Domestic Helpers as Frontline Workers in Home-Based Eldercare in China: Opportunities and Challenges

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Purpose:
In-home or hourly domestic helpers provide domestic services, normally including cleaning, cooking, and caring (3C work). Although the work of domestic helpers is still labelled as low-end and precarious, they have become an important frontline workforce in the long-term care (LTC) system as a result of accelerated global population aging. Families in China now turn to domestic helpers for assistance to take care of their older family members at home. Studies show that domestic helpers have significantly decreased early/unnecessary institutionalization of older adults and family caregivers’ distress by providing daily care for older adults with functional and cognitive impairment. Culturally speaking, hiring domestic helpers to provide care at home rather than relocating older family members to LTC facilities helps older adults aging in place and reduces the social stigma experienced by older adults and their families in China. However, there are acute shortage and high turnover of domestic helpers due to multiple challenges facing them. This empirical qualitative study aims to explore and understand the status quo of domestic service in eldercare in China from the perspectives of domestic helpers, their employers, domestic service agency managers, and government officers.

Methods:
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with domestic helpers providing care for older adults (N=25), employers (N=25), domestic service agency managers (N=8), and government officers (N=6) from 3 cities in China. We used a conventional content analysis approach to understand challenges facing domestic helpers and eldercare domestic service industry in China. Efforts were made by the team to follow the principles established by Guba and Lincoln (1985) to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

Results:
Few young women and men are willing to take care of older adults. Most in-home domestic helpers providing care are migrants, older and with low level of education. Domestic helpers in this study told us that they are confronted with multiple challenges due to low income, lack of access to social welfare and social support, lack of training, limited opportunities for career advancement, and heavy workload. In terms
of training, all parties believe that not only is there a lack of eldercare-specific training, such as feeding, lifting, and communication skills with older adults to build trust and an reciprocal relationship, especially those with dementia, there is also a need for coordination amongst domestic helpers, their employers, domestic service agencies and the government to make it possible for in-home domestic helpers to receive regular eldercare training. The employers, government officers, and agency managers deem that the inconsistency in service standards, evaluation, and pricing hindered the development of eldercare domestic service.

**Conclusion:**
Domestic helpers as a vulnerable group are playing the role as frontline workers in homes-based eldercare, however, financial, social and psychological support are much needed for this vulnerable group to thrive with older adults whom they take care of.

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**Keywords:**
caregiver well-being, long term care and vulnerable group

**Abstract Summary:**
Domestic helpers as a vulnerable group are becoming the frontline workers in taking care of older adults with dementia and functional limitations. This study explored perspectives from domestic helpers, their employers, their agencies, and government officers to understand the challenges facing them and opportunities ahead of them.

**References:**

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**Author Summary:** Jing Wang obtained her PhD from Duke University School of Nursing in 2019 and is now an assistant professor at Fudan University. She has been conducting research in aging and long term care and global health, with a special focus on older adults with cognitive impairment and their caregivers.

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Author Summary: Dr. Wu's career in gerontology has been distinguished by interdisciplinary collaborations at many academic institutions globally. She has provided keynote presentations, lectures, and consultation in multiple countries including China, Singapore, the Netherlands, Norway, and Turkey. Dr. Wu’s research has also been reported by the mainstream media such as U.S. News & World Report. Dr. Wu’s publications range across different issues related to aging and health, including long-term care, dementia, caregiving, and oral health.