministry of Manpower*, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/faq/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/what-is-household-services-scheme>.

Decreasing outflow of care workers

Nonetheless, more policies are needed to secure the welfare of care workers and recognise their rights and contributions,¹²⁹ in order to incentivise job retention. In South Korea, the turnover rate for nurses in major general hospitals has increased steadily from 11.6 per cent in 2019 to 16 per cent in 2021.¹³⁰ South Korean nurses are vocal about their rights, organising strikes in response to unfair legislation, and to express a desire for better working conditions.¹³¹ Upon consultation, South Korean nurses express a desire for a more manageable workload, less mistreatment and a change in society's perception of them and their work.¹³² They argue that the lack of legislation blurs the scope of their work, leading to exploitation by medical doctors and consequent overwork.¹³³

Similarly, in Singapore, more attention is being given to nurses' well-being, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, offering them better wages, welfare benefits and job flexibility.¹³⁴ MOH also provides professional counselling services and establishes peer-support networks to assist healthcare professionals.¹³⁵ Accommodation is provided for foreign healthcare workers to facilitate their adaptation and integration into Singapore, smoothening the migration process.¹³⁶ In addition, the government is developing a long-term retention scheme for nurses,¹³⁷ rewarding their commitment.

Utilising Technology

Evidently, the repercussions of care work and immigration extend across different domains, particularly in the sociocultural aspect. The use of technology seeks to overcome these difficulties, allowing gaps in the workforce to be bridged without additional manpower.

¹²⁹ International Labour Organization, "Care Work and Care Jobs: For the Future of Decent Work," *International Labour Organization*, 17, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_633166.pdf.

¹³⁰ Seong-Kwang Kim, Eun-Joo Kim, Hye-Kyeong Kim, Sung-Sook Song, Bit-Na Park and Kyoung-Won Jo, "Development of a Nurse Turnover Prediction Model in Korea Using Machine Learning," *Healthcare* 11, no. 1583 (2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11111583>.

¹³¹ Lee Jaeun, "Nursing Bill Raises Tensions between Doctors, Nurses," *The Korea Herald*, April 23, 2023, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230423000095>.

¹³² Mi Ra Yun and Boas Yu, "Strategies for Reducing Hospital Nurse Turnover in South Korea: Nurses' Perceptions and Suggestions," *Journal of Nursing Management* 29 (2021): 1258-1260, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jonm.13264>.

¹³³ Lee, "Nursing Bill Raises Tensions between Doctors, Nurses."

¹³⁴ Ministry of Health, "Ensuring Adequate Rest for Nurses," *Ministry of Health*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/ensuring-adequate-rest-for-nurses/>.

¹³⁵ Ministry of Health, "Supporting Mental Well-Being of Healthcare Professionals amidst COVID-19 Pandemic and Preventing Burn-Out," *Ministry of Health*, January 10, 2022, <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/supporting-mental-well-being-of-healthcare-professionals-amidst-covid-19-pandemic-and-preventing-burn-out>.

¹³⁶ Lee Chong Ming, "New Foreign Healthcare Workers May Be Housed in Hostel-Type Accommodation," *Channel NewsAsia*, August 7, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/new-foreign-healthcare-workers-nurses-hostel-accommodation-facilities-3682961>.

¹³⁷ Ministry of Health, "Efforts to Further Build Up Nursing Manpower and Expand Hospital Bed Capacity," *Ministry of Health*, July 19, 2023, <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/efforts-to-further-build-up-nursing-manpower-and-expand-hospital-bed-capacity#:~:text=Building%20Up%20Our%20Nursing%20Manpower&text=MOH%20had%20earlier%20announced%20that,6>.

Robot nurses

For instance, instead of employing foreign nurses, robot nurses have increasingly become a potential solution. The first robot nurse, Grace, was developed by Hong Kong-based robotics firm Hanson Robotics.¹³⁸ Developed to interact with the elderly and isolated COVID-19 patients, Grace uses artificial intelligence to diagnose patients and assist healthcare providers.¹³⁹ Often, humans' empathy and emotions are cited as reasons why they cannot be replaced by robots. However, Grace can socialise and facilitate talk therapy with her patients.¹⁴⁰ Proficient in English, Mandarin and Cantonese,¹⁴¹ Grace overcomes the perennial language barrier between older patients and nurses, particularly younger nurses or nurse migrants.

A similar, albeit less technologically advanced, initiative has been adopted in Singapore, where robot nursing assistants deliver medication to patients and record vital signs before transmitting the data directly to the National Electronic Health Record.¹⁴² By performing such manual tasks, robots reduce the workload of healthcare professionals. Given the increasing demands of Singapore's healthcare system, such utilisation of technology avails healthcare professionals for higher-level tasks,¹⁴³ allowing them to engage in more fulfilling work that increases their sense of satisfaction and reduces burnout. There is potential for such technological advancements to improve working conditions.

Active Ageing

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), active ageing is defined as "the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age".¹⁴⁴ Various countries have encouraged their elderly citizens to remain active, both to improve their own well-being, and to contribute to the shrinking workforce.

Lifelong learning

In Singapore, a range of campaigns and initiatives form an ecosystem known as "lifelong learning".¹⁴⁵ Various stakeholders, including trade unions, employers and workers are involved in this process, providing training and funding for workers to upskill.¹⁴⁶ One such initiative is SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG), a "national movement" that helps Singaporeans "develop their fullest potential throughout life".¹⁴⁷ Singaporeans are

¹³⁸ Rebecca Cairns, "Meet Grace, the Ultra-Lifelike Nurse Robot," *CNN*, August 19, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/19/asia/grace-hanson-robotics-android-nurse-hnk-spc-intl/index.html>.

¹³⁹ Farah Master, "Meet Grace, the Healthcare Robot COVID-19 Created," *Reuters*, June 10, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/meet-grace-healthcare-robot-covid-19-created-2021-06-09/>.

¹⁴⁰ Master, "Meet Grace."

¹⁴¹ Designboom, "Lifelike Robot Nurse 'Grace' will Bring Emotional Care to Isolated Patients," *Designboom*, accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.designboom.com/technology/hanson-robotics-grace-robot-nurse-08-27-2021/>.

¹⁴² Joyce Teo, "Robotic Nursing Assistant can Take Patients' Vital Signs, Freeing up Nurses for Other Tasks," *The Straits Times*, November 28, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/robotic-nursing-assistant-can-take-patients-vital-signs-freeing-up-nurses-for-other-tasks>.

¹⁴³ Teo, "Robotic Nursing Assistant."

¹⁴⁴ World Health Organization, "Active Ageing: A Policy Framework," 12, <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/WHO-Active-Ageing-Framework.pdf>.

¹⁴⁵ Gretchen Cheney, "Building a System of Lifelong Learning in Singapore," *National Center on Education and the Economy*, June 5, 2021, <https://ncee.org/quick-read/building-a-system-of-lifelong-learning-in-singapore/>.

¹⁴⁶ International Labour Organization, "Skills Development and Lifelong Learning in Singapore," *International Labour Organization*, June 2022, 1, https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/issue-briefs/WCMS_847560/lang--en/index.htm.

¹⁴⁷ SkillsFuture, "About SkillsFuture," *SkillsFuture*, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.skillsfuture.gov.sg/aboutskillsfuture>.

eligible to participate in the SGUnited Skills Programme and the SGUnited Mid-Career Pathways Programme,¹⁴⁸ which facilitate transitions into new careers even at an older age. Singaporeans aged 25 years and above are also granted SkillsFuture Credit, which can be used to "offset SSG-approved training course fees".¹⁴⁹ This allows Singaporeans to pursue their interests independently, enabling new workers like homemakers or the unemployed to enter the workforce and alleviate the demographic time bomb. However, its uptake has been limited, as seven in 10 people have not used their SkillsFuture Credit since its introduction in 2015.¹⁵⁰ Various factors like the lack of time, preference for the status quo and disinterest may undermine its effectiveness.

A Silver Workforce

To promote active ageing, the retirement age was also increased to 63 in Singapore in 2022, and intends to be raised to 65 years old by 2030.¹⁵¹ Similarly, in Japan, retaining existing employees - including the elderly - is crucial to ensuring its strength and numbers, given its shrinking population and workforce. Although the legal retirement age in Japan is 60, the average effective retirement age is 69.5 years and 66.5 years for males and females respectively.¹⁵² This has been enabled by an evolution in societal mindsets, both by employers and employees. Due to a shortage of labour, companies have become more open to employing older workers, with 40 per cent of companies hiring someone over 70 in 2022.¹⁵³ Similarly, elderly Japanese are also motivated to work; driven by economic reasons and a desire for "social participation",¹⁵⁴ they choose to utilise their skills to benefit society instead of retiring.¹⁵⁵ Japan has thus been described as an "age-free society", in which the government encourages citizens to live a fruitful "hundred-year life".¹⁵⁶ Simultaneously, this ensures that the elderly remain mentally and physically fit,¹⁵⁷ avoiding an increased load on the possibly strained healthcare system.

¹⁴⁸ Jolene Ang, "540,000 Singaporeans Benefited from SkillsFuture Initiatives in 2020," *The Straits Times*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/540000-singaporeans-benefited-from-skillsfuture-initiatives-in-2020-skillsfuture-singapore>.

¹⁴⁹ SkillsFuture, "Encouraging Individuals to Take Ownership of Their Skills Development and Learning Journey," *SkillsFuture*, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.skillsfuture.gov.sg/initiatives/mid-career/credit>.

¹⁵⁰ Claudia Lim and Calvin Yang, "8 in 10 Eligible Singaporeans Aged under 30 yet to Use SkillsFuture Credits," *Channel NewsAsia*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/eligible-singaporeans-skillsfuture-credits-upskilling-upgrading-learning-training-courses-3755766>.

¹⁵¹ Tripartite Workgroup on Older Workers in 2019, "Strengthening Support for Senior Workers," Ministry of Manpower, National Trade Union Congress and Singapore National Employers Federation, accessed December 1, 2023, www.mom.gov.sg/-/media/mom/documents/press-releases/2021/1101-rraa---twg-ow-infographic.pdf.

¹⁵² Hidehiko Ichimura and Satoshi Shimizutani, "Retirement Process in Japan: New Evidence from the Japanese Study on Aging and Retirement (JSTAR)," in *Aging in Asia: Findings from New and Emerging Data Initiatives*, ed. James P. Smith and Malay Majmundar (Washington: The National Academies Press), 173, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK109234/>.

¹⁵³ Anaya Bhattacharya, "40% of Companies in Japan Hired Someone over 70 Last Year," *World Economic Forum*, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/08/japan-working-age-labour-shortage/>.

¹⁵⁴ Moriyama Tomohiko, "Why Does the Older Population in Japan Work So Much?" *Japan Labor Issues* 6, no. 39 (2022): 20, <https://www.jil.go.jp/english/jli/documents/2022/039-04.pdf>.

¹⁵⁵ Julian Ryall, "How Japan Keeps its Elderly Employed and Active," *DW*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-japan-keeps-its-elderly-employed-and-active/a-59516633>.

¹⁵⁶ Juergen Voegelé, "Rethinking Silver: Lessons from Japan's Age-Ready Cities," *World Bank*, July 15, 2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/rethinking-silver-lessons-japans-age-ready-cities#:~:text=The%20Japanese%20Government%20proposed%20the,senior%20citizens%20but%20are%20encouraged>

¹⁵⁷ Ryall, "How Japan Keeps its Elderly Employed and Active."

Combatting Ageism

However, despite these efforts, little can be achieved if societal mindsets remain prejudiced against the elderly. Ageism - defined as stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination because of one’s age¹⁵⁸ - is a barrier to active ageing, and can aggravate the demographic time bomb as elderly become more isolated from society. The WHO has identified ageism as a global challenge, calling for effective anti-ageism strategies,¹⁵⁹ and providing a toolkit for the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism.¹⁶⁰ Australia has implemented an anti-ageism campaign, EveryAGE Counts, focusing on establishing a “social movement”, better “advocacy and political engagement”, and “powerful responses to structural ageism”.¹⁶¹ However, these campaigns are limited, given that they are non-legally binding and, as acknowledged by EveryAGE Counts, “change can take years to grow and embed”.¹⁶²

Thus, the Australian government has also implemented the Age Discrimination Act 2004, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of age,¹⁶³ in work, education and access to goods, services and accommodation.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, in Japan, Article 10 of the Employment Measure Act requires firms to provide equal opportunities to workers in terms of hiring irrespective of age.¹⁶⁵ In Singapore, the government is likewise taking steps to combat ageism, implementing the Retirement and Re-Employment Act,¹⁶⁶ actively protecting seniors facing discrimination.¹⁶⁷ Such legislation explicitly outlines the government’s stance, setting a clear direction for the country. However, older workers are still subject to social stereotypes,¹⁶⁸ highlighting possible limitations of such policies.

Epilogue

Various policies have been implemented to mitigate Singapore’s demographic time bomb. Managing an ageing population remains a key challenge in Singapore. Yet, a country’s fertility rates are closely tied to residents’ highly personal decisions, life priorities and preferences, which may not be easily altered under the

¹⁵⁸ Liat Ayalon and Senjooti Roy, “Combatting Ageism in the Western Pacific Region,” *The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific* 35 (2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanwpc.2022.100593>.

¹⁵⁹ World Health Organization, “Ageism is a Global Challenge: UN,” *World Health Organization*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-03-2021-ageism-is-a-global-challenge-un>.

¹⁶⁰ World Health Organization, “Global Campaign to Combat Ageism - Toolkit,” *World Health Organization*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/global-campaign-to-combat-ageism-toolkit>.

¹⁶¹ “About - Here for the Long Haul,” *EveryAGE Counts*, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/about>.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Australian Human Rights Commission, “Age Discrimination,” *Australian Human Rights Commission*, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/employers/age-discrimination#:~:text=Age%20discrimination%20occurs%20when%20a,on%20the%20basis%20of%20age>.

¹⁶⁴ Federal Register of Legislation, “Age Discrimination Act 2004,” accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2020C00283>.

¹⁶⁵ Ryoko Sakuraba, “The Amendment of the Employment Measure Act: Japanese Anti-Age Discrimination Law,” *The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training*, accessed December 3, 2023, https://www.jil.go.jp/english/JLR/documents/2009/JLR22_sakuraba.pdf.

¹⁶⁶ Goh Yan Han, “Law to Protect Senior Workers from Dismissal due to Age Could be Double-Edged Sword: Jessica Tan,” *The Straits Times*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/law-to-protect-senior-workers-from-dismissal-due-to-age-could-be-double-edged-sword-jessica-tan>.

¹⁶⁷ Ministry of Manpower, “Protecting and Supporting Seniors who Face Discrimination,” *Ministry of Manpower*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/press-replies/2020/0304-protecting-and-supporting-seniors-who-face-discrimination>.

¹⁶⁸ Sue-Ann Tan, “Fighting Ageism in Singapore,” *The Straits Times*, November 6, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/jobs/fighting-ageism-in-singapore>.

influence of policies. While top-down direction was feasible in historically paternalistic family planning campaigns and policies, the government can only prompt certain decisions through its policies and narratives today. This includes making conditions favourable for families, including prioritised allocation of public housing and welfare benefits.

Nevertheless, population ageing remains a widespread challenge, not just in Asia, but across the world, as one in six people in the world will be aged 60 years or over by 2030.¹⁶⁹ Through transnational cooperation and discussion, in collaboration with international organisations like the WHO, countries may be able to address this problem through the sharing of ideas and resources.

Discussion questions

1. What are some key challenges faced in managing an ageing population?
2. How can the government manage the repercussions of its policies?
3. What are some possible policies not discussed in this case study, that may be possible solutions to mitigate Singapore's demographic time bomb?

¹⁶⁹ World Health Organization, "Ageing and Health," *World Health Organization*, October 1, 2022, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health#:~:text=At%20this%20time%20the%20share,2050%20to%20reach%20426%20million>.