

A Qualitative Approach to Understand Migrant Worker's Psycho-Social Problems in Malaysia

Abdul Mujeeb Khan, Dr. Abdul Talib Mohmed Hashim,
Dr. Muhammad Yousuf, Dr. Aladdin Assaiqeli

Faculty of Education and Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjung Malim,
Malaysia

Abstract: *Malaysia is one of the major migrant workers' receiving countries in Southeast Asia. The migrants from various countries like Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and South Asian countries come to Malaysia for job opportunities. According to Malaysia's immigration department's statistics, a total of 1.99 million foreign workers in Malaysia were registered under the Temporary Visiting Work Permit as by August 31, 2019. The majority of workers are semi and low skilled, mainly working in manufacturing, construction, services sector, plantation, etc. The research objective is to examine the migrant worker's psychological issues, intercultural issues, ethnocentrism and overall issues related to adaptation in a foreign country. The data will be obtained by using the qualitative method– in-depth interviews with 30 participants using the non-probability sampling technique from three countries, namely, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. Expectantly, the results of this study will give enormous insight to understand migrant worker's issues which can ultimately help in reviewing migrant worker's sending countries' policies as well as Malaysian policies to improve chances of migrant worker's psychological wellbeing.*

Keywords: *Migrant workers, Experience, Intercultural, Psychosocial, Issues*

I. INTRODUCTION

Migration is very old phenomenon. For centuries, people have moved across borders in search of better opportunities due to poverty, unemployment, displacement and other factors. Migration of people to other countries in search of employment has occurred all through history. Migration processes are complex decision and in economic theories, purposes to migrate are often seen in the framework of labor market openings and economic factors are prominent motives for migration (Verwiebe, Mau, Seidel, and Kathmann, 2010). The right to mobility is one of basic human rights. Through various research studies and facts, it is well known that migrant workers significantly contribute to the development of sending and receiving countries by means of sending back remittances and by providing cheap but essential labour in receiving countries.

Migrant workers usually perform dangerous and difficult jobs in hazardous working conditions which affect their wellbeing severely. Their poor living conditions are also a contributing factor in increasing health risks. Living abroad away from family, working hard to meet basic necessities of life, combined with facing a new culture which is completely different than their own give them a cultural shock. Normally people have their own perceptions and they see the things through their own cultural lens. They have their own toolkits (approaches and skills to solve problems). However, when they go abroad and see the new cultures, they try to evaluate that by using their own toolkits which can deviate from their expectations and perceptions most of the time. The whole scenario could generate anxiety, stress and adaptation problems in a new culture.

Migrant worker's experience intercultural issues in Malaysia. These intercultural issues include discrimination, financial hardships, language, culture, well-being etc. (Mucci, Traversini, Giorgi, Garzaro, et al., 2019). Migration has a great impact on economic, social, cultural and psychological life of people, both at place of emigration as well as of migration (Kaur, 2003).

The intercultural experience involves individuals in handling issues which differ two or more different cultures. Culture also affects the thinking of an individual that resultantly brings differences in the use of judgment (Weber and Hsee, 1999). Cultural intelligence as a personal source is more important and brings benefits in work and life for migrants working for cross-cultural nonprofit organizations (NPOs) (He, An, and Zhang, 2019). People who migrate to a different country require to give importance to handling problems or issues in an intercultural environment. Cultural intelligence concerns an individual to manage effectively when handling problems in a cross-cultural environment and adopt a positive organizational behavior perception, intercultural change, and performance. Anxiety and uncertainty are both crucial factors in forecasting the occurrence of intercultural (Logan, Steel, and Hunt, 2016). The overall aim of this study is to explore the migrant worker's intercultural issues in Malaysia. Overall migrant workers might be suffering from various problems as explained below:

Violation of Human Rights

Although labour migration is beneficial for sending and destination countries, governments from both ends treat migrant workers as commodities for labour export or cheap labour. Neither origin nor destination governments fulfill their obligations to protect migrants' rights and well-being. Consequently, migrant workers (MWs) suffer from various violations at all stages of the migration cycle. Among others, most frequently migrant workers face violence, abuse (physical and sexual abuse), exploitation, violation of rights such as labour rights, health rights, restrictions on freedom and movement, cheating by middlemen and recruitment agencies etc. Hazardous working and living conditions and occupational injuries cause serious health risks for migrant workers with no access to treatment and health information.

Many migrant workers are vulnerable to rights violation and abuses due to a lack of entitlements, absence of protection regimes, laws & policies and a lack of access to redress mechanisms. Female migrants working as domestic workers are especially vulnerable to exploitation, labour rights violations, physical abuse and sexual violence, etc.

Human rights are defined as a set of rights based on the principles of freedom and fairness which involve various scopes of human lives (Wong and Celbis, 2019). The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICMW) is designed to ensure that migrant workers benefit from the protection given by human rights, political, economic, social, and cultural rights (Sookrajowa and Pecoud, 2019). It does also provide number of new rights for migrant workers such as the right to transfer allowances or access the information for migration process. However, there is a lack of implementation of these rights.

Language Barriers (Communication Issues)

Among others, the language issue is one of the central areas of difficulty for migrant workers, and the language barrier can be the root for many difficulties. Poor language proficiencies was known as an obstacle for entrance, not for those with less or no education but also for highly educated migrant workers (Tasleem, Na, Azizah, and Abidin, 2019). Majority of migrant workers upon arrival in a receiving country are found to be unable to speak the local languages. Language problems and cultural differences often cause problems with respect to communication with the local people, integrate with communities as well as understanding the safety regulations at work. Due to language problems it is hard for migrant workers to communicate with health care providers and get treatment and also understand any announcements and health and safety information, etc.

Communication is an issue for contractors that need to be precise as part of work to ensure high levels of production and to maintain safety and security legislation (Kraft, 2019). Smooth communication is important in a working environment for the migrant workers; also for the hiring environment amongst employers (Tasleem et al., 2019). In Malaysia, the presence of migrant workers into a country has caused language issues. Research that was carried out showed 50% of the respondents of contractors agreed and 41% of them agreed strongly that the communication gap due to language barrier among migrant workers in the construction industry leads to an accident at construction site (Mohd Nordin, Salleh, & Abdul Rashid, 2012). Most Indonesian migrant workers do not experience language problems because most of them understand Malay language used by citizens in Malaysia whereas other foreign workers do not understand Malay and English language and this will delay carrying out construction activities. The study reveals that Nepali workers have low knowledge of the prospect of their job and poor communication with colleagues and senior staff. It is believed that communication difficulties with colleagues and supervisors have increased the danger of accidents and injuries at the workplace (Adhikary, Keen, and Teijlingen, 2019).

Psychological Health of All Migrants

Although they contribute to the economy of host countries, many migrants are either being denied access to or find it difficult to access meaningful health services. If they become infirm or are infected with a treatable but communicable disease, rather than receiving proper social protections similar to locals, in many cases, migrants are simply deported - as if they were dispensable commodities, not human beings deserving of health.

Many women migrant workers are the victims of mental, physical and sexual abuse. Numerous migrant women end up in the informal sector, with domestic work being the single largest occupation. Working in isolated conditions and completely at the will of their employers, foreign domestic workers face enhanced vulnerabilities to malnutrition, mental health issues, and sexual and reproductive health problems.

Occupational Health & Safety Issues

Migrant workers are often engaged in jobs that are hazardous to their health where they can be exposed to a range of occupational health risks such as harmful chemicals or injurious accidents. Migrants commonly fill jobs in the following sectors: agriculture, construction, domestic work, and low grade manufacturing including the garment industry. Due to poor working conditions and lack of proper safety equipment, migrant workers have high rates of occupationally related health issues which result in poor health outcomes, such as workplace injuries and resultant disability, chronic health conditions, and even death.

The dead bodies of migrants in their prime years are being returned home on a daily basis without proper cause of death being ascertained. Living and working conditions undoubtedly are a significant factor, and must be explored further and addressed. Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is recognized in the construction industry and involvement of construction stakeholders such as the government, developers, subcontractors, consultants and general workers of human rights within the context of worker's safety (Belayutham and Ibrahim, 2019). Migrant workers face challenges that create risks to occupational health and workplace challenges related to health, such as insecure working environment, long work hours and lack of equipment (Caxaj and Cohen, 2019). Nepali migrants in Malaysia are involved in manufacturing sectors which need physically demanding work with little chance of rest even though daily working hours are 8 hours; it is normal to work overtime for some additional hours in a day (Aryal et al., 2019). Low wages described as a main stressor among the migrant workers and workers discussed how ensuring protection for migrant's wages and working conditions would prevent in Malaysian worker's condition. (Pocock et al., 2018). An

increase of interpersonal disorders as interpersonal sensitivity, paranoid ideation, obsessive compulsive behavior, aggression and depression disorders are associated with migrant workers in the construction industry (Hargreaves et al., 2019). Migrant workers who had been unemployed had more psychiatric symptoms with poor coping strategies and adaptation expressed many other symptoms (Mucci, Traversini, Giorgi, Tommasi, et al., 2019).

Discrimination

Migrant workers often face discrimination as they are seen as coming from an inferior culture. Negative media reports about their health, habits and deportation news reinforce this negative image. For example, as revealed in some studies, employers consider workers as poor, uneducated and ignorant. The difficult living and working conditions and often discriminatory and unsupportive policies have an adverse impact on migrant worker's behavior in many ways. Migrants are often discriminated against in various aspects such as housing, education, health, work or social security. They are considered as cheap labour and paid very less compared to nationals for their labour. Wage discrimination identified as pay differences of employment and form of unfairness practiced in the workplace (Econ, Manag, and Falope, 2017).

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are 1.99 million migrant workers in Malaysia. Most of the time their cases are being reported in the media related to various problems. Hence there is need to explore their psychosocial problems in Malaysia in various dimensions. This will help to understand these issues at a deeper level. There are various intercultural issues faced by any migrant worker from all over the world. Intercultural issues of an individual could be identified, and further recommendations would help in the future.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

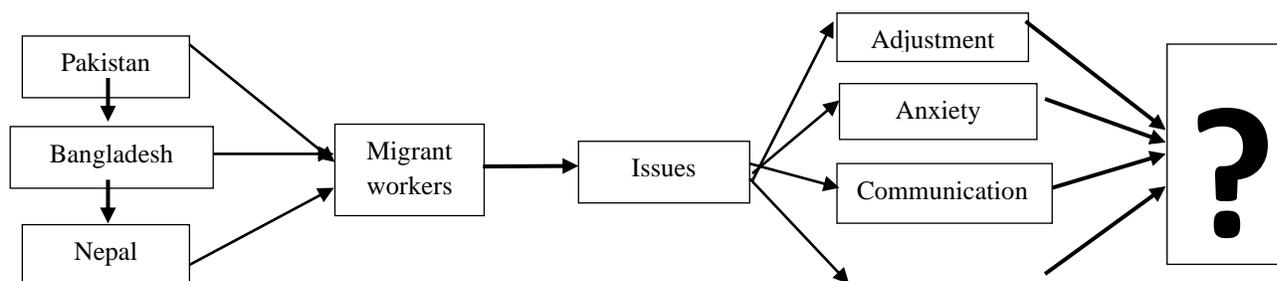
- Identify migrant workers psychosocial problems in Malaysia.
- Understand communication and cultural adaptation problems.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of this study is comprised of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) created by Bennet M. 1986. DMIS theory is based on constructive perception and communication theory. It assumes that the experience of reality is constructed through perception, and that more complex perceptual categories yield more complex (sophisticated) experience. Especially, the theory assumes that we are constructing boundaries of "self" and "other" that guide our experiences of intercultural events. This theory explains six stages of development, at one end is the ethnocentrism which comprised of ethnocentric constructions such as Denial, Defense and Minimization, and at the other end is the ethno-relativism, comprised of ethno relative constructions such as Acceptance, Adaptation and Integration.

This study aims to understand migrant workers' psychosocial problems in the context of cultural differences by exploring their experiences in line of DMIS's six stages of development from ethnocentrism to ethno relativism. The questions will be seeking information to explain how migrant workers from three different countries experiences cultural difference in Malaysia.

Conceptual framework



Others

Conceptual framework psychosocial issues

Figure 1.3 shows the relationship of migrant workers from various countries (Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh) with intercultural issues encountered in Malaysia based on the research problem. The figures showed the difference and relationship of intercultural issues perceived by the migrant workers in Malaysia for this study.

Definitions and Conceptualization of Variables

Employment

The member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is categorized into two groups of emigration and immigration. The first group consists of the Philippines, Cambodia, Burma, Lao, PDR, Vietnam and Indonesia whereas Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia and Thailand fall into second group. Less skilled guest workers are recruited from ASEAN countries and South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) (A. Kaur, 2010). Most of the international migrants in Malaysia are from Indonesia, followed by Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and India. About 80.3% of these 5 countries migrant workers are in Malaysia and 54% of documented workers work in manufacturing, 20% in agriculture, 14% in construction and 12% in the service sector (Rahman et al., 2019). In conclusion, cultural characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and religion of migrant workers motivate their relatives or neighbors in their home villages in Nepal and Bangladesh to come to Malaysia for work. The employer still has to acquire a work permit from the government and produce a contract with the name and address of the employer and the signature of the worker, with requirement of the working conditions for the migrant workers to be in Malaysia.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative data will be collected through interviews, observations as qualitative research tries to reveal the viewpoints of the subjects. Nonprobability sampling will be used with this research design. The aim of study is to investigate psychosocial issues, adaptation matters and anxiety among migrant workers in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews will be used to stimulate discussion about their experiences across languages, cultures, and countries.

Through collecting and analyzing the lived experiences of migrant workers, the study will provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences of growing up with movement, intercultural experiences and exchanging their identity. The population of this study comprises targeted thirty (30) migrant workers, ten (10) from each country, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan working in Malaysia. The semi structured interview method will be used for the research because it is easy to explore participant's views and

analyze the data. The sample size withdraws from all categories of workers that comprises migrant workers between the age of 18 to 50 years old from each country.

V. CONCLUSION

With use of the qualitative data collection approach, the study will help in understanding migrant worker's psycho-social problems and adaptation issues in Malaysia. Numerous intercultural issues including discrimination, financial hardships, language, culture, well-being and others that can have a huge impact on an individual migrant (Mucci, Traversini, Giorgi, Garzaro, et al., 2019). The study will be carried out to identify the intercultural issues and impact encountered by workers from Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh who migrate for a job opportunity in Malaysia. In this context, migrant workers with multi-dimensional experiences will be able to reflect on their experiences of intercultural environment in Malaysia. In addition, the study results will provide a basis for broader research involving various migrant's receiving countries. Most importantly, the study results will provide evidence to develop policies towards improving migrant worker's psycho-social wellbeing.

Corresponding Author

Abdul Mujeeb Khan
Lecturer of Psychology
Faculty of Education and Human Development,
Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malaim, Malaysia
Fax: +6015 4879 7297
H/P 0169952210, email: mmpsy2@gmail.com , mujeeb@fpm.upsi.edu.my

VI. REFERENCES

- [1] Bennett, M. J. (1986). A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10(2), 179–196. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(86\)90005-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(86)90005-2)
- [2] Econ, S. J., Manag, B., & Falope, S. S. (2017). Wage Discrimination and Its Effect on Employee ' s Job Outcomes : Evidence from North Cyprus. *Scholars Journal of Economics, Business and Management*, 4(9), 626–637. <https://doi.org/10.21276/sjebm.2017.4.9.5>
- [3] Mohd Nordin, N., Salleh, N. A., & Abdul Rashid, A. K. (2012). The Language Problem Issue among Foreign Workers in the Malaysian Construction Industry UKM. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 3(11), 97–99.
- [4] Mucci, N., Traversini, V., Giorgi, G., Tommasi, E., Sio, S. De, & Arcangeli, G. (2019). Migrant Workers and Psychological Health : A Systematic Review, (12), 1–28.
- [5] Rahman, M. M., Arif, M. T., Safii, R., Tambi, Z., Akoi, C., Jantan, Z., & Halim, S. A. (2019). Care seeking behaviour of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Sarawak, Malaysia. *Bangladesh Medical Research Council Bulletin*, 45(1), 47–53. <https://doi.org/10.3329/bmrcb.v45i1.41808>
- [6] Sookrajowa, S. S., & Pécod, A. (2019). United Nations Migrant Workers Convention. *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, 1813–1827. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2898-5_142
- [7] Tasleem, Z., Na, M., Azizah, N., & Abidin, Z. (2019). A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON THE SETTLEMENT

OF PAKISTANI IMMIGRANT LABORS IN MALAYSIA. *Asian People Journal*, 2(1), 155–168.

[8] Verwiebe, R., Mau, S., Seidel, N., & Kathmann, T. (2010). Skilled German migrants and their motives for migration within Europe. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 11(3), 273–293. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-010-0141-9>

[9] Weber, E. U., & Hsee, C. K. (1999). Models and mosaics: Investigating cross-cultural differences in risk perception and risk preference. *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, 6(4), 611–617. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03212969>

[10] Wong, P. H., & Celbis, M. G. (2019). Human Rights, Income and International Migration. *International Migration*, 57(3), 98–114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12558>