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Chapter 1

COVID-19 and Foreign Care Workers in Japan: Impacts on the Labour Market and the Wellbeing of Filipino Care Workers

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Abstract

The objectives of this study are twofold. First, it examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market for care workers in Japan in general and foreigners in particular. Second, it analyses the effects of the pandemic on the work challenges and stress of Filipino care workers in long-term care facilities in the country. While the pandemic did not affect the demand for care workers as much as in other sectors, increases in supply due to job switching and government schemes to attract new entrants, re-entrants, and current care workers resulted in a slight alleviation of labour shortages. However, the need for more workers in the sector remains strong. In addition, recent trends in the recruitment of foreign care workers to Japan have seen a shift in the source of foreign workers due to Japan's border closure from overseas to foreign workers already in Japan, such as former technical intern trainees and students who are hired as specified skilled workers, and permanent and long-term residents who have shifted into care work due to unemployment.

Drawing from the results of an online survey (n=105) in January 2022, the report finds the following: (1) while Filipino care workers have perceived a strong impact of the pandemic on their well-being, they have coped quite well in the past two years; (2) the main work-related concerns are worry and anxiety at work, busier work schedule, lack of hazard pay, and fear of being infected with the virus; (3) workers with nursing degrees had a higher tendency to think about quitting their jobs; (4) the top three sources of support are fellow Filipino co-workers, family members, and Japanese employers or staff in charge of migrants; and (5) the top reasons for not seeking support based on visa category are lack of time due to busy schedules for permanent residents and care work

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students, while the perception that the supporter would not understand them was also ranked high by care work students. The pandemic heightened isolation, stress, and socio-psychological challenges for foreign care workers and opened up issues that further challenged the issue of retention of care workers. For Filipino care workers, the options range from returning to the Philippines to working in the next destination, to switching to another job such as English language teaching within Japan.

As the economy improves and the demand for workers in other sectors increases, more incentives and support programs must be implemented to retain workers in the sector. In addition to the direct recruitment of care workers overseas, hiring foreign residents in Japan is one way to address this shortage. These findings suggest an important employment dynamic among foreign workers in Japan who have shifted to care work because of job insecurity in other sectors and border closures caused by the pandemic. However, whether the objective is to attract or retain care workers, and whether the care worker is foreign or local, their common concerns, namely low compensation and poor working conditions, must be immediately addressed to sustain labour needs during and even more importantly, beyond this pandemic.

Keywords: Filipino care workers, COVID-19, wellbeing, labour market, Japan

Introduction

Two years have passed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Being both a health and an economic crisis, it has serious implications, not only for the general labour market conditions but also for the labour markets in essential occupations, such as care work. Assessing and understanding these impacts are necessary to better address human resource issues and concerns during the pandemic and, perhaps more importantly, in the post-pandemic era.

Maintaining the well-being of essential workers in the medical, health, and care sectors is also an immediate concern that needs to be addressed during the pandemic. As essential workers, care workers suffer from additional stress as they experience overwork, higher exposure to the virus, and stigmatization (see, for example, Bell, William, and Beaglehole, 2021). Filipino care workers in Japan are no exception and could have experienced further stress due to intercultural differences in working and communication styles between Japan and the home country and the everyday challenges they face as migrants.

The objectives of this study are twofold. First, it investigates the impacts of the pandemic on the labour market for care workers in Japan in general, and specifically foreign care workers, using official statistics issued by sector stakeholders. Second, it attempts to capture the effects of the pandemic on the wellbeing of Filipino care workers and how they cope with them. An online Google survey was conducted in January 2022 (n=105) on this issue through snowball sampling from a network of Filipino care workers and Japanese employers in Kansai and Kyushu regions.

Our research study yielded the following results. First, during the pandemic, the number of employees in the care work sector increased due to job switching from other sectors and the government's various schemes to attract and maintain workers in this sector. On the other hand, labour demand did not fluctuate as much as other sectors. As a result, a chronic shortage continues. Second, due to the border closure, most foreign care workers hired during the pandemic were sourced from Japan. They comprised former technical trainees and students whose visas were converted to specified skilled worker (SSW) visas and permanent/long-term residents. Third, the Filipino care workers' self-assessment in the survey revealed that the impact of the pandemic on their welfare was relatively strong, but they coped well after two years. Fourth, worry and anxiety at work, busier work schedule, lack of hazard pay, and fear of being infected with the virus are the main sources of work-related stress. Fifth, compared to Filipino non-nursing graduates, graduates of the four-year nursing degree in the Philippines seem to have a higher tendency to think about quitting their current job. Sixth, the top three sources of support are fellow Filipino co-workers, family members, and Japanese employers or staff in charge of migrants; and lastly, the top reasons for not seeking support are lack of time due to busy schedules and the perception that the supporter would not understand them.

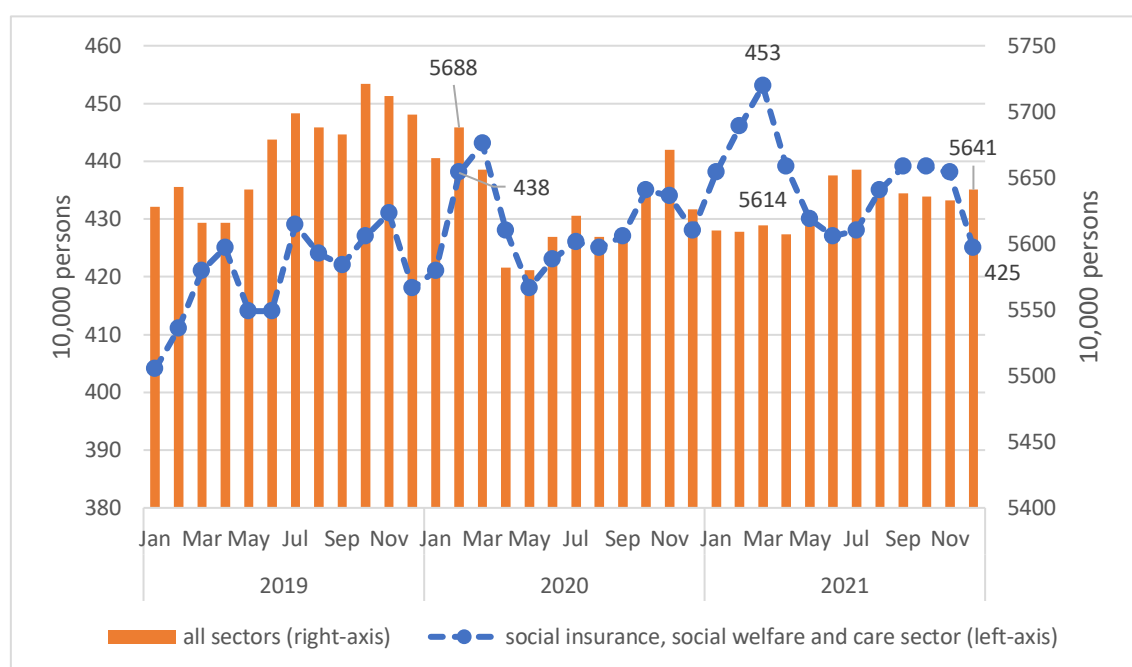
The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next two sections, the impacts of the pandemic on the labour market for care workers in general (Section 1) and foreign care workers (Section 2) are examined. Section 3 introduces the methodology, while Section 4 presents and analyzes the survey results. The last section (Section 5) summarizes the implications of the study.

1. Japan's care labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic is not only a health crisis but also an economic crisis. This section introduces several labour market indicators to demonstrate that the impact is small and that the chronic shortage of care workers continues to the present.

The changes in the number of employees (full-time and part-time workers, excluding executives) for all sectors and the social insurance, social welfare, and care sectors (in which the care work services sector belongs) in Japan from January 2019 to December 2021 are illustrated in Figure 1.1.⁵ This shows that the number of employees in all sectors fluctuated in the past two years and have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The unemployment rates, however, could have been higher if not for measures adopted by companies, such as shortened or decreased work hours, keeping their workers and temporary closing of business, and by the government, which introduced economic support programs such as a subsidy of up to 60% of the workers’ salaries and payment of a fixed amount of subsidies to restaurants, businesses, part-time workers, and self-employed workers (for details, see, for example, the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), n.d. and discussion below).

Figure 1.1 Number of employees (except executives) in all sectors and in the social insurance, social welfare and care sector (Jan. 2019 - Dec. 2021, in 10,000 persons)



Notes: The data include both regular and irregular workers but exclude executives.

⁵ In Japan’s statistical data, “employee” is defined as “persons who work for wages or salaries as employees of companies, associations, governments or unincorporated enterprises and are classified into “long-term employee,” “temporary employee” and “daily employee” according to the status in employment (Statistics Bureau of Japan website, n.d.).

Source: Extracted from Statistics Bureau of Japan (2022) 'E-Stat Database Labour Force Survey 2-1-4 Employee by major industry [12th and 13th revision industrial classification] - Whole Japan, Monthly Data'

According to the Labour Force Survey, the most hard-hit sectors in terms of the decrease in the number of employees between February 2020 and December 2021 were the construction, wholesale, retail, accommodation, eating, and drinking services sectors (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022). This was due to the decrease in labour demand, as many Japanese people stayed at home, and establishments temporarily closed or shortened their operating hours. As the economy recovers in the "New Normal," the level of employment appears to be slightly improving, while the unemployment rate remains high at 2.7% in December 2021 (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2022).

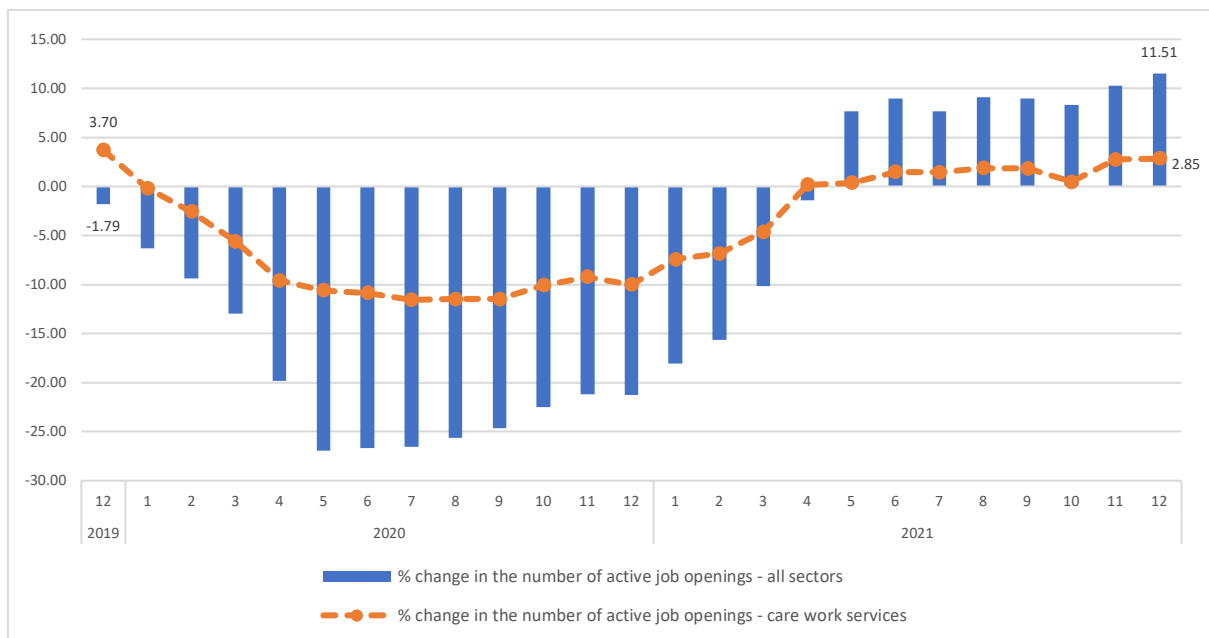
Meanwhile, immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic in Japan around the end of February 2020, the number of workers slightly increased in the social insurance, social welfare, and care sectors but subsequently decreased (Figure 1.1) as many employees resigned voluntarily due to fear of infection, family obligations (mothers need to take care of children and older relatives when schools and daycare centres suspended services due to COVID-19), and heavier and more stressful work environments as new protocols must be observed (Yamamoto, 2020). The number of employees began to increase from around May 2020 until it reached the highest level of employed persons in history at 4.53 million persons, in March 2021. Since then, the number has fluctuated, and the latest data (December 2021) indicate that 4.25 million workers are employed in the sector, which is comparable to the pre-pandemic value. However, it is 280,000 less than the peak in March 2021, suggesting that there is a large potential pool of local workers, and the bigger problem is retaining them in the sector.

To what extent did the demand for care workers change during the pandemic? Figure 1.2 illustrates the monthly year-on-year percentage changes in the number of job openings (%), a proxy for the change in demand for all sectors and the care work services sector.⁶ A negative value indicates a decline in the number of job openings compared to that in the same month of the previous year, while a positive value means a year-on-year increase in the number of job openings. Visual inspection confirmed that during the first year of the pandemic, the number of job openings for all sectors, including care work

⁶ To eliminate the influence of seasonal factors in the changes, the % change was computed on a year-on-year basis, using the value in the same month of the previous year (for example, the value for February 2020 is the percentage change from the value in February 2019).

services, had a year-on-year decline. The changes have been positive for all sectors since around the middle of 2021, following the relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions and a gradual increase in consumption, particularly in the wholesale, retail, entertainment, and leisure sectors, until the last quarter of 2021 (Mitsubishi Research Institute, 2022). However, compared to all sectors, the job openings in the care work services sector registered generally smaller fluctuations, suggesting a relatively weak labour demand response to the pandemic, and that the care work sector is not as sensitive to economic shocks compared to other sectors combined.

Figure 1.2 Monthly year-on-year % change in the number of active job openings for all sectors and in care work services sector (Dec. 2019 - Dec. 2021)



Source: Compiled from Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) (n.d.a) ‘Employment Referrals for General Workers’ various years.

What could explain for the minimal decrease in the demand for care workers despite the increase in the number of tasks of care workers due to COVID-19 protocols? Two informants, a human resource manager for a group of nursing care facilities (Mr. H, Osaka, male, 40s) and a head of a nursing care facility (Ms. Y, Kyoto, female, 50s), noted that the priority was not hiring additional staff for many nursing care facilities, but how to keep their facilities COVID-19-free. Given the urgent need to train current workers with COVID-19-related tasks, they did not have the time or resources to train new

workers. They also argued that it would be ineffective to look for additional workers because their staffing needs even before the pandemic were still unmet.⁷

There are also reasons for the business aspects of this sector. The small increase in the number of job openings is partly due to elderly daycare centres, which are usually affiliated with nursing care homes, stopping regular operations for fear of cluster infections. As a result, care workers assigned to daycare centres were transferred to nursing care facilities, filling in the required workforce. The cost-cutting efforts of the employers in this sector during the pandemic was also another reason stated by Mr. H and Ms. Y. With the decline in revenues due to the closing of daycare facilities and cluster infections, and additional COVID-19 related expenses, facilities could not afford to employ more workers (Kaigo HR, 2021). There are also testimonies that nursing care facilities' recruitment activities, such as facility tours and visits to training centres, were halted, and prospective new workers and re-entrants postponed their job hunting in March–May 2020 (Japanese Council of Senior Citizens Welfare Services, 2020).⁸

The fact that the demand for care workers did not substantially change also suggests that the attrition rate for current care workers is remarkably low, although there were reports of resignations initially (Kaigo HR, 2021). The government has played a considerable role in maintaining workers in the sector. As an incentive, it introduced a bonus scheme for those who worked for at least ten days from April to June 2020. This was set at 200,000 yen if there was a case of COVID-19 infection in the workplace and 50,000 yen if there was none (CB News Management, 2021). Furthermore, the national government has raised the salary of care workers by three percent (around 9,000 yen) from February 2022 (Kyodo News, 2021).

Job switching contributed in the alleviation of labour shortage during the pandemic. Many workers, especially in restaurants, hospitality, leisure/entertainment, and other service sectors, found jobs in care work which is considered one of the two highly preferred sectors to turn to (the other one is IT) (Kajimoto, 2021). This is because it is stable and allows the worker to be employed without any experience, regardless of age. To encourage workers to enter the sector, the government introduced two loan schemes, in which new entrants and re-entrants do not need to pay the loan as long as they remain working in the sector for two years. The first one is the “reemployment preparation loans

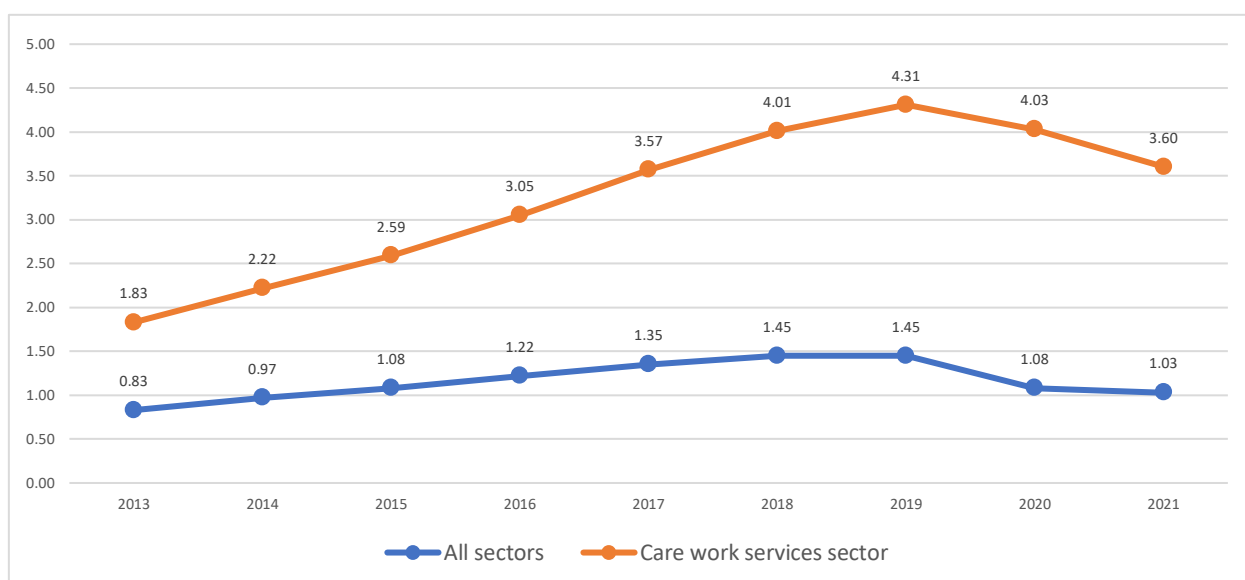
⁷ Interviews with Ms. Y, head of a nursing care facility in Kyoto (August 2020) and Mr. H., human resource manager of a group of nursing care facilities in the Kansai area (September 2020).

⁸ These data are not reflected in the job openings-to-applicants ratio, which is calculated based on data gathered from public employment offices.

program” (*Saishushoku Junbikin Kashitsuke Jigyō*), which lends up to 400,000 yen interest-free to workers who had prior experience and training in care work. The second program is for those who do not have any experience in care work (job switchers), those who received training but have not yet worked, and those who have previously worked in the care sector without formal training. They were allowed to borrow up to 200,000 yen free of interest (MHLW, n.d.b). The money can be used to buy a bicycle or scooter, relocate near work, or pay tuition fees for care work training. Some local governments, such as Osaka Prefecture, have also strengthened their subsidy programs for those who want to study care work. Implementing these programs could be a factor that caused a positive change in employment in the sector (Figure 1.1).

To further capture the extent to which the pandemic has impacted on the labour shortage in the care work sector, we examined the changes in the active job openings-to-applicants ratio plotted below (Figure 1.3). The number of active job openings is a proxy for labour demand, while the number of active job applicants represents labour supply. It is an indicator commonly used in Japan to evaluate the extent of labour shortages. If the value exceeds 1, more jobs are available than workers who seek it, implying excess demand or labour shortage.

Figure 1.3 Active job openings-to-applicants ratio (all sectors and care work services sector, 2013-2021)



Note: The active job openings-to-applicants ratio is computed by dividing the number of active job openings with the number of active job applicants in the same period. The data are collected by MHLW from Public Employment Security Offices and thus exclude

those job openings and applications that are carried out directly by employers or through private placement entities.

Source: Compiled from MHLW (n.d.a) 'Employment Referrals for General Workers' various years.

Figure 1.3 illustrates that even prior to the pandemic, the value for the care work services sector was much higher than the average value for all sectors. The ratios peaked in 2019, at 4.31 for the care work services sector, indicating that there are more than four available jobs for every applicant in the care work sector, and only 1.45 in all sectors combined. During the pandemic, the values decreased for both all sectors combined and the care work services sector, indicating a slight alleviation of the labour market condition. However, the value for the latter is still high at 3.60, meaning it is more than three times as difficult to fill a position in the care work services sector compared to all sectors combined (at 1.03). There are also differences in the ratio across nursing care categories. It is the worst for home visit care, with about 15 available jobs for every applicant (NHK, 2020). This is because of the perceived higher risk of infection in private homes. Furthermore, foreigners who do not hold a certified care worker license, such as EPA certified care worker candidates, technical trainees, SSW workers, and care work students, are prohibited from working in home visit care.

In summary, the pandemic affected the labour market for care workers in three ways. First, the number of employees in the social insurance, social welfare, and care sectors registered positive increases in some months (periods) during the pandemic, reaching an unprecedented level a year after the outbreak. This can be attributed to the incentive schemes of the government to retain and attract new workers in the sector and a large pool of unemployed people in other sectors who switched to care work. Second, the number of job openings in care work did not fluctuate as much as those in other sectors, suggesting weak links between economic shocks and the demand for care workers. Third, the labour shortage in the social insurance, social welfare, and care sectors remains high and high employment levels may not be sustained in the post-pandemic period due to greater economic activities in other sectors. Given the weak ability of the local labour force to provide a stable source of care workers and the growing labour needs of this sector, recruiting foreign workers remains a viable option. During interviews with nursing care facility managers and other stakeholders, they affirmed the urgent need to employ foreign care workers, during and after the pandemic.

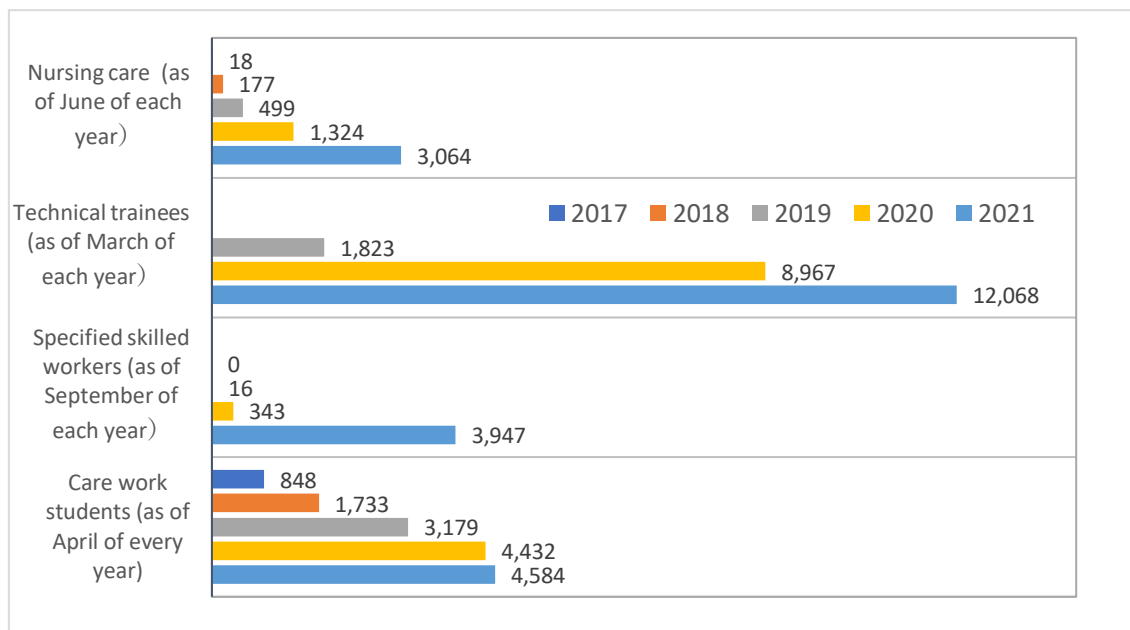
2. Recruitment and employment of foreign care workers to Japan during COVID-19

This section examines how the pandemic affected the deployment and employment of foreign care workers. Foreign care workers in Japan typically have the following visas: nursing care, designated activity (for economic partnership agreement candidates or EPA), SSW (category 1), and technical intern trainees (TIT). Permanent and long-term residents are also employed in the care work sector. Of these, the SSW, TIT, and EPA workers (arriving as candidates) are directly sourced overseas, while permanent and long-term residents (and naturalized citizens) are sourced from Japan. Many holders of the nursing care visa come as Japanese language students and later move into care worker training (vocational) schools. While studying, they are allowed to work for a maximum of 28 hours a week (and unlimited hours during school breaks) in a nursing care facility. Under the current system, they are granted the care work license and the nursing care visa even without passing the national licensure examination (Carlos, 2021).⁹

Figure 1.4 illustrates the number of foreign care workers in four categories: nursing care, TIT, SSW (all three are full-time workers), and care work students in the past five years. All these categories increased during the pandemic. Regarding the holders of “nursing care” visas, the increase was due to the influx of care work students from 2017 to 2019, when a certified care worker license was granted after graduating from a two-year course, even without passing the national examination. Of these four categories, SSW visa holders had the most remarkable jump in number, at 3,604 (or ten times) between September 2020 and September 2021 and 1,168 from October to December 2021. However, this number is still lower than expected (NHK, 2021). A breakdown in terms of country of origin and route is presented in Table 1.1, with the three major countries of origin being Vietnam (52.96%), Indonesia (11.13%), and the Philippines (11.13%). On the other hand, the number of TIT workers has increased by 3,101 between March 2020 and March 2021. Many arrived in Japan when the government temporarily lifted the ban on pressure from private stakeholders (Asahi News, 2021).

⁹ During the pandemic, there were also some stranded tourists and short-term visitors who found a job in a nursing facility.

Figure 1.4 Number of foreign care workers in Japan per visa category except EPA
(2017-2021)



Note: Nursing care visa scheme started in Sept. 2017, TIT (care worker) visa in November 2017 and SSW in April 2019. For care work students, the number is calculated as the sum of the number of international students who entered training institutions for certified care workers for the past two years. The data on the number of EPA care workers for the period are not available.

Data sources:

1. SSW - Compiled from Immigration Services Agency of Japan (n.d.a) '*Tokutei ginou zairyu gaikokujinsuu no kouhyou*' (in Japanese) 「特定技能在留外国人数の公表」 (various years)
2. TIT - Compiled from Organization for Technical Intern Training (n.d.) '*Gaikokujin Ginou Jisshu Kikou Gyomu Toukei*' (in Japanese) 「外国人技能実習機構業務統計 (various years)
3. Nursing care - Compiled from Immigration Services Agency of Japan (n.d.b) '*Zairyu gaikokujin toukei Kyuu touroku gaikokujin toukei Toukei hyou*' (in Japanese) 「在留外国人統計 (旧登録外国人統計) 統計表」 (various years)
4. Care work students - Compiled from Japan Association of Training Institutions for Certified Care Workers (n.d.) '*Kaigofukushishi Youseishisetsu he ho Nyugakushasu to Gaikokujin Ryuugakusei*' (in Japanese) 「介護福祉士養成施設への入学者数と外国人留学生」 (various years)

Table 1.1 Number of Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) Visa Holders Already Employed in the Care Work Section (as of Dec. 2021)

Country of origin	Total	Route		
		Testing	Former technical trainees in care work	Former EPA candidates
All countries	5,155	4,817	158	180
Myanmar	410	410	0	0
China	293	251	42	0
Indonesia	574	433	55	86
Nepal	400	400	0	0
Philippines	535	445	0	90
Vietnam	2,730	2,690	36	4

Source: Immigration Services Agency of Japan (n.d.a)

While there are no statistics available on the exact number, newspaper articles and interviews with stakeholders noted that most of these SSW visas were issued to foreigners who were already living in Japan, such as TIT workers in other sectors who were laid-off or whose contract had expired, Japanese language and vocational students who were forced to stay in Japan after completion of their studies, and tourists who were stranded in Japan due to the pandemic (Ito, 2021 and Jiji Press News, 2022).

Among the SSW visa holders, 4,817 or 93.44% obtained their visas by passing three tests, namely, the care work skill evaluation test, the Japanese language test for nursing care, and the general Japanese language test (Japan Foundation Test – Basis (JFT-Basic) or Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) Level N4), which are administered both in Japan and in the sending countries (The Philippines, Cambodia, Nepal, Indonesia, Myanmar, Mongolia, Thailand, and from 2020 January, India, and Sri Lanka) (Table 1). These computer-based tests are available in ten languages and more than 150 test centres all over Japan (Prometric, n.d.) several times a month, making it very accessible for foreign residents. As a result, there are now about 18,000 foreign residents who have taken and passed the tests in Japan, forming a large pool of domestically sourced foreign care workers (MHLW, n.d.c).¹⁰

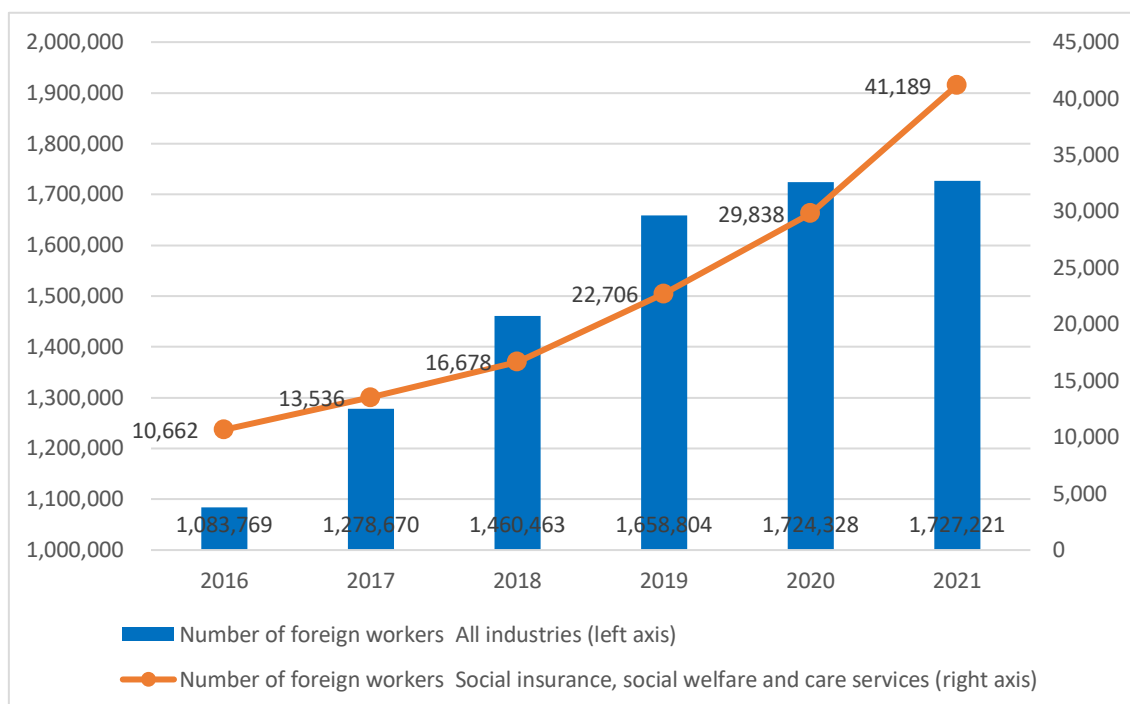
¹⁰ There are about 11,000 who took the tests at overseas test sites and passed. Compiled from MHLW (n.d.c) ‘*Kaigo bunya ni okeru tokutei ginou gaikokujin no ukeire ni tsuite*’ (in Japanese). 「介護分野における特定技能外国人の受入れについて」 Accessed on 27 February 2022. https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/newpage_000117702.html

Care work students also provided a reliable source of workforce during the pandemic. In AY2020, the number increased by 358 students (at 2,395) from 2019, while the AY2021 figure was lower by 206 students (2,189 or 10% of the total) (Figure 1.4). The course takes two years, and in AY2021, there were about 4,500 international students (first-year and second-year students) enrolled. Mr. H (human resource manager for a group of nursing care facilities in Osaka) mentioned that they are a stable source of labour because they rarely missed work as they needed to earn a living to support themselves and their families back home. However, compared to TIT and SSW workers, they have a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 since they commute to school and are exposed to more people every day. He was also worried that their number would not increase in AY 2022 because the Japanese language schools, the common entry point of many care work students, had significantly fewer students in the previous year.

Despite the conservative increases in the number of care workers in the four categories in Figure 1.4, the number of foreigners engaged in social insurance, social welfare, and the care sector registered a huge increase in the past two years (Figure 1.5). In 2020 and 2021, there were increases of merely 3.95% and 0.17%, respectively, for all sectors, while the social insurance, social welfare, and care sectors recorded considerable increases of 10.15% and 38.04%, reaching 29,838 and 41,189 foreign employees, respectively.¹¹ This can be attributed to the increasing number of permanent and long-term residents who shifted to care work. The revived interest in employing permanent and long-term residents is demonstrated by the sharp rise in the number and proportion of care work establishments that hired them, which was indicated in a survey conducted by the Care Work Foundation (2021) in October 2020.

Figure 1.5 Number of foreign workers in Japan (2016-2021, as of September of every year)

¹¹ The data were drawn from the 'Reporting System on Employment Situation of Foreign Workers' that requires employers to report, via online or through the public employment agency, all foreigners that are hired or who quit (MHLW, n.d.d).



Source: Compiled from MHLW (n.d.d) ‘Reporting System on Employment Situation of Foreign Workers’ (various years)

A significant number of new foreign workers engaging in care work comprise permanent and long-term residents who have lost their jobs in other sectors, particularly the manufacturing, accommodation, restaurant, and leisure/entertainment sectors. Interviews with some Filipino informants in Osaka and Kyoto who lost their jobs in hotels, restaurants, and *o-mise* (nightclubs and bars) found a job as care workers easily because the only requirement was ‘can speak Japanese’ and an introduction from care worker friends (interviews in June and December 2020). However, many of them think that it is not a job they want to do for a long time because of the low salary and physical and mental stress. Some of them also took up care work part-time to augment their earnings, while the number of hours in their primary job was reduced due to the pandemic.

For Filipino care workers, especially the permanent and long-term residents, who plan to leave care work, teaching English in a nursery or elementary school emerged as their desired alternative occupation. In August 2021, an association of Filipino English teachers in Nara organized a two-day training workshop for beginners and about half of the participants were permanent and long-term residents who were already engaged in care work. When asked about the motivation in joining the workshop, one participant (Ms. N, female, in her 40s) emphasized that while she loved taking care of the elderly, it

was tiring as it requires a lot of physical and emotional strength. She hopes to work in a nursery school and a nursing home part-time when she reaches her 50s.

In addition to the perceived difficulties in retaining permanent and long-term residents in the care work sector, the exorbitant cost of recruiting locals without any guarantee that they will stay in the job also drove many employers to hire employees from overseas (interview with the president of a sending company for TIT workers in care work, January 2022). Hiring may cost the same (or even less) for TIT and SSW workers, but compared to locals or residents, they tend to stay at least until the end of their contract and may extend their stay by converting to another visa category.

To illustrate, Table 1.2 indicates the payment scheme of a placement agency based in Osaka. The placement fee shouldered by the employer is about 2 million yen (about US\$17,320¹²) for full-time workers, with an average monthly salary of 338,340 yen (about US\$3,000) for a worker with nine years of working experience (MHLW, 2020). For other workers (irregular and part-time), it costs a fixed amount of JPY 600,000 (about US\$5,200). If the worker quits after three months, only 30% of the placement fee is refunded; after six months, the placement fee is forfeited. Facilities, especially those who need to comply with the staffing requirement, however, have no choice but to avail of this arrangement, even if it incurs higher costs than recruiting through public employment offices. Moreover, there is no guarantee that a local worker will stay longer than a foreign worker because as the Japanese Council of Senior Citizens Welfare Services (2020) reported, these agencies encouraged care workers to change their workplaces since the more often they do so, the higher the profits of these agencies.

Table 1.2 An example of a care worker placement scheme

Type of Employment Contract	Placement fee (to be paid by the facility/employer + 10% consumption tax)
1. Contract with no fixed term	50% of the annual wages
2. Fixed term contract	a. Fulltime worker - 50% of the annual wages
	b. Others (part time/irregular) 600,000 yen
The amount of refund in case the worker quits depends on the timing of resignation. For lump sum payment:	
1. Within a month from the first day of work – 80% of the placement fee	
2. More than 1 month to until 3 months – 30% of the placement fee	
3. More than 3 months to until 6 months – 10% of the placement fee	
4. After 6 months – no refund	

Source: Compiled from Nissonet (n.d.)

¹² Converted at the rate of 115.43 yen: US\$ 1 (25 Feb 2022)

In summary, the border closure to new foreign entrants enforced in Japan since March 2020 has temporarily slowed the recruitment of foreign care workers directly from overseas. Japanese employers have been forced to diversify their recruitment strategies, and foreign workers already residing in Japan have become an alternative source of care workers. In particular, TIT workers in both care work and other sectors who have finished their contract, language and vocational school students, and stranded short-term visitors have seen care work as a viable option to renew/extend their stay in Japan. Permanent and long-term residents who have been unemployed due to the pandemic have also seen care work as an opportunity to regain employment. However, employers still prefer foreign workers and plan to continue recruiting them beyond the pandemic because of the expensive placement fees for local workers (Japanese and foreign residents) whose retention in the care work sector is less guaranteed.

3. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of Filipino care workers

The second part of this report discusses work-related stresses and challenges Filipino care workers face in Japan during the pandemic. The data were obtained from the results of an online survey that yielded 105 responses. This section discusses the method, followed by an analysis of the results.

This report utilized the partial results of an online Google survey titled “Survey of Filipino Care Workers about their Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic” conducted over two weeks (January 12–28, 2022) through snowball sampling. Ethical permission for the survey was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Ryukoku University.

The demographic profile of the respondents included their visa type, employment status, care-worker license, educational background, and the number of years working as a care worker. There were 105 Filipino care workers included in the current study (12% men, 84% women and 3% who prefer to not identify their gender; 79% were single and never married, 21% were married; and 97% were in their 20s and 30s). They were categorized as having a nursing degree (nursing graduates, n=39, 37%) and those who had other degrees or none (non-nursing graduates, n=66, 63%), as well as according to the following four visa types: permanent residents/long-term residents/naturalized citizens and dependents (n=18, 17%), designated activities/nursing care (n=27, 26%), SSW workers and TITs (n=35, 33%), and care work students and others (n=25, 24%). Table 1.3 illustrates the four visa categories and accompanying

restrictions for each type. Categorizing them based on their nursing background and visa types allows for a richer understanding of their behaviour during the pandemic.

Table 1.3 Visa category and work restrictions

Category 1. Permanent residents, long term residents, naturalized citizens and dependents	Category 2. Designated activities/ nursing care visa holders	Category 3. SSW and TIT visa holders	Category 4. Care work students and others
No restrictions in terms of type of job/activities, type of employment and period of stay Allows family Integration	Some restrictions in terms of type of work/activity and period of stay Allows family integration	Some restrictions in terms of type of work/activities and period of stay Does not allow family integration	Some restrictions in terms of type of work/activities and period of stay Allows only up to 28 working hours per week Does not allow family integration



The pre-tested instrument comprised 20 questions, and the answers were processed using SPSS software. The questions ranged from the perceived effects of COVID-19 on their work and personal circumstances,¹³ what challenges they experienced, and how they managed these challenges and stresses.

The main findings from this survey are the following: (1) there is a strong perceived overall effect of COVID-19 by Filipino care workers in their work; (2) the main work-related concerns are worry and anxiety at work, busier work schedule, lack of hazard pay, and fear of being infected with the virus; (3) between nursing graduates and non-nursing graduate respondents, the former perceived a stronger impact of the pandemic on their work in terms of their desire to quit care work or switch to another profession; (4) the top three sources of support are fellow Filipino co-workers, family members, and Japanese employers or staff in charge of migrants; and (5) the top reasons for not seeking support based on visa category are lack of time due to busy schedules for permanent residents and care work students, while the perception that the supporter would

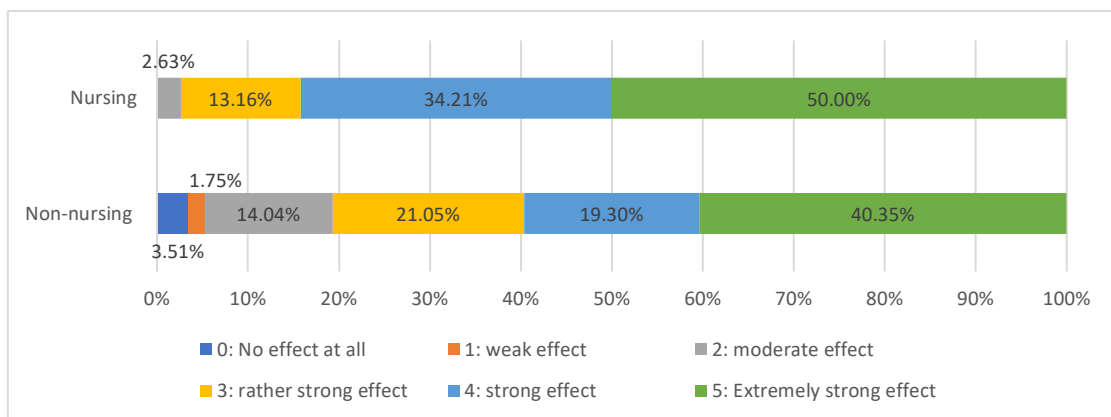
¹³ The respondents were asked to rate their responses on a Likert scale of 0 (no effect at all) to 5 (extremely strong effect).

not understand them was also ranked high by care work students. However, further econometric testing is necessary to determine whether the desire to stay or quit among nursing graduates is solely due to the effects of COVID-19 in their work or can be attributed to other factors that have long existed even before the onset of COVID-19 (such as dissatisfaction at work, inability to adjust with job responsibility and expectations, low salary, and desire to move back to the nursing profession).

3.1 Work-related impacts of COVID-19 and adaptive strategies

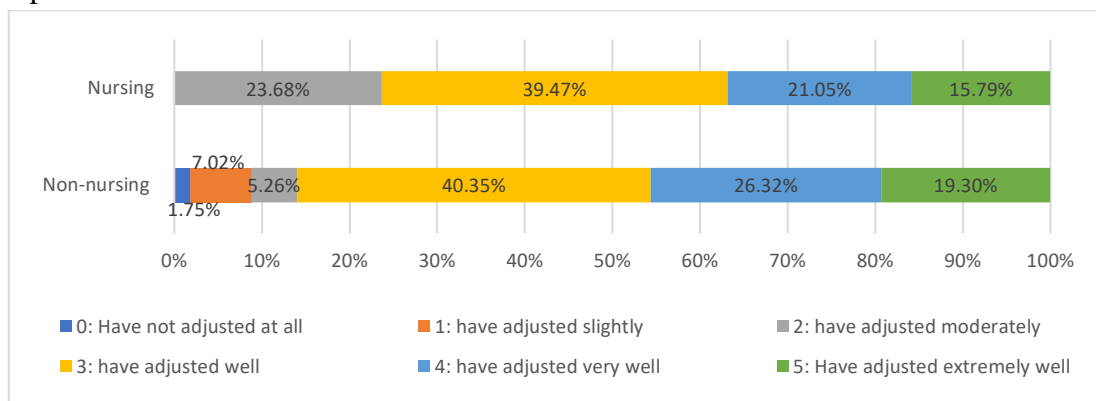
There is a strong perceived impact of COVID-19 for both nursing (97.37%) and non-nursing (80.7%) respondents (see Figure 1.6), but Filipino care workers in general rated themselves as having adjusted well from the impacts of COVID-19 in their work (see Figure 1.7) in the past two years since the onset of the pandemic.

Figure 1.6 Perceived impacts of COVID-19 among nursing and non-nursing respondents



Source: Authors' calculation

Figure 1.7 Perceived adjustment to COVID-19 among nursing and non-nursing respondents



Source: Authors' calculation

The perceived work-related impacts of the pandemic affected the Filipino care workers' social and psychological wellbeing as described by two care workers:

“Increased mental stress—of being exposed [to the virus], and lack of freedom outside.” - Ella, nursing graduate, certified care worker¹⁴

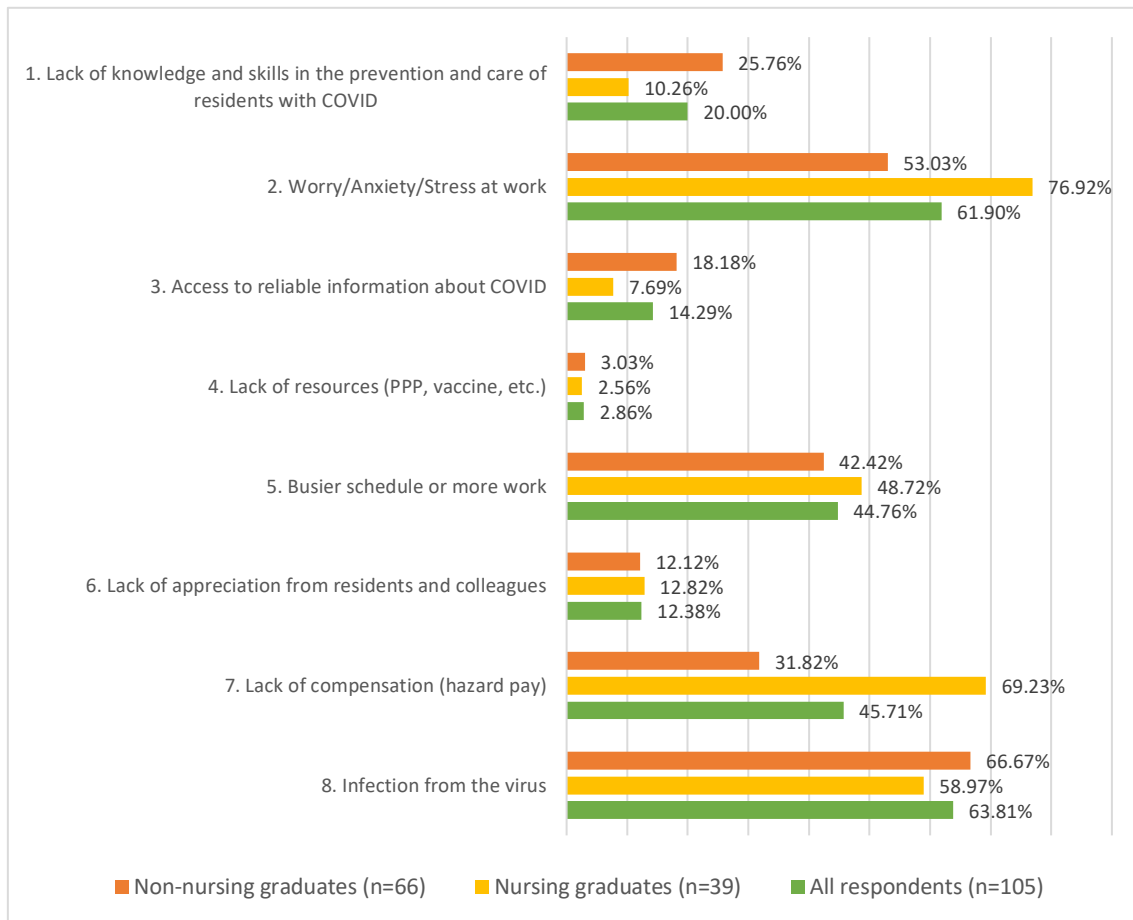
“More workload, more overtime, changes in the [shift and management] system, long hours of duty, no stress outlet.” - Leah, nursing graduate, certified care worker¹⁵

Worry, stress and anxiety, busier work schedules, lack of compensation, and fear of infection from the virus were the top four work-related concerns during COVID-19 (see Figure 1.8). Among the four categories of visa holders, anxiety and infection from the virus were consistently the top concerns (see Figure 1.9). When the specific impacts were categorized into (1) physical and mental health-related impacts, (2) impacts on relationships, and (3) impacts on career and job retention, more respondents appeared to have been most affected in terms of physical and mental health, body condition, and sleeping condition. These health issues might be similarly shared by Japanese care workers and should be addressed in government policies related to the working conditions of care workers in general.

¹⁴ Based on a focused group discussion on August 8, 2020.

¹⁵ Based on a focused group discussion on August 8, 2020.

Figure 1.8 Work-related concerns regarding COVID-19



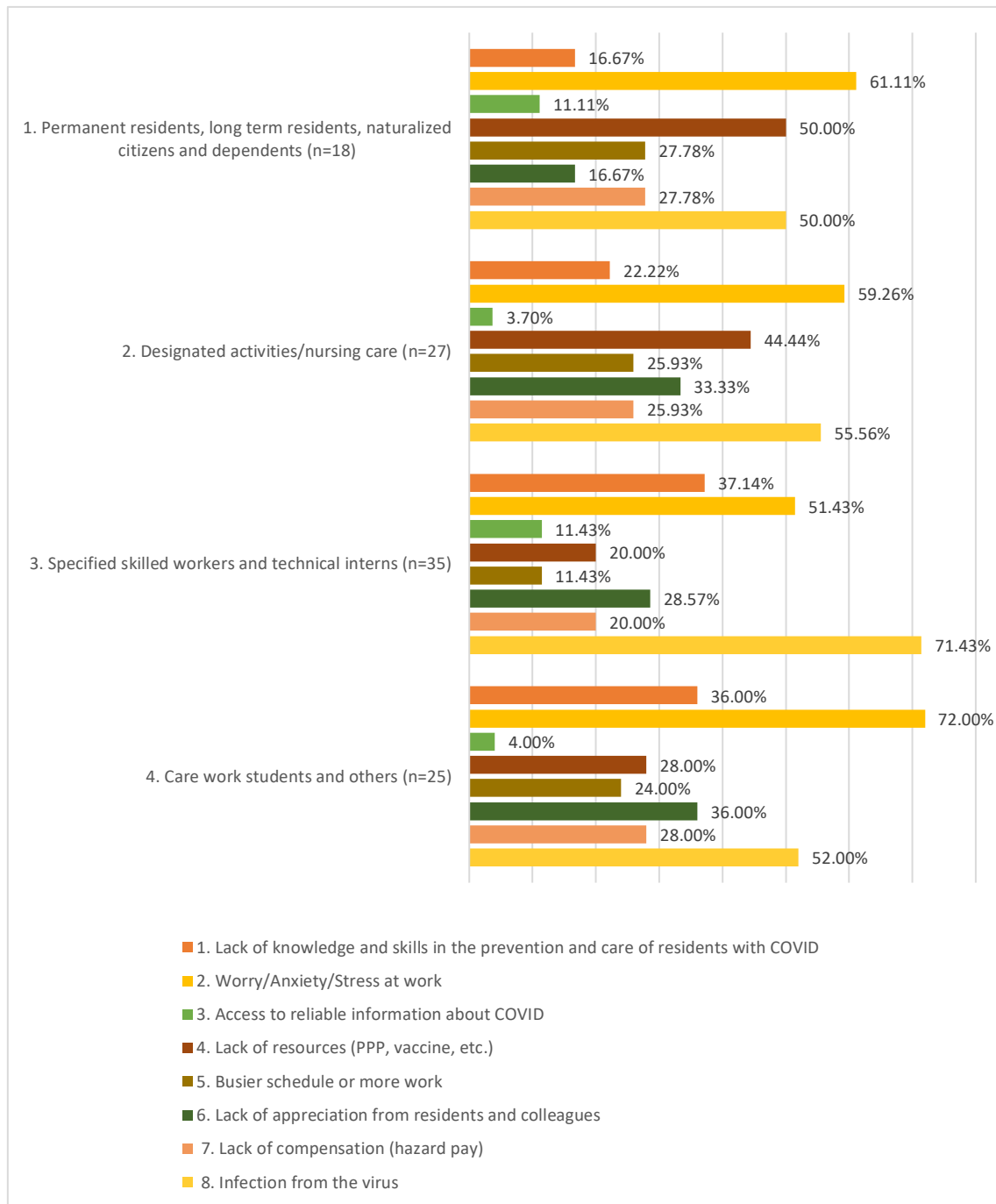
Source: Authors' calculation

The findings demonstrate that nursing graduates had perceived higher scores in terms of worry, anxiety, stress from work, and inadequacy of compensation (such as having no hazard pay) during the pandemic. In contrast, non-nursing graduates perceived higher scores in terms of being infected with the virus. This difference in the perceived stressors of the two groups reflects the impact of medical knowledge and nursing training in care work.

Nursing graduates with four years of medical knowledge and training in the nursing profession have more confidence in performing preventive measures in transmitting and contracting the virus, unlike non-nursing graduates who may feel more vulnerable due to their limited medical knowledge. Furthermore, it demonstrates that having such medical knowledge and training at the level of professional nurses causes more dissatisfaction among nursing graduates who can provide care based on this standard; they understand the pathology of viral infection and are thus able to respond

well in preventing viral transmission, which is beyond the level of care work. This potentially explains why they have a higher burden of concern when infection control measures in the workplace are inadequate and when they do not receive adequate compensation due to exposure to the virus brought about by their occupational roles and responsibilities.

Figure 1.9 Work-related concerns regarding COVID-19 based on visa category

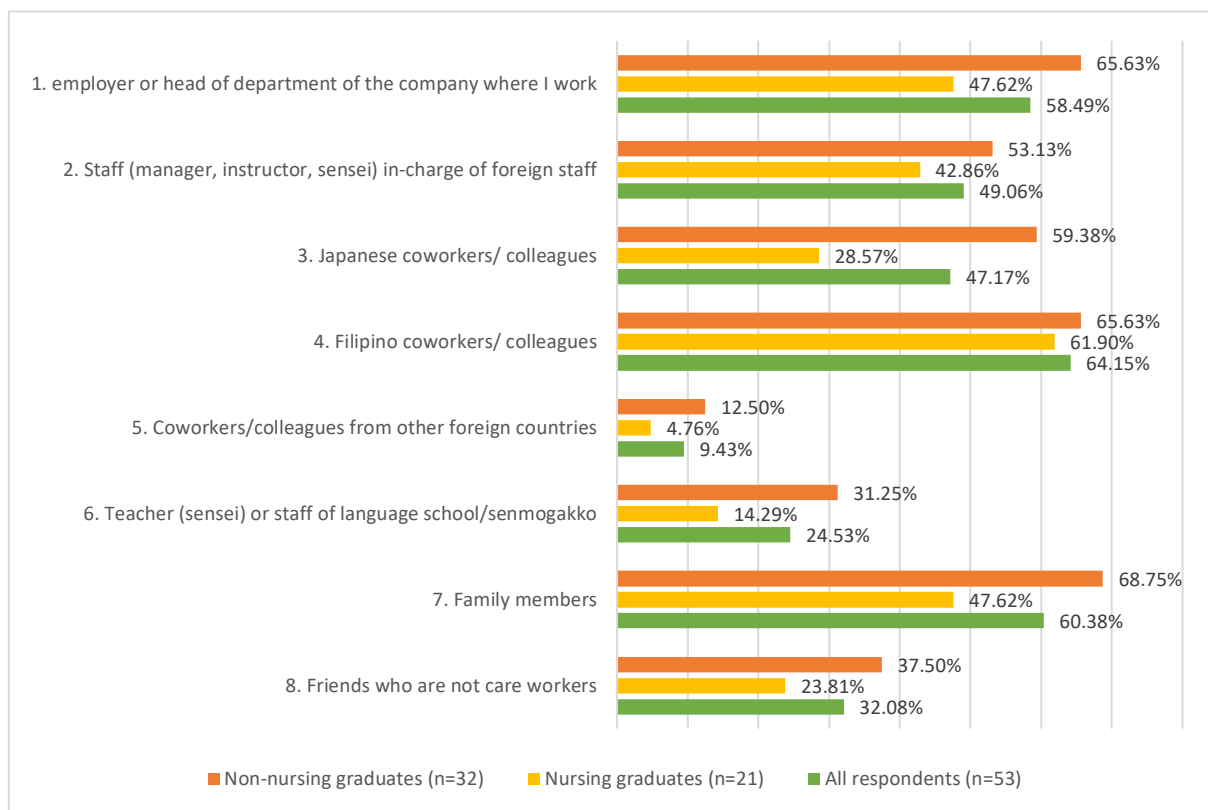


Source: Authors' calculation

On the other hand, a higher percentage of non-nursing graduates were more concerned about being infected with the virus, which may be attributed to their limited medical knowledge and skills in infection control and prevention.

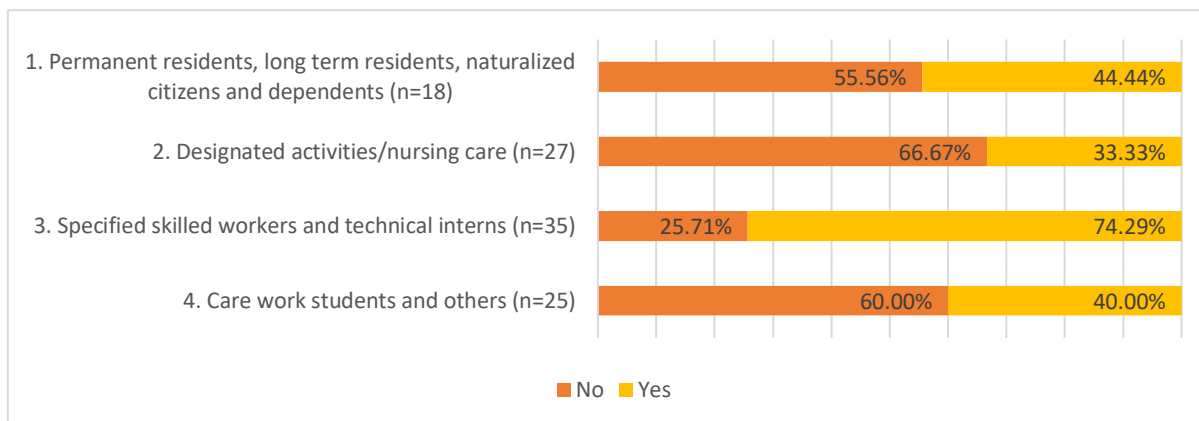
While both groups of care workers experienced stress at work during the pandemic, only about half of them sought help regarding the problems they encountered at work (Figure 1.10). In general, non-nursing graduates tended to seek support from more sources than nursing graduates (for example, among those who sought support from family members, 73.33% of the non-nursing graduates sought support, and only 42.86% of the nursing graduates did so). This finding is reinforced when support-seeking behaviour is analysed based on the visa category: SSW and TIT workers (mostly non-nursing graduates) had the highest proportion of those who sought support with work-related COVID-19 issues (see Figure 1.11). In addition, non-nursing graduates think that the support they receive is useful (half of the non-nursing graduates think that the advice or support they receive is useful all the time).

Figure 1.10 Sources of help/support sought by Filipino care workers



Source: Authors' calculation

Figure 1.11 Sought support about work-related COVID-19 issues based on visa category



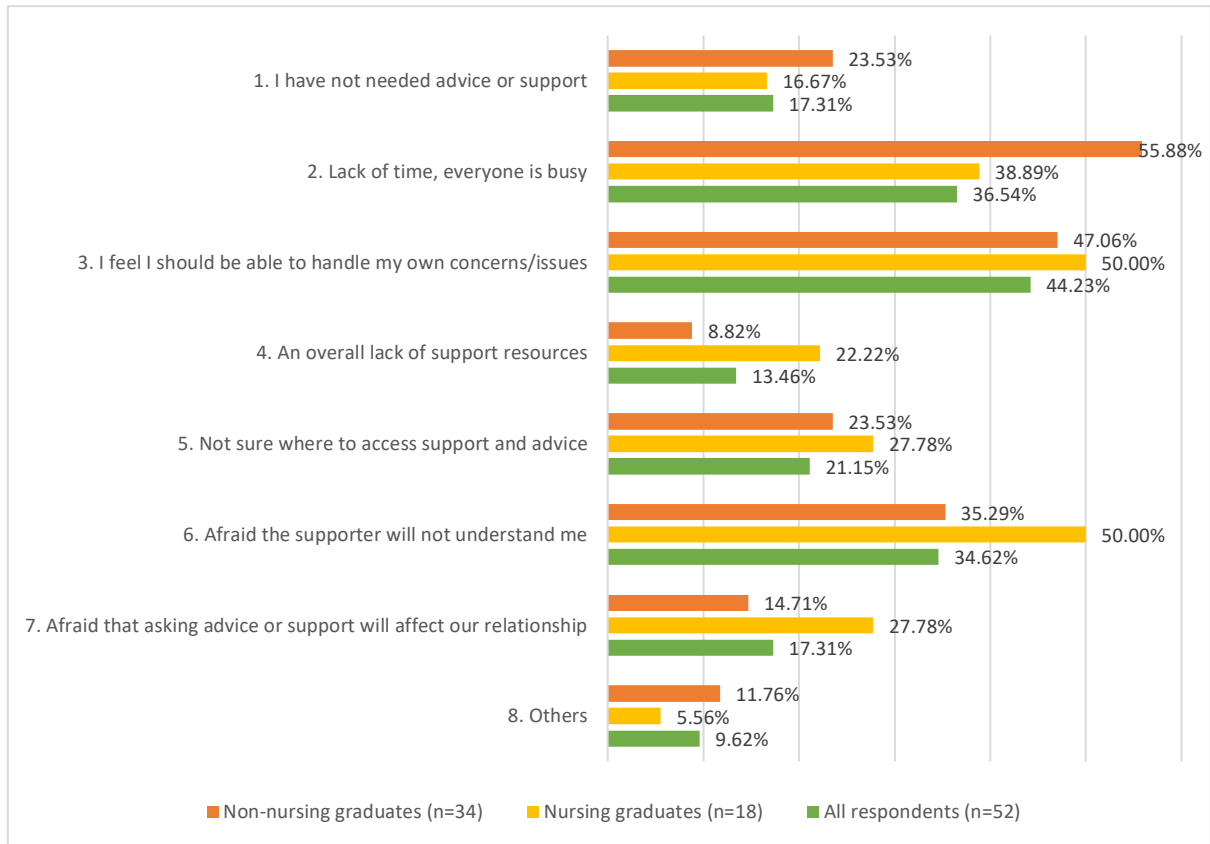
Source: Authors' calculation

The top source of help for the respondents is Filipino colleagues at work, followed by family members, and finally, their Japanese employers or staff in charge of foreign care workers. Filipino colleagues are the most preferred source of help, as co-ethnics share a common understanding of their issues from a socio-cultural perspective and have the comfort and familiarity of speaking the same language. Families become the second source of support although they may not fully understand the situation at the workplace, they can listen and provide comfort to the respondents.

The Japanese employers rank third in the source of support for Filipino care workers. While their Japanese employers, staff in charge of foreign care workers and Japanese co-workers may be the best people to understand the situation and provide appropriate structural and managerial support, language barriers appear to influence the ease with which they seek support from them. Moreover, reluctance to voice out difficulties supports the survey result regarding the perception that everyone is burdened by the additional work hours during the pandemic. For example, as described by Leonora, a Filipina care worker, she finds it more difficult to ask for days off during the pandemic.

“There is increased difficulty of asking for *yasumi* [rest day] given the current situation.” - Leonora, nursing graduate, certified care worker

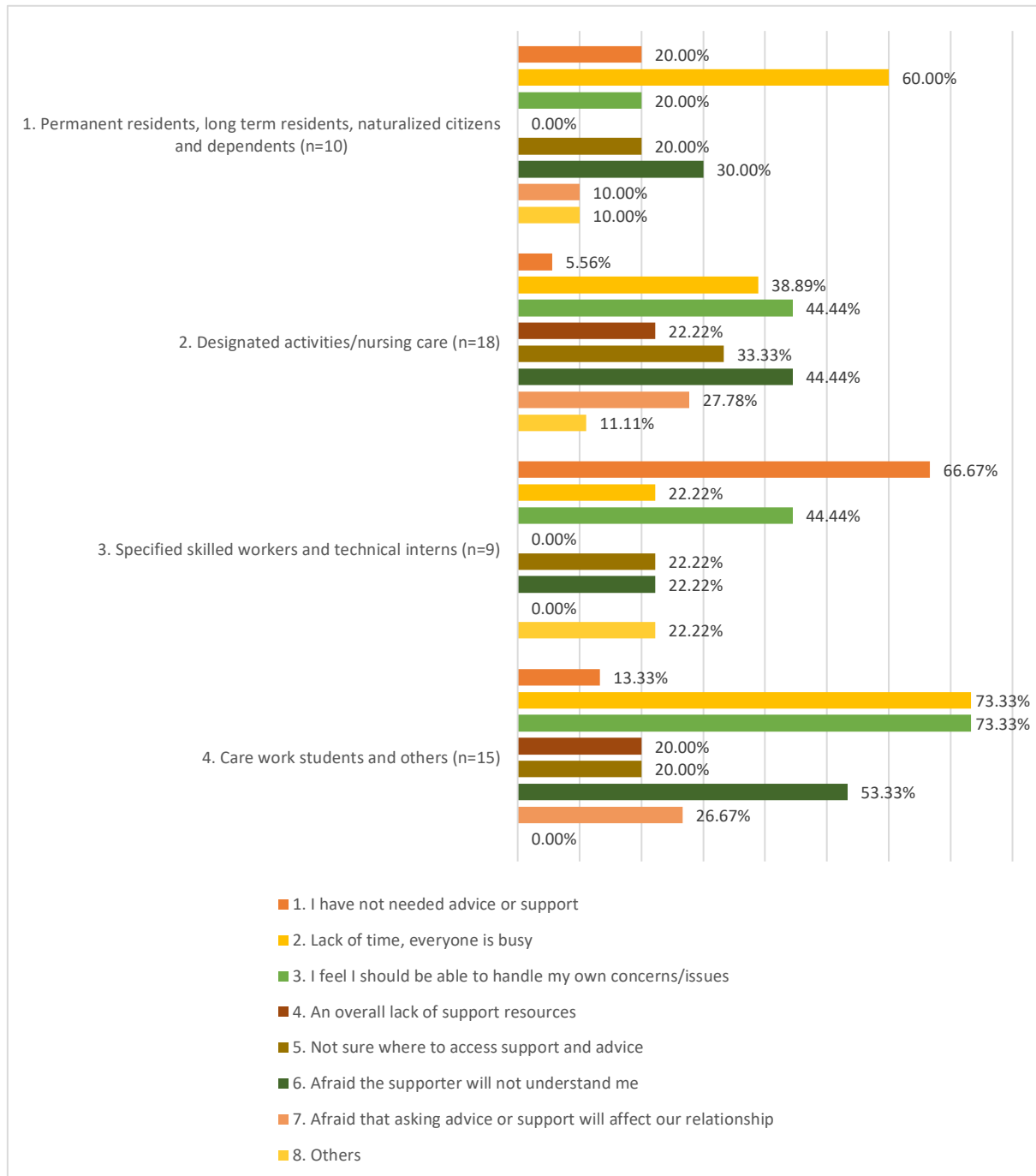
Figure 1.12 Reasons for not seeking support



Source: Authors' calculation

This also relates to why 20% of the respondents did not seek help due to thinking that they should be able to handle their concerns, followed by lack of time and opportunity to seek support from others due to busy work schedules, and finally, because of the thinking that they may not be understood (Figure 1.12). For the remaining 80%, finding ways to reach out to others to help with their concerns is important for their mental health and ability to stay in the care work sector. When we analysed the data based on their visa category (see Figure 1.13), the perception that everyone is busy and lacks time was perceived as high among permanent residents and care work students, while the perception that the supporter would not understand them was particularly high for care work students. These reflect the cultural barriers of support-seeking behaviours among Filipino care workers.

Figure 1.13 Reasons for not seeking support based on visa category



Source: Authors' calculation

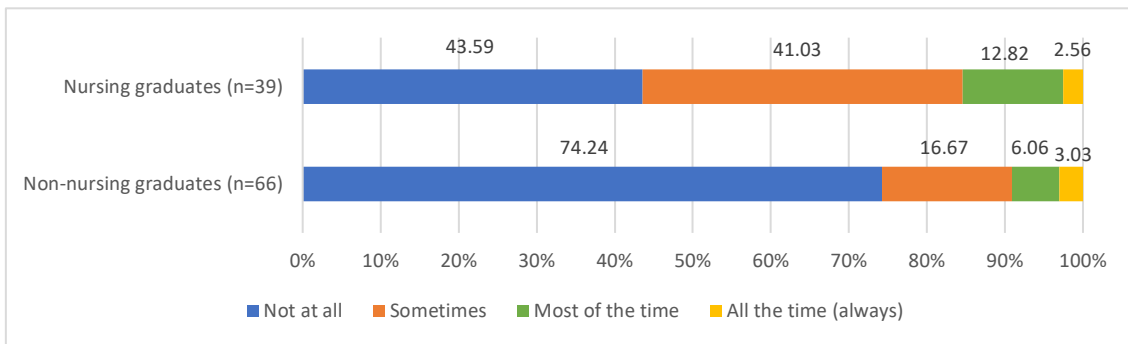
3.2 Nursing graduates and their tendency to stay or quit care work during COVID-19

Many Filipino nursing graduates have been coming to Japan as care workers since EPA was approved in 2008. Existing studies (Carlos, 2010; Ogawa, 2012; Ohno, 2012) of

Filipino nurses who became care workers have emphasized the tendency for this group of care workers to leave care work and find opportunities elsewhere or return to the nursing profession. Even before the onset of COVID-19, such motivation to leave the care work profession was observed among nursing graduates.

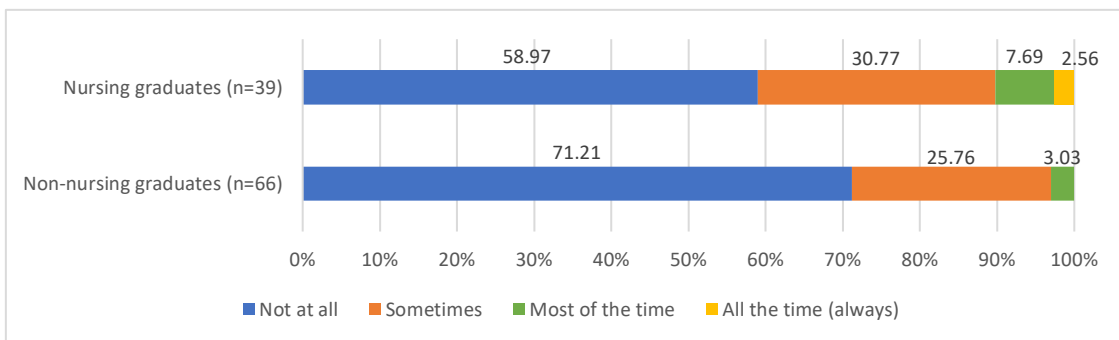
The survey results adhere to this observation and demonstrate that nursing graduates tend to score higher than non-nursing graduates in terms of their desire to quit their care-work jobs (Fig 1.14), leave Japan, or return to their home country (Fig 1.15), and switch to another profession (Fig 1.16).

Figure 1.14 Effect of stress from COVID-19 on the desire to quit current job



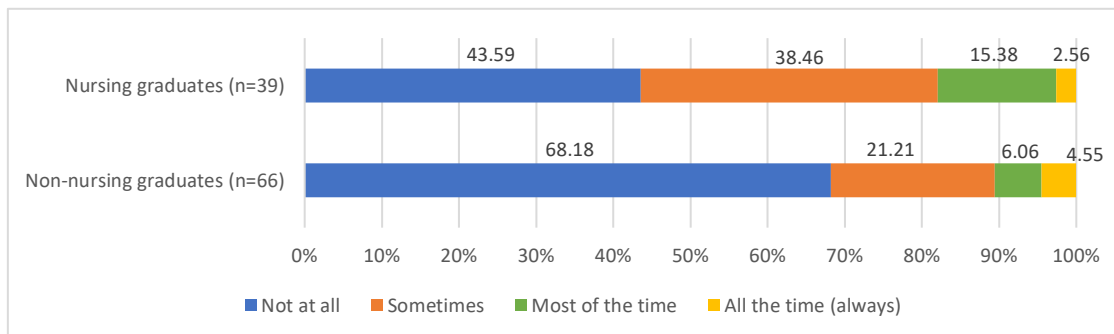
Source: Authors' calculation

Figure 1.15 Effect of stress from COVID-19 on the desire to leave Japan/return to home country



Source: Authors' calculation

Figure 1.16 Effect of stress from COVID-19 on the desire to switch to another profession



Source: Authors' calculation

“If I go back to the Philippines as a nurse, [there is] more difficult treatment and situation than now. At some point, I wanted to go back due to stress and worry of not meeting the family anymore due to COVID-19.” – Leonora, nursing graduate, certified care worker

However, several nursing graduates shared that while they may have plans to leave care work eventually, the current pandemic situation forces them to continue working because the economic and work conditions in the Philippines and other countries are uncertain and insecure.

I still feel better with my family, having worries that I might not see them, I may prefer to go to the Philippines even if I do another job.” - Leah, nursing graduate, certified care worker (interviewed in October 2020, left for the US to get married in April 2021)

“[I think I will] still stay in Japan as a care worker, as much as I want to be with my family, being here may be better... I feel I am blessed; being in the healthcare field, there is always a job available. If I go home to the Philippines, I may be a nurse, but I would still prefer to be in Japan [because] the treatment of nurses [during the pandemic] in the Philippines is not satisfactory.” Ella, nursing graduate, certified care worker (interviewed in October 2020, returned home in January 2022)

Leah and Ella, both nursing graduates and certified care workers, expressed the desire to go home to be with their families during the pandemic but emphasized the insecurity of nursing jobs in the Philippines and the conditions of overworked nurses in hospitals in the Philippines at present. There seems to be a weak effect of the pandemic

on the career and job retention of the respondents, as the stress from the pandemic did not necessarily result in their desire to quit their jobs, shift to another profession, or leave Japan. This might be because, during the pandemic, it became more difficult to find another job in Japan and the Philippines.

It was found that a higher proportion of nursing graduate respondents tend to think about leaving the care work sector more often than non-nursing graduates because they may perceive more opportunities for nurses in other countries during the pandemic. For example, the United States has intensified the recruitment of Filipino nurses (Ehli, 2022) and UK hospitals have been actively announcing recruitment of nurses from the Philippines in their websites since the beginning of the pandemic.¹⁶ This is in line with the second finding that while nursing graduates may want to quit their care work jobs, it is likely to be because of a longstanding motivation and not solely because of the work stress brought about by the pandemic.

4. Conclusion and policy implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the labour shortages in the care work sector and the urgent need to address this problem. At the same time, it also demonstrated the challenges of hiring care workers, both overseas and domestic, to fill this shortage and for the government to employ more flexible employment policies for foreign workers.

While tapping into the latent resources of foreign workers already in Japan has proved to be a temporary stop-gap solution to the labour shortage, the question remains on how sustainable this will be. Due to the inability to enter Japan because of the border closure, foreign workers with limited-stay visas (such as the TIT and SSW workers and international students) have shifted into care work to renew their stay in Japan. Additionally, there has been an increased entry of permanent and long-term residents into care work due to unemployment. Although driven by Japanese employers' needs to immediately fill the labour shortage in nursing care facilities and by foreign workers' opportunity-seeking behaviours during unemployment and uncertain visas, these shifts seem to be a temporary measure and depend on how soon the economy will recover post-pandemic.

¹⁶ The threat of massive deployment of nurses prompted the Philippine government to issue a travel ban on nurses and other health workers in April 2020 (Venzon, 2020).

Indeed, Filipino workers perceived the strong impact of COVID-19 on their work. However, the survey findings revealed how foreign care workers have adapted to the challenges at work during the two years since the pandemic began. The highest sources of stress include worry and anxiety at work, busier work schedules, lack of hazard pay, and fear of being infected with the virus. Despite this, they strongly perceived that they had coped well over the past two years. Seeking support and advice from various sources has also been helpful, especially from Filipino co-workers and colleagues, family members, and their Japanese employers. The pandemic heightened isolation, stress, and socio-psychological challenges for foreign care workers and created issues that further challenged the issue of retention of care workers.

Our results have significant implications for Japan's employment and retention policies regarding foreign care workers. In recent years, the Japanese government has introduced various ways to ease care workers' entry into Japan. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a higher demand for these care workers and seriously affected overseas deployment because of the border restrictions and closure. This highlights the risk of over-reliance on foreign care workers deployed directly from overseas. As mentioned above, tapping foreign residents in Japan—not only permanent and long-term residents but also technical trainees and students of language schools, vocational or training schools—to engage in care work can be one way to alleviate labour shortages. To accommodate them, accessible and affordable training and support programs in care work and the Japanese language can be offered more aggressively. Artificial intelligence (AI) can also help solve problems arising from technical and language difficulties in the workplace. An attractive compensation package can also be one way to attract them to enter the labour market.

Improving the well-being of foreign care workers, which can impact their retention, is another area that needs to be addressed through policies. Support for mental health is a priority given the heightened isolation and increased work stress without any viable outlet to avoid exposure to and transmission of the virus in their workplaces. To further improve the support-seeking behaviours of Filipino care workers from their Japanese employers and co-workers, and recommends that workplace consultations with language support could also help foreign care workers establish better communication with their Japanese counterparts and manage their work stress.

Worker retention has long been a challenge in this sector, and this will continue beyond the pandemic. A transparent and realistic career progression system can be introduced to encourage foreign workers to stay. This is very important, especially for

those who already have knowledge, skills, and experience in nursing care, such as nursing graduates, to stay long in the sector. Further relaxation of the family integration policy can also be adopted to ease the social and psychological burden experienced by transnational families. However, the most urgent and relevant way to secure a stable labour market for care workers beyond the pandemic is to formulate a salary scheme that corresponds to the difficulties of the job and the alleviation of labour conditions in the workplace, not only of foreigners but also of local workers. Unless the basic problems of low wages and difficult working conditions are addressed, the labour shortage will continue and may even worsen after the pandemic.

Lastly, within the wider context of an economy struggling with a general shortage of workforce, addressing the issues of Filipinos who want to quit care work but remain in Japan must be included in future discussions of keeping foreign talents in the country. The skills, experiences in the Japanese culture and language proficiency of care workers can be tapped especially in other sectors. One profession that care workers who have the necessary qualifications can take up is teaching English especially in elementary schools. The demand for language teachers has been on the rise due to the implementation of a new elementary school curriculum covering more intensive English language education. Future studies must be conducted to determine the foreign workers' potentials for such job switching, both as part of their personal career progression and a way to effectively engage them in addressing the specific labour needs of Japan's ageing society.

Acknowledgment

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