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Review Article

At the margins of care: Looking at what matters for migrant care workers

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ABSTRACT

This review is intended as firstly a conceptual intervention, and secondarily a review, of care work studies. Drawing on a thematic literature synthesis, I focus on the affective, emotional, and relational dimensions of care for Migrant Care Workers (MCWs). I center what care means to caregivers themselves, exploring subjective visions that are often drowned out by neoliberal frameworks of social reproduction. This review focuses on what matters for MCWs: critiques of resilience; the diversification of "care"; aging-related considerations; and digital activism. Building on existing emerging scholarship in especially social anthropology of MCWs' lived experiences, I call for frameworks that foreground migrant interpretations and research approaches that see our migrant interlocutors as political agents of knowledge.

1. Introduction: uncommon stories of care and migration

This review disrupts resilience as a governing norm of care work studies, drawing on uncommon stories of care ethics and practice among Migrant Care Workers (MCWs). It argues that applied care work studies have certain knowledge gaps, namely in terms of the central role of feelings and emotions in understanding care outcomes. The field has moved from an overriding focus on structural analyses of labour migration in social reproduction to related aspects of migrant workers' lived experiences, interpersonal agency, emotional labour, and everyday practices of care. I situate this review's purposeful approach to source searches in this context of the scholarship's trajectory. Below, I outline the literature selection and synthesis process, discuss several key "gaps" for conceptual intervention, and suggest areas for future research.

Compared to the economic growth outcomes and/or healthcare sector resource allocation aspects in care labour migration, less attention has been paid to the affective, emotional aspects of care in everyday life (Amrith, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2017; Raghuram, 2016; Robinson, 2013). Social constructions of what is "good care", as well as subjective interpretations of its metrics for competence, recognition, and skills valuations, are key to uncovering what alternative practice-based frameworks (from migrant interlocutors) can bring to the table. This purposeful review hence examines what care means to MCWs themselves. Overall, it finds that care is treated as a problem to be solved rather than a paradox to corral around (Williams, 2018). In that sense, an instrumentalist bias poses moral blocks to valuing the more-than-economic substance of care, which requires grounded narratives that take seriously standpoint lenses (see Presto, 2025). The review's below areas of focus, then, are not parallel cases but connected moments in a broader thread of MCWs' affective and relational meaning making work, which has been eclipsed by state-centric and structural economic framings (Raghuram, 2019; Robinson, 2013). I weave them together to reflect on what the current emphasis on labour market outcomes or institutional policy mechanisms, crucial as they are, may leave out for frontline caregivers.

The most relevant bodies of literature to MCWs doing eldercare on a global scale are: East Asian developmental states, including global care chains; Feminist political economy of care work and social reproduction; and global racial capitalism. Intersectionality approaches in the field have centered the triangle of gender, race, and class at the expense of alternative identities, such as age and aging processes, which tend to be overlooked in academic and policy debates of care labour migration (Amrith, 2023; Baldassar, 2023). Building on global applied care work studies, including those in North America and Europe, Parvati Raghuram (2019) advocates for efforts to complicate Eurocentric conceptual foundations of "care"; to see MCWs' lived experiences as a contingent "bundle of journeys geared toward social transformation" (Dhamoon, 2023, p. 162). This analytical standpoint foregrounds those aspects of relational care that are less 'famous' (or popular) but more apposite to our interlocutors. For MCWs, these may include non-capitalist elements of care grounded in intergenerational customs of age relations and social status vis-a-vis elders in the wider community (Raghuram, 2012, 2019).

Scholars have observed that migrant women carry formative ethics – steeped in family and community backgrounds – while caring on the move that inform how they encounter and make sense of the host

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society's eldercare culture (e.g. critiques of local filial piety in eldercare markets in Chien, 2018; Yeoh et al., 2021). Athena C. R. Presto's account of Filipina single mothers "doing family" in Singapore shows that for MCWs, "here" (employer's home) and "there" (their own home) spaces are dialectical and always exerting demands on a woman's limited time, energy, and resources (Presto, 2025, p. 10). As such, there is always "a sense of shared time with their family back home … in spite of the geographical distance" that mediates caring subjectivities in the mutually interactive, not exclusive, "here" and "there" spaces that both form a "reachable domain of our everyday lifeworld" (Presto, 2025, p. 5). Approaching MCWs as protagonists and political agents in their own right who uphold distinct versions and visions of caring worlds means paying attention to their role as intellectual trailblazers who reshape the meaning of "care". From this perspective, my review builds on earlier generations of scholarship that mapped global care chains, feminist political economy, and transnational family arrangements as structuring conditions of care labour migration. My interest is in how researchers' affective and subjective concerns in recent years extends, departs from, and enriches foundational accounts of care work in a migrant's world.

This piece is intended as a narrative review rather than meta-analysis, with an interpretive mode of synthesis informed by a nexus of keywords: migrant care workers (MCWs), resilience, ageing, care ethics, agency, and digital activism. Sources were chosen for their empirical and theoretical engagement with the affective, relational, and subjective dimensions of "care" rather than geographical scope or worker population. I selected these works for their commitment to "care" as a generative domain of politics (Tungohan, 2019). The thematic areas are derived inductively from recurring discussions of certain domains of care work that are urgent and pressing to study. My aim is not to propose new fields of concern per se, but to deepen the emerging conversations that push the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge. Because the review is intentionally interpretive rather than systematic, no formal assessment of study quality or risk of bias was conducted. To reflect recent interests in foregrounding affective dimensions of feelings and emotions, I mostly draw on the related sources in Ethel Tungohan (2019), Parvati Raghuram (2012, 2019), and Megha Amrith (2026) among others. There has been a noticeable shift in moving beyond economic frameworks of labour supply/demand in making sense of the socially necessary nature of care activity, signaling a collective desire to foreground firstly, the normative frame of resilience, and secondly, the semantic boundaries of "care". This review's scope is not all-encompassing of the numerous achievements of care work studies, but to enrich the field's trajectory and suggest further research directions. A synthesis of what matters for MCWs is timely for reasons beyond citation currency; the ageing of migrant workers and the populations they serve and the accelerated uptake of digital technologies in labour recruitment, which mean that resilience, care, ageing, and digital activism are converging concerns for the field.

2. An elephant in the room: resilience (and its discontents)

Since the 1980s, "resilience" has become a ubiquitous, and indeed normative, concept in care labour migration literature (Chee, 2020). Defined variously as a sort of psychological hardiness, adaptive capacity, or the ability to "bounce back" from adversity, resilience imperatives are now a standard trend in occupational health, nursing science, migration studies, and social work – at individual, community, and national scales. In this neoliberal backdrop, scholars warn against celebratory framings of the concept, given that the Global South woman's resilience is politically abused to justify ongoing labour rights violations (Banta, 2025; Chang, 2018; Tungohan, 2019). In other words, when it comes to MCWs featured as survey respondents and/or interviewees, there is reason to slow down and interrogate the asymmetrical power dynamics enmeshed in the wider structures of academia, i.e. What are the primary assumptions, including non-negotiables of coping mechanisms (e.g. self-help efforts to overcome injustice and thrive indefinitely), that researchers are looking to affirm and confirm? And do these conceptual starting points align with migrant care workers' own perspectives and lived experiences as caregivers on the move?

In the past three years, a few scoping reviews have focused on reframing resilience by viewing its processes not as individual characteristic, but as relational and social. Monika Winarnita and colleagues illustrate a concept of carescapes: "the landscape or terrain of care" enmeshed in "the wider relationship between policies, services and infrastructure related to care as determined by nation-state, local government and employers" (Winarnita et al., 2025, p. 2). This framework of reconceptualizing resilience, which my review builds on, is key to acknowledging power asymmetries and inequalities in migrant agency. When understanding social resilience in migrant communities, structures of labour abuse/exploitation, predatory migrant recruitment practices, and overall lack of social supports in sending/receiving states are core considerations. In other words, sustainable resilience needs nurturing relationships from the workplace to community that enable MCWs to cope, adapt, and transform; migrant agency to enhance well-being is inseparable from social institutions. In an earlier study, Winarnita and colleagues (2023) drew on seven in-depth interviews with Asian female migrant caregivers in Australia, showing that resilience cannot be pinned down to discrete units of analysis, themes/-topics, or clearly defined stakeholders. Particularly for migrants, culturally appropriate standards and local knowledge of care are in the background. This study relates to regional scholarship in Asia that zones in on migrant perspectives/voices on coping with socioeconomic realities that allude to less well-attended to dimensions of modernity; age relations, aging processes, and cultural attitudes toward elders in the community (see Amrith, 2023; Raghuram, 2012).

Theoretically, resilience scholars have pointed out the need for a horizontal, not just vertical, lens of studying resilience as relational process. In their systematic review of 250 articles from 1998 to 2023, Abrar Bawati and colleagues observe a marked uptick in scholarly publications on resilience especially during peak COVID years. Yet, as they observe, adaptation processes already assume a dominant actor in question that risk simplifying the complex realities of caregiving arrangements. For instance, adaptation for social resilience scholars tends to focus on anticipating possible disruptions to planned routines, exercising coping agency, and alleviating harmful impacts (Bawati et al., 2025, p. 898). Family resilience studies, on the other hand, are formatively influenced by family belief systems frameworks that emphasise the household unit's stress response, communication quality, and overall organizational pattern. But caregivers to the elderly occupy an ambiguous, awkward position in this analytical split between "family" and "social" varieties of resilience. Given that risk considerations are a common concern, there is room for more expansive approaches to migrant resilience that recognizes the interplay between family and society (units of study), namely in healthcare immigration structures (Winarnita et al., 2023, 2025). Seen together, these works are affirmative indications of a growing interest in relational approaches to resilience in care work studies, paving the way for future investigation.

Resilience embodies a colonial and imperial genealogy. A psychological construct with predominantly North American and European experiences, its normative assumptions and institutional settings bear little to no resemblance to the lived realities of migrant care workers. Dominant models of resilience, rooted largely in positivist developmental psychology traditions, emphasise individual capacity and responsibility to withstand adversity, even shocks, to the system (e.g. Garabiles et al., 2022; Ha et al., 2018; Ho et al., 2022). For migrant care workers, cognitive reframing strategies and personality traits that encourage the build-up of community support networks (e.g. religious groups) are elevated as crucial coping mechanisms. While it is unlikely that migrant women who participate in these social support activities will claim they are not important, the reality is that these group efforts emerge because of enduring structural violence of the global care economy: precarious immigration status, wage theft, continuous work

without overtime pay, inadequate rest, social isolation, and more egregious violations. In labor migration, which includes state-endorsed recruitment agencies, scholars have noted that resilience discourse serves a legitimizing function of allowing sending/receiving state governments and ordinary citizens (domestic employers) to frame migrant care workers as a naturally available and free, self-replenishing labor force - stoic, hardy, and culturally fit for a life of altruistic sacrifice - while deferring questions of structural reform (Nazareno et al., 2022). The "hyper-resilient maid" is, in this reading, someone who is recruited to perform ideological work for a global care market that exploits them, absorbing the contradictions of care systems that are chronically underfunded (Chee, 2020). Resilience is not a neutral description of events but a technology of governance (govern-mentality) that relocates the costs of precarity to the worker's emotional state (Chang, 2018). Her adaptive response becomes the object of study while what she needs to adapt to, and why, disappears from view.

As the topics of economic longevity, urban sustainability, advanced digital technologies (ADTs), and aging population concerns take over research priorities, for MCWs, resilience is still an awkward elephant in the room. The majority of studies discussing resilience as a neoliberal ideology reside in popular psychology and/or economic labor migration policy, where the dominant tendency is to start with a celebratory stance toward this bounce-back imperative. As an essentially contested term, resilience's rise especially since the 1980s onward has now blended into any and every aspect of modern life, including but not limited to environmental planning, community disaster preparedness, political regimes, and perhaps the most significant of all, the empowered self - marketed in an array of "self-care" service industries. My current focus is not to elaborate on the travelling, sprawling applications of resilience at mostly state policy levels, but to flesh out the concept's work of everyday structural violence enacted in interpersonal realms, with the foreign 'maid' withstanding the worst of market innovation. Existing studies have made significant strides in illuminating the structural conditions under which care work and professions are organized globally, including but not limited to frameworks of care chains, labor market segmentation, and legal while unjust policy regimes that govern migrant mobilities. Yet a striking gap in knowledge projects persists: the affective, embodied, and temporal dimensions of the aging process as lived by migrant care workers themselves - one generative domain of investigation to deepen critical perspectives of resilience.

The ethnographic work of Megha Amrith, Parvati Raghuram, Carol Chan, and Vanessa Banta in particular offers theoretical and empirical resources, informed by critical care geographies and feminist intersectionality, of situated accounts of mobile caregivers. From their scholarship, we gather that racial hierarchies rooted in slavery and colonialism underpin contemporary care arrangements and working encounters, shaping questions of competence, recognition, skills, and communication between those who provide and receive care. For migrant care workers, age is a Janus-faced identity. In eldercare, for instance, senior women are often preferred due to longstanding associations of age with wisdom, patience, and understanding. But it is common for receiving destinations to impose age criteria on employment eligibility, such as directly in the case of Singapore (forced return at 60 years), and indirectly in most other cases such as Taiwan (maximum stay duration of 14 years). The migrant woman, although aging herself, is not allowed to embrace popular notions of retirement as slowing down to enjoy the fruits of one's labor. Because foreign 'maids' are positioned as economic agents who are "only here to work", as bodies whose value is perpetually contingent on their perceived productivity and fitness, the majority have not accumulated significant savings or retirement 'nest eggs' that allow a comfortable exit. This instrumental calculus of profiteering recruitment agencies and state policy regimes continues to intensify as migrant care workers age (Chan, 2023b), necessitating careful documentations of what it means to grow old while laboring abroad on temporary contracts. Drawing on critical social gerontology, transnational ageing, and migration studies, it becomes apparent that ageism is a majorly (or relatively) under-recognized outcome in care organization.

Relatedly, life course perspectives of aging MCWs' concerns remain understudied even as the states that employ them are experiencing rapid aging-related population crises. Megha Amrith's (2026) documentation of Filipina domestics and nurses abroad, in this sense, exposes the profound disjuncture of restrictive immigration regimes: migrant care workers' own understandings of older age and life transitions are often misaligned with the state's rigid chronological criteria on which border protection decisions are made. Aging workers are made to suffer not just economic but emotional and unquantifiable consequences. Many migrant care workers are denied pension entitlements by both sending and receiving states despite decades of care labor to sustain their populations, as their aging bodies are rendered "unproductive", indeed now "useless", to overriding economic logics. Researchers keep finding evidence that migrant women approaching the end of their contracts are expected to take on individual responsibility for their retirement security through financialised self-management because state-based social protection does not exist (Banta, 2025). For the field, "who cares for the carers?" is a question with no expiry date. Care ethics and practice, in the first instance, is subject to change. Compared to one-off surveys that predict on migrants' behalf about their future, an alternative might be to demand of our own inquiries a longitudinal focus on storied narratives, participatory approaches, and long-term observations that allow for affect, subjectivity, and time to enter the conversation. More than narrating stories of resilience, I follow colleagues who call for "standpoint theory as a critical feminist lens to center the lived experiences" of participants, with the hope of shoring up "their voices within the literature" (Presto, 2025, p. 16).

Vanessa Banta's recent study shows that financial literacy programs targeting Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) deserve to be read more critically and apprehensively rather than taken at face value (as an empowering tool). Informed by a case study of the civil society organization IGNITE, and interviews with 30 migrant workers based in Dubai (including former/current IGNITE trainees, participants, and volunteers/mentors), Banta shows that while financial literacy programs are framed as acts of care, these initiatives obscure, and enable, the structural conditions of possibility that reproduce migrant indebtedness. Instead of an individual problem to resolve (by building resilience skills), the migration-development nexus should be understood as a broader problem for migrants to jointly confront, and to construct collective action against. While OFWs anywhere in the world experience such violations of human rights, the Dubai context is notable for its *kafala* sponsorship system that ties a migrant's right to residency to an employer, resulting in acute vulnerabilities. In conventional neoliberal self-help materials, migrant debt is framed as an issue of personal irresponsibility rather than recognized as structurally manufactured. Its moralizing discourse is not neutral, but rather infused with gendered racialized assumptions in normative virtues like altruistic love, sacrifice, and delayed gratification, which are intended to prescribe prudent financial behaviors that depoliticize the root causes of migrant debt (Banta, 2025). Rather than addressing state violence, financial literacy programs locate indebtedness in an alleged lack of financial maturity, exemplified in everyday practices of conspicuous consumption: purchasing electronics, dining out, and taking up recreational hobbies and/or leisure pursuits. Ironically, remittance sending - a compulsory legal obligation for most OFWs - is constructed as "too much kindness" that must be curtailed and managed. Under conditions of state abandonment, these financial literacy program messages function primarily to impart responsibility to workers for their own futures, given the Philippine state's limited reintegration support and the UAE's exclusion of migrants from basic civic welfare protections. Popular invocations of cultivating an "entrepreneurial mindset", such as being "flexible" and immersing oneself in the Dubai landscape, are hardly relatable to OFWs who are already absorbing unpaid overtime and extreme isolation. NGOs face a common predicament: by individualizing debt, these

organizations miss an opportunity to be a site for critical consciousness raising, collective advocacy, and transformative action.

The overriding theme of Banta's study is a longstanding one familiar to applied care work studies scholars: institutional responses and calls to reform, by and large, mirrors the broader patterns of offloading market risk onto individual workers rather than sincere systemic changes. The irony of aging migrant care workers who spend their lives caring for others, yet receive no care in return at the end of their occupational tenure, runs across informal homes to formal institutional settings. This article is one among numerous recent takes on a long unfolding pattern, which should provoke further conversations aimed at troubling 'care' itself. Ethically, for host societies, there is a primary obligation to grapple with the political and economic conditions of the 'good life' that create migrant vulnerabilities, not simply train them to endure efficiently. Focusing on middle-aged or older migrant domestic workers in Singapore and Hong Kong, Megha Amrith finds that the financial education courses offered to those near retirement do allow for an important experiment in independent agency "with financialisation now becoming a visible option" (Amrith, 2026, p. 167). Yet, in a neoliberal world where "there is no alternative", financialised modes of thinking, self-identity, and future making must also be unpacked and understood as more complex than just money considerations, embodying internal conflicts, moral turmoil, and unpredictable subjective "existential questions relating to home, belonging, and emotional connections to kin" (Amrith, 2026, p. 167). Keeping in mind diverse and dynamic versions and visions of care (Raghuram, 2019), especially ways of living in Global South communities that are less well-represented, "financialisation is just one option among a range of ways for thinking about the future" (Amrith, 2026, p. 170). As such, common migrant-turned-entrepreneur stories cover up for state irresponsibility over migrant wellbeing.

The mainstream tendency to prioritize workforce supply/demand, labor market integration (assimilation), and economic policy outcomes, while important, tends to gloss over the root issues of sustainable care planning: migrant care workers are not merely nameless inputs into national care systems, but aging persons who navigate deeply unequal geographies of belonging, security, and futurity. The quality of their lives in our homes directly impacts the quality of care that elders can receive – not an easy admission for the average citizen to make. Alternative accounts that demand "calling for state accountability" (Amrith, 2026, p. 176) are well and alive among all age groups, and are not mutually exclusive with financialised modes of thinking. When scholars invoke 'bounce-back' resilience, the implication is typically that MCWs will do psychological coping work to endure social injustice and enhance labour market integration (Garabiles et al., 2022; Ha et al., 2018; Ho et al., 2022). This linear view of resilience, however, clashes with the actual conditions of care work. This review does not imply that resilience is without analytical and practical value, but that its foundational assumptions and impact on migrant populations warrant careful scrutiny. The popular adoption of resilience as a positive attribute, in that sense, does not serve everyone in equal measure. Now, I turn to another urgent but underrated task for scholars in care work studies: viewpoint diversity.

3. Diversifying 'care' with intersectional perspectives

In the scholarship on migrant care work, care has become an increasingly prominent analytical lens for making sense of global structures in labor migration. Calls to complicate, diversify, and trouble Eurocentric foundations of care itself, as a broad umbrella concept, are still needed. The work of Parvati Raghuram in particular offers one of the most sustained, generative engagements with the limitations of how frameworks of "care" are operationalised. The term's geographically restricted scope and insufficient attention to intersecting axes of power and privilege, including gender, race, class, and colonial history, shape how care is defined, valued, and distributed. In an important intervention in *Global Networks*, Raghuram (2012) argues that applications of care chains frameworks to other sites have too often imported foundational assumptions that are taken for granted in specific Global North colonial histories of welfare and domestic labor. Typically left unexamined are locally specific circumstances and socioeconomic conditions that can be drawn upon to reflect on how, and in what ways, might "care" be distinctive "here" and "over there", in the eyes of migrant care workers (Amrith, 2023; Tungohan, 2019). Varied genealogies of care shaped by post-war modernization, such as colonial missionary activity, indigenous caste hierarchies, religious institutions, and plural family structures, can produce (in)formal arrangements of care that differ from those in receiving destinations (Raghuram, 2012). For foreign 'maids', economic frameworks of labor supply/demand usually override subjective discussions of the possible meanings of care. But MCWs are living influencers of care's configurations and active participants in reconfiguring care's subjective contours, bringing more than "just work" to the table. Policy practice has not contended substantially with the fact that when care workers migrate, they carry formative understandings of care shaped in particular places, informed by specific family cultures/social upbringings, that will not necessarily align with the (instrumental and marketized) norms of care they encounter in receiving destinations.

For many overstretched MCWs, a common complaint is an employers' insensitivity to the need for a clear job scope, namely regarding primary responsibilities. In any given household, what is a domestic worker's top priority? Ideally, employers would specify what these most critical concerns are, and what can be left undone (or done by employers themselves). Cooking, cleaning, and caring are inseparable in practice. But where eldercare and childcare needs coexist, for instance, it is necessary to receive clarification on what one should focus on; caring for an elder while being expected to handle cleaning chores with food preparation is beyond reasonable boundaries. While not every worker faces this struggle, where there is a lack of task allocation hierarchy, labor politics discussions are thrown out of the window. The most painful situations involve simultaneous childcare and eldercare demands, during which MCWs are not neutral providers but active participants in managing and negotiating care practice. Similar to how Amrith (2026: 170) unexpectedly came to focus on financialised modes of thinking, I did not expect to single out eldercare as a unique scenario (of double devaluation) warranting dedicated attention (Ng, 2023). But such decisions come from participants themselves who spoke as passionately about elder abuse/neglect as they did about human rights violations. After all, financialised modes of thinking (e.g. thriftiness) that are promoted to MCWs are "bound up with the existential questions relating to home, belonging, and emotional connections to kin …" (Amrith, 2026, p. 167), leaving much to be asked of the women's aspirations, hopes, and dreams.

Also looking at less common stories, Carol Chan troubles the category of "migrant broker", challenging its dichotomous "altruistic" or "predatory" framings. She follows two Filipina women in Dubai who actively look out for their 'sisters' (comrades), in the process blurring commercial and social boundaries of working relationships. Care and control are "intimately entangled" (Chan, 2023b: 5); the women choose to step in as ad-hoc intermediaries for their peers if they sense danger looming. The first woman, Marbeth, had followed her husband's mobile career and lived in various countries before landing in Chile, where she had now established middle-upper class status. She had come to act as an informal intermediary for new Filipina migrants, such as Flor, a younger woman, and Flor's other family members. Chan observes that "despite their class differences, Marbeth clearly was critical of broader structures of exploitation", and sought to minimize harm wherever possible. In the second case, Vivian was a small recruitment agency owner in Chile, having herself worked as a migrant domestic worker in the Middle East. Vivian had endured abusive employers before seeking help from her church networks in the community, where she met her husband, and understood that her labor rights had been violated. With his support, she set up an online business, now 'maid' agency, as an "intermediary between primarily Chilean employers and Filipina workers" – her main

priority is to ensure both parties are "happy" (Chan, 2023b: 13). In both cases, Filipina women take it upon themselves to look out for one another, circumvent state violence, and minimize risks.

Marbeth, for instance, "prepared Flor psychologically for the realities of being a migrant worker", i.e. "I assured her, I said, if you are only looking for a job, or you want money, I think you will be alright here" (Chan, 2023b: 10). She went out of her way to ensure that Flor was in safe hands with "decent" employers, but also called on her for help with house chores or other 'favours' when she could not get to them herself (e.g. after a medical surgery). This relationship, although offering both women peace of mind, is a complicated one that blends friendship norms with employer-employee dynamics. Similarly, as a recruitment agency manager, Vivian admits that "she prefers to hire women who are in the Philippines and with family needs" since they are likelier to be driven by desperation - "need the job and money more and will work harder" - and show up as more "exploitable" due to financial pressure (Chan, 2023b: 14). Vivian's advice to her juniors echo what others have found in pre-departure training programs, i.e. 'resilience training' (Chang, 2018; Chee, 2020). Filipina women, according to this logic, should not think about entertainment desires or leisure pursuits that interfere with an employer's demands, however unreasonable. As Vivian says, "Out of 100 Filipinas, about 30% will be problematic or stubborn … They want to work 10 h when the law says twelve … I tell them, remember why you came to Chile, to work, not for a boyfriend. You came for your kids. Remember that." (Chan, 2023b: 15). Existing laws on domestic work regulation, in that sense, are legal while unjust: staying at the level of performative lip service to respect domestic workers' human rights, but in reality, allowing ordinary citizens (employers) total authority. In a world where the Global South woman's resilience is 'free' (taken--for-granted), creative "risk-avoiding strategies (such as advising workers or selecting employers) ultimately do not change the fundamentally exploitative situation" that MCWs find themselves in (Chan, 2023b: 16). As such, recognizing care as political, scholars look to more "less common stories" (Chan, 2023b: 15).

For Ethel Tungohan (2019, 2023), feminist care ethics, including intersectionality approaches, have contributed to an increasing emphasis on context and relationality in practice – the central role of feelings and emotions (Montsion, 2020). Nonetheless, subsequent reviews find a dominant tendency to privilege the host society's framing of care needs/wants over migrant perspectives. Geographical histories that inform what counts as good care, who is responsible for providing it, and through what institutional means are left unaccounted for, warranting comparative engagements with non-Western ethical traditions, e.g. Ubuntu or Confucianism (Raghuram, 2016). Raghuram illustrates that racialized care is risky; gender has been a privileged analytic through which care ethics has been theorized, such that colonial legacies of race segregation that shape valuations of care work(ers) are not discussed (Raghuram, 2019). First, the competence required (skills) to give care is not self-evident but geopolitically coded: whose skills are recognized, validated, and rewarded is shaped by histories of white supremacy and global racial hierarchy of professional knowledge. Second, both the recognition of care needs and the ability to articulate these are unevenly distributed, as historically dispossessed and racialized populations are less likely (and less able to afford) to see themselves as entitled to care or to communicate these rights to institutions. Third, and most importantly, given these inequities, care for racialized workers is an inherently risky affair that justifies special affirmative action. This review foregrounds the reality that "care" is not a pre-given, stable, or universal object of study. We have to ask not only who cares, but also: under what conditions; what care is taken to mean in any given context; whose professional and personal histories have shaped care's meaning; and which life experiences of power and privilege influence how care is understood. Below, I discuss another emerging domain of study: feminist digital activism.

4. Finding hope in online spaces

Interest in digital labour and platform governance in migration regimes have risen exponentially. Since the 2010s, scholars have already noticed that ongoing changes in artificial intelligence (AI) innovation, ADTs, and ICTs are an undeniable game changer for migrant rights advocacy (Madianou, 2016). Compared to previous times where offline gatherings had a larger role to play, digital activism and speaking out online have become popular modes of resistance among diverse migrant communities. It bears reiterating that the foundational injustices of state-endorsed regimes of domestic servitude cause the most structural violence for foreign 'maids' who cannot access basic social protections. As such, scholars argue that for MCWs, digital participation is a site of struggle in its own right (Chee, 2023; Ng, 2025; Sawai & Bose, 2020). While the smartphone revolution has expanded migrants' access to shared knowledge networks, including Facebook groups that provide real-time updates on labor regulations, peer counselling services, and resources for navigating abusive employment conditions, digital tools do not have an automatic emancipatory effect. In most Southeast Asian host societies, migrant domestics are legally required to reside with their employers who have an unquestioned authority over their daily whereabouts, routines, and mobile phone usage. In multiple studies, scholars find that an employer's willingness to allow a 'maid' to call their loved ones and how much internet access their device can access, is the most decisive factor. In this context of micromanagement, positive outcomes from digital participation are not equally available to migrant domestics, and is itself contested terrain where confinement and surveillance mechanisms prevail. Such current tensions in the backdrop of technological progress are crucial to investigate as digital platforms emerge across multiple care labour migration settings (Kantachote, 2023; Mintarsih, 2019).

Challenging the conventional "visibility bias" in social movements scholarship, some studies show that when a migrant's capacity to mobilize in public is severely curtailed, online spaces allow the marginalized to speak truth to power. One case study by Kayoko Ueno and Daniele Belanger (2019) examines how Filipino FDWs in Singapore used a Facebook group supported by an NGO (ANGELICA) for social activism. The authors looked at more than 126 000 Facebook posts over three years and in-person interviews with roughly 100 workers, alongside participant observation, to show that the "backstage" nature (isolated) of domestic work enables rather than hinders online activism. In Singapore, as is mostly the case worldwide, FDWs are excluded from national labour laws (Ng, 2025; Sawai & Bose, 2020). Government restrictions on civil society are overbearing even for local citizens, with foreign workers forbidden from public demonstration activities. Online spaces, in this context, are comparatively more accessible and appealing than visible public protest, and if acted upon in great enough numbers, do result in some tangible change. For instance, ANGELICA mobilized over 1000 FDWs to sign a petition for a window cleaning ban after years of cases of workers falling to their deaths. In 2012, the Ministry of Manpower issued a press release to restrict employers from requiring FDWs to clean high-rise windows without adequate safety measures, with penalties of up to ten grand and/or 12 months' imprisonment. Also, ANGELICA has been raising awareness of illegal placement fee charges by unethical recruitment agencies. Through offline legal action supported by NGO partners, the group managed to secure nearly 7 million pesos in compensation for over 224 workers in early 2015 (Ueno & Bélanger, 2019). This case study is not intended to sugarcoat the structural violence and harsh realities that foreign 'maids' face, but rather to note that the private, informal nature of social media platforms can generate meaningful, actual change even under authoritarian constraints. In fact, most FDWs join online support communities for practical information and social connection, but the blending of labour rights content with peer support – through the sharing of creative work, humorous posts, short videos, and photo essays – lowered the psychological barriers to participation even for those who

did not identify as activists.

As short-form videos have gained considerable popularity over older social media platforms, TikTok in particular has evolved into a site of resistance. Liberty Chee's study coded 250 videos from 2021 to 2022 from migrant domestic workers in the Gulf Region by searching primarily under the hashtags #shagala and #kadama (meaning "servant" or "housemaid"), combined with geographic terms (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Dubai, and Kuwait). She found that migrant domestics enact humor, dance, play, and satire alongside informative videos on practical advice on issues that "only shagala can understand" (Chee, 2023, p. 609). TikTok functions as a "third space" (Chee, 2023, p. 611) of neither the private household nor the formal public, but a liminal digital zone where counter-conduct is imagined, enacted, and circulated. Because the *kafala* system imposes physical isolation, TikTok videos are not a concrete substitute for genuine political participation. Still, online presence represents creative acts of practicing alternative forms of visibility that force viewers to contend with the reality of state violence (Chee, 2020).

Relatedly, scholars have framed FDWs' user-generated content as constituting feminist imaginaries of just care, which are ideological interventions that, while unable to enact structural policy change, do still articulate an alternative ethics of care rooted in MCWs' lived experience of 'maid' culture (Ng, 2025). The literary dimensions of such activism, documented in Mintarsih's (2019) account of The Voice of Singapore's Invisible Hands (a Facebook-based literary collective of Indonesian FDWs), underscore that creative storytelling is a significant, albeit understudied, register of migrant digital activism. Similarly, Shiho Sawai and Christine Bose found that FDWs in Hong Kong draw on Islamic frameworks of self-representation on Facebook to reclaim a sense of dignity and complex belonging that exceeds their working identity. Smartphones, however, are still a double-edged sword for FDWs in the structural conditions of domestic servitude (Sawai & Bose, 2020). FDWs value digital tools for maintaining connections with kin abroad, timely information sharing, and informal solidarity networks. But the phone is also where employers extend their surveillance and demands, exacerbating FDWs' already on-demand status. As such, researchers ought to exercise caution before claiming an emancipatory function of ICTs, given that while technology has no doubt been helpful for maintaining communication, mobile devices can also worsen gendered obligations of transnational mothering (Presto, 2025, p. 4). The root power asymmetries of the live-in regime are not dissolved by digital participation; in many cases they are reproduced within it.

5. Conclusion: looking ahead to futures of care work

As a whole, the field has witnessed gradual shifts from structural and political economy approaches to affective, relational, and subjective concerns of feelings/emotions and migrant agency. The threads of care ethics, relational care, migrant agency, resilience, ageing, and digital activism are not stand-alone concerns but interconnected priorities for futures of care work. This review's themes point to several overarching priorities for further research: foregrounding migrant perspectives in theoretical knowledge; adopting longitudinal/life-course frameworks that account for how care ethics and identities shift across time/space; and building plural lenses of "care" that take seriously the formative experiences that migrant caregivers carry. I prioritize these focus areas over a historical overview of the field's development (see Nguyen et al., 2017; Williams, 2018). As a narrative rather than systematic review, my contribution is admittedly shaped by a reliance on English-language scholarship and a relatively focused set of authors who are bound by a geographical emphasis on particular countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Gulf nations. This area emphasis reflects the scholarship's inclinations. Looking ahead, future research should examine transnational ageing in the context of MCWs' lived experiences, including but not limited to: long-term settlement, pension rights, retirement pathways, and return migration. The exponential rise of AI-enabled healthcare infrastructures will also be a key research priority.

Rather than writing with economic goals in mind, my intention for the present discussion is to read between the lines of care labour migration where subjective ethics and practice reside, and where complex, messy realities of emotions unravel. As neoliberal teachings become the standard curriculum, individual responsibility to bounce back, recover, and even thrive in adversity is celebrated. But at what costs to the world's care systems? MCWs are showing, with steadfast fortitude, the need for life course perspectives that take age seriously by recognizing elderly needs in population welfare; eldercare is not disconnected or separate from but embedded in social reproduction. Connected stories of migrant activism demonstrate that especially aging women endure the most of states' exploitation of low-cost temporary workers, with many having no secure old age future in sight despite spending their productive years contributing to the host society. Digital platforms and social media, especially in recent years, have ushered in undeniable positive changes to the social activist landscape. While MCWs have been a beneficiary group of technological advances, it is still the case that root power asymmetries in national live-in employment regimes for migrant domestics are unresolved. As such, the rise of digital platforms should not be mistaken as evidence of actual progress, which must lie in concrete policy change and migrant testimonials.

Care is a sprawling, multifaceted domain that makes the stuff of political worlds. In advanced capitalist societies, it is common for consumer citizens to take for granted a swathe of conveniences that the modern marketplace offers. Indeed, when it comes to hiring migrant domestics, overstretched working professionals often cite a pervasive sentiment: "we have/there is no choice". But everyday life, with its banal affairs and mundane preoccupations, are not simply small tactics that have insignificant impact on public policy. What ordinary citizens do to make ends meet, including the choices and sacrifices made, comprise a comprehensive feedback loop of consumption trends in eldercare planning. Governments draw on such metrics and trends in negotiations of family care vis-a-vis household duties to arrive at diagnostics of a citizenry living in a milieu of "there is no alternative". In other words, the resilient 'woman-carer' model of family care that depends hugely on immigrant women from the Global South (Yeoh et al., 2021), is influenced by ordinary folks' agency as much as top-down directives. Today's industrial behemoths should not forget what their post-war scramble for the "good life" has necessitated for less fortunate others. For foreign 'maids', racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and class discrimination are personal. The innocent question "Why can't you just hire a nanny?" assumes that the person being asked has no qualms with buying into the exploitative care work regimes of modern slavery. So, we are left with an old question that bears continuous inquiry: Can we live with a liberalism that cannot account for its moral comfort with national capitalist dispossession, at home and abroad?

Care is a collective issue of equity and justice. Taking people's stories seriously takes care beyond its economic dimensions, into subjective realms of (un)freedom in labour migration. Migrant care workers, for the most part, go about their lives with an ardent desire for reducing (and eventually removing) the unquestioned, harmful authority that ordinary citizens have over their lives. My review hones in on situations where care's embodied, emotional aspects spill over in unforeseen directions, filled with corporeal realities enmeshed in market structures. The larger hope is to preserve knowledge on the temporality of how care is endured and passed on. My review is not all-encompassing in scope, but several empirical domains of investigation are key for the field's future trajectory: marriage migration/reproductive labour; au pair/live-in domestic work; transnational grandparenting/informal childcare; student migration/incidental care work; agricultural/seasonal labor with care dimensions; and digital care work. These suggestions are not exhaustive but each involve subjective domains of care work/professions that will become ever more timely concerns.

Data availability statement

The study relies on previously published literature. The data analysed is from existing studies in the cited References list.

Ethical approval statement

Ethical approval is not applicable to this manuscript.

Declaration of the use of AI

The author did not use artificial intelligence to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

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