

STUDIES ON LOW-SKILLED MIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA IN 2000-2018: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Tarikh dihantar: 29/6/2021 / Tarikh diterima: 23/8/2021 / Tarikh terbit: 22/12/2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51200/ejk.v28i1.4171>

ABSTRACT Malaysia is a popular destination for low-skilled migrant workers primarily from developing and less developed countries. Their huge presence in the country has consequences for the economy and society which have sparked interest among scholars in studying multitude of low-skilled migrant workers issues. Despite the volume of studies on low-skilled migrant workers, which cover a broad range of issues, little is known about the trend and direction of this stream of research. This paper aims to identify and highlight the main research traditions and scopes of the low-skilled migrant workers studies in Malaysia by reviewing 35 articles published between 2000 and 2018. Although there are no peculiar patterns observed for the 19-year period, the increase in interest to write or research on low-skilled migrant workers among scholars is quite evidenced lately. Authors of the papers reviewed generally preferred to use either the terms “migrant workers” or “foreign workers” to refer to the low-skilled non-citizen workers in Malaysia. Almost all studies reviewed were empirical in nature that adopted more of the qualitative rather than quantitative approaches to analyze low-skilled migrant worker issues. Social, behavioral, policy, legal and workers’ rights issues were more dominant as compared to economics and health related issues.

Keywords: Migrant workers, low-skilled migrant workers, literature review, qualitative approach, quantitative approach, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

International migration, a phenomenon that has existed in Malaysia since the early days of Malaya and Malaysia. A particular historical episode of such migration was the presence of a significant number of migrant workers to Malaya from the mainland China and India, brought in by the British empire to work in tin mines, sugar, coffee and rubber industries as well as the construction of roads and railways (Kaur, 2005). Until today, Malaysia still remains a major labor importing country with not only the number of migrant workers continues to increase, but also the list of countries of origin is expanding as well. When Malaysia experienced a high growth of economic development (i.e. industrial sectors) particularly for the period from 1965 to 1994 (Moha Asri Abdullah & Chan, 1998), the influx of migrant workers who were mostly from the neighboring countries and undocumented became more prominent (Azizah Kassim, 2014). Basically, these workers were deployed to fill in the chronic shortages of labor in various economic sectors (Kaur, 2010; Nah, 2011). As the number of migrant workers continues to grow, the Malaysian government acknowledged the need to install a clear policy that aims to regulate their inflows into the country. Thus, an official policy was formulated in 1992 to address the issue (Kaur, 2014). Since then, the total number of migrant workers in Malaysia has soared to 523,723 in 1993 alone with many of the workers hailed from the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Garces-Mascarenas, 2011). The Malaysian Department of Statistics cited in Loganathan, Rui, Ng and Pocock (2019) reported that 15 percent of the labor force in Malaysia comprised migrant workers. Most of these workers are low-skilled and employed in low-wage jobs in the construction, agriculture and plantation, manufacturing, services as well as domestic sectors which basically failed to attract the low-skilled locals (Loganathan *et al.*, 2019).

According to the Department of Immigration, the total number of registered low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia stands at 1,868,270 in 2020 (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2020) with Indonesian, Bangladeshi, and Nepali nationals occupying the top three spots on the list. In Malaysia, the low-skilled migrant workers are issued a temporary work permit called *Pas Lawatan Kerja Sementara* (PLKS) or Temporary Employment Visit Pass. Available literature in various academic disciplines seemed to suggest

the presence of interest among scholars in investigating issues related to the low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia. Despite this commendable trend, little is known about the focus and direction of this research stream. Thus, this paper is considered an initial attempt to synthesize existing studies on low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia published within the period of 19 years, from 2000 to 2018. This paper hopes to be able to identify the scope and direction of these research that can shed light on some potential future research areas concerning the low-skilled migrant workers.

METHODOLOGY

Basically, this paper is prepared based on a descriptive inquiry drawn from published articles on low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia. The key challenge in this endeavor is to identify articles for inclusion in the analysis. Nonetheless, to ease the process of selecting articles, the following criteria are used as guidelines.

- i. Full-text articles written wholly in English language.
- ii. The main subject of study in the articles is low-skilled migrant workers regardless of the issue of focus.
- iii. Published in any recognized academic journals, or seminar/conference proceedings, or official publication by established entities, both local and foreign.
- iv. Publication between 2000 and 2018, a period that marks significant changes in terms of the number of registered low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia (Azizah Kassim, 2014; ILMIA, MoHR 2020).

Ideally, this paper aspires to review as many articles on low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia which were written fully in English language. However, the attempt to achieve this novelty was mainly hampered by accessibility to the targeted publications. The materials suggested through general internet search were either unavailable for free or limited to abstracts only without access to the full articles. Given these constraints, the works included in this paper were confined to those retrievable from the free electronic databases as well as academic databases accessible to the authors which were subscribed by the institution where the authors are attached to.

With the aim of securing as many relevant publications possible, the author opted to use the advanced search modes to locate the publications using specific English keywords only such as “migrant workers”, “foreign workers”, “guest workers”, “low-skilled migrant workers”, and “low-skilled foreign workers” that were contextualized to “Malaysia”. Due to the overwhelming volume of possible materials generated from the search, the selection of articles to be included in the review was based firstly on the titles as well as abstracts which are presented in English language relevant to the aim of the paper. In the case where the title or abstract of an article did not seem to be helpful for the screening purpose, for example, a generic term such as “migrant workers” or “foreign workers” is used which may also include expatriates or other categories of non-citizen workers, the author chose to thoroughly read the article and applied his knowledge and familiarity with the characteristics and issues commonly associated and identified with low-skilled migrant workers to help identify the articles. As a result of this rigor and laborious process, a total of 35 articles were chosen for analysis and discussed in this paper.

In line with the purpose of this paper, the full texts of each of these chosen articles were content-analyzed to identify the emerging and common themes, which then described and presented according to the following aspects: terminologies used, types of studies, research design and method, the main phenomena and focus of articles including the key findings. In the instance where more than one phenomenon or theme were present in the article, the relatively more prominent theme will be chosen for the purpose of classifying the article by theme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of articles by year

Although the list of articles on low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia is not exhaustive, the distribution of 35 articles considered in the current review by year can be depicted in Figure 1. In general, no peculiar pattern is observed. Nevertheless, the distribution of articles by year seems to suggest that there were relatively more articles published in the latter half of the period of study

with the year 2012 and 2014 recorded the most with eight articles each. This observation somewhat indicates the prominent increase of interests among scholars in issues related to the low-skilled migrant workers in the more recent years.

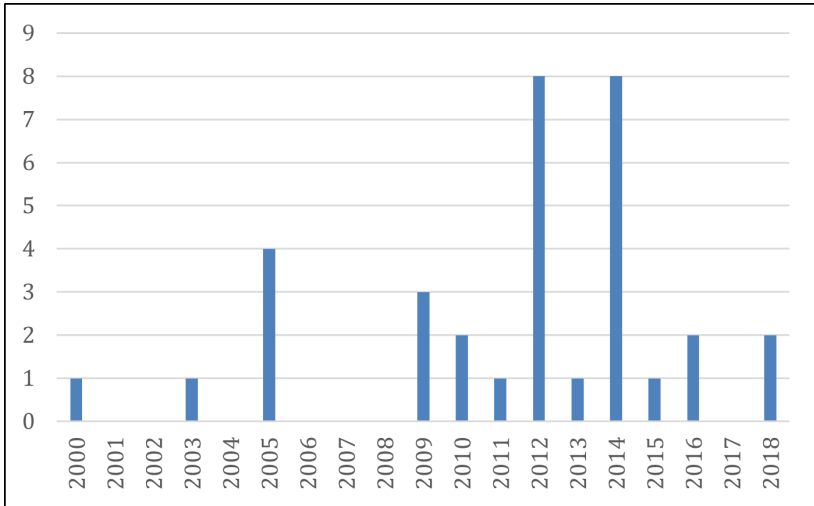


Figure 1 Distribution of articles on low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia in 2000 to 2018 reviewed

Terminologies and nationalities of low-skilled migrant workers

Based on the 35 articles reviewed, the results have demonstrated the different terminologies used by authors to refer to the low-skilled foreign individuals who are employed in Malaysia. Despite the variations, interestingly, the two most prominent and frequently used terms are “migrant workers” (i.e. Bormann et al., 2010; Crinis, 2012; Dannecker, 2005, 2009; Devadason & Chan, 2014; Hill, 2012; Islam, 2013; Kaur, 2012; Nah, 2012; Norhidayu et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2014; Sundra-Karean & Sharifah Suhanah, 2012; Ullah, 2009; Zehadul Karim & Nurazzura, 2015) and “foreign workers” (i.e. Azizah Kassim, 2014; Crinis, 2005, 2010; Devadason, 2009; Hamzah et al., 2012; Healy, 2000; Mohd Na’eim et al., 2014; Mohd Safri & Salmie, 2014; Normah et al., 2016; Nurul Azita et al., 2012; Rohaida et al., 2018; Zaleha et al., 2011). In addition to these two terms, there were also authors who used the terms such as “guest workers” (Kaur, 2012, 2014; Le, 2010), “migrant

labour” (Kaur, 2005; Liow, 2005), “immigrant workers” (Kartini et al., 2012), “immigrant labour” (Narayanan & Lai, 2005; Narayanan & Lai, 2014), and “foreign labor” (Rahmah & Ferayuliani, 2014).

A further analysis of the low-skilled migrant workers by nationality suggests that there were relatively more studies on the Bangladeshis (e.g., Ullah, 2009; Dannecker, 2005, 2009; Zehadul Karim & Nurazzura, 2015), Indonesians (e.g., Liow, 2003; Islam, 2013) and Nepalese (e.g., Hil, 2012; Norhidayu Sahimin et al., 2016) as compared to their counterparts of other nationalities. This trend seems to depict the reality of the concentration of low-skilled migrant worker population in the country.

Types, research designs and methods of study

There were more empirical papers, either adopting quantitative or qualitative approaches, published as compared to the conceptual ones during the period between 2000 and 2018. Obviously, the study design opted by researchers was tied closely with the issues investigated, and aims of their respective inquiries. For example, studies that examined issues related to the representation of migrant workers in the media (e.g., Kaur, 2005; Crinis, 2005) applied the qualitative design and content-analyzed the news reports. Similarly, researchers who focused more on exploring the subject of policy and management of migrant workers (e.g., Islam, 2012; Muniandy & Bonatti, 2014; Kaur, 2014) were prone to engage the qualitative design as well. Another cluster of researchers that took advantage of the qualitative design in their studies include Healy (2000), Crinis (2010), Le (2010), Bormann et al. (2010), Kartini et al. (2012), Sundra-Karean and Sharifah Suhana (2012), Nah (2012), and Mohd Safri and Salmie (2014) who examined issues of migrant workers from the legal and human rights perspectives. In contrast, driven by the goals to testify relationships as well as to measure the impacts of migrant workers on the economy, development and its indicators (e.g., productivity), whether at micro or macro levels, researchers like Narayanan and Lai (2005, 2014), Devadason (2009), Zaleha et al. (2011), Rahmah and Ferayuliani (2014) and Hamzah et al. (2012), collectively chose the quantitative design by specifically capitalizing on economic modeling techniques that were fed by secondary or time series data.

Interestingly, there is also a group of researchers that adopted either qualitative or quantitative design in their studies when investigating health related issues. In particular, Santos et al. (2014), Normah et al. (2016), and Norhidayu et al. (2016), conducted cross-sectional surveys to investigate the prevalence of health issues, access to public health services, and transmission of intestinal parasites among migrant workers respectively. Meanwhile, Zehadul Karim and Nurazzura (2015), Rohaida et al. (2018), and Pocock et al. (2018) chose to use qualitative methods to study health seeking behavior, health insurance, and general health among migrant workers respectively. The qualitative methods used include focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and content analyses of labor legislations.

Likewise, a cluster of studies that examined the issues of socio-cultural adjustments and performance in the host country, had adopted mainly a qualitative design. Specifically, Nurul Azita et al. (2012) conducted a series of in-depth interviews with five contractors in the construction industry to probe the language problem confronting non-Indonesian migrant workers.

Research themes and major findings

In terms of the phenomena of research covered by the articles reviewed, they are considered quite diverse. Nevertheless, for the purpose of discussion in this paper, the phenomena are clustered into the following eight themes. The main findings of these studies are presented briefly under each theme with the aim to highlight their commonalities or differences which can serve as an impetus to establish the status quo and probably hinting the direction of research on low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia.

Theme 1: Images and media representations of low-skilled migrant workers. Three studies under this theme were reviewed. It seems like the media attempted to offer a balanced perspective of both low-skilled migrant workers and the host government. Nevertheless, Kaur (2005) and Crinis (2005) maintain that reports in the media were mainly framed from the Malaysian perspective which tended to be biased toward their own. The government was reported to play an active role in addressing issues and problems with regard to the low-skilled migrant workers. At the same time, the media also publicized

issues like abuse of low-skilled migrant workers by employers, their illegal status, crime committed, poor health and diseases. Dannecker (2005), on the other hand, highlighted the socially-constructed label “others” as a category that depicts a new group comprising individuals like the low-skilled migrant workers and their strategies to fit into the existing host society.

Theme 2: Migration processes and networks. The journey and experiences of low-skilled migrant workers to reach the Malaysia shore had also sparked interest among researchers to investigate as well. Ullah (2009) for example, reported in his study about the majority of Bangladeshi low-skilled migrant workers incurring exorbitant costs, took a long time, and suffered inhumanely on their migration attempt to Malaysia. Meanwhile, slightly in a different light, Dannecker (2009) advocated that the construction of Muslim brotherhood between Malaysia and Bangladesh played a significant role for the migration flows between the two countries.

Theme 3: Impacts on economy and development. The economists who conducted studies on the low-skilled migrant workers adopted either a micro or macro perspective of the issue of interest. Specifically, Devadason (2009) and Rahmah and Ferayuliani (2014) adopted the macro perspective to examine the socio-economic effects and economic growth of employment of migrant workers respectively. Devadason (2009) found that this group of migrant workers had no significant negative impacts on employment but exerted negative long-run effects on relative wages. Whilst Rahmah and Ferayuliani (2014) claimed that skilled and semi-skilled migrant workers had positive and significant impact on long-run and short-run output growth. They further argued that unskilled migrant workers adversely affected output growth in both long and short run.

The economic issues related to the low-skilled migrant workers were also examined in four studies from a micro standpoint with two studies each in the construction and manufacturing sectors. Narayanan and Lai (2005) concluded that low-skilled migrant workers did not contribute to the skills formation. Instead, they accumulated skills while on the job which were lost when they returned home. There was no evidence that the low-skilled migrant workers displaced local workers since they were mainly employed

in the jobs shunned by Malaysians. The authors also emphasized that hiring the low-skilled migrant workers was not cheap and not a cost-saving option. Hamzah et al. (2012) who also studied the construction sector, highlighted the negative impacts of the low-skilled migrant workers in terms of escalation in criminal activities and other social problems.

By examining the manufacturing sector, Zaleha et al. (2011) suggested that the low-skilled migrant workers in particular had positive and significant impact on labor productivity. Similarly, they advocated that the low-skilled migrant workers were neither substitutes nor complements for local labors. Nevertheless, Narayanan and Lai (2014) suggested that the low-skilled migrant workers complemented their local counterparts in the initial phase when labor shortage emerged at prevailing wage levels, but replaced them at the later periods. In addition, the authors emphasized that the deployment of low-skilled migrant workers contributed to low productivity.

Theme 4: Policy and management of low-skilled migrant workers. Most of the studies under this theme deal with issues of policy as well as the management of the low-skilled migrant workers. A study by Mohd Na'eim et al. (2014) reiterated that Malaysia is a popular destination particularly among the low-skilled migrant workers. In addition, the low-skilled migrant workers are said to be more disciplined, productive, can endure working long hours, obedient, and willing to accept relatively lower wage. But the influx of low-skilled migrant workers is of a great concern and posed a threat to national security. The hiring of low-skilled migrant workers was further enhanced by the availability of labor brokers (Azizah Kassim, 2014).

The huge presence of the low-skilled migrant workers in the country also challenged the quality of services rendered by the relevant authorities to them. Highlighting the case of Indonesian migrant workers, Islam (2013) stressed that the partnership between the Malaysian and Indonesian governments could be helpful in identifying labor problems, and they can collectively formulate policies that benefit both countries. A similar concern was also raised by Liow (2013) who highlighted the importance of such a concerted effort to resolve particularly the issue of illegal Indonesian low-skilled migrant workers. Another policy of concern that had been highlighted

by past studies include policies that differ by types of migrant workers. For instance, Kaur (2012) commented on the different policy applied to skilled and unskilled or low-skilled migrant workers. Likewise, she raised the concern on the impact of a weak policy in managing the low-skilled migrant workers would hinder Malaysia from moving up the value chain. The activities like labor brokers, disparities in levy system, and demand for labor contributed to the escalation of irregular migration as well. The weakness in the implementation of policy with regard to the management of low-skilled migrant workers was also emphasized by Devadason and Chan (2014). They specifically raised concerns over the basic rights and discriminatory nature of the specific law concerning the low-skilled migrant workers.

Theme 5: Legal and human rights. Comparatively, there were more works published on issues related to the legal and rights of the low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia within the studied period. Healy (2000) advocated that the presence of foreign nationals abundantly that was mainly made up of low-skilled migrant workers had forced Malaysia to redefine its national identity in response to the “new outsiders”. The low-skilled migrant workers were deemed as “undesirable aliens” who suffered acts of deplorable violence, inhumanity, verbal and sexual abuse. Crinis (2010) also examined restrictions imposed on the low-skilled migrant workers in the garment industry which breached the codes of conduct of the industry. A similar concern was also raised by Le (2010) who investigated the fate of the Vietnamese low-skilled workers in Malaysia. The key issue he raised concerned the recruitment procedure and gradual loss of autonomy of these low-skilled workers. These low-skilled Vietnamese workers started their foreign endeavor with ‘voluntary’ indebtedness that eventually led to them becoming subordinate and immobilized guest workers. The author further argued that these low-skilled Vietnamese workers were entangled in the web of obligations involving multiple parties including recruiter, the state (i.e. bank), employer that inflicted restrictions in autonomy over life and work.

Issues of poor treatments of low-skilled migrant workers is nothing new and still remains as a key concern among scholars. Like the studies discussed above, Hill (2012) pointed out the role played by the close association between capital and politics which to him led to incidences of poor treatment of low-

skilled migrant workers, which in his observations involved the Bangladeshi and Nepali nationals. The issue of human rights among low-skilled migrant workers was further examined by Nah (2012) who claimed the existence of hierarchy of rights. He firmly asserted that skilled workers enjoyed greater rights as compared to their low-skilled counterparts who suffered various restrictions on their rights.

From the legal perspectives, Kartini et al. (2012) found that the labor law granted more authority to private employers than to low-skilled workers including their well-being. These researchers highly recommended that the government meet the world-class standard of employment conditions through provisions of a legal system that guarantees labor rights of low-skilled workers. Still within the legal framework, Sundra-Karean and Sharifah Suhana (2012) examined the potential corporate social responsibility and other soft law such as policies and codes to generate change for the low-skilled as well as unskilled migrant workers in Malaysia. Among others, they recommended the potential of hybrid labor regulation and the need to harden soft law through creative methods of interpretation by the court. Lastly, Mohd Safri and Salmie (2014) found the absence of social security mainly to the low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia. They said both local and low-skilled migrant workers were governed by two different sets of rules and regulations on the matter.

Theme 6: Socio-cultural adjustments and performance. How well the migrant workers adjust and adapt to the new culture of Malaysia was indeed one of the areas that had attracted researchers to investigate. Unfortunately, most of these studies were among the expatriates (i.e. Aida Hafitah et al., 2007; Raduan Che Rose et al., 2010; Tan, 2012), and relatively less on the low-skilled except those by Nurul Azita et al. (2012), and Muniandy and Bonatti (2014). An important factor influencing ability of the low-skilled migrant workers to adjust to the new cultural environment is language. A study by Nurul Azita et al. (2012) confirmed that language problem was more prominent among the low-skilled non-Indonesian migrant workers in the construction industry in Malaysia especially those who had just arrived. Muniandy and Bonatti (2014) suggested that temporary low-skilled migrant workers were able to use various innovative strategies, political technologies, and devices to adapt to and secure dignified lives in where they work and live in.

Theme 7: Health and safety issues. In more recent years, researchers had started to focus on health-related issues mainly among the low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia. In terms of diseases, studies have shown that musculoskeletal pain was prevalent among the low-skilled migrant workers in the manufacturing industry particularly during the period before they had access to personal protective equipment and training on preventive measure (Santos et al., 2016). Meanwhile, Norhidayu et al. (2016) found that many low-skilled workers from Nepal and India were infected with intestinal parasites especially among those who had just arrived in the country.

Besides the contraction of diseases, access to healthcare and medical facilities was also another pertinent issue that past studies had focused on. For example, Zehadul Karim and Nurrazura (2015), Normah et al. (2016), and Pocock et al. (2018) highlighted that the low-skilled migrant workers either had no access at all or limited access to healthcare and medical facilities. Moreover, the low-skilled migrant workers such as the Bangladeshis were not protected by any kind of medical insurance (Zehadul Karim & Nurrazura, 2015). Compared to some developing and advanced countries, Malaysia's health insurance model for low-skilled migrant workers was still considered lagging, to countries like Singapore. Thus, Rohaida et al. (2018) through their study suggested that Malaysia should emulate Singapore that has a more comprehensive health insurance model for the low-skilled migrant workers.

Theme 8: Research method. Lastly, a study by Crinis (2012) was the only one on low-skilled migrant workers in Malaysia which focused on the research method issue. Specifically, this study applied the feminist principle to investigate the low-skilled migrant workers' experience in the garment industry. He stressed that one of the challenges he confronted when conducting the fieldwork was to develop close personal relationships with low-skilled migrant workers. This was because the low-skilled migrant workers lived and worked in different places, and they spent most of the times working, thus had very limited time to interact with the researcher. The author also pointed out the difficulty to maintain trust and transparency with the manufacturers as the fieldwork progressed.

CONCLUSION

Labor migration is a phenomenon caused mainly by the globalization process. Malaysia, a fast-growing economy especially among the developing world, relies heavily on migrant workers to address the acute labor shortages in many key industries such as agriculture and plantation, construction, manufacturing, and services. By reviewing 35 research works on migrant workers in Malaysia, published between 2000 and 2018, the authors have identified eight main themes of issues ranging from the public policy on migrant workers to their health. Lastly, this paper has its own limitations especially in terms of the number of studies and their criteria of inclusion, that may have implications on the conclusions drawn from them. Thus, similar reviews in the future should also include studies that were excluded in this paper due to inaccessibility to full articles.

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