



# ► Research Brief

3 December 2023

## Disability rights and domestic work in ASEAN

### Key points

- Migrant domestic workers are providing direct care to persons with disabilities.
- The full independence and autonomy of certain persons with disabilities may depend on the quality of the care that is provided to them.
- Direct care to persons with disabilities is classified internationally as medium-skilled work.
- Only a small proportion of migrant domestic workers receive any training related to their work with persons with disabilities.
- In the absence of equal labour rights and social protection, most migrant domestic workers in South-East Asia do not have access to comprehensive social protection in the event they acquire a disability.
- This brief recommends that Association of South-East Asia (ASEAN) Member States implement the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) enabling full social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities. Towards this, decent working conditions, as well as skills training and recognition, should be ensured for migrant domestic workers and other care service providers.

### Introduction

At the opening of the 2023 session of the [UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#) in Geneva, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities warned that countries must prioritize working conditions, skilling and career opportunities for carers – or else disability rights will be in jeopardy. The quality of care provided to a person with disabilities can be critical to their social and economic inclusion. Providing adequate care requires that carers have decent working conditions that recognize the demands and skill of the work, including through decent wages and sufficient rest. Across South-East Asia, much care to persons with disabilities is delivered within the home by a migrant domestic worker.

Whilst many of these workers have developed the skills necessary to provide care, they are rarely met with decent working conditions, often working long hours, on call throughout the night, for less than the minimum wage.

In 2023, the ILO TRIANGLE in ASEAN programme conducted a study about the skills and working conditions of migrant domestic workers in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, the findings from which were published in the report *Skilled to care, forced to work? Recognizing the skills profiles of migrant domestic workers in ASEAN amid forced labour and exploitation*. This study asked 1,200 migrant domestic workers about care to persons with disability and about protection if they themselves acquire a disability. The study also surveyed 600 employers. This brief is based on the study's findings.

## Migrant domestic workers provide care and support to persons with disabilities

A higher proportion of employers of domestic workers in Malaysia reported that domestic workers were providing care services to a person with disabilities in their household at 27 per cent, compared with 25 per cent in Singapore and 15 per cent in Thailand. A higher proportion of men domestic workers provide care services to a person with disabilities (40 per cent, as opposed to 20 per cent of women domestic workers). Thus, in an otherwise feminized sector, women are more likely to be domestic workers overall (90 per cent), but men are more likely to be domestic workers in households requiring care and support to a person with a disability.

### Medium-skilled work

Domestic work is often dismissed as “unskilled work”. The [International Standard Classification of Occupations \(ISCO-08\)](#), however, classifies Home-based Personal Care as medium-skilled work.

#### ► What’s needed? Home care skills required in qualifications

Personal hygiene	Feeding	Dressing
Physical mobility and exercise	Changing bed linen	Washing clothes and cleaning living quarters
Transportation in a wheelchair	Keeping records on client care	Giving information and advice on topics such as nutrition, hygiene or exercise

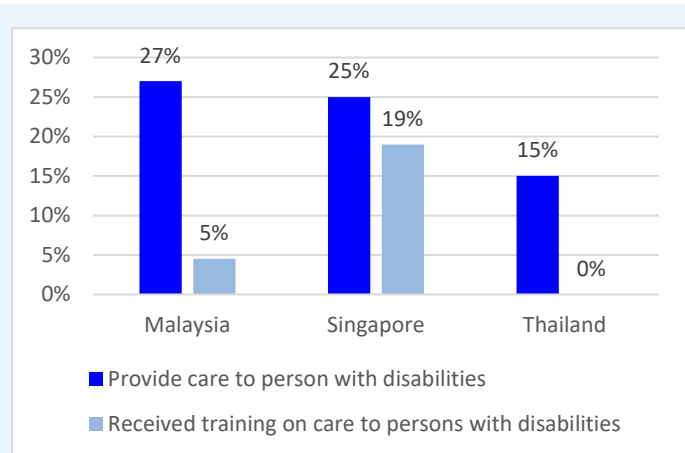
Selected tasks per ISCO-08 Skill Level 2 Home-Based Personal Care worker

Recognizing this work as medium-skilled work is significant because the knowledge and skills required for occupations at this level often involve specialized vocational education or on-the-job training (ISCO-08), ideally including trainers with lived experience of disabilities. However, because domestic work is often considered unskilled and informal, migrant domestic workers are often working in a medium-skill role without any formal training or recognition of their skills, and without the compensation associated with work at this skill level.

While a minority have received skill training, most domestic workers learn most care skills through on-the-job training, including from employers with disabilities. Workers also share skills and learning with each other, over Facebook or other social media, in-person informally or through domestic worker associations. Domestic workers giving each other advice on healthcare, recipes for specific care needs, and detailed technical skills advice for care.

In some instances, care work is recognized with higher pay. Workers engaging in care are paid more in Malaysia and Thailand than those employed for cleaning and cooking. In Malaysia, the average pay for domestic workers in care (encompassing elderly care, care to persons with disabilities and healthcare) was 17 per cent higher and in Thailand 27 per cent higher. In Singapore, migrant domestic workers were not paid any more for work in care.

#### ► Migrant domestic workers engaged in care services to persons with disabilities and those who have received training on this type of care, %



Note: Data on “providing care to person with disabilities” from the study’s employer survey; data on “received training on care to persons with disabilities” from the worker survey.

## Migrant domestic workers as recipients of care

In the event that a migrant domestic worker acquires a disability due to an accident or injury at work, social protection is not consistent or comprehensive, despite the fact that the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) calls on ratifying member States to ensure domestic workers have rights equal to other workers with respect to occupational safety and health measures (Art 13) and social security (Art 14). Migrant domestic workers in the region report disabilities stemming from violence and harassment at work, as well as injuries related to working at heights and exposure to harsh chemicals, among others.

- In Malaysia, migrant domestic workers have access to the benefit schemes of the Social Security Organization (SOCSO), which include temporary and permanent disability benefits only where such disability is the result of an employment injury. The survey found only 17 per cent of migrant domestic workers were signed up to SOCSO.
- In Singapore, it is mandatory that employers provide domestic workers with personal accident cover of at least 60,000 Singapore dollars (US\$ 44,600) per year, which pays out compensation to the worker in the event

of permanent disability that occurs within 12 months of an injury.

- In Thailand, migrant domestic workers are not eligible for Thai Social Security and its disability coverage. Those employed by a service company or agent have access to benefits for workplace injury under the Workmen's Compensation Act B.E. 2537 (1994).

## Recommendations

1. Enable full social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities and implement the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by all ASEAN Member States.
2. Ratify the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and ensure domestic workers enjoy rights at least equal to those of other workers, including pay and social protection.
3. Strengthen and make accessible skills recognition and training opportunities for domestic workers that consider years of experience.
4. Consider capacitating and including persons with disabilities as trainers in care work skills training programmes.

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This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and not necessarily the views of the Australian Government or the Government of Canada.

Supported by:



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54394/IFDN9872>