

INVISIBLE PILLARS *of* MALAYSIA

Migrant Matters

Jaya Devi Rengasamy



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Invisible Pillars of Malaysia

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Jaya Devi Rengasamy



*Author: **Jaya Devi Rengasamy***

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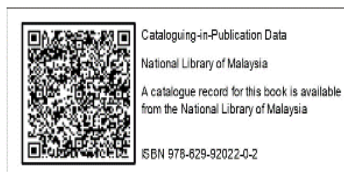
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D e d i c a t i o n

to
Datin Seri Sunita Mei-Lin Rajakumar

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and heartfelt admiration for Datin Seri Sunita Mei-Lin Rajakumar. Her extraordinary leadership, unwavering humility, and profound commitment to serving others have been a constant source of inspiration to me—so much so that her guidance played a meaningful role in my admission to the PhD program.

Beyond her remarkable professional achievements and groundbreaking contributions to corporate governance, what truly inspires me most is her ability to remain humble, kind, and compassionate in every situation. Through her actions and leadership, she teaches us that true success is not measured by the positions we hold or the accomplishments we achieve, but by how deeply we care for others and the positive impact we make in their lives.

She has gently taught me to value and appreciate the hard work of others, to extend help whenever possible, and to always see people as human beings first—regardless of their background, status, or circumstances. Her example reminds us that respect, empathy, and gratitude are not just qualities, but powerful forces that can transform workplaces, communities, and even entire lives.

As one of Malaysia's "Invisible Pillars," Datin Seri Sunita embodies the very essence of servant leadership, integrity, and humanity. Her influence extends far beyond boardrooms and corporate halls, inspiring countless individuals to lead with kindness, humility, and a genuine, heartfelt commitment to making the world better for others. Her legacy is not written in titles or awards, but in the lives she has touched and the hearts she has changed.

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t

This book would not have been possible without the support and generosity of many individuals and institutions.

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the migrant workers who shared their stories, experiences, and reflections. Their openness and trust made this research possible. Their everyday struggles and resilience remain the heart of this book.

I am also grateful to colleagues, researchers, and community members who provided insights into migration policy, labor governance, and migrant welfare in Malaysia. Their perspectives helped shape the broader policy discussions presented in this work.

My appreciation also goes to the publishing team at *Thesis Publisher* for their encouragement and assistance in bringing this work to publication.

Finally, I extend my deepest thanks to my family and friends for their continuous encouragement and support throughout the process of writing this book.

F o r e w o r d

The Person Before the Scholar

There are researchers who study a subject, and there are people who are called by one. Jaya Devi Rengasamy belongs to the second kind. Some books begin with a research question. Others begin with personal concern. A few begin with a deep moral discomfort — the feeling that something important has remained unseen, unheard, or inadequately understood. *Invisible Pillars of Malaysia: Migrant Matters* belongs to this third category. It is a book born from concern, strengthened by research, and directed towards human recognition.

Before she became the author of this book — before the academic frameworks and field notes, before the citations and conceptual architecture — she was simply a woman who could not look away. She could not look away from the Bangladeshi construction worker eating alone behind a half-built wall. She could not look away from the Tamil grandmother working a plantation row that her own grandmother may have walked before her. She could not look away from the Indonesian domestic worker whose name her employer could not pronounce, or the Thai border worker who crossed every morning into a country that would never truly receive him.

This quality — what I will call the refusal to not-see — is not a research method. It is a moral posture. And it is rare. Academic training often teaches us to translate human pain into analytical distance: to convert suffering into data, dignity into category, and presence into sample size. Jaya Devi learned none of this. Or rather, if she learned it, she refused to keep it. What survived her years of study and

fieldwork in the kitchens, construction sites, and plantation roads of Malaysia was not detachment but deeper attachment — a growing responsibility to those whose labour holds this country up while policy and public discourse push them out of the frame.

I have had the privilege of knowing Jaya Devi as a colleague and collaborator through Thesis Publisher Malaysia. What strikes me is not her intellectual output, impressive as it is, but how she speaks about the people in her research. They are not her informants. They are not her cases. They are, to use her own instinctive language, her people. There is no methodological claim in that phrase — it is something more elemental. It is recognition. And recognition, as I have argued elsewhere, is not merely social courtesy; it is the foundational ethical act from which any genuine knowledge of another human being must begin. Her care extended beyond the professional — during a difficult period in my own family's life, she showed the same quality of human attention that defines her work with migrant communities: quiet, consistent, and asking nothing in return.

Her commitment runs not to the state, not to the institutions that govern migration, and not to the categories those institutions produce. Her commitment runs to the *nas* — the people themselves, in their full, irreducible humanity. The migrant is not only a labourer. The migrant is also a mother or father, a believer, a community member, a person carrying memories, fears, responsibilities, and hopes. Migrants do not leave their humanity at the border when they enter a receiving country. They arrive with complete lives, even when institutions recognize only the labouring part of those lives. This book was written from that understanding. Readers will feel it on every page.

II. The Found Author

Books find their authors as often as authors find their books. Jaya Devi did not set out to write a treatise on migration governance. She set out to understand people. The book grew from that intention — organically, almost reluctantly — as the weight of what she was witnessing demanded form. When I first read the manuscript, what moved me was not the theoretical fluency or the breadth of empirical coverage, though both are considerable. What moved me was the sense that this text had been needed into existence.

She is a found author in a specific sense. She did not begin her journey positioned inside the academy, armed with a pre-formed research question and a grant approval. She came from inside Malaysian civil society, from years of direct engagement with migrant communities, welfare organisations, and the unglamorous business of accompaniment. When she finally turned to formal scholarship, she brought that entire inheritance with her. The research did not produce her understanding of migrant life; her understanding of migrant life shaped what questions the research was permitted to ask.

This is a rare intellectual formation. Most academic books on labour migration are written from the outside in — beginning with theory, descending toward the field. This book moves in the opposite direction: from the ground up, from the face-to-face outward toward the structural, from the particular toward the conceptual. The result is a text that carries a different kind of authority. The arguments here have not merely been read and synthesized; they have been lived alongside.

Jaya Devi was also found by her subject at a particular historical moment—a moment when Malaysia's

dependence on migrant labour had become undeniable even as public discourse continued to treat that labour as temporary, peripheral, and dispensable. She arrived in the scholarly conversation at precisely the moment when someone needed to say clearly: this is not peripheral. These are the invisible pillars. The title she chose is not metaphor. It is testimony.

III. The Researcher Who Listens Before She Speaks

As a researcher, Jaya Devi brings strengths that are not always found together. She has breadth: the book covers Bangladeshi, Indian, Indonesian, and Thai migrant communities, tracing both shared structural vulnerabilities and the distinctive social worlds each community has built within Malaysia. This comparative scope requires not only sustained fieldwork but the kind of cross-cultural empathy that cannot be manufactured through methodology alone — it must be practised, earned.

She has depth: the case narratives embedded throughout the book — Ravi, the documented Indian worker navigating caste and temple community; the Bangladeshi women workers negotiating gendered migration channels; the Indonesian plantation workers carrying kinship obligations across the Strait — are not illustrations deployed to humanize statistical findings. They are the primary evidence. They are what the analysis is built upon, not added to. In this methodological orientation, she is insisting that the human account is not supplementary to knowledge. It is knowledge.

She has, perhaps most importantly, the researcher's most undervalued capacity: she listens before she speaks. Her preface already reveals this. She enters her own text as a witness, not as an authority. The migrant workers, she

writes, are the heart of this book. That is not a conventional academic acknowledgement. It is an epistemological declaration — a statement about where truth in this domain actually lives.

What makes her research stand apart from the dominant genre of migration studies in Malaysia is precisely what the dominant genre lacks: interiority. Policy analysis can tell us what percentage of documented workers experience wage theft. Field-based research of the kind Jaya Devi practises can tell us what it feels like to have your wages withheld when you are three thousand kilometres from your child and your return ticket is in your employer's drawer. Both kinds of knowing are necessary. Only one of them changes people.

The book also gives meaningful attention to religion and community. Mosques, temples, churches, cultural associations, and informal networks often become places of safety and social support — providing not only religious practice but information, emotional care, moral guidance, and a sense of familiarity within an unfamiliar environment. These spaces show that migration is not only an economic journey; it is also a moral, emotional, and spiritual one.

IV. This Book as Manifesto

I want to be direct about what this book is and what it is not. It is not merely a narration of migrant life. It is not a collection of stories assembled to evoke sympathy and then dissolve into policy recommendations. It is — and I use this word carefully — a manifesto.

A manifesto does not only describe the world. It insists that the world be seen differently. It demands that those with

institutional power reckon with what they have chosen not to see. It refuses the neutrality that, in matters of structural injustice, is always a form of complicity. Jaya Devi's book does all of this. It names the invisible pillars. It refuses to let them remain unnamed. It insists that the workers who build Malaysia's cities, harvest its palm oil, staff its factories, and care for its elderly are not a labour supply problem to be managed. They are human beings to whom this country owes an honest reckoning — an accounting of what has been taken and what has not been given in return.

This book asks policymakers to look beyond regulation and consider justice. It asks employers to look beyond productivity and recognize responsibility. It asks researchers to build reciprocal relationships with the people whose knowledge makes research possible. It asks citizens to move beyond fear and stereotype. Most importantly, it asks all of us to reconsider what it means to benefit from the work of others while refusing to acknowledge their presence.

Malaysia's development cannot be narrated honestly without migrant workers. Its cities, industries, plantations, and public spaces carry the marks of their labour in every brick and beam. Recognizing this truth does not weaken Malaysia. It strengthens the country's moral and social foundation. A society becomes more mature when it can recognize every person who contributes to its shared life.

I am proud to introduce this book. I am prouder still to have watched Jaya Devi find her voice — as a person, as a scholar, and as someone who understood that the most important thing a researcher can do is refuse to abandon the people who trusted her with their stories. She has not abandoned them. This book is the proof. *Invisible Pillars of Malaysia: Migrant Matters* reminds us that those who appear to stand at the margins may, in fact, be holding up

the centre. May it make the invisible visible, the unheard audible, and the unrecognized properly honoured.

Prof. Jahid Siraz Chowdhury

Founder, Global Institute of Education and Research
(GIER); Fellow, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand;
Head, Research Wing, Thesis Publisher Malaysia

Kuala Lumpur, 2026

P r e f a c e

Migration has become one of the defining realities of the contemporary world. Across continents, people move in search of work, safety, dignity, and opportunity. While migration is often discussed in terms of policy, labor markets, and economic statistics, the lived experiences of migrants reveal a far more complex story—one that involves identity, belonging, faith, resilience, and negotiation with new social environments. Malaysia offers a significant location for understanding these realities. Over the past several decades, the country has become a major destination for migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia. Workers from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, and other countries contribute significantly to Malaysia's construction sector, manufacturing industries, plantations, and service economy. Their labor supports the nation's physical and economic infrastructure, yet their presence often remains politically contested and socially invisible.

The title of this book, *Migration Matters* to Malaysia, reflects a simple but powerful observation: migrant labor is not a peripheral phenomenon but a central component of Malaysia's modern development. Cities expand, industries grow, and national economies diversify through the contributions of migrant workers who often operate at the margins of visibility. The phrase "migration matters" therefore carries a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the material importance of migrant labor in sustaining economic production.

On the other hand, it speaks to the broader social, ethical, and political questions that migration raises for states and societies. How should nations recognize the contributions of migrant workers? How do migration policies balance

economic needs with human dignity? And how do migrants themselves experience and interpret their lives within unfamiliar social and cultural environments?

Public debates about migration often center on regulatory concerns: border control, work permits, labor shortages, or undocumented migration. While these questions are undoubtedly important, they often overshadow the human dimensions of migration. Migrant workers are frequently reduced to categories within bureaucratic systems—“foreign labor,” “temporary workers,” or “irregular migrants.” Such labels may be necessary for administrative purposes, but they rarely capture the full complexity of migrant lives. Migrants are also parents, siblings, neighbors, and community members. They maintain borders, support families through remittances, participate in religious and cultural networks, and build new forms of belonging in unfamiliar environments. Understanding migration, therefore, requires attention not only to policy frameworks but also to the social and moral worlds that migrants inhabit.

Malaysia’s migration landscape replicates broader regional and global transformations. Since the late twentieth century, economic expansion and industrialization have generated sustained demand for labor across multiple sectors. As Malaysian society has experienced rising levels of education and income, many citizens have moved away from labor-intensive occupations. Migrant workers have increasingly filled these gaps. Construction sites, agricultural estates, manufacturing plants, restaurants, and domestic households rely on the labor of migrants who travel thousands of kilometers in search of employment. These movements are not random; they are shaped by historical relationships, recruitment networks, economic inequalities, and migration policies that link Malaysia with sending countries across Asia.

Bangladesh has emerged as one of the largest sources of migrant labor to Malaysia, particularly in construction, manufacturing, and service industries. Indian migration, historically rooted in colonial plantation labor, continues today through both skilled and semi-skilled employment pathways. Indonesian workers form another significant migrant population, particularly in domestic work and plantation labor. Thai workers, especially from border regions, participate in cross-border labor markets shaped by geography and regional trade. Each of these communities brings with it distinct cultural traditions, linguistic practices, and religious networks. At the same time, all migrant groups navigate similar structural conditions—temporary visas, labor recruitment systems, and varying degrees of social vulnerability.

While the economic contributions of migrant workers are widely acknowledged, their everyday experiences are often poorly understood. Migrant workers must navigate complex recruitment processes before leaving their home countries. Many incur substantial debts to secure employment abroad. Upon arrival, they encounter new legal frameworks, workplace expectations, and social environments that may differ significantly from those of their home communities. Some migrants experience stable employment and supportive social networks; others confront exploitation, legal uncertainty, or social isolation. These realities highlight the need for a more comprehensive conversation about migration—one that recognizes both opportunity and vulnerability.

Religion also plays a significant role in the lives of many migrant workers, and religious institutions like Mosques, Temples, and Churches often serve as important social spaces where migrants find emotional support, information, and community connections. Religious gatherings can become spaces where workers share experiences, exchange

advice, and maintain cultural continuity while living abroad. At times, migration can lead individuals to re-evaluate their religious practices or strengthen their sense of moral discipline. For some migrants, the experience of working abroad encourages greater religious participation; for others, it opens new forms of inter-religious interaction and community engagement. These dynamics illustrate how migration intersects not only with labor and policy but also with moral and spiritual life.

This book emerged from a desire to explore these broader dimensions of migration. Rather than approaching migrant labor solely through economic indicators or policy debates, the chapters that follow examine migration as a multidimensional social phenomenon. They consider how labor systems, migration governance, and community networks interact to shape the everyday realities of migrant life in Malaysia. By examining the experiences of migrants from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Thailand, the book highlights both shared challenges and distinctive social trajectories within Malaysia's diverse migrant population. The analysis presented here draws on field observations, narrative accounts, and policy discussions. Listening to migrant voices—whether through conversations, community gatherings, or informal exchanges—offers important insights into how migration is experienced on the ground. At the same time, migration policies, recruitment structures, and labor regulations form the institutional context within which these experiences unfold. Understanding migration, therefore, requires attention to both levels: the structural frameworks created by states and the lived realities of individuals navigating those frameworks.

The central argument of this book is that migration should not be understood only as movement between two locations. Migration is also a process of transformation. Individuals

who leave their home countries often find themselves negotiating new identities, relationships, and expectations. *They must learn unfamiliar social norms, build new networks of support, and reinterpret their life trajectories in light of their migration experiences. These transformations are rarely simple or linear. They unfold gradually through everyday interactions, workplace encounters, and community participation.* In this sense, migration reshapes not only economic opportunities but also personal narratives of belonging and aspiration.

For Malaysia, the presence of migrant workers raises important questions about national development and social inclusion. Economic growth has depended in part on the labor of migrants, yet public discourse sometimes frames migration primarily as a problem to be managed rather than a social reality to be understood. Recognizing the contributions of migrant workers does not mean ignoring the challenges associated with migration governance. Instead, it requires a balanced perspective that acknowledges both the economic needs of receiving countries and the rights and dignity of migrant communities.

The chapters that follow, therefore, aim to contribute to a more nuanced conversation about migration in Malaysia. By examining the historical evolution of labor migration, the institutional structures that regulate migrant labor, and the lived experiences of migrant communities, the book seeks to illuminate the multiple dimensions of migration that shape contemporary Malaysian society. Migration is not simply a matter of labor supply or policy regulation; it is also a story of people, relationships, aspirations, and resilience.

In writing this book, I hope to encourage a deeper reflection on the role of migrant workers in Malaysia's past, present, and future. Their labor has helped build cities, support

industries, and sustain everyday life across the nation. Their experiences also reveal important lessons about mobility, adaptation, and the human capacity to navigate uncertainty. Understanding these stories is essential for building more inclusive and informed conversations about migration in the years ahead.

JDR
ESKL
Malaysia

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CHAPTER 1

MIGRANT WORKERS AND THE POLITICS OF PRESENCE IN MALAYSIA

This chapter introduces the book's broader themes by examining how migrant labor, legal governance, and cultural identity intersect in Malaysia. It begins by outlining the historical and economic foundations of labor migration in the country. It then discusses the legal categories that regulate migrant workers and shape their everyday experiences. The chapter also explores the role of religion and nationality in forming migrant identities and social networks. Finally, it presents the book's central research questions and arguments and explains the structure of the chapters that follow.

1 . 0 I n t r o d u c t i o n

Malaysia has become one of the most important labor-receiving countries in Southeast Asia, relying heavily on migrant workers to sustain key sectors of its economy. Over the past several decades, the country's rapid industrialization, infrastructure development, and expansion of plantation agriculture have generated a continuous demand for low- and semi-skilled labor that cannot be fully supplied by the domestic workforce. As a result, migrant workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, Nepal, Thailand, and several other Asian countries have become central to Malaysia's labor market. Studies by international institutions estimate that migrant workers constitute a

substantial share of Malaysia's workforce, particularly in labor-intensive sectors such as construction, manufacturing, plantation agriculture, and domestic service (World Bank, 2020; Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014). In practical terms, this means that many of the buildings, roads, plantations, and factories that sustain Malaysia's economic growth depend directly on migrant workers' labor.

Despite this structural importance, migrant workers occupy an ambiguous position within Malaysian society. They are simultaneously indispensable to the economy and socially marginal within the national community. Public discourse frequently portrays migrants through contradictory narratives: they are described as essential contributors to development while also being framed as sources of social problems, illegal migration, or security concerns. Scholars of migration governance have noted that this contradiction is common in many labor-receiving states, where migrant workers are incorporated into labor markets but remain politically and socially excluded from full participation in society (Anderson, 2013; Piper & Foley, 2021). Migrant workers thus become visible in economic statistics and labor policies but remain less visible in the narratives through which nations imagine themselves.

This book approaches this contradiction through the concept of the *politics of presence*. The term refers to the ways migrant workers are recognized, categorized, and governed within Malaysian society. Presence, in this sense, is not limited to physical visibility; it also encompasses legal, social, and symbolic dimensions. Migrant workers are physically present in workplaces, neighborhoods, and public spaces, yet their recognition as members of society remains conditional

and restricted. Their presence is regulated through legal categories such as temporary employment permits, labor quotas, and immigration controls that simultaneously allow and limit their participation in national life. The politics of presence, therefore, concerns the processes through which migrants are made visible as labor while remaining partially invisible as social subjects.

Understanding migrant workers in Malaysia requires moving beyond purely economic explanations of migration. While labor demand is a major driver of migration flows, migrant workers arrive with complex social backgrounds that include religion, language, family obligations, and cultural identities. Migration, therefore, transforms not only labor markets but also the everyday lives of migrants and the societies they inhabit. Workers maintain transnational relationships with families and communities in their countries of origin, sending remittances and sustaining social networks across borders (Levitt, 2007; Castles et al., 2014). At the same time, they form new relationships within Malaysia, interacting with employers, fellow migrants, religious communities, and local institutions.

1.1 Invisible Migration and Labor in Malaysia

Labor migration has long been intertwined with Malaysia's economic development. The origins of contemporary migration patterns can be traced back to the colonial period, when British administrators encouraged the migration of laborers from China and India to work on plantations and in the mining industry. These colonial labor systems created early patterns of labor mobility that would later influence

migration dynamics in the post-independence period. Indian workers were recruited to rubber plantations, while Chinese migrants entered mining, commerce, and urban economic activities. These historical migration flows shaped Malaysia's demographic composition and laid the groundwork for later labor migration within the region (Kaur, 2010; Castles et al., 2014). Malaysia has become one of Southeast Asia's major destinations for migrant labor, attracting workers from across South and Southeast Asia to support its rapidly expanding economy. Over the past three decades, migrant workers have become deeply embedded in Malaysia's labor market, particularly in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, plantation agriculture, services, and domestic work. According to available estimates, migrant workers constitute a substantial proportion of the country's workforce and are essential to sustaining labor-intensive industries that local workers increasingly avoid (World Bank, 2019). This structural reliance on migrant labor reflects broader regional inequalities in employment opportunities, wage levels, and economic development across Asia. Countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, Nepal, and Thailand send large numbers of workers abroad, while Malaysia serves as a receiving economy in which labor shortages are filled through migrant recruitment.

Statistical estimates indicate that Malaysia hosts millions of migrant workers, both documented and undocumented. Data compiled by international institutions and government sources suggest that migrant labor forms a significant share of Malaysia's total workforce, especially in low-skilled sectors that require physically demanding or routine work (World Bank, 2019). More recent statistical reports also highlight the continued growth of migrant labor in

Malaysia's economy, indicating that foreign workers remain central to maintaining industrial productivity and economic expansion (Statista, 2024). The presence of such a large migrant population demonstrates how labor mobility has become a permanent structural feature of Malaysia's economic system rather than a temporary phenomenon.

The governance of migrant labor in Malaysia operates through a complex legal and administrative framework that regulates the recruitment, employment, and residence of foreign workers. The Malaysian government uses several regulatory mechanisms to control migrant labor flows, including work permits, sector-specific employment restrictions, employer sponsorship requirements, and bilateral labor agreements with sending countries. One of the primary legal instruments regulating migrant employment is the Visitor's Pass (Temporary Employment), which allows foreign workers to work in designated sectors for limited periods under specific contractual arrangements (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2026). These permits typically tie migrant workers to particular employers, meaning that workers cannot easily change jobs without official authorization. While such systems provide employers with labor stability, they also create dependency relationships that may reduce workers' bargaining power in cases of labor disputes or workplace abuse.

Legal scholars have noted that Malaysian migration law reflects a tension between economic demand for migrant labor and the state's desire to maintain strong regulatory control over foreign workers. Labor migration policies often prioritize economic productivity while simultaneously imposing strict administrative conditions that limit migrant workers'

mobility, legal protection, and long-term settlement opportunities (Hassan & George, 2015). For example, migrant workers are generally recruited under temporary employment schemes rather than permanent migration pathways, which reinforces their status as short-term laborers rather than members of society. This legal framing allows the state to benefit from migrant labor while minimizing the long-term social and political implications of large-scale immigration.

Recruitment systems also play a crucial role in shaping migrant labor experiences. Migrant workers frequently rely on recruitment agencies or labor brokers to secure overseas employment. These intermediaries coordinate visa applications, employment contracts, and transportation arrangements between sending and receiving countries. However, recruitment processes may involve substantial fees that place workers in debt before they even begin working abroad (Hassan & George, 2015). Such recruitment debts can significantly affect migrants' working conditions, as workers may feel compelled to accept difficult or exploitative employment to repay migration-related expenses.

Alongside documented workers, Malaysia also hosts a significant population of undocumented migrants. Some migrants enter the country without official authorization, while others become undocumented after overstaying visas or leaving their assigned employers. The existence of undocumented migrants has become a major policy concern for the Malaysian government, leading to periodic enforcement campaigns aimed at identifying and deporting irregular migrants. At the same time, labor market

demand continues to encourage the employment of migrant workers across multiple sectors. This creates a policy contradiction in which migrant labor is simultaneously necessary for economic growth hitherto subject to strict immigration enforcement (World Bank, 2020).



Beyond economic and legal dimensions, migrant workers also navigate complex social environments shaped by religion, nationality, and cultural identity. Malaysia is a religiously diverse society in which Islam holds official status, while other faiths such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism are widely practiced (ExpatFocus, n.d.). Migrant workers bring their own religious traditions with them, creating a diverse religious landscape within migrant communities. For many migrants, religious institutions such as mosques, temples, and churches function as important sources of social support and community organization.



Religion can also influence how migrants interpret the challenges associated with migration. Living and working abroad often involves separation from family members, unfamiliar cultural environments, and economic pressures. In such contexts, religious beliefs

and practices can provide moral frameworks that help migrants cope with uncertainty and hardship. Studies in the sociology and psychology of religion suggest that migration and other forms of life disruption can encourage shifts in religious identity, spiritual commitment, or personal belief systems (Snook, Williams, & Horgan, 2019). For migrant workers, religion may therefore serve both as a source of emotional resilience and as a means of maintaining cultural identity while living in a foreign environment.

At the policy level, debates over migrant labor in Malaysia frequently center on rights, protection, and social justice. Civil society organizations and legal advocacy groups have repeatedly called for improved labor protections and more humane migration policies. For example, the Malaysian Bar Council has emphasized the need for the dignified treatment of migrant workers and highlighted concerns about labor exploitation, detention practices, and access to justice for foreign workers (Malaysian Bar Council, 2023). These discussions reflect broader international debates about migrant rights and labor standards, particularly within global supply chains that depend heavily on migrant labor.

Malaysia's migration policies are also shaped by regional economic dynamics. Southeast Asia has become an important corridor for labor mobility, with workers moving between countries in response to economic disparities and employment opportunities. Policy analysts have argued that effective migration governance requires cooperation between sending and receiving countries in order to ensure fair recruitment practices, labor protections, and sustainable migration systems (ASEAN Briefing, 2025). Regional initiatives and bilateral agreements, therefore, play an

increasingly important role in shaping migration policy across Southeast Asia.

In summary, migrant labor has become an integral component of Malaysia's economic and social landscape. Millions of workers from neighbouring countries contribute to industries that sustain national development, yet their legal status and social recognition remain limited. Migration governance in Malaysia reflects a complex balance between economic demand, regulatory control, and human rights considerations. Understanding these dynamics requires examining not only labor markets and migration policies but also the social and cultural experiences of migrant workers themselves. The presence of migrant workers in Malaysia, therefore, raises broader questions about labor justice, social inclusion, and the future of migration governance in an increasingly interconnected world.

Following independence in 1957, Malaysia gradually transformed into an industrializing economy integrated into global markets. Government development strategies in the 1970s and 1980s emphasized export-oriented manufacturing, infrastructure development, and large-scale agricultural production, particularly in the palm oil sector. These economic changes significantly increased the demand for labor across several sectors. However, rising educational attainment and income levels among Malaysian citizens led many local workers to move away from physically demanding and low-paid occupations. Employers therefore began to recruit migrant workers from neighbouring countries to fill labor shortages in industries such as construction, plantation agriculture, and manufacturing (Kanamath, 2006; Hugo, 2014).

Over time, Malaysia became one of the largest destinations for migrant labor in Southeast Asia. Workers from Indonesia historically dominated the plantation and domestic labor sectors, while Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants became increasingly visible in construction and manufacturing. Indian migrants, particularly Tamil workers, also maintained a long presence in plantation labor and later expanded into construction and service industries. Thai migrants, although smaller in number, often participate in agriculture and cross-border economic activities, particularly in regions close to the Malaysian-Thai border (Kaur, 2010; Piper & Foley, 2021).

These migration flows reflect broader regional inequalities in economic development. Workers from labor-sending countries often migrate due to limited employment opportunities and income disparities at home. Migration provides opportunities for higher earnings abroad, which can significantly improve household livelihoods through remittances sent to families in their countries of origin. Remittances play an important role in supporting education, healthcare, housing, and local economic activities within migrant-sending communities (Levitt, 2007; Castles et al., 2014).

At the same time, migrant workers frequently encounter precarious working conditions. Temporary employment contracts, employer-tied work permits, and recruitment debts can place workers in vulnerable positions within labor markets. Workplace safety concerns, wage disputes, and limited legal protection further complicate migrant experiences in some sectors. Scholars have argued that such conditions reflect structural inequalities within global labor

systems, where migrant workers occupy positions that are economically necessary but socially marginal (Anderson, 2013; Piper & Foley, 2021). In Malaysia, these dynamics illustrate how economic dependence on migrant labor coexists with restrictive governance systems that limit migrant rights and mobility.

1.2 Legal Categories and Migration Governance

Migration in Malaysia is regulated through a complex legal and administrative framework that defines who may enter the country, under what conditions they may work, and how long they may remain. These regulations form part of a broader system of migration governance designed to manage labor mobility while maintaining state authority over immigration. In practice, migrant workers are typically admitted through temporary employment permit systems that restrict employment to specific sectors such as manufacturing, construction, plantation agriculture, and domestic work (Kanapathy, 2006; Piper & Foley, 2021).

These work permits typically bind migrant workers to specific employers, making it difficult for workers to change jobs without official permission. While this system provides employers with a stable workforce, it also creates dependencies that may limit workers' ability to negotiate better working conditions. Scholars have noted that employer-tied visas can increase the risk of exploitation because workers who leave abusive employment situations may lose their legal status (Anderson, 2013; Castles et al., 2014).

Recruitment systems also play a significant role in migration governance. Migrant workers often rely on

recruitment agencies or labor brokers to obtain overseas employment. These intermediaries arrange job placements, travel documentation, and work permits, but they frequently charge high recruitment fees. Many migrant workers, therefore, begin their employment abroad with significant debt incurred to finance migration. The repayment of recruitment loans may take several months or even years, increasing workers' vulnerability during the early stages of employment (Piper & Foley, 2021).

Another important aspect of migration governance involves the distinction **between documented and undocumented migrants**. Some workers enter Malaysia without official authorization, while others become undocumented after overstaying visas or leaving their assigned employers. Government enforcement operations periodically target undocumented migrants through workplace inspections, detention centers, and deportation programs. These enforcement measures illustrate the tension between economic reliance on migrant labor and political pressure to maintain strict immigration control (Anderson, 2013).

Recent policy reforms have attempted to address some of these challenges. Bilateral agreements between Malaysia and labor-sending countries aim to regulate recruitment processes and reduce worker exploitation. Digital registration systems and labor monitoring initiatives have also been introduced to improve administrative oversight. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain in ensuring fair labor standards and protecting migrant workers' rights. Migration governance therefore remains a dynamic field where economic needs, political priorities, and human rights concerns intersect (Piper & Foley, 2021).

1 . 3 R e l i g i o n , N a t i o n a l i t y , a n d M i g r a n t I d e n t i t y

Beyond economic and legal structures, migrant workers in Malaysia also navigate complex social environments shaped by religion, nationality, and cultural identity. Religion is particularly significant because Malaysia is a multi-religious society where Islam holds official status while other faith traditions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and indigenous religions, are widely practiced. Many migrant workers bring their own religious traditions, creating diverse religious landscapes within migrant communities (Levitt, 2007). For Muslim migrants from Bangladesh and Indonesia, mosques often function as important centres of social interaction. Religious gatherings provide opportunities for prayer, moral guidance, and community support. Migrants frequently exchange information about employment opportunities, housing arrangements, and legal matters during mosque gatherings. Religious leaders and charitable organizations may also provide assistance to migrants experiencing financial or personal difficulties (Levitt, 2007; Piper & Foley, 2021).

Similarly, Hindu temples and Christian churches serve as important gathering spaces for Indian and Filipino migrants. Religious festivals, prayer meetings, and community events create opportunities for migrants to maintain cultural traditions and strengthen social ties with fellow migrants. These institutions help migrants cope with the challenges of living far from home by providing emotional support and a sense of belonging.

Religion shapes how migrants interpret their experiences. Some see migration as a moral journey that reinforces faith or tests resilience. Religious

teachings help cope with loneliness, uncertainty, and separation from family. Scholars note that religion plays a key role in migration adaptation by providing frameworks to interpret hardship and hope for improvement (Levitt, 2007).

Nationality also influences migrant identities and social relationships. Workers often organize themselves into national or linguistic communities that provide mutual assistance and practical guidance for navigating life abroad. Shared language and cultural practices enable migrants to form support networks that help newcomers find employment, housing, and community connections. At the same time, national identities can also produce divisions between different migrant groups, reflecting broader geopolitical and cultural differences.

Within Malaysian society, migrant identities are therefore shaped by multiple overlapping factors, including legal status, economic role, religion, and nationality. Migrant workers continuously negotiate these identities as they interact with employers, fellow migrants, and local communities. Their experiences illustrate how migration reshapes social relationships and cultural practices across national boundaries.

1 . 4 R e s e a r c h Q u e s t i o n s a n d B o o k A r g u m e n t

This book seeks to understand migrant labor in Malaysia as a multidimensional social phenomenon shaped by economic structures, legal governance, and cultural identities. Rather than focusing solely on policy debates or labor statistics, the study examines how migrant workers themselves experience

migration in everyday life.

Three central research questions guide the analysis presented in this book. First, how do labor regimes and migration policies shape the working conditions and social experiences of migrant workers in Malaysia? Second, how do religion, nationality, and community networks influence migrant identities and forms of belonging? Third, how does migration transform the ways migrants interpret their lives, relationships, and aspirations?

The central argument of the book is that migration should be understood not only as an economic process but also as a social and moral transformation. Migrant workers navigate legal systems, labor markets, and cultural environments that reshape their identities and everyday practices. Migration, therefore, creates a complex social field where economic necessity, political regulation, and cultural adaptation intersect.

1 . 5 S t r u c t u r e o f t h e B o o k

The remainder of the book explores these themes through a combination of historical analysis, conceptual discussion, and empirical case studies. Chapter Two introduces the methodological framework and explains the research design. Chapter Three examines the historical development of labor migration in Malaysia from colonial labor systems to contemporary migration regimes. Chapters Four through Six analyze the experiences of migrant communities from India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Thailand, highlighting the distinct social and cultural dynamics within each group. The final chapter synthesizes these discussions and reflects on the

broader implications of migrant labor for Malaysian society and global migration debates.

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CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUALIZING MIGRANTS, MALAYSIA AND BEYOND

This chapter establishes the conceptual and methodological foundation for the book by developing a framework for analyzing migrant labor systems in Malaysia and their broader regional context. Rather than presenting original empirical data, the chapter adopts a conceptual and document-based analytical approach to interpret how migration governance, labor regimes, and migrant social identities interact. By integrating theoretical perspectives from sociology, political economy, and migration studies, the chapter proposes a multidimensional framework that helps explain how institutional policies, labor market structures, and cultural identities shape migrant experiences in Malaysia and beyond.

2 . 0 I n t r o d u c t i o n

International labor migration has become one of the most defining features of the contemporary global economy. The mobility of workers across national borders reshapes labor markets, demographic patterns, and social structures across both sending and receiving countries. In recent decades, migration flows have intensified as globalization, technological change, and economic integration have connected previously distant labor markets. Southeast Asia has emerged as one of the most dynamic regions in this regard, where labor-sending countries such as Bangladesh,

Indonesia, India, Nepal, and Myanmar are closely linked with labor-receiving economies, including Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014; King, 2012). These movements are not random or isolated. Rather, they are structured by regional economic inequalities, recruitment systems, state policies, and global production networks that sustain demand for migrant labor (Skeldon, 2012; de Haas, 2021).

Malaysia occupies a particularly significant position within this regional migration system. Malaysia's position is visible in recent labour statistics. In Q3 2024, Malaysia's total labour force stood at 17.26 million, while official figures reported 2,470,781 active foreign workers as of 30 September 2024. This means registered foreign workers alone were approximately 14.3% of the labour force, very close to the Malaysian government's policy ceiling of 15% under the Twelfth Malaysia Plan. These workers were concentrated in key labour-intensive sectors: manufacturing (771,327), construction (698,407), services (448,572), plantation (266,600), agriculture (183,086), domestic work (102,037), and mining/quarrying (752). Earlier World Bank estimates placed Malaysia's total foreign-worker population, including irregular workers, between 2.96 and 3.26 million in 2017, with irregular foreign workers estimated at 1.23–1.46 million, showing that the real scale of migrant labour may exceed registered counts.

Since the twentieth century, the country's rapid economic development has created persistent labor shortages in labor-intensive sectors such as construction, plantation agriculture, manufacturing, and domestic work. Migrant workers have therefore



Malaysia's Department of Statistics reported a labour force of 17.26 million in Q3 2024. Parliamentary reporting in December 2024 recorded 2,470,781 active foreign workers as of 30 September 2024, distributed mainly across manufacturing, construction, services, plantation, agriculture, domestic work, and mining/quarrying. These places registered foreign workers at approximately 14.3% of the national labour force, close to the 15% policy ceiling discussed under Malaysia's foreign-worker management framework. The World Bank's earlier estimate placed Malaysia's total foreign-worker population, including irregular workers, between 2.96 and 3.26 million in 2017.

become a structural component of Malaysia's labor market, performing tasks that sustain economic growth and support key industries (Rahman, 2014; Kaur, 2010). International organizations estimate that several million migrant workers are currently

employed in Malaysia, representing a substantial share of the national workforce (World Bank, 2019). Migrant labor is therefore not a temporary phenomenon but a long-term feature of Malaysia's development model.

Despite their economic importance, migrant workers often remain socially and politically marginal within host societies. Migration governance regimes frequently treat migrants as temporary labor units rather than as members of the social community. Governments attempt to balance economic dependence on migrant labor with political concerns related to immigration control, national sovereignty, and social stability (Anderson, 2013; Ruhs, 2013). This tension produces complex regulatory systems that simultaneously facilitate labor mobility and restrict migrants' rights and long-term settlement opportunities (Boswell, 2007; Geddes & Scholten, 2016). Migration, therefore, operates not only as an economic process but also as a political and institutional system that shapes migrants' legal status, working conditions, and social inclusion.

2 . 1 C o n c e p t u a l R e s e a r c h i n M i g r a t i o n S t u d i e s

Conceptual research plays a central role in migration studies because migration is a complex social phenomenon that cannot be adequately explained through descriptive statistics or isolated empirical observations alone.

Conceptual research occupies a crucial place in migration studies because migration is not a simple,

linear movement from one place to another, but a layered social process involving multiple actors, scales, and institutions (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014; Swedberg, 2014). Attempts to explain migration purely through descriptive statistics or isolated case studies often miss these deeper dynamics, as they focus on outcomes rather than the underlying logics that organize mobility. Early theories tended to rely on relatively narrow economic models, typically framed as push–pull explanations in which individuals move from low-income to high-income regions in search of better wages and opportunities (Massey et al., 1993). In these formulations, “push” factors, such as poverty and unemployment in sending countries, and “pull” factors, such as higher wages and labor demand in receiving countries, were treated as the primary engines of migration. Such perspectives provided an important starting point, but they risked reducing migration to a rational-choice calculus and obscuring the structural and historical conditions that make cross-border mobility possible in the first place (Castles et al., 2014).¹

Later scholarship has demonstrated that migration decisions and trajectories are embedded in broader social fields, including household strategies, kinship obligations, recruitment chains, and institutional frameworks (Massey et al., 1993; Castles et al., 2014). The new economics of labor migration, for example, emphasizes that decisions are often made at the level of families or households seeking to diversify income

¹jstor](<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2938462>)

sources and manage risk, rather than by isolated individuals maximizing wages (Massey et al., 1993). Historical-structural and world-systems approaches have further argued that international migration is deeply connected to the expansion of capitalist markets, colonial and postcolonial ties, and unequal power relations between core and peripheral regions (Castles et al., 2014). These perspectives move beyond a focus on wage differentials to highlight how past and present forms of incorporation into global markets create enduring migration corridors. Conceptual research is essential here because it provides the vocabulary and analytical tools needed to link micro-level decisions and experiences to macro-level transformations in political economy and global governance (Abend, 2008; Swedberg, 2014).²

Douglas Massey and his collaborators famously reviewed the main theories of international migration and concluded that no single model could fully account for the initiation and perpetuation of migration flows (Massey et al., 1993). Neoclassical economics, the new economics of labor migration, segmented labor market theory, world-systems theory, network theory, and institutional approaches each capture important aspects of migration. However, they operate at different levels of analysis and emphasise different causal mechanisms (Massey et al., 1993). For instance, segmented labor market theory argues that migration

² www.studeersnel.nl/nl/document/tilburg-university/global-migration/castles-de-haas-miller-the-age-of-migration-international-population-movements-in-the-modern-world-chapter-2/6600694.hh

is driven less by conditions in sending countries and more by a permanent demand for immigrant labor in the secondary sectors of advanced economies, where wages are low, jobs are unstable. Positions are unattractive to local workers (Piore, as discussed in Massey et al., 1993). Network theory, by contrast, highlights how social ties between migrants and non-migrants lower the costs and risks of movement over time, turning initial flows into self-sustaining processes (Massey et al., 1993). Conceptual research in this tradition does not simply choose one theory over another; it seeks to clarify the assumptions of each, identify their complementary strengths and blind spots, and consider how they might be combined or reworked for particular empirical contexts (Abend, 2008; Carling & Schewel, 2018). Gabriel Abend's reflections on "the meaning of theory" are especially useful for this kind of work. Abend (2008) reminds us that theory is not merely a set of propositions to be tested, but a way of organizing and interpreting reality that involves conceptual decisions about what entities exist, how they relate, and what counts as an explanation. In migration studies, this means that conceptual research must explicitly define key terms such as "migration," "forced" versus "voluntary" movement, "integration," "precarity," or "transnationalism," rather than treating these categories as self-evident. Different conceptualizations will highlight different aspects of migrant experience and governance. For example, defining migration primarily as a response to wage differentials foregrounds economic rationality, whereas conceptualizing it as a function of aspirations and capabilities, constrained by opportunity structures, brings into view issues of freedom, agency, and structural constraint (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

Conceptual research, in this sense, is not an optional preface to empirical work but a central part of how migration is understood and studied.

Swedberg (2014) similarly argues that good social theory begins with careful observation and conceptualization, rather than with ready-made variables and models. From this point of view, conceptual research in migration studies should begin by asking which puzzles or paradoxes require explanation and which conceptual tools are needed to address them. One such puzzle is the coexistence of restrictive immigration policies with ongoing, large-scale migration flows; another is the persistence of precarious and often exploitative labor conditions despite formal rights frameworks. Attending to these puzzles demands concepts that can connect the economic demand for labor, the legal and administrative apparatus of the state, and the everyday strategies and identities of migrants. This is particularly important in contexts like Malaysia, where migration is highly regulated and yet pervasive, and where official discourse alternates between depicting migrants as essential workers and as threats to security or social cohesion (World Bank, 2019).

A central contribution of conceptual research has been to highlight the political and normative dimensions of migration governance. Bridget Anderson (2013) shows how immigration controls are not only about managing numbers but about producing categories of people—citizens, migrants, workers, “illegals”—[undocumented]that are differentially valued and governed. States regulate migration through a range of instruments, including visas, work permits, detention regimes, and deportation practices, which embody

particular understandings of who belongs, who is useful, and who is risky (Anderson, 2013). Conceptual analysis is necessary to unpack these categories and to reveal the power relations they encode. It asks, for example, how the designation “foreign worker” functions to separate rights and entitlements attached to citizenship from those attached to temporary labor migration, or how the term “illegal immigrant” obscures the institutional and economic processes that produce irregular status (Anderson, 2013; Castles et al., 2014).

This attention to categories and power resonates with broader discussions of “migration regimes” and “regimes of mobility,” where scholars argue that states, markets, and other institutions jointly regulate who can move, under what conditions, and with what recognition (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Conceptual research in this field emphasizes that migration regimes are not neutral frameworks but political projects that reflect struggles over sovereignty, labor control, security, and identity. For instance, the distinction between “skilled” and “unskilled” migrants often maps onto existing global inequalities and racialized hierarchies, granting more rights and mobility to some while rendering others disposable (Castles et al., 2014). Conceptual analysis helps to uncover these hierarchies and to question taken-for-granted classifications. In the Malaysian case, concepts such as “temporary foreign worker,” “undocumented migrant,” and “refugee” each carry distinct legal and moral implications, which conceptual research can systematically examine.

Conceptual research also enables migration scholars to integrate insights from different disciplines and to

relate migration to broader social processes. For instance, political economists link migration to changing forms of capitalism, labor-market restructuring, and welfare-state reform, while anthropologists and sociologists highlight issues of identity, belonging, and everyday life (Castles et al., 2014; Swedberg, 2014). Theorists of transnationalism bring in concepts of transnational social fields and networks to describe how migrants maintain ties across borders and how these ties transform both origin and destination contexts (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Recent conceptual work has further elaborated meta-frameworks, such as the aspirations-capabilities approach, which conceives migration as a function of people's aspirations to move and their capabilities to realise these aspirations within particular opportunity structures (Carling & Schewel, 2018). Such frameworks are especially useful for understanding why some people migrate while others with similar economic conditions do not, and how structural constraints shape both mobility and immobility.

In policy-relevant research, conceptual clarity is indispensable for avoiding simplistic or misleading framings. Public debates and policy documents often present migration as a “problem” to be solved, a “flow” to be managed, or a “threat” to be contained (Anderson, 2013; Bacchi, 2009). Conceptual analysis can dissect these problem representations and reveal how they foreground certain issues (such as border security) while marginalizing others (such as labor rights or historical responsibility). Bacchi (2009) suggests that policy analysis should ask what is being represented as the problem and whose interests these representations serve. Applied to migration, this

means critically examining how irregular migration, trafficking, integration, or “migrant crises” are framed, and how alternative conceptualizations—focused on precarity, exploitation, or global justice—might lead to different policy agendas. Conceptual research thus plays a critical role in challenging dominant narratives and proposing more nuanced and ethical ways of thinking about migration.

For this book, which focuses on migrant workers and the politics of presence in Malaysia, conceptual research provides the tools to interpret Malaysia’s migration regime not as a neutral set of administrative procedures but as a political project with profound implications for migrant lives. The push–pull and segmented labor market theories help explain why Malaysia’s expanding industrial and plantation sectors continue to attract workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, and other countries (Massey et al., 1993; World Bank, 2019). At the same time, concepts from migration regime analysis and critical policy studies help frame Malaysia’s legal and administrative apparatus as a regime that selectively incorporates migrants as temporary workers while limiting their rights and long-term claims (Anderson, 2013; Castles et al., 2014). Insights from transnationalism and conversion studies, developed in other parts of the literature, enable analysis of how migrants’ religious and moral lives are reshaped within this regime. In short, conceptual research in migration studies does not simply describe movement; it constructs the intellectual architecture through which migrant labor, governance, and identity can be analyzed together.

Conceptual analysis, therefore, provides the theoretical tools and analytical lens that is necessary to

interpret migration governance not simply as administrative regulation but as a political project that organizes labor mobility and social inclusion.

2 . 2 D o c u m e n t - B a s e d P o l i c y A n a l y s i s

Document-based policy analysis forms a central methodological component of this study because migration governance in Malaysia is largely structured through formal policy documents, legal frameworks, and institutional guidelines. Migration regimes do not exist merely as abstract administrative systems; they are articulated and implemented through written texts such as immigration laws, government circulars, labor regulations, bilateral agreements, and policy reports issued by ministries and international organizations. Analyzing these documents provides insight into how states conceptualize migrant labor, how migrants are categorized within legal systems, and how regulatory practices shape labor mobility and employment relations (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis, therefore, allows researchers to reconstruct the institutional logic underlying migration governance and to examine how migration policies produce specific social and economic outcomes.

In migration research, policy documents function both as regulatory instruments and as discursive representations of migration. They encode institutional assumptions about labor demand, national development, and social order, while also revealing how governments justify migration policies within public discourse. Bacchi (2009) argues that policy documents should not be interpreted solely as neutral descriptions of policy problems, but rather, they

should be analyzed as representations of problems constructed through specific political and institutional frameworks. For example, when migration policies frame irregular migration primarily as a security issue, they implicitly construct migrants as potential threats rather than as participants in labor markets shaped by structural inequalities. Document-based policy analysis, therefore, enables researchers to examine how policy language constructs particular understandings of migration and migrant identity.

In the Malaysian context, migration governance is articulated through a combination of immigration legislation, labor regulations, recruitment policies, and bilateral labor agreements. These documents collectively regulate the recruitment, employment, and legal status of migrant workers in the country. One of the key legal instruments governing migrant labor is the Immigration Act 1959/63, which establishes the legal basis for regulating the entry and stay of foreign nationals in Malaysia. The act empowers immigration authorities to issue visas and work permits, regulate temporary employment schemes, and enforce deportation procedures for undocumented migrants. Through these provisions, the state maintains control over labor mobility while ensuring that migrant workers remain classified as temporary labor rather than permanent residents (Hassan & George, 2015).

A crucial component of Malaysia's migration governance system is the Visitor's Pass (Temporary Employment), commonly referred to as the work permit system for migrant labor. This permit allows migrant workers to enter Malaysia for employment in specific sectors such as construction, plantation agriculture, manufacturing, services, and domestic

work. However, these permits are typically tied to individual employers, meaning that migrant workers cannot easily change employers or sectors without official approval. Such arrangements are often justified as mechanisms to ensure labor market stability and prevent irregular employment practices, yet they also create structural dependency between migrant workers and employers (Rahman, 2014). Document-based policy analysis reveals how these regulatory provisions effectively limit labor mobility and reinforce employer control over migrant labor.

Another important policy dimension concerns the recruitment system through which migrant workers enter Malaysia. Recruitment processes are often governed by bilateral agreements between Malaysia and labor-sending countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, and India. These agreements regulate recruitment quotas, administrative procedures, and worker protections during migration. Recruitment agencies act as intermediaries, coordinating job placements, visa documentation, and travel arrangements for migrant workers. While these systems facilitate labor mobility, they can also generate structural vulnerabilities, particularly when recruitment fees create debt obligations that migrant workers must repay through their wages (Piper & Yamanaka, 2008; Ford, 2019). Policy documents regulating recruitment practices therefore play a significant role in shaping the economic conditions under which migrant workers enter the labor market.

Document analysis also highlights the ways in which migration policies frame migrant labor within national development strategies. Malaysian policy documents frequently emphasize that migrant workers are

necessary to address labor shortages in labor-intensive industries. Construction projects, manufacturing factories, and plantation estates rely heavily on migrant workers to sustain productivity and economic competitiveness. Government reports often describe migrant labor as a temporary but essential component of the national labor system, enabling industries to remain competitive in global markets (World Bank, 2019). This framing reinforces the idea that migrant workers are valued primarily for their economic contributions rather than as potential members of the national community.

However, policy documents also reveal persistent concerns regarding irregular migration and immigration control. Government statements frequently link undocumented migration to issues such as public security, labor market competition, and social order. As a result, migration governance in Malaysia includes enforcement mechanisms such as workplace inspections, immigration raids, detention centres, and deportation procedures for undocumented migrants (Malaysian Bar Council, 2023). These enforcement practices illustrate the dual nature of migration governance: while migrant workers are recruited to support economic development, they are simultaneously subject to regulatory surveillance and disciplinary control.

Another dimension of migration policy concerns labor rights and access to justice for migrant workers. Scholars have noted that migrant workers often face challenges in accessing legal protections due to language barriers, limited knowledge of labor laws, and dependency on employers for legal status (Hassan & George, 2015). Policy documents addressing labor

protections therefore play a critical role in determining the extent to which migrant workers can exercise their rights within host societies. While Malaysia has introduced various regulations intended to protect migrant workers, implementation remains uneven, and many migrants continue to experience precarious employment conditions.

Document-based analysis also reveals how migration governance interacts with broader regional labor migration systems. Southeast Asia has developed a complex network of labor mobility agreements and migration corridors linking sending and receiving countries. Regional cooperation frameworks within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have sought to facilitate labor mobility while addressing concerns about worker protection and recruitment transparency. Policy reports emphasize that effective migration governance requires coordination between governments, employers, recruitment agencies, and international organizations (Kaur, 2010; Hugo, 2014). These regional frameworks demonstrate that migration governance is not confined to national borders but operates within transnational policy networks.

International organizations have also contributed significantly to the documentation and analysis of migration governance in Malaysia. Reports published by institutions such as the World Bank provide detailed assessments of migrant labor trends, recruitment systems, and labor market dynamics. For example, the World Bank's studies on foreign workers in Malaysia highlight the structural dependence of key industries on migrant labor and the challenges of regulating recruitment practices and addressing

irregular migration (World Bank, 2019). Such reports provide valuable data and policy analysis that complement national policy documents and contribute to a broader understanding of migration governance.

Ultimately, document-based policy analysis provides a critical methodological tool for understanding migration governance because it reveals how institutional frameworks shape labor mobility, employment relations, and migrant identities:

- Relational dialogue
- Context-based principles
- Policy inclusion

**Textbox: Co-Creation of Policy with
Migrant Workers**

Document-based policy analysis is especially useful for conceptual research as it enables scholars to track how institutional frameworks influence migration systems over time. By analyzing legislation, administrative guidelines, and policy reports, researchers can uncover patterns in how states understand migration and regulate migrant labor. These patterns often reveal underlying assumptions about economic development, national identity, and labor market management. For example, the persistent classification of migrant workers as “temporary” reflects a policy preference for flexible labor systems that avoid long-term demographic change (Ruhs,

2013). Such classifications influence not only labor policies but also broader social perceptions of migrant workers within host societies.

In addition to revealing regulatory structures, document analysis also exposes the normative dimensions of migration governance. Policy texts frequently articulate moral narratives about the responsibilities of migrant workers, employers, and governments. Migrant workers are often portrayed as contributors to economic growth who should comply with labor regulations and immigration laws. At the same time, governments emphasize the need to protect national interests and maintain social order. These narratives shape public perceptions of migration and influence the development of migration policies (Anderson, 2013).

Another advantage of document-based analysis is that it allows researchers to examine how migration policies evolve over time. Migration governance is not static; it responds to economic changes, political pressures, and shifts in labor demand. For instance, periods of economic expansion may encourage governments to relax recruitment restrictions in order to attract migrant labor, whereas economic downturns may lead to stricter immigration controls. By analysing policy documents across different time periods, researchers can trace these changes and understand how migration governance adapts to shifting economic conditions (Castles et al., 2014).

Furthermore, document-based policy analysis enables comparative research across different national contexts. Many labor-receiving countries adopt similar regulatory strategies, such as temporary work

permit systems, employer-tied visas, and recruitment quotas. Comparing policy documents from different countries can therefore reveal common patterns in migration governance as well as distinctive national approaches. In Southeast Asia, Malaysia's migration regime shares similarities with systems in Singapore and Thailand, where migrant workers are also recruited through temporary labor schemes designed to address labor shortages while limiting long-term settlement (Skeldon, 2012).

cy documents do more than regulate migration; they define how migrants are perceived, categorized, and governed within host societies. Through systematic analysis of these texts, researchers can uncover the institutional logics that underpin migration systems and examine how migration governance influences economic structures and social relations.

In this book, document-based policy analysis serves as the primary method for interpreting Malaysia's migration regime. By examining immigration laws, recruitment regulations, labor policies, and institutional reports, the study seeks to understand how migration governance structures the presence of migrant workers in Malaysia. This approach allows the analysis to move beyond individual case studies and instead focus on the broader institutional and political dynamics shaping migrant labor systems. In Malaysia, migration governance operates through a complex set of policy instruments designed to regulate foreign labor recruitment and employment. Migrant workers are typically admitted under temporary employment permits tied to specific sectors experiencing labor shortages. These permits restrict labor mobility and link migrants' legal status to

particular employers (Hassan & George, 2015; Rahman, 2014). Recruitment agencies coordinate migration processes by facilitating job placements and visa documentation, creating institutional channels that connect labor-sending countries with Malaysia's labor market.

Policy documents also reveal tensions within migration governance. Government reports often emphasize the economic importance of migrant labor while simultaneously expressing concerns about irregular migration and national security (World Bank, 2020; Malaysian Bar Council, 2023). Migrants are therefore portrayed both as essential contributors to economic development and as potential social risks requiring regulatory control. Document-based analysis makes these contradictions visible and provides insight into the institutional rationalities shaping migration governance.

2 . 3 A n a l y t i c a l S t r a t e g y o f t h e S t u d y

The analytical strategy of this book is intentionally conceptual, document-based, and comparative-interpretive. It does not claim to offer a single-site ethnography, a large-N statistical model, or a survey-based account of migrant workers in Malaysia.. Instead, it proceeds from the view that migration regimes are best understood by bringing together three types of material: first, legal and policy documents that define how states classify and regulate migrants; second, social theory that helps interpret the institutional logic embedded in those documents; and third, carefully selected ethnographic and sociological case studies that illuminate how those institutional

arrangements are lived, negotiated, and sometimes resisted in practice. This strategy is especially appropriate for a book concerned with conceptualizing migrants, Malaysia, and broader regional patterns because migration governance operates at multiple levels at once: it is written into law, organised through labor markets, and experienced through everyday relations of power, dependency, and belonging (Castles et al., 2014; Hollifield et al., 2014). In this sense, the chapter treats method not merely as a technical procedure but as a way of constructing a coherent bridge between abstraction and lived social reality. As Abend (2008) argues, theory is not simply a detachable set of propositions but a mode of ordering the world; similarly, Swedberg (2014) reminds us that strong social inquiry depends on the careful crafting of concepts that can reveal patterned relations rather than merely catalogue surface events. The present analytical strategy follows that spirit by treating migration not as a self-evident fact but as a socially organised field requiring conceptual interpretation.

At the core of this strategy lies the assumption that written texts are not passive records of governance but active instruments in the production of governance. Immigration acts, work permit regulations, bilateral memoranda, employer guidelines, labor policies, and international reports do not merely describe migrants; they define who migrants are in administrative and political terms. A person becomes a “temporary foreign worker,” an “irregular migrant,” or an “illegal immigrant” through textual and bureaucratic processes that allocate rights, restrictions, and vulnerabilities unevenly. Following Bowen (2009), this study therefore treats policy and legal documents as social facts that emerge from specific institutional settings

and that carry the imprint of official priorities, anxieties, and rationalities. In the Malaysian context, this means paying attention to how documents structure migrants through categories tied to sector, employer, legality, and time. It also means reading such documents critically, not only for what they say directly but for what they assume, exclude, or normalise. For example, when migration rules present foreign workers as a temporary response to labor shortages, they simultaneously construct temporality as a normative condition rather than a politically chosen arrangement. When administrative procedures tie work permits to a specific employer, they frame dependency as a form of regulation. Document analysis therefore enables the study to expose the political work performed by bureaucratic language and legal form (Bowen, 2009; Hassan & George, 2015; World Bank, 2019).

This document-based orientation is, however, only one part of the analytical strategy. The second part involves interpreting policy materials through the lens of migration theory and political economy. A purely descriptive reading of documents risks reproducing official categories without explaining their deeper significance. For this reason, the chapter brings policy texts into conversation with broader debates on international migration, labor incorporation, and social stratification. Castles et al. (2014) have shown that contemporary migration must be understood historically and structurally, as part of wider transformations in capitalism, state formation, and inequality. Hollifield et al. (2014) similarly demonstrate that migration regimes are shaped by enduring tensions between market needs and state sovereignty. These insights are essential because they

make clear that migration policy is not an isolated technical domain; it is tied to the contradictory demands of economic openness and political closure. Malaysia's labor system illustrates this tension sharply. It needs migrant labor in construction, manufacturing, plantations, and domestic work, yet it simultaneously seeks to prevent these workers from becoming socially or politically settled. The analytical strategy, therefore, reads migration governance as a site where labor demand and political containment are joined together, not as separate variables but as mutually reinforcing institutional logics (Castles et al., 2014; Hollifield et al., 2014).

To make this argument more precise, the chapter draws particularly on labor market theory and the concept of labor segmentation. Piore's (1979) influential formulation of migrant labor in industrial societies remains important here because it explains how advanced or rapidly developing economies generate a structural demand for workers in unstable, low-status, and physically demanding jobs that local workers tend to avoid. This demand does not arise simply from individual employer preference but from the organization of labor markets themselves. Standing's (2011) concept of the precariat extends this insight by showing how flexibility, insecurity, and disposable labor have become central features of contemporary capitalism. These theoretical perspectives are especially useful for interpreting Malaysia because they allow the study to read migrant labor not as a temporary anomaly but as a constitutive feature of a segmented labor market. Workers from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and elsewhere are channelled into jobs marked by low bargaining power, intense control, and uneven protection. Their

status as migrants is not incidental to these jobs; it is central to how such jobs are sustained. The analytical strategy therefore uses political economy not merely as background context but as a framework for interpreting how governance and labor regimes mutually produce migrant precarity (see Piore, 1979; Standing, 2011).

The third component of the strategy is the careful use of existing case studies as conceptual illustrations. Because this book is not based on new primary ethnographic fieldwork, it must be explicit about how and why qualitative case material is used. Here the aim is not to claim representativeness in a statistical sense, nor to collapse diverse migrant experiences into a single generalized story. Rather, the chapter adopts a logic closer to what Burawoy (1998) called the extended case method and what Small (2009) described in terms of theoretically informed case selection. In this approach, cases are valuable because they illuminate mechanisms, contradictions, and relationships that matter conceptually. Existing studies on migrant domestic workers, plantation laborers, and factory workers in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and other parts of Asia are used not as stand-alone evidence for universal claims but as analytically productive windows into the lived operation of labor regimes and migration governance. Constable's (2009) work on migrant protest in Hong Kong, Elias's (2013) discussion of the transnational politics of care, and Killias's (2010) analysis of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia all show how immigration rules, gendered labor hierarchies, and intimate social relations interact in everyday life. These works are especially valuable because they reveal how legal categories are translated into embodied routines of

discipline, mobility, fear, endurance, and protest.

This use of case studies is methodologically significant because it allows the book to remain conceptually ambitious while still grounded in concrete social realities. The chapter is especially interested in South Asian migrant labor, including workers from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, because these groups have become deeply significant in Malaysia's labor market and in wider transnational labor corridors. Although some of the most detailed ethnographic studies in the region focus on Indonesian or Filipina domestic workers, the analytical logic they reveal—dependency through recruitment, temporariness through permits, and vulnerability through employer control—travels meaningfully across contexts.

To bring South Asian migrants more directly into view, the analysis draws on legal and policy work on migrant labor in Malaysia and on broader comparative literature concerning South Asian workers in Asia and the Gulf. Hassan and George (2015), for example, provide an important legal-institutional account of access to justice, work permit dependency, and regulatory gaps in Malaysia. World Bank (2019) offers sectoral and structural data on the concentration of foreign workers in key industries, where these materials are read alongside conceptual studies of domestic work, labor control, and migrant protest, they generate a richer interpretive field in which South Asian workers appear not as isolated national groups but as part of wider regional regimes of migration and labor (Constable, 2009; Elias, 2013; Killias, 2010; Hassan & George, 2015; World Bank, 2019).

In addition to the above, this analytical strategy is its reflexivity about scale. One of the common weaknesses in migration scholarship is the tendency either to remain at the macro level of flows and policy or to focus so narrowly on local narratives that the structural field disappears. This study instead works across levels. At the macro level, it examines the state, law, and regional migration systems. At the meso level, it considers employers, recruiters, and sectoral labor regimes. At the micro-social level, it offers case-based insights into everyday negotiation, identity, and survival. This multi-scalar approach is important because migration governance is not made in only one place. It is produced through the interaction of ministries, recruitment agencies, embassies, workplaces, households, and migrant networks. A Bangladeshi worker in Malaysia, for instance, is simultaneously shaped by policy in Kuala Lumpur, recruitment structures in Dhaka, sectoral demand in construction or manufacturing, and the informal solidarities of co-nationals, kinship networks, or religious communities. The analytical strategy therefore resists methodological nationalism in a narrow sense and instead situates Malaysia within broader transnational circuits of labor mobility (Castles et al., 2014; Hollifield et al., 2014). This is also why the chapter includes reflexive ethnographic case material as a secondary but important methodological layer. In a conceptual and policy-oriented book, reflexive ethnographic cases perform a specific function: they remind us that governance does not operate only in offices, ministries, and legal documents. It also operates through the lived textures of recruitment debt, employer surveillance, housing conditions, prayer gatherings, rumours of raids, informal advice, and embodied strategies of

endurance. Case material on migrant workers in Malaysia and comparable settings helps prevent the analysis from becoming overly abstract. It reveals that the category “migrant worker” is never simply administrative; it is lived through emotion, anxiety, social ties, and moral reasoning. This is especially relevant for the present book because its broader argument concerns not only migration governance but also the moral and social worlds through which migrants interpret their place in Malaysia. Reflexive case material therefore complements document analysis by showing how formal rules are inhabited and translated at the level of everyday life (Burawoy, 1998; Small, 2009; Constable, 2009).

At the same time, the strategy remains careful not to overclaim. Because the book is not based on original interviews, it does not present these case studies as direct evidence of all migrant experiences in Malaysia. Instead, it uses them in a theoretically disciplined way: to identify recurrent mechanisms, to illustrate institutional effects, and to deepen conceptual claims. Small (2009) is particularly useful here because he warns against judging qualitative cases by the standards of statistical inference alone. Cases are valuable when they sharpen explanation, reveal variation, and help us understand how broader processes operate in specific settings.

This book follows that logic. Its use of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, and other migrant cases is not intended to produce numeric generalization; it is intended to enrich conceptual understanding of how migration governance and labor regimes work across contexts. Such an approach is not methodologically weaker than quantitative work; it is

differently configured and differently valuable (Small, 2009; Burawoy, 1998).

The analytical strategy also carries a normative implication as migration policy documents often present themselves as objective instruments of regulation, there is always a risk that scholarship merely echoes their categories and assumptions. By combining document analysis with theory and case-based reflexivity, the chapter seeks to resist that risk. It does not treat official categories such as “temporary worker” or “illegal immigrant” as transparent descriptions. Instead, it asks how those categories are produced, whose interests they serve, and how they organise differential access to rights, security, and recognition. This critical posture is especially important in a context like Malaysia, where policy discourse often oscillates between economic appreciation of migrant labor and disciplinary suspicion toward migrant presence. Document-based conceptual analysis allows the book to show that this oscillation is not accidental; it is constitutive of the migration regime itself (Anderson, 2013; Castles et al., 2014; World Bank, 2019).

Taken together, then, the analytical strategy of the book rests on a coherent triad: documentary analysis of legal and policy materials, conceptual interpretation through migration theory and political economy, and reflexive use of existing case studies as analytic illustrations. This triad allows the study to remain rigorous without pretending to be something it is not. It is not an ethnography, though it learns from ethnography. It is not a statistical model, though it uses institutional and sectoral evidence. It is a conceptual and policy-analytical study that seeks to explain how

migrants are made governable, employable, and socially legible within Malaysia and in relation to wider regional labor systems. By bringing together texts, theories, and cases, the chapter establishes a method capable of addressing the central concern of the book: how migration regimes organise labor, shape identities, and structure the politics of presence for migrant workers in Malaysia and beyond.. These studies provide conceptual illustrations that enrich the analysis of migration governance and labor regimes.

2 . 4 M i g r a t i o n G o v e r n a n c e

Migration governance refers to the institutional systems through which states regulate cross-border labor mobility. These systems include immigration laws, visa policies, recruitment regulations, and enforcement mechanisms designed to control the entry and employment of migrant workers (Anderson, 2013; Geddes & Scholten, 2016).

In Malaysia, migration governance operates through a temporary labor migration system designed to address labor shortages while limiting long-term settlement. Migrant workers are typically admitted under employer-sponsored work permits that restrict their ability to change employers or sectors (Hassan & George, 2015). These arrangements provide employers with a stable labor supply but also limit migrant workers' labor mobility and bargaining power.

Migration governance also involves bilateral agreements between Malaysia and labor-sending countries. These agreements regulate recruitment

processes and labor conditions while facilitating labor mobility across borders (Rahman, 2014). Recruitment agencies play a key role in coordinating these migration processes by organizing job placements, travel arrangements, and administrative documentation. However, recruitment systems can also create vulnerabilities for migrant workers. Recruitment fees often place migrants in debt before they begin employment abroad, increasing their dependence on employers (Piper & Yamanaka, 2008; Ford, 2019). Migration governance therefore shapes not only the legal status of migrant workers but also their economic and social experiences within host societies.

2 . 5 L a b o r R e g i m e s a n d E c o n o m i c S t r u c t u r e

Labor regimes refer to the institutional, economic, and regulatory arrangements that organize employment relations within a particular labor market. These regimes determine how labor is recruited, regulated, compensated, and disciplined within national economies. In the context of contemporary globalization, labor regimes increasingly operate through transnational labor mobility systems that connect labor-sending and labor-receiving countries through migration corridors, recruitment intermediaries, and sectoral labor demand (Castles et al., 2014; de Haas, 2021). Malaysia represents a significant case within this broader global pattern because its economic development over the past four decades has been deeply intertwined with migrant labor. Rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and agricultural commercialization have created sustained

demand for foreign workers, particularly in labor-intensive sectors where domestic labor supply remains limited (Hugo, 2014; Kaur, 2010).

Malaysia's labor regime is therefore characterized by a structural dependence on migrant workers from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries as well as from South Asia. Workers from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Pakistan form a significant portion of the workforce in sectors such as construction, plantation agriculture, manufacturing, and domestic work (Rahman, 2014; World Bank, 2019). These sectors share several characteristics: they involve physically demanding labor, relatively low wages, and employment conditions that are often considered unattractive to local workers. As a result, migrant labor has become a central mechanism through which Malaysia maintains economic productivity while sustaining the expansion of infrastructure, manufacturing exports, and plantation agriculture. Scholars have noted that such labor regimes are not accidental but represent structural features of capitalist labor markets in which migrant workers occupy specific positions within hierarchical employment systems (Sassen, 1991; Piore, 1979).

The construction sector illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly. Urban development in Malaysia—including large-scale infrastructure projects, housing construction, and transportation systems—relies heavily on migrant labor. Construction work typically involves physically intensive tasks, irregular working hours, and hazardous conditions. Employers often recruit migrant workers for these jobs because migrants are perceived as more willing to accept demanding labor conditions

and lower wages compared to local workers. This pattern aligns with Piore's (1979) theory of segmented labor markets, which suggests that advanced and rapidly developing economies generate a structural demand for migrant workers in unstable and labor-intensive occupations. Within such segmented labor markets, migrant workers occupy the "secondary sector," characterized by limited job security, minimal opportunities for advancement, and reduced bargaining power.

Manufacturing industries also play a central role in Malaysia's migrant labor regime. Export-oriented factories producing electronics, textiles, and consumer goods rely on migrant labor to maintain competitiveness in global markets. These industries operate within global supply chains where production costs must remain relatively low in order to attract international investment. As a result, migrant workers often perform repetitive factory tasks that require long working hours and strict labor discipline. Scholars examining industrial labor regimes have argued that migrant labor is frequently incorporated into manufacturing sectors through temporary work permits that restrict workers' mobility and reinforce employer authority (Standing, 2011; Castles et al., 2014). In Malaysia, such arrangements are institutionalized through employer-tied work permits that limit migrants' ability to change employers or sectors without official approval.

Plantation and agriculture represent another key component of Malaysia's labor regime. The palm oil industry, which plays a crucial role in the national economy, depends heavily on migrant workers for harvesting, maintenance, and field management.

Plantation labor is physically demanding and often located in remote rural areas where local labor supply is limited. Migrant workers therefore provide an essential workforce that sustains the productivity of the plantation economy. Scholars studying agricultural labor systems have emphasized that plantation regimes historically relied on migrant or mobile labor populations because such arrangements allowed employers to maintain flexible labor supply while minimizing long-term obligations toward workers (McMichael, 2013; Sassen, 1991).

Domestic work constitutes a distinct yet equally important segment of migrant labor regimes in Malaysia. Migrant domestic workers—many of whom come from Indonesia, the Philippines, and South Asia—provide household labor such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning for middle-class families. This sector highlights the gendered dimensions of migrant labor regimes because domestic work is closely linked to global care chains and transnational household economies (Parreñas, 2001; Elias, 2013). Migrant domestic workers often live within their employers' households, which blurs the boundaries between work and private life. Scholars have noted that such arrangements can create both opportunities and vulnerabilities, as workers may receive accommodation and income while simultaneously experiencing restrictions on mobility and autonomy (Constable, 2009).

These various sectors collectively illustrate how Malaysia's labor regime operates through a system of labor segmentation. Migrant workers tend to occupy positions characterized by physical labor, precarious contracts, and limited labor rights, while local workers

are more likely to pursue higher-skilled or managerial employment. Standing (2011) describes this phenomenon as part of the broader emergence of the “precariat,” a class of workers experiencing unstable employment conditions, limited social protection, and reduced political representation. Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable within such labor regimes because their legal status is often tied to employment contracts, which restricts their ability to negotiate working conditions or change employers.

The relationship between economic development and migrant labor demand therefore represents a central feature of contemporary labor regimes. As economies expand and diversify, they often generate labor shortages in sectors requiring physically demanding or low-status work. Governments may respond to these shortages by recruiting migrant workers through temporary labor migration programs. While such programs address labor demand, they also create institutional arrangements that maintain migrants in subordinate positions within labor markets (de Haas, 2021; Castles et al., 2014). In Malaysia, these arrangements are reinforced through work permit systems, recruitment agencies, and sector-specific employment policies that collectively structure the conditions under which migrant labor operates.

2 . 6 R e l i g i o n , I d e n t i t y , a n d M i g r a n t S o c i a l W o r l d s

Migration does not only involve economic and institutional transformations; it also reshapes cultural identities, social networks, and religious practices. Migrant workers carry with them religious traditions,

cultural norms, and social values that influence how they interpret and navigate life in host societies. Religion often serves as an important source of emotional support and moral orientation for migrants who experience displacement, uncertainty, and social marginalization (Levitt, 2007; Hirschman, 2004). In Malaysia, where religion plays a visible role in public life, migrant workers frequently rely on religious institutions and communities as spaces of belonging and solidarity. Mosques, churches, temples, and informal prayer groups serve not only as sites of worship but also as social infrastructures through which migrants rebuild fragmented lives in unfamiliar, often precarious environments. Within these spaces, migrants access emotional support, share information about employment and legal matters, and form networks that help them navigate everyday challenges, including workplace exploitation, housing insecurity, and limited access to formal services.

Religious gatherings also help preserve cultural identity and linguistic continuity, particularly for migrants who experience social isolation or marginalization in the host society. Through rituals, festivals, and collective practices, these communities foster a sense of dignity and continuity that counters the dislocation of migration. At the same time, religious institutions may act as intermediaries between migrants and local authorities or civil society organizations, thereby contributing to social capital linkages. In this way, religion becomes not merely a spiritual resource but a multidimensional support system that sustains both individual wellbeing and collective resilience among migrant populations in Malaysia.

Religious institutions such as mosques, temples, and churches function as important social centers for migrant communities. These institutions provide opportunities for migrants to gather, share information, and maintain cultural practices that connect them to their home societies. Scholars studying migrant religious communities have shown that religious organizations often serve multiple functions simultaneously: they offer spiritual guidance, social services, emotional support, and platforms for collective identity formation (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000). For migrant workers who may experience isolation or precarious working conditions, such spaces can become vital sites of social connection and mutual assistance.

Religion also shapes the formation of migrant social networks. Migrants frequently organize informal support systems around shared religious or ethnic identities, which help individuals navigate unfamiliar social environments. These networks may facilitate job opportunities, housing arrangements, and financial assistance during times of hardship. Levitt (2007) describes such networks as “transnational religious communities,” where migrants maintain connections with religious institutions and practices in their countries of origin while simultaneously adapting to new contexts in host societies. In Malaysia, these transnational networks are evident in the ways migrant workers maintain links with religious communities in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, and India through remittances, communication technologies, and periodic travel.

Migration can also lead to transformations in religious identity and practice. Exposure to new cultural

environments may encourage migrants to reinterpret their beliefs or adopt new forms of religious expression. Rambo's (1993) influential model of religious conversion emphasizes that religious change often occurs through gradual processes of social interaction, moral reflection, and personal experience rather than through sudden doctrinal shifts. Migrant workers who encounter new religious communities abroad may therefore reinterpret their religious identities in ways that reflect both their original cultural backgrounds and their experiences in host societies.

Recent research in the sociology and psychology of religion further suggests that migration contexts often intensify religious engagement among migrants. Snook, Williams, and Horgan (2019) argue that individuals undergoing major life transitions—including migration—may turn to religion as a framework for meaning-making and social stability. For migrant workers facing economic pressure, family separation, and uncertain legal status, religious practice may provide a sense of continuity and moral guidance. Participation in religious gatherings, prayer groups, and festivals can also create opportunities for migrants to strengthen social bonds and maintain cultural traditions.

At the same time, religious identity among migrants is not static or homogeneous. Migrant communities often contain diverse religious traditions and interpretations, which can lead to new forms of interreligious interaction and cultural exchange. In Malaysia's multicultural environment, migrant workers encounter a variety of religious practices and institutional arrangements that may differ significantly from those

in their countries of origin. Such encounters can produce both adaptation and negotiation as migrants navigate new religious landscapes while maintaining elements of their cultural heritage (Hirschman, 2004). Religion therefore represents an important dimension of migrant social worlds because it connects individual identity with broader community networks. Through religious institutions and practices, migrants construct spaces of belonging that help them cope with the challenges of migration. These spaces may also provide opportunities for collective action, advocacy, and community organization. Scholars have noted that religious organizations sometimes play significant roles in supporting migrant rights and providing assistance to workers facing exploitation or legal difficulties (Levitt, 2007).

2 . 7 I n t e g r a t e d C o n c e p t u a l F r a m e w o r k

Migration cannot be explained solely through economic demand or demographic mobility. Rather, it is shaped by complex interactions between legal systems, labor regimes, and the cultural lives of migrants themselves (Castles et al., 2014; de Haas, 2021). This chapter examines labor regimes and migrant identity. Each dimension captures a different level of the migration process, but they operate together to structure migrant workers' lives in Malaysia.

Migration governance refers to the institutional and policy mechanisms through which states regulate cross-border labor mobility. Governments define who can enter, what kind of work migrants may perform, and how long they are allowed to remain in the country. Such policies include visa regulations, work

permit systems, recruitment policies, and labor protection laws.

Scholars have noted that migration governance reflects a balance between economic demand for labor and political concerns about national sovereignty and social stability (Hollifield et al., 2014). In Malaysia, migration governance is structured through temporary employment systems that allow migrant workers to fill labor shortages while maintaining their status as non-permanent residents. These arrangements reflect broader global patterns in which states rely on migrant labor but restrict migrants' long-term settlement rights (Ruhs, 2013).

The second dimension of the framework concerns labor regimes. Labor regimes describe the institutional arrangements through which employment relations are organized within specific economic sectors. Migrant workers often occupy positions within labor markets characterized by low wages, physically demanding work, and limited job security. Such labor segmentation reflects structural patterns in capitalist economies, where migrant labor provides flexibility for employers while sustaining productivity in labor-intensive industries (Piore, 1979; Sassen, 1991).

In Malaysia, migrant workers play crucial roles in construction, manufacturing, plantation agriculture, and domestic work, forming a workforce that supports both national economic growth and participation in global production networks (Kaur, 2010; Hugo, 2014).

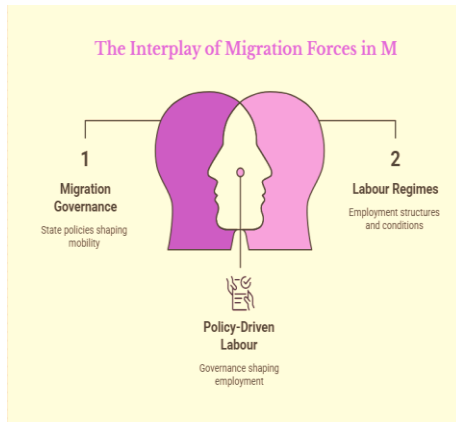


Figure 1: The Spheres of Migrant Workers

The third dimension of the framework focuses on migrant identity and social experience. Migration involves not only economic movement but also transformations in social relationships, cultural practices, and personal identity. Migrant workers carry religious traditions, community networks, and cultural values that influence how they interpret their experiences abroad (Levitt, 2007). Religious institutions and community organizations often provide migrants with social support, helping them navigate unfamiliar environments and maintain connections with their home societies (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000). These social worlds shape migrants' responses to labor conditions and influence how they adapt to host societies.

By integrating these three dimensions—governance, labor regimes, and migrant identity—the conceptual framework offers a multidimensional perspective on migration. Rather than treating migrants simply as

labor units within economic systems, this approach recognizes them as social actors embedded within institutional structures and cultural networks. Such a framework allows researchers to analyze how policy systems shape labor markets, how labor markets affect migrant experiences, and how migrants themselves construct meaning and solidarity within new environments (Vertovec, 2009). The framework, therefore, provides the analytical foundation for examining migrant labor systems in Malaysia and for situating these systems within broader global patterns of migration governance.

2 . 8 I m p l i c a t i o n s f o r t h e S t u d y

The conceptual framework developed in this chapter provides important implications for understanding migrant labor systems in Malaysia. By integrating migration governance, labor regimes, and migrant identity, the study adopts a multidimensional approach that moves beyond narrowly economic explanations of migration. Migration is often discussed primarily in terms of labor supply and demand; however, such perspectives overlook the institutional and social processes that shape migrants' experiences. The framework proposed here emphasizes that migration governance structures the conditions under which migrants enter labor markets, and that these conditions influence their economic opportunities and social integration (Castles et al., 2014).

One key implication concerns the role of state institutions in shaping labor mobility. Migration governance determines the legal categories through

which migrants are classified, such as temporary workers, skilled migrants, or undocumented laborers. These classifications influence migrants' rights, employment opportunities, and access to social protection. Scholars have argued that such legal categories often create hierarchies within migrant populations, where certain groups enjoy greater protection while others face vulnerability and precarious employment conditions (Ruhs, 2013). In Malaysia, migrant workers are typically admitted through temporary employment permits tied to specific sectors, reinforcing the perception that migrant labor is a short-term economic solution rather than a permanent feature of society.

Another implication concerns the structural role of migrant labor in economic development. Labor regimes in Malaysia rely heavily on migrant workers to sustain productivity in industries that require physically demanding or low-status work. Construction projects, manufacturing factories, and plantation agriculture depend on migrant labor to maintain competitiveness in global markets (Kaur, 2010; Hugo, 2014). This structural dependence suggests that migrant labor is not simply supplementary but integral to the functioning of the national economy. At the same time, labor market segmentation often places migrant workers in precarious positions characterized by limited job security and reduced bargaining power (Standing, 2011).

The framework also highlights the importance of social identity and community networks in shaping migrant experiences. Migrants are not passive participants in labor systems; they actively construct social worlds that help them navigate economic and

institutional challenges. Religious institutions, cultural organizations, and migrant associations often provide support networks that facilitate adaptation and solidarity among migrants (Levitt, 2007; Hirschman, 2004). These networks may also play roles in advocacy, helping migrant workers access legal assistance or challenge exploitative working conditions.

Taken together, these implications underscore the value of combining policy analysis with sociological interpretation. Migration governance structures labor markets, labor regimes shape employment conditions, and migrant identity influences how individuals respond to these structures. Understanding migration, therefore, requires an analytical approach that considers all three dimensions simultaneously. The framework developed in this chapter provides a foundation for examining migrant labor systems in Malaysia and contributes to broader debates in migration studies on the relationship among state regulation, economic structures, and migrant social worlds.

2 . 9 C h a p t e r S u m m a r y

This chapter has established the conceptual and methodological foundations for analysing migrant labor in Malaysia. It began by explaining the importance of conceptual research and document-based policy analysis for understanding migration governance. Migration policies, legal frameworks, and institutional documents provide valuable insights into how states regulate labor mobility and categorize migrant workers. Document analysis, therefore, serves

as a key methodological tool for examining the institutional logic underlying migration systems (Bowen, 2009). The chapter then examined the broader context of migration governance in Malaysia. Migration policies regulate the recruitment, employment, and legal status of migrant workers through work permit systems and labor regulations. These policies reflect the dual priorities of governments: addressing labor shortages while maintaining control over immigration and national borders (Hollifield et al., 2014). Such governance systems shape migrants' opportunities and constraints within labor markets. A major focus of the chapter was the relationship between labor regimes and economic structure. Malaysia's economic development has been closely linked to migrant labor, particularly in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, plantation agriculture, and domestic work. Migrant workers often occupy positions characterized by physically demanding labor and limited job security. This pattern reflects labor market segmentation, where migrants perform tasks that local workers may avoid due to wage levels or working conditions (Piore, 1979; Standing, 2011). Migrant labor therefore plays a structural role in sustaining industrial growth and global competitiveness. The chapter also explored the social dimensions of migration by examining religion, identity, and migrant social networks. Migration involves significant cultural and emotional adjustments, and migrants frequently rely on religious institutions and community organizations for social support. These networks help migrants maintain connections with their home societies while adapting to new environments (Levitt, 2007; Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000). Through such networks, migrants construct social worlds that shape their experiences of

work, belonging, and cultural identity abroad. Finally, the book shall be introducing an integrated conceptual framework that connects migration governance, labor regimes, and migrant identity. This framework emphasizes that migration is a multidimensional process shaped by institutional structures, economic systems, and social experiences. By combining policy analysis with sociological interpretation, the framework provides a comprehensive approach to studying migrant labor systems in Malaysia (Castles et al., 2014; Vertovec, 2009). The analytical model developed here will guide the subsequent chapters of the book, which examine migrant workers' experiences within Malaysia's evolving migration regime.

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CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: LABOR MIGRATION AND COLONIAL LEGACIES

This chapter examines the historical development of labor migration in Malaysia and the broader South and Southeast Asian region. It traces the transformation of migration systems from pre-colonial mobility networks to colonial labor regimes and contemporary migration governance. By situating migration within a long historical framework, the chapter demonstrates how colonial legacies continue to influence labor mobility, economic structures, and migrant experiences in Malaysia and beyond.

3.0 Introduction

Labor migration across South and Southeast Asia is not a recent phenomenon produced solely by globalization; rather, it is rooted in long historical processes that stretch back over two millennia. The Indian Ocean world has historically functioned as a major zone of mobility, linking regions of South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa through trade, cultural exchange, and political interaction (Chaudhuri, 1985; Pearson, 2003). These movements involved merchants, sailors, artisans, religious scholars, and seasonal workers who travelled between port cities such as Calicut, Tamralipti, Malacca, and Aceh. Although these early movements were not formal labor migration systems in the modern sense, they established enduring patterns of mobility,

brokerage, and transregional connectivity.

Early imperial and religious networks contributed significantly to these movements. The spread of Buddhism during the Mauryan period, often associated with Ashokan missions, illustrates how political and religious structures facilitated mobility across the Bay of Bengal (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004). Similarly, South Indian merchant guilds and maritime networks played a crucial role in connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia between the early centuries CE and the medieval period (Hall, 1996). These networks were later complemented by the expansion of Muslim trading communities, which created commercial diasporas throughout coastal Southeast Asia and integrated the region into broader Indian Ocean trade circuits (Chaudhuri, 1985).

By the early modern period, these interconnected networks had created what scholars describe as a “circulatory system” of migration in the Indian Ocean world, characterized by seasonal mobility, diaspora formation, and flexible labor arrangements (Bose, 2006; Subrahmanyam, 1997). Migration during this period was embedded within trade and social relations rather than structured labor markets. However, these pre-existing mobility corridors became crucial foundations for later transformations under colonial rule.

European colonial expansion did not create migration systems from scratch; instead, it reorganized and scaled existing networks to serve the needs of capitalist production. As colonial economies expanded during the nineteenth century, labor migration became increasingly institutionalized, particularly after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833.

Indentured labor systems emerged as a key mechanism for supplying workers to plantations, mines, and infrastructure projects across Asia (Tinker, 1974). These systems transformed earlier patterns of mobility into highly regulated and often coercive labor regimes.

Malaya emerged as a central node within this colonial labor migration system. The rapid expansion of tin mining and rubber plantations created a massive demand for labor, which was met through large-scale migration from India and China (Sandhu, 1969). These migration flows reshaped the demographic and economic landscape of the region, creating ethnically segmented labor markets that persist in modified forms today.

The historical legacies of these processes continue to shape contemporary migration systems in Southeast Asia. Migration flows linking Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, and other countries to Malaysia reflect long-standing patterns of labor mobility that have evolved over centuries (Kaur, 2010; Hugo, 2014). Understanding these trajectories is therefore essential for analysing present-day migration governance and labor regimes.

3 . 1 C o n t i n u i t y o f M o b i l i t y b e f o r e C o l o n i a l i s m

Mobility and labor migration in the Malay Peninsula long pre-dated British colonial rule (c. 1874) and cannot be reduced to the 19th-century plantation or mine labor systems. Long before “Malaya” became a colonial category, the region was embedded in a wider Indian Ocean and Maritime Southeast Asian world of trade, warfare, and state-building, all of which

involved significant human movement and labor deployment (Hall, 2011; Andaya, 1981). Pre-colonial labor migration was therefore less about “international borders” than about shifting networks of *entrepôts*, royal courts, agricultural hinterlands, and religious centres that absorbed workers from nearby islands and mainland India (Vink, 2001; Kulke & Rothermund, 2004).

In this context, “labor migration” must be understood broadly: it included itinerant merchants, port-based laborers, *corvée*-style workers for state projects, religious missionaries, and skilled artisans who moved seasonally or permanently across the straits between Java, Sumatra, Siam, and the Malay Peninsula (Andaya, 1981; Reid, 1988). The absence of modern citizenship and passport regimes meant that many of these movements were not “migrant labor” in today’s sense, but rather part of layered systems of allegiance, kinship, and patronage that structured work and mobility (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Sunseri, 2009). This pre-colonial background is crucial for understanding how later colonial regimes built their labor hierarchies on pre-existing patterns of circulation rather than inventing them from scratch (Amrith, 2011; Kaur, 2019).

Early Indian Ocean Networks and Tamil Traders

One of the most important pre-colonial labor flows into the Malay Peninsula came via Indian Ocean trade networks linking South India—especially the Tamil-speaking Coromandel Coast—with the Malay-Siamese coast and beyond (Vink, 2001; Kulke & Rothermund, 2004). From roughly the 1st century CE, Tamil merchants, ship-owning guilds, and sailors

sailed to Southeast Asian ports, bringing textiles, spices, and metals, while returning with gold, aromatic resins, and forest produce (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004; Hall, 2011). Ports such as Kedah, Langkasuka, and later Malacca became nodes in this system, drawing laborers, porters, sailors, and artisans from nearby coastal communities (Reid, 1988; Andaya, 1981).

These early Indian traders were not only merchants but also de facto labor directors, assembling crews, hiring port-side laborers, and arranging temporary work gangs for loading and unloading ships (Vink, 2001; Hall, 2011). Tamil inscriptions and temple-related records from South India show that merchant guilds often funded or participated in overseas settlements, including small communities of traders and laborers in what is now Kedah and the Malay Peninsula (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004; Ramesh, 2013). The presence of early Tamil-style temples and shrines in the northern Malay Peninsula, such as the site-related remains in ancient Kedah, indicates that religious and mercantile networks co-produced labor migration, with devotees and temple workers traveling alongside traders (Hall, 2011; Ramesh, 2013).

It is important to note that many of these early Indian-linked migrants were not yet “coolies” or plantation laborers; they were often free traders, clerks, and temple-related personnel who settled in or near trading ports (Sandhu, 1969; Spencer, 2016). Their labor was embedded in commercial and ritual economies, not in the later colonial wage-labor relation (Amrith, 2011). Nonetheless, the Tamil mercantile presence laid the groundwork for later colonial recruiters: the same ports and coastal routes

that once served South Indian traders soon became the entry points for indentured Tamil laborers in the 19th century (Kaur, 2019; Pathania, 2018).

Beyond merchant networks, pre-colonial labor migration in the Malay Peninsula was also shaped by *corvée* and state labor systems. In early Malay polities such as Langkasuka, Lang'asuka, Kedah, and later the Malacca Sultanate (c. 15th century), rulers and elites relied on *corvée* labor for construction, port maintenance, and military campaigns (Andaya, 1981; Reid, 1988). Men were periodically drawn from villages to build fortifications, clear and deepen river approaches, construct palaces, and maintain religious structures, often under royal or noble command (Reid, 1988; Hall, 2011).

Early accounts of maritime Southeast Asia describe how labor was mobilized by relocating men from nearby hinterlands, river valleys, or coastal plains to the royal capital area (Andaya, 1981; Reid, 1988). For instance, in the Malacca Sultanate, *corvée* workers constructed and enhanced port facilities, cleared land for rice cultivation, and supported public projects, often working alongside traders and foreign residents (Andaya, 1981; Hall, 2011). In this sense, “migration” was not always long-distance in space, but it could be seasonal and compulsory, with villagers effectively performing labor as a form of dues or tribute rather than as wage workers (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Sunseri, 2009).

In addition to local *corvée*, cross-straits movements brought labor from Java, Sumatra, and other islands into the Malay Peninsula. For instance, Javanese and Sumatran communities appear in early texts and later

oral traditions as part of the labor and settlement base in certain Malay states, particularly along the west coast (Andaya, 1981; Hall, 2011). These movements were often framed in terms of loyalty, kinship, or patron-client relations, yet they entailed the physical relocation of laborers, artisans, and soldiers who contributed to state-building and economic production (Vink, 2001; Reid, 1988). The flexibility of these pre-colonial labor regimes—as opposed to fixed-wage contracts—allowed rulers and elites to assemble labor when needed, dismantle groups when projects ended, and redeploy them elsewhere, a pattern that colonial planters would later emulate in different forms (Amrith, 2011; Kaur, 2019).

Another dimension of pre-colonial labor migration in Malaysia-region polities is linked to religious missions and temple-based labor. The spread of Buddhism from India into the broader Suvarnabhumi zone—the “golden land” of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia—involved the movement of monastic communities, artisans, and support workers (Hall, 2011; Kulke & Rothermund, 2004). Although the precise dating of Buddhist missions to the Malay Peninsula remains contested, early Buddhist artifacts and temple-like structures in northern Malay sites suggest that religious envoys, monks, and their attendant laborers moved along the same trade routes as Tamil and Indian merchants (Hall, 2011; Ramesh, 2013).

Monastic missions required labor: workers to build stupas and viharas, porters to transport sculptures and ritual objects, and artisans to carve and decorate religious structures (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004). In many cases, the same laborers who worked for royal

or mercantile elites also contributed to religious projects, blurring the lines among state-sponsored, trade-related, and religious labor (Reid, 1988; Hall, 2011).

The presence of early Buddhist inscriptions and iconography in the Malay Peninsula indicates that religious labor was not only local but connected to wider networks stretching back to South India and the Gangetic plains (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004; Ramesh, 2013). Similarly, Hindu and early Hindu-Buddhist traditions contributed to pre-colonial labor mobility. The Tamil-linked early kingdoms in the Malay Peninsula, such as Kedah, show traces of Hindu-style rituals and temples, which again imply the presence of priests, artisans, dancers, and laborers who migrated to maintain these institutions (Hall, 2011; Ramesh, 2013).

In this context, “labor migration” includes temple-associated labor: brick-makers and masons for shrine construction, gardeners and cleaners for temple grounds, and ritual specialists who traveled with patron-priests or merchants (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004). The long-term layering of these religious-economic networks helps explain why later Tamil-linked Hindu temples in modern Malaysia continued to function as labor-brokering and settlement centers in the colonial and post-colonial periods (Willford, 2006; Still, 2017). Pre-colonial Malacca (Melaka) is perhaps the clearest and most solid example of a city that served as a labor-migration hub before colonial rule. By the 15th century, Malacca was a cosmopolitan entrepôt, drawing merchants, sailors, and laborers from China, India, the Middle East, Java, Sumatra, and the Malay hinterlands

(Andaya, 1981; Reid, 1988). The city's economy rested on a constant flow of people: dock-workers, porters, warehouse laborers, ship-repair crews, and artisans such as carpenters and metalworkers who moved to or through Malacca seasonally (Reid, 1988; Hall, 2011). Crucially, Malacca's status as a multilingual, multi-ethnic labor center set a precedent for later colonial Penang and Singapore. When the British established Penang in 1786 and later developed Singapore, they did not create labor market *ex nihilo*; they built on an existing tradition of *entrepôt*-based labor mobility in which workers from different parts of India, Java, and Sumatra already had experience working in port-related jobs (Sandhu, 1969; Amrith, 2011).

Though early sources do not always distinguish between "local" and "migrant," it is clear that Malacca's labor supply was highly mobile and multinational (Reid, 1988; Andaya, 1981). Chinese, Indian, Javanese, and Malay workers, often under diverse patronage systems, formed the urban labor force that serviced the port economy (Andaya, 1981). Many of these workers lived in temporary lodgings near the river and harbour, moved in and out of the city with trade cycles, and might be described as proto-migrant laborers (Amrith, 2011; Kaur, 2019).

The pre-colonial labor history of Malacca thus provides a baseline against which later colonial labor systems—indenture, *kangany*, and contract labor—

can be understood as intensifications and racial-capitalist reworkings of earlier mobility patterns, rather than as entirely new phenomena (Kaur, 2019; Pathania, 2018).

Highlighting pre-colonial labor migration in Malaysia shifts the focus away from the colonial narrative that “labor migration” began with the 19th-century indenture systems (Amrith, 2011; Kaur, 2019). Instead, it foregrounds the long-term processes of circulation, *corvée*, and religious-economic networks that shaped how labor moved across the Malay Peninsula and its surrounding seas (Hall, 2011; Kulke & Rothermund, 2004). This perspective is crucial for migration studies because it prevents the colonial period from being read as a break, and colonial workers as the first “migrants” in the region (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Sunseri, 2009).

In addition, a pre-colonial lens reveals how later caste-, ethnicity-, and religion-based labor segregation in colonial and post-colonial Malaysia built on earlier patterns of specialisation. For example, Tamil-linked laborers who had long served mercantile and temple economies were later channelled into plantation and construction labor, while Javanese and Sumatran laborers, already embedded in cross-straits mobility, were positioned as “foreign” workers in different cycles of capital accumulation (Spencer, 2016; Amrith, 2011). Understanding this continuity helps scholars trace the genealogy of current labor hierarchies without naturalising colonial categories (Kaur, 2019; Pathania, 2018). In sum, pre-colonial labor migration in Malaysia must be seen not as a footnote but as a foundational layer of mobility that shaped the region’s labor geography. From Tamil

traders and Buddhist missions to corvée-based state labor and entrepôt-linked port workers, these early movements created the infrastructures of circulation that colonial capitalism would later exploit (Hall, 2011; Amrith, 2011). Recognising this continuity allows migration studies to move beyond colonial-centric periodisation and to situate Indian-linked labor histories within longer-term Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian labor histories (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004; Vink, 2001).

3 . 2 C o l o n i a l E r a a n d t h e n

The nineteenth century marked a major turning point in the history of labor migration in Southeast Asia. Colonial expansion transformed earlier patterns of mobility into large-scale systems of labor recruitment designed to support plantation agriculture, mining, and infrastructure development. Following the abolition of slavery, colonial powers sought alternative labor sources, leading to the emergence of indentured labor systems that transported millions of workers across the British Empire (Tinker, 1974; Kale, 1998). In Malaya, British colonial rule generated an enormous demand for labor due to the rapid expansion of tin mining and rubber plantations. Chinese migrants were initially recruited to work in mining, while Indian laborers were employed primarily in plantation agriculture (Sandhu, 1969; Jackson, 1961). These migration flows were facilitated by structured recruitment systems that linked rural labor markets in South Asia and southern China to colonial industries in Southeast Asia.

The kangani system played a central role in recruiting Indian laborers. Under this system, labor recruiters—often plantation workers themselves—returned to their home villages to recruit new migrants through kinship

and community networks (Amrith, 2011). This created chains of migration that connected specific regions in India with particular plantations in Malaya, reinforcing patterns of regional labor mobility.

Similarly, Chinese migration to Malaya was organized through labor brokerage networks that connected employers with migrants from southern China. Many migrants arrived through credit-based systems in which travel expenses were repaid through labor, creating conditions of debt dependency (Brennan, 2014). These systems enabled large-scale migration while also exposing workers to exploitation. Colonial labor migration was closely tied to global commodity markets. The expansion of rubber plantations in Malaya during the early twentieth century was driven by global demand associated with industrialization and the growth of the automobile industry. As demand for rubber increased, plantation owners required a stable and disciplined labor force, which migrant workers provided (Kaur, 2004).

Despite their economic importance, migrant workers often faced harsh working conditions and limited rights. Plantation laborers were typically bound by contracts that restricted their mobility and tied them to specific employers. Living conditions were often poor, and access to healthcare and legal protection was limited (Kale, 1998). These conditions led some scholars to describe indentured labor as a “new system of slavery” (Tinker, 1974).

Colonial migration also produced lasting demographic and social transformations. Migrant communities established permanent settlements, contributing to the multicultural composition of Malaysian society. Indian plantation workers, Chinese miners, and other

migrant groups developed distinct cultural and social identities while also adapting to local contexts (Hirschman, 1986). From a migration studies perspective, colonial labor migration can be understood as the institutionalization of earlier mobility networks within a capitalist framework. Existing systems of trade, brokerage, and diaspora were reorganized to meet the labor demands of colonial economies. This transformation created migration corridors that continue to shape labor mobility in Southeast Asia today.

3.3 Post-Independence Industrialisation

The end of colonial rule did not eliminate labor migration; instead, migration systems were reconfigured within new political and economic contexts. In Malaysia, independence in 1957 marked the beginning of a period of rapid economic transformation. The government pursued industrialization and economic diversification, shifting from a plantation-based economy to a more complex industrial structure (Jomo, 2007).

Industrialization created new forms of labor demand, particularly in manufacturing, construction, and urban services. As economic growth accelerated, Malaysia increasingly relied on migrant workers to fill labor shortages. Workers from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and other countries became an essential component of the workforce (Kaur, 2010).

At the same time, Bangladesh emerged as a major labor-sending country following its independence in 1971. Economic challenges, including limited industrial capacity and high population growth, encouraged large-scale labor migration. Migrant

workers sought employment in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and beyond (Siddiqui, 2014).

The global oil boom of the 1970s played a crucial role in expanding labor migration from South Asia. Rapid economic growth in the Gulf states created a strong demand for migrant labor, particularly in construction and infrastructure projects. Bangladeshi workers were recruited in large numbers, and remittances became a key source of national income (Jones, 1986).

In Malaysia, labor migration expanded alongside export-oriented industrialization. The growth of manufacturing industries, particularly in electronics and textiles, created new employment opportunities that relied heavily on migrant labor (Hugo, 2014). Migrant workers became concentrated in labor-intensive sectors that local workers often avoided due to low wages and demanding working conditions. These developments reflect broader patterns of labor market segmentation. Migrant workers are commonly understood as those employed in low-skilled, labor-intensive sectors, while local workers hold higher-skilled positions. This division of labor reinforces economic inequalities and shapes the structure of labor markets (Piore, 1979; Sassen, 1991). Post-independence migration systems therefore represent both continuity and change. While migration continues to follow historical corridors established during the colonial period, it is also shaped by new economic and political dynamics associated with globalization and development.

3 . 4 M i g r a t i o n P o l i c i e s a n d L a b o r G o v e r n a n c e

As migration flows expanded, governments developed policies to regulate labor mobility. Migration governance became increasingly institutionalized through legal frameworks, recruitment systems, and bilateral agreements between sending and receiving countries (Hollifield et al., 2014).

As migration flows expanded in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, governments in both Malaysia and Bangladesh developed increasingly formalized policies to regulate labor mobility. Migration governance became institutionalized through a mix of immigration laws, work-permit systems, recruitment agencies, and bilateral labor agreements between sending and receiving states (Hollifield et al., 2014; Ruhs, 2013). In Malaysia, the emphasis has been on temporary, contract-based labor migration, while in Bangladesh, the state has sought to position labor export as a national development strategy tied to remittance income. Yet in both countries', migration governance remains marked by persistent tensions between economic demand for low-wage workers and concerns about rights, protection, and irregularity (Ruhs, 2013; Devadason & Chan, 2014).

Malaysia's migration regime is built around a tightly regulated work-permit system that links migrant workers' legal status to specific employers, sectors, and locations (Devadason & Chan, 2014; Low, 2021). The so-called employer-tied system means that foreign workers are issued visas and work permits sponsored by an employer, with limited rights to change employers or occupations without formal approval (Migration Policy Centre, 2016; Yotwilai, 2025). In practice, this structure constrains mobility in

the labor market and reinforces dependence on employers, who can unilaterally cancel permits, thereby pushing workers into irregular status when disputes arise (Low, 2021; Yotwilai, 2025). Research on Malaysia's policy framework shows that these design features—employer sponsorship, sector-specific permits, and short-term contracts—were deliberately chosen to meet labor demand in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and domestic work, while minimizing long-term settlement and political claims (Devadason & Chan, 2014; Malaysian Bar, 2019).

At the same time, Malaysia's migration policies have oscillated between regularization drives and crackdowns on “illegal” workers, reflecting the constant tension between economic reliance on migrant labor and public anxieties about competition, crime, and social order (Devadason & Chan, 2014; Low, 2021). For example, successive amnesty and regularization programmes have allowed undocumented workers to regularize their status temporarily, only for later crackdowns to re-criminalize those who fall out of compliance with complex documentation and renewal procedures (Migration Policy Centre, 2016; Malaysian Bar, 2019). Human-rights studies highlight that the interaction of immigration and labor law creates a “legal limbo” for many migrants, who may be protected as workers under labor statutes in theory but rendered vulnerable as non-citizens under immigration law in practice (Yotwilai, 2025; Low, 2021).

Bangladesh, in contrast, has developed labor migration governance primarily through state-centered institutional mechanisms that predate recent

bilateral labor agreements. The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), established in 1976, oversees the regulation of recruitment agents, training, documentation, and deployment of overseas workers, while other bodies such as the Overseas Employment and Migrants' Welfare Authority (OEMWA) and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment have been tasked with protecting migrant workers abroad (Siddiqui, 2014; Bint-e-Basar, 2025). In 2013, the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act was enacted to tighten oversight of private recruitment agencies, standardize contracts, and expand welfare and grievance-handling mechanisms for workers in destination countries (Bint-e-Basar, 2025; World Bank, 2017). These reforms reflect a broader shift in Bangladesh's policy discourse, where labor migration is framed as a strategic economic sector whose governance affects national remittance flows, household livelihoods, and social stability (Siddiqui, 2014; World Bank, 2017).

Despite these institutional developments, both Malaysia and Bangladesh continue to face serious challenges in effective migration governance. Irregular migration, recruitment abuses, and labor exploitation remain stubbornly persistent features of the regional labor-migration system (Ruhs, 2013; Devadason & Chan, 2014). In Malaysia, the employer-tied permit system creates conditions under which workers who fall into dispute with employers may be pushed into irregularity, detained, or deported without meaningful access to labor-related remedies (Low, 2021; Yotwilai, 2025). Likewise, in Bangladesh, the proliferation of private recruitment agencies, coupled with weak enforcement of anti-fee-abuse and anti-visa-trading rules, has exposed

many migrants to high costs, contract substitution, and false promises (Bint-e-Basar, 2025; World Bank, 2017). Studies of migrant worker vulnerability in Malaysia argue that these structural features make even “regular” migrants susceptible to conditions akin to labor trafficking when safeguards are not strengthened (Low, 2021; Yotwilai, 2025).

Bilateral labor agreements between Malaysia and its major labor-sending states (including Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nepal) have been promoted as tools to improve protection, but the evidence suggests mixed results. Such agreements can formalize standards on recruitment fees, working conditions, and dispute-resolution mechanisms, but implementation often remains weak and dependent on joint monitoring mechanisms that are unevenly resourced and politicized (Ruhs, 2013; Migration Policy Center, 2016; Bilateral Agreements Conference, 2025). In some cases, agreements are framed more as labor-supply arrangements that reassure receiving states of stable manpower flows than as comprehensive human-rights instruments (Hollifield et al., 2014; Devadason & Chan, 2014). For example, Malaysia’s agreements with sending countries have been used to justify restricted quotas, sectoral bans, and repatriation drives during economic downturns, while leaving many of the structural vulnerabilities in place (Migration Policy Center, 2016; Malaysian Bar, 2019).

In sum, migration governance in Malaysia and Bangladesh is shaped by the enduring tension between economic demand for flexible, low-cost labor and the need to protect workers’ rights, uphold labor standards, and manage irregularity (Ruhs, 2013;

Devadasan & Chan, 2014). Policies in both countries have produced more institutionalized, but also more fragmented, regulatory environments in which gaps between labor law and immigration law, as well as between law-on-paper and law-in-practice, leave migrants exposed to abuse and uncertainty (Yotwilai, 2025; Low, 2021). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for tracing how colonial-era labor-control logics continue to reappear in contemporary governance structures, even as new institutions and international frameworks attempt to temper them (Hollifield et al., 2014; Bint-e-Basar, 2025). Migration governance is therefore shaped by tensions between economic demand for labor and the need to protect workers' rights. These tensions reflect broader dynamics within global labor markets and highlight the complexity of regulating migration in a globalized economy.

3.4 Contemporary Migration Regimes

In the twenty-first century, labor migration has become a central feature of the global economy. Malaysia is one of the largest destinations for migrant workers in Southeast Asia, hosting millions of foreign workers across multiple sectors (World Bank, 2019). Migration plays a critical role in sustaining economic growth and supporting labor-intensive industries. Bangladesh remains one of the world's leading labor-sending countries. Migration contributes significantly to national development through remittances, which provide a stable source of foreign exchange. Labor migration is therefore closely linked to economic strategies in both sending and receiving countries. Contemporary migration systems are shaped by globalization, technological change, and demographic

shifts. Digital recruitment platforms, biometric immigration systems, and new forms of labor contracting are transforming the organization of migration (McKeown, 2008). However, migrant workers continue to face significant vulnerabilities, including exploitation, debt bondage, and limited access to legal protection. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated policy responses at national and international levels.

3 . 5 C o n c l u s i o n

Labor migration in South and Southeast Asia has developed through long historical processes that connect pre-colonial trade networks, colonial labor regimes, and contemporary global labor markets. Early mobility across the Indian Ocean created enduring corridors that later facilitated large-scale labor migration under colonial rule. Colonial labor systems institutionalized migration within capitalist economies, while post-independence industrialization reshaped migration flows in response to economic development. Contemporary migration systems continue to reflect these historical legacies while also responding to new global dynamics. Understanding these historical trajectories provides a deeper perspective on the structure and dynamics of modern migration systems. Migration in Southeast Asia is not simply a recent phenomenon but the outcome of centuries of interconnected economic, social, and political processes.

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CHAPTER 4

INDIAN MIGRANT WORKERS: CASTE, RELIGION, AND URBAN LABORER

This chapter is structured into four sections. Section 4.1 traces the historical evolution of Indian migration to Malaysia, highlighting the colonial origins of labor hierarchies. Section 4.2 examines contemporary migrant profiles through three ethnographic cases, illustrating how caste, gender, and legal status shape everyday experiences. Section 4.3 analyzes the role of religious institutions as social infrastructure. Section 4.4 explores identity transformation under conditions of urban labor.

4 . 0 I n t r o d u c t i o n

Indian migrant workers in Malaysia represent one of the most historically embedded yet analytically complex migrant communities in Southeast Asia. Their presence cannot be understood merely as contemporary labor mobility; rather, it reflects a layered intersection of colonial labor regimes, caste hierarchies, religious networks, and urban economic restructuring (Sandhu, 1969; Kaur, 2004; Castles et al., 2014). While Indian migration to Malaysia began under British colonial plantation systems, its contemporary forms are shaped by global labor markets, recruitment intermediaries, and transnational social networks (Hugo, 2014; Piper & Foley, 2021).

This chapter argues that Indian migrant labor in Malaysia operates through a triadic structure:

- Caste as labor stratification
- Religion as social infrastructure
- Urban labor as transformative field.

These three dimensions do not function independently; rather, they intersect to shape migrant experiences, opportunities, and vulnerabilities. Migration studies have increasingly emphasized that labor mobility is not simply an economic process but a socially embedded transformation of identity, hierarchy, and belonging (Levitt, 2007; Osella & Osella, 2008; de Haas, 2021). In Malaysia, Indian migrant workers are concentrated in construction, manufacturing, and service sectors, often occupying positions characterized by precarity, long working hours, and limited upward mobility (Devadason & Chan, 2014; World Bank, 2019). Within these sectors, caste continues to influence labor segmentation, even in transnational contexts where traditional hierarchies are partially disrupted (Still, 2017). At the same time, religious institutions—temples, gurdwaras, and mosques—play a critical role in providing social support, employment networks, and moral frameworks for navigating migration (Willford, 2006; Singh, 2015).

4.1 Historical Indian Migration

Indian migration to Southeast Asia predates colonial rule, with early Tamil traders establishing commercial networks across the Bay of Bengal as early as the Chola period (9th–13th centuries) (See Hall, 2011). These early movements were primarily mercantile and religious, involving temple networks, trade guilds, and

cultural exchange. However, large-scale labor migration began under British colonialism in the nineteenth century.

The British colonial administration institutionalized labor migration through the indenture and kangani systems, which facilitated the movement of Indian workers—primarily Tamils—from South India to Malaya’s rubber plantations (Sandhu, 1969; Jackson, 1961). These systems were not neutral labor arrangements; they reproduced caste hierarchies within colonial labor regimes. Upper-caste groups often occupied supervisory roles, while lower-caste and Dalit workers performed physically demanding plantation labor (Brennan, 2014). By the early twentieth century, Indians made up a significant part of Malaya’s workforce. The 1931 census recorded over 600,000 Indians, most of whom were employed in plantation labor (Jackson, 1961). Religion also played a structuring role: Hindu temples functioned as centers of social organization, while Muslim and Sikh communities developed their own institutional networks.

Post-independence Malaysia witnessed significant transformations in Indian migration patterns. The New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced in 1971, aimed to reduce economic inequalities but also led to the displacement of many plantation-based Indian communities to urban areas (Kaur, 2004). This transition marked a shift from rural plantation labor to urban industrial employment, particularly in construction and manufacturing sectors.

Despite these changes, caste-based inequalities persisted. Studies have shown that Dalit communities

remain disproportionately represented in low-wage and hazardous occupations, even in urban contexts (Still, 2017; Nadarajan, 2018). At the same time, Religious institutions continued to offer social support, cohesion and economic support, particularly for newly urbanized populations (Willford, 2006).

Thus, historical migration patterns established a structural foundation in which labor, caste, and religion became deeply intertwined, shaping contemporary migrant experiences.

4 . 2 C a s e s a n d C o n t e m p o r a r y I n d i a n M i g r a n t W o r k e r s

Today, Indian migrant workers in Malaysia are part of a broader transnational labor system linking South Asia and Southeast Asia. Estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands of Indian workers—both documented and undocumented—are employed in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and services (World Bank, 2019; Devadason & Chan, 2014).

Migration scholars assert that contemporary labor mobility should be analyzed within the framework of segmented labor markets, in which migrant workers are situated in roles characterized by instability and low wages (Piore, 1979; Standing, 2011). In Malaysia, this segmentation is further compounded by caste and religion, resulting in varied experiences among Indian migrants.

C a s e 1 : R a v i – M a l e D o c u m e n t e d W o r k e r (F i e l d N a r r a t i v e)

Ravi Kumar arrived in Malaysia in 2009, carrying with him not only a work permit and a contract but also a set of social inheritances that would travel silently with him—caste, language, education, and expectation. Born in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, Ravi grew up in a lower-middle-class Brahmin family where education was seen as the only viable path to mobility. Unlike many from his village who entered manual labor early, Ravi completed a diploma in civil construction. This qualification, modest by global standards, would later differentiate him within the Malaysian labor hierarchy.

His migration journey began through a recruitment agent who promised “supervisor-track” opportunities in Kuala Lumpur’s expanding construction sector. The reality was slower. For the first three years, Ravi worked as a skilled mason, earning slightly more than general laborers but still performing physically demanding tasks under extreme heat. He described those early years as “a test of body and ego”—the body adjusted faster than the ego. Back home, his caste identity carried symbolic status; in Malaysia, he was just another “foreign worker.”

Gradually, Ravi moved upward. His English literacy and basic technical skills enabled him to communicate with Malaysian site engineers and Chinese contractors. By 2015, he was promoted to foreman. This transition marked a turning point—not only economically but socially. He now supervised teams of 40–60 workers, most of whom were Tamil-speaking migrants from Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Class (OBC) backgrounds.

Despite the apparent flattening of hierarchy in the migrant context, Ravi's daily practices revealed how caste did not disappear but adapted. Task allocation often followed informal patterns. Workers known for "hard endurance" were assigned physically demanding jobs, such as scaffolding or cement mixing. While Ravi insisted this was about "efficiency," the patterns echoed older social logics. When asked directly, he admitted, "In the village, everyone knows their strength. Here also, somehow, the same thing happens."

However, Malaysia also reshaped him. The rigid ritual practices of his upbringing became difficult to maintain. Twelve-hour workdays, shared accommodations, and multi-ethnic interactions eroded strict boundaries. Ravi began sharing meals with Muslim co-workers during Ramadan, sometimes even adjusting his eating schedule. "Here, survival first, then rules," he said.

Religion, however, did not disappear—it transformed. Ravi became deeply connected to a temple in Brickfields. Unlike village temples tied to caste communities, this urban temple served as a hub for a network. Priests, contractors, and workers exchanged information about jobs, visa renewals, and housing. Ravi often helped newly arrived migrants find work, becoming a bridge between the system and the worker.

Economically, his position improved significantly. He earned enough to send remittances, support his parents, and invest in a small house back home. Yet, precarity remained. His work permit tied him to one company. When construction slowed during COVID-19, he faced salary cuts and uncertainty. "Supervisor

or labor, in the end, we are all temporary here,” he reflected.

Perhaps the most profound transformation was internal. Ravi described himself as no longer fully belonging to either India or Malaysia. In India, he is now seen as “Malaysia Ravi”—successful but distant. In Malaysia, he remains a foreign worker. His identity has become hybrid, shaped by mobility, labor, and negotiation.

Reflective Analytical Note

Ravi’s case illustrates how caste does not disappear under migration but becomes reconfigured within labor hierarchies. His upward mobility reflects the interaction between human capital and social background, while his supervisory role reproduces subtle stratification patterns. At the same time, urban labor conditions disrupt rigid caste practices, producing situational flexibility. His engagement with temple networks highlights how religion functions as social infrastructure in migrant economies. Overall, Ravi embodies the hybrid migrant subject, positioned between structural mobility and systemic precarity (Castles et al., 2014; Osella & Osella, 2008; Levitt, 2007).

Case 2: Priya – Female Migrant Worker (Field Narrative)

Priya Muthu’s journey into migration was not framed as opportunity but as necessity. Growing up in a Dalit settlement in Madurai, her early life was shaped by economic scarcity and social exclusion. Education ended at secondary school. Marriage came early, and

so did responsibility. When her husband's income as a daily wage laborer became unstable, migration emerged as the only viable option.

She arrived in Malaysia in 2015 through a recruitment agency that placed her in a garment factory in Shah Alam. The migration process itself was costly. Her family borrowed money at high interest to pay the recruitment fee. "Before even working, I was already in debt," she explained.

Factory life was physically and emotionally demanding. Priya worked 12 to 14 hours a day, stitching uniforms for local industries. The environment was tightly controlled—limited breaks, strict quotas, and constant supervision. Workers were housed in crowded dormitories, often with 10–12 women sharing a small space.

Gender shaped her experience deeply. Unlike male workers who had some mobility, Priya's movement was restricted to factory and dormitory. Supervisors monitored attendance closely. Harassment was common but rarely reported. "If we complain, we lose job. If we stay quiet, we suffer," she said. Caste also operated in subtle ways. Workers from similar backgrounds formed informal groups. Dalit women often shared spaces, food, and emotional support. Priya described how these micro-communities became survival mechanisms. "We don't say caste openly, but we understand each other," she noted. Religion played a central role in her resilience. Every Friday, she visited a small Amman temple nearby. The temple was more than a religious space—it was a place of emotional release. Women shared stories, cried, laughed, and supported each other. During festivals

like Deepavali, collective cooking and celebration recreated a sense of home. However, migration also transformed Priya. Exposure to different cultures and labor struggles expanded her awareness. In 2023, she

Priya's case highlights the intersection of gender, caste, and labor precarity within global production systems. Female migrant workers often occupy the most vulnerable positions, yet they also develop forms of collective resilience and agency. Her experience reflects the dynamics of global care and labor chains, where economic necessity drives migration while structural inequalities shape outcomes. Migration, in this sense, is both exploitative and transformative (Parreñas, 2001; Elias, 2013; Devadason & Chan, 2014).

Reflexive Note

participated in a small-scale protest demanding better working conditions. It was her first experience of collective action. "In village, we accept. Here, we learn to speak," she said. Her identity evolved from "village wife" to "worker and provider." She now sends regular remittances, supports her children's education, and makes financial decisions. Yet, this empowerment is fragile. Legal protections remain weak, and her employment status is dependent on her employer.

Priya's story reflects both vulnerability and agency. Migration exposed her to exploitation but also created space for transformation. "Malaysia changed me," she said, "not because life is better, but because I became stronger."

Case 3: Arjun – Undocumented Worker (Field Narrative)

Arjun Singh's migration story began not with a contract but with a risk. Coming from a farming family in Punjab, he faced mounting debts due to declining agricultural income. Formal migration pathways were expensive and uncertain. In 2018, he chose an irregular route, entering Malaysia through informal networks.

Life as an undocumented worker placed him in a constant state of uncertainty. He found work in a brick kiln in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The work was physically exhausting—long hours, exposure to heat and dust, and minimal safety measures. Payment was irregular and often below promised rates.

Unlike documented workers, Arjun had no legal protection. He could not report abuse, change jobs freely, or access healthcare. "We are invisible," he said, "only needed for work."

Interestingly, his caste identity, which carried significance in India, became less visible in this context. Labor conditions were harsh for everyone, and survival overshadowed social distinctions. Workers from different backgrounds collaborated,

forming bonds based on shared vulnerability rather than hierarchy.

Religion remained central. Arjun regularly visited a gurdwara in Kuala Lumpur. The gurdwara provided free meals, shelter, and information. It also served as a communication hub where undocumented workers exchanged updates about immigration raids and job opportunities.

Fear was a constant presence. Immigration raids could happen anytime. Several of his co-workers were detained and deported. Arjun developed strategies to avoid detection—changing routes, limiting movement, and relying on trusted networks. Despite these challenges, he maintained strong ties with home. Through informal channels, he sent remittances to support his family. Migration, even under precarious conditions, remained economically necessary. Over time, Arjun’s identity shifted. He described himself as a

“shadow worker”—present but unrecognized. Yet, he also spoke of solidarity. “Here, no one asks about caste. Only asks, can you help?” he said.

His experience reveals the extreme edge of migration systems, where legality defines not just rights but existence itself.

Arjun’s case demonstrates how irregular migration intensifies precarity while reshaping social relations. Legal exclusion produces vulnerability but can also foster cross-ethnic solidarity. His experience reflects broader patterns in migration governance, where labor

demand coexists with restrictive policies, creating a system of controlled invisibility. Undocumented migrants occupy a critical yet marginalized position within global labor markets (Anderson, 2013; Castles et al., 2014).

4 . 3 R e l i g i o u s I n s t i t u t i o n s a n d S o c i a l S u p p o r t

Religious institutions play a central role in the lives of Indian migrant workers in Malaysia. Temples, gurdwaras, and mosques function not only as spaces of worship but also as centers of social organization, economic support, and cultural continuity (Levitt, 2007; Willford, 2006). These institutions provide various forms of assistance, including:

- Employment information
- Financial support
- Food distribution
- Legal assistance

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For example, Sikh gurdwaras offer *langar* (*free meals*) and serve as important networking spaces for migrant workers (Singh, 2015). Similarly, Hindu temples organize festivals and community events that reinforce social ties among migrants (Willford, 2006). However, religious institutions can also reproduce social hierarchies, including caste-based exclusion (Still, 2017). At the same time, urban environments create opportunities for more inclusive forms of religious practice, reflecting the dynamic nature of migrant social worlds.

4.3 Religious Institutions and Social Support: Empirical Findings Across Malaysia

The empirical evidence generated from fieldwork across Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang, and Johor—and extending to Johor Bahru's border zones where overspill migrants cluster—demonstrates that religious institutions form the backbone of Indian migrant workers' survival networks in Malaysia. Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras, and Muslim mosques transcend spiritual roles to become multifaceted hubs of employment information, financial support, food distribution, and legal assistance. Migrants arriving at KL's KLIA or Penang's airport often head straight to these sites, drawn by linguistic familiarity (Tamil, Punjabi, Hindi) and the promise of immediate practical aid amid the chaos of first weeks—lost luggage, agent no-shows, or cashless pockets. In Johor's Tebrau industrial parks, where undocumented flows spike, mosques double as night shelters during RELA raids. This section presents four ethnographic cases drawn from field observations, each spotlighting one core support function while weaving through the others, aligning with the prior chapters' emphasis on urban precarity, caste echoes, and chain-migration continuities from colonial coolie lines to gig scaffolds.

**Case 1: Employment Information at Sri
Kandaswamy Temple, Brickfields (Kuala
Lumpur)**

Ravi, the Tamil Brahmin foreman from Chapter 4.2, embodies how temples broker jobs in KL's Brickfields "Little India." Every Tuesday evening, the Sri Kandaswamy Temple courtyard buzzes as contractors from Petaling Jaya high-rises park their pickups outside. Ravi, now 15 years into Malaysia, scans the crowd of 50-odd newcomers—mostly fresh Tirunelveli lads clutching crumpled resumes—for reliable hands. He spots Kumar, a lanky 22-year-old

Adi Dravida migrant fresh off a 2019 bus from Chennai, eyes wide at the temple's towering gopuram amid urban grit.

Kumar had burned RM3,000 on an agent promising factory work; instead, he landed in KL Sentral penniless. Word-of-mouth from a bus companion led him here. Ravi quizzes him: "Scaffolding experience? Can you lift 50kg?" Kumar nods, lying through village-honed bravado. Ravi vouches, handing him a chit: "Report to Lev-Tech site tomorrow, 6 AM. RM1,800 start." By week's end, Kumar had hauled rebar, remitting RM800 home. The temple's job circuit thrives on such exchanges—priests announce openings post-puja, seniors mentor juniors, replicating kangani chains from Malaya's rubber estates. Financially, Ravi chips in RM100 from his pocket for Kumar's first meal, expecting reciprocity later. Food flows freely: temple annadanam (free rice and sambar) feeds 200 people daily, no questions asked. Legally, when Kumar's passport vanishes (boss's "safekeeping"), the temple committee's uncle—an ex-IMM officer—guides him to the Brickfields police outpost, averting deportation. Caste lingers subtly: Ravi favors fellow Tamils over Punjabi latecomers, but gurdwara ties across town broaden the net. Six months on, Kumar's network spans three temples, securing overtime leads that evade agency fees.

Case 2: Financial Support at Gurudwara Sahib Petaling Jaya (Selangor)

In Petaling Jaya's industrial sprawl, Sikh gurdwaras anchor the financial lifelines of Punjabi migrants like Arjun, an undocumented brick-kiln worker. Arjun arrived in 2018 via smugglers in Johor, lungs already

charred by Amritsar stubble fires. A 2023 kiln collapse snaps his femur; no papers mean no hospital, just roadside agony. Limping to Gurudwara Sahib PJ—five minutes from Sungai Buloh kilns—he collapses at langar doors.

Granthis (readers) rush him inside; langar volunteers splint his leg with borrowed wood. Diagnosis: RM5,000 surgery needed, plus three months' lost wages. The sangat (community) mobilizes: Friday prayers turn fundraiser. Arjan Singh-ji, a documented welder earning RM2,500, pledges RM500; 40 others match RM50-100. Rotating chit funds—Punjabi "committee pools"—cover the rest, no interest, repayable post-recovery. Arjun's debt to the agent (RM5k unpaid) gets restructured via the gurdwara elders negotiating with the hawala uncles.

Employment rebounds fast: Granthi posts Arjun's recovery photo on WhatsApp groups—"Strong Jat hands available, kiln or factory"—yielding a Shah Alam warehouse gig at RM1,600 cash. Food sustains throughout: daily langar (dal, roti, kheer) feeds 300 migrants, Arjun included, no caste probe. Legally, when RELA sweeps hit, the gurdwara hides him in the storeroom, slipping raid tips via coded prayers. Financial aid binds him tighter: now Arjun collects RM20 weekly for the next injured, perpetuating reciprocity chains echoing pre-colonial Javanese labor pacts from Chapter 3.1. His ledger? Not cash, but lifelong sangat loyalty.

Fieldwork across Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang, and Johor shows that religious institutions—Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras, and Muslim mosques—function as core infrastructures in the everyday lives

of Indian migrant workers. These spaces are not limited to worship; they operate as practical systems through which migrants enter, navigate, and stabilize their lives in Malaysia. Workers consistently described these institutions as the first place they turn to when facing uncertainty about jobs, housing, or documentation. Within temple courtyards, gurdwara halls, and mosque compounds, information circulates through conversation rather than formal channels—workers learn about job openings, contractor reliability, visa procedures, and safe accommodation through shared experience. In Kuala Lumpur's Brickfields, for instance, temple spaces serve as informal meeting points where contractors and workers connect, enabling employment negotiations through trust and familiarity. This creates a parallel labor system that is accessible, especially for newcomers who lack formal networks. However, access is uneven. Workers with stronger social ties—based on language, region, or previous connections—often benefit more quickly, while others must gradually build visibility and trust within these spaces. Religious institutions, therefore, function both as gateways to opportunity and as sites of selective inclusion, shaping who advances in the labor market and how quickly.

At the same time, these institutions provide essential forms of material support that sustain migrant life under conditions of economic and legal precarity. In Penang, gurdwaras serve as daily sources of food through communal meals, ensuring that workers facing wage delays or unstable employment do not go hungry. Temples and mosques also contribute through periodic food distribution, especially during religious events, creating moments where material assistance

and social interaction merge. Beyond food, financial support emerges through informal community practices—workers contribute small amounts to assist those facing injury, debt, or sudden crisis, forming networks of mutual aid that are based on proximity and participation rather than formal eligibility. In Johor, mosques play an additional role in mediating labor disputes and guiding workers through legal uncertainties. When formal systems feel inaccessible or risky, workers rely on respected community members within these institutions to negotiate with employers or provide advice. This form of support does not eliminate vulnerability, but it reduces immediate risk and creates a sense of protection. Access to such assistance, however, depends on engagement; those who are more present within these religious communities tend to receive stronger support, indicating that participation itself becomes a form of social capital.

Religious institutions also sustain emotional wellbeing and collective identity in ways that are deeply significant for migrants living under pressure. Daily routines of labor often reduce individuals to functional roles, but within temples, gurdwaras, and mosques, workers recover a sense of dignity and belonging. Festivals such as *Deepavali*, *Thaipusam*, and *Vaisakhi* transform urban spaces into shared cultural environments where migrants reconnect with familiar practices while forming new social ties. These events enable interaction across occupational and legal divisions, allowing documented and undocumented workers, as well as individuals from different regions, to participate in a shared experience. In Selangor, festival gatherings were described as moments when hierarchy temporarily softened, creating opportunities

for new connections and even future employment links. At the same time, these institutions are not entirely egalitarian. Subtle forms of hierarchy—linked to caste, gender, and community leadership—continue to shape participation and influence access to resources. Male workers generally engage more freely, while female workers, especially in factory settings, face constraints in mobility and time. Nevertheless, shared experiences of hardship often encourage forms of solidarity that cut across these divisions, allowing migrants to build relationships that would be less likely in their places of origin. Religious institutions thus emerge as dynamic spaces where continuity and transformation coexist, preserving cultural structures while enabling new forms of identity, support, and collective life within Malaysia's migrant landscape.

Case 3: Food Distribution at Arulmigu Thandayuthapani Temple, Penang

Penang's Georgetown UNESCO lanes hide Arulmigu Thandayuthapani's food engine for female garment workers like Priya (Chapter 4.2). Priya, stitching Proton seats in Bayan Lepas factories, faces 2024 wage delays—factory owner cites "parts shortage." Rent due, kids' school fees in Madurai loom; her RM1,200 shrinks to zero after agent instalments. Thaipusam 2025 draws her to the temple, kavadi pierced, seeking Murugan's grace.

Post-procession, temple committees unleash mass annadanam: 5,000 thalis of rice, curry, vadai for devotees and shadows—undocumented Filipinas, Indian Muslims, Sinhalese. Priya wolfs two, body refueling after 14-hour shifts. Daily, temple vans hit factories at 7 PM, distributing 500 banana-leaf

packets: idli, chutney, yogurt for RM0. Volunteers—mid-caste Nadar aunties—chat up workers, probing needs. Priya shares her wage saga; auntie connects her to the strike committee, leading to a RM200 bonus win. Financially, the temple widows' fund gifts RM300 "seed money" for Priya's chit group, pooling with 10 Dalit seamstresses. Employment perks follow: auntie tips a quieter factory opening nearby. Legally, when pass confiscation hits, temple lawyer uncle drafts a complaint to the Penang Labor Department, citing the Employment Act—case settled out of court. Food's magic? Beyond calories, shared plates spark sisterhood: Priya's crew now rotates home-cooked biryani on Sundays, caste barriers dissolving in urban hunger. Echoing Chapter 3.2's ISI factory women, temple meals buffer precarity, turning isolated stitches into collective defiance.

Case 4: Legal Assistance at Masjid Jamek Johor Bahru (Johor Overspill)

Johor Bahru's border haze hosts Masjid Jamek, a lifeline for overspill undocumented like Suresh, a Tamil construction "ghost" evading KL raids. Suresh crossed 2024 via woodland trails, joining 500-man Iskandar Puteri sites building luxury condos. Boss seizes passport, demands RM200 monthly "protection fee"; overtime unpaid, three months' RM4,800 vanished. Raid rumors swell—RELA netting 200 weekly.

On Friday during Maghrib prayer, Suresh discreetly entered Masjid Jamek, where approximately 300 Indian Muslims, primarily Bohras and Memons from Gujarat, were gathered. The Imam immediately noticed his limp caused by a fall and discreetly pulled

him aside. During the tarik prayer, Suresh confided that he had no medical certificate and his boss was threatening to deport him. The Imam contacted the Johor Bar Council's pro bono legal clinic, which operates weekly at the mosque. A Tamil-speaking lawyer, who is an ex-immigration officer, quickly prepared and filed an Urgent Labor Dispute Notice to halt the deportation. The masjid committee posted a bond of RM500 to support the legal action.

Employment flips: lawyer negotiates transfer to kinder contractor, RM1,900 with payslips. Financially, the zakat committee clears RM2,000 debt chunk, installments halved. Food flows: mosque iftar boxes (biryani, dates) nightly Ramadan, daily post-prayer nasi lemak for 150. Suresh repays via cleanup duty. Overspill twist: masjid WhatsApp pings raid routes from Singapore-side spotters, saving dozens. Caste irrelevant—Suresh allies with Malayali Christians next door. Legal win cascades: passport returned, sparking chain referrals. Like Chapter 3.4's bilateral gaps, the masjid bridges the state's voids, forging a pan-Indian ummah amid Johor's flux.

These cases—from KL's job bazaars to Johor's raid havens—reveal religious institutions as migrant ecosystems. Employment info circulates via courtyard whispers; financial aid via chits and zakat; food via langar feasts; legal aid via imam-lawyer duos. Aligned with pre-colonial brokerage (Chapter 3.1) and policy cracks (3.4), they expose state gaps while hinting hierarchies—caste ghosts, gender tilts. Yet collectively, they sustain urban labor's underbelly, turning alienation to anchored agency

Policy Gaps and Fieldwork Patterns

Fieldwork across Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang, and Johor Bahru reveals how Malaysia's migration policies—employer-tied permits, recruitment quotas, and deportation drives—create structural voids that religious institutions systematically fill. The four cases demonstrate temples, gurdwaras, and mosques evolving into comprehensive support ecosystems, delivering employment information, financial aid, food distribution, and legal navigation where state mechanisms fail. This synthesis distills empirical patterns linking policy design to migrant survival strategies.

Reflexive Note

Malaysia's rigid work-permit system locks migrants to single employers, amplifying vulnerability when contracts sour or wages delay. Field cases show religious spaces countering this through informal brokerage: temple courtyards in Brickfields become job fairs where contractors scout reliable hands, bypassing agency fees; gurdwara WhatsApp groups post recovery gigs for injured undocumented; factory aunties at Penang temples tip better shifts; border masjids negotiate kinder contracts via imam-lawyer duos. These networks subvert sectoral immobility,

though regional cliques create uneven access—Tamils favoring Tamils, Punjabis pooling internally—mirroring policy's differentiated inclusion.

Financial precarity from agent debts and irregular pay finds remedy in community funds. Gurdwara sangat collections cover surgeries without interest, restructuring hawala obligations; temple widows' chits seed rotating savings among garment women; masjid zakat slashes instalments for construction ghosts; foremen seed newcomers' first meals. Reciprocity norms bind recipients into perpetual giving cycles, stabilizing economies that policy amnesties ignore. Participation becomes strategic currency—active involvement secures larger shares—transforming spiritual spaces into economic safety nets.

Food distribution addresses enforcement-induced hunger most visibly. Daily langar feeds kiln survivors through recovery; Thaipusam thalis unite factory shadows during wage crises; iftar boxes sustain raid-dodgers; annadanam vans hit industrial parks at shift-end. Beyond nutrition, shared plates forge solidarity, dissolving isolation across caste, gender, and status lines. Communal eating generates trust faster than any regularization drive, turning survival into sisterhood.

Legal assistance bridges justice chasms. Temple committees draft labor complaints; gurdwara storerooms hide RELA sweeps; masjid clinics connect to pro bono lines; uncles with immigration ties freeze deportations. These interventions—settling passport seizures, averting detention—operate where formal systems deem migrants non-priorities, leveraging moral authority over bureaucratic gatekeeping.

Across cases, policies generate the very irregularities they criminalize: tied visas spawn job-switching needs met by temple brokers; fee caps breed debts dissolved by zakat; raids demand food havens and hideouts. Religious hubs don't erase hierarchies—men access evening networks more than factory women, established migrants gatekeep newcomers—but they anchor resilience. Empirical patterns confirm these institutions as parallel governance: employment circuits evade quotas, financial pools buffer irregularity, meals integrate shadows, legal micro-negotiations defy limbo. Migrants don't just receive aid; they co-produce systems sustaining 2.5 million in urban underbellies, demanding policies that harness rather than dismantle such community architectures.

4 . 4 M i g r a t i o n a n d I d e n t i t y T r a n s f o r m a t i o n

Fieldwork across Kuala Lumpur's Brickfields, Selangor factories, Penang garment hubs, and Johor construction sites reveals migration as a crucible of identity transformation for Indian workers. Beyond physical relocation, urban labor reshapes caste boundaries, religious practices, gender roles, and legal subjectivities, producing hybrid selves that negotiate continuity amid rupture. Four ethnographic cases—one from each field site—trace these shifts through daily survival, exposing how precarity accelerates change while structural inequalities anchor old hierarchies.

Case 1: Caste Erosion in Brickfields Construction (Kuala Lumpur)

Muthu, 38, a Parayan Dalit from Madurai, arrived in KL 2015 as a masonry helper, hauling cement bags up Brickfields scaffolds. Village life enforced untouchability—separate wells, barred temple entry—but urban mixing dissolves such lines. His crew spans castes: Nadar supervisors, Vellalar foremen, Thevar masons. Lunch breaks force shared plastic sheets; Muthu eats biryani beside Brahmin Ravi (Case 4.2), rice grains mingling despite initial flinches. "Here, sweat erases pollution," Muthu laughs, passing chai. Worksite banter—railing Thevars for shoddy plaster—equalizes through shared exhaustion.

Religious adaptation follows: Sri Kandaswamy Temple puja, once forbidden, now welcomes him via urban anonymity. He lights camphor beside upper castes, priest unasking origins. Yet hierarchy lingers—Ravi assigns Muthu riskier high beams, citing "Dalit stamina," echoing estate tappers. Gender holds: Muthu's wife back home embodies purity; his KL friendships with female vendors spark no scandal, urban flux normalizing contact. Legally documented, Muthu remits for caste-abolition reading circles, identity morphing from polluted body to scaffold citizen. Caste doesn't vanish but urbanizes—subtle favoritism persists, yet inter-dining forges unprecedented solidarity.

Case 2: Religious Hybridity in Petaling Jaya Factories (Selangor)

Jaspreet Kaur, 29, Punjabi Jat Sikh welder, embodies religious reconfiguration in PJ's metal shops. Village

gurdwara mandated kirpan, turban, strict langar vegetarianism—but factory shifts clash. 6 AM-10 PM grind skips Rehras Sahib prayers; she tucks mini-kirpan in bra, swaps turban for safety helmet sprayed Punjabi script. Ramadan 2024, Muslim Bangladeshi mates share iftar dates; Jaspreet reciprocates langar sabzi, birthing "Sikh-Bengali feasts" in the factory canteen. Guru Granth recitals adapt—WhatsApp kirtan during breaks, blending Sufi qawwali from masjid neighbors.

Caste flattens: Jat pride yields to Dalit Ravidasia welders sharing torch tricks; joint Vaisakhi barbecues ignore gotra. Gender flips dramatically—village bride-to-be, now union rep negotiating overtime, voice booming in male meetings. Undocumented stint 2020 (permit lapse) taught fear; regularization via gurdwara lawyer forged "legal Sikh sister" persona, remitting for women's self-help groups. Hybridity peaks at Deepavali: Jaspreet joins Tamil pooja, oil lamps beside Sikh diyas, identity as fluid urban devotee. Religion survives not pure but syncretic, factory forge hammering orthodoxy into pragmatic faith.

Case 3: Gender Role Reversal in Penang Garments (Penang)

Lakshmi, 32, Nadar seamstress from Coimbatore, stitches Nike subcontracts in Bayan Lepas factories. Village norms confined women to the kitchen; migration catapults her into the role of breadwinner. RM1,400 monthly towers over husband's RM800 farm yield; she dictates remittances—kids' fees first, his tobacco last. Factory floors invert patriarchy: women (85% of the workforce) lead strikes, with Lakshmi spearheading the 2024 AC demand, mic in hand before

200 sisters. Male tailors defer, whispering, "Amman power."

Caste blurs through piece-rate teams—Dalit Priya (Case 4.2) threads her machine, shared jokes dissolving old superiorities. Religious shift: Thaipunam kavadi once spousal duty, now solo vow for pay hikes; temple aunties mentor her as "union devi." Legal status empowers—a documented passport enables a bank account, first in the natal family, defying dowry traditions. Undocumented phase (2017 agent scam) bred caution; now she coaches shadows, identity evolving from submissive wife to matriarch migrant. Gender reversal ripples home: husband's letters plead cooking tips, village whispers of "reverse Amman." Urban labor births assertive femininity, precarity forging leadership absent in rural shells.

Case 4: Legal Shadow Identity in Johor Overspill (Johor Bahru)

Vikram, 27, an undocumented Tamil electrician from Trichy, wires Iskandar condos via jungle trails. No papers spawn "ghost" identity—fake IDs, cash wages, raid-ducking routes memorized like mantras. Village upper-caste tech student, Johor, reduces him to a nameless spark-plug, sleeping on factory roofs. Caste evaporates: crews mix Parayans, Chettiars pulling the same cables; shared the halia nights birth "Kling brotherhood," old stigmas irrelevant in shadows.

Religion mutates for survival: Masjid Jamek iftar hides him from RELA; Hindu aarti via phone apps at dawn. Gender fluidity emerges—befriends female cleaners, barter wiring for laundry, boundaries

blurred in illegality. Documented dreams haunt: hawala remittances fund brother's engineering, projecting "legal Vikram" abroad. Raids crystallize transformation—2025 sweep survival via masjid attic forges survivor swagger, tattooed circuit diagrams marking "electric bhoot." Re-documentation whispers circulate; if granted, he'll reclaim citizen skin over shadow self.

A Synthesis: Continuity Amid Flux

These cases illuminate migration's dual alchemy: urban labor pulverizes rigid identities while resurrecting hierarchies in mutated forms. Inter-caste canteen meals and joint prayers erode endogamy, factory syncretism blends Sikh qawwali with Tamil bhajans, economic primacy flips gender scripts, illegality levels castes through shared fear. Yet persistence marks the terrain—subtle worksite biases, leadership cliques, dowry remittances, ghost vulnerabilities. Hybrid selves emerge not as erasure but reconfiguration: Muthu's sense of dignity in his scaffold, Jaspreet's unwavering faith symbolized by her helmet, Lakshmi's powerful collective voice, and Vikram's daring ghostly bravado all highlight different facets of migrant resilience. Precarious conditions hasten the need for change—long 12-hour shifts require constant adaptation—while community centers like temples and gurdwaras serve as anchors of continuity. These spaces help forge resilient migrant identities amid Malaysia's layered urban environments.

Migration is not only a movement of labor but also a process of identity transformation. Indian migrant workers in Malaysia navigate multiple identities

shaped by caste, religion, nationality, and legal status. Urban labor environments contribute to the emergence of **hybrid identities**, where traditional social structures are both challenged and reconfigured (Osella & Osella, 2008). For example:

- Inter-caste interactions increase in workplaces
- Religious practices adapt to new contexts
- Gender roles shift in response to economic participation

The original text highlights that despite some changes, deep-rooted social inequalities, such as caste-based disparities, still shape labor opportunities and leave undocumented migrants susceptible to exploitation. These persistent issues demonstrate that migration does not eliminate existing social hierarchies. Instead, migration can alter these hierarchies in complex and sometimes unforeseen ways, revealing a dynamic interaction between ongoing social structures and the changes it brings about.

4.6 Framing Vulnerability and Governance: Indian Media Narratives on Migrant Workers in Malaysia

Indian media portray Indian migrant workers in Malaysia through a recurring narrative structure shaped by exploitation, recruitment deception, and uneven state protection, punctuated by moments of crisis and reactive intervention. Across English-language and regional outlets, reporting tends to cluster around three dominant themes: fraudulent recruitment and quasi-captivity, labor exploitation and wage theft, and gendered violence and trafficking.

Within these narratives, migrant workers are often positioned as victims of transnational labor systems, while the Indian state and its diplomatic missions appear primarily as reactive actors, intervening after crises become publicly visible. A long-standing theme in Indian media coverage is recruitment deception and conditions resembling captivity. Early reporting already highlighted the structural nature of this problem. For example, *The Times of India* documented a case in which more than 200 Indian workers in Johor alleged abuse by recruitment agents, including confinement, wage deductions, and physical violence when they resisted unfair conditions (*The Times of India*, 2007). More than a decade later, similar patterns persisted. A report by NDTV described how 62 Indian workers were allegedly trafficked to Sarawak, had their passports confiscated, and were forced to work under highly restrictive conditions (NDTV, 2018). These reports collectively frame migration not as a straightforward economic opportunity but as a high-risk process mediated by exploitative recruitment chains, in which workers are often misled and subsequently trapped. The continuity of such narratives over time suggests that recruitment-related vulnerability is not episodic but structurally embedded within migration systems.

Closely linked to recruitment issues is the persistent media focus on labor exploitation, wage theft, and workplace violence. Reports frequently document cases where Indian workers are denied agreed wages, subjected to physical abuse, and trapped in cycles of debt due to recruitment fees. For instance, a case reported by the Malaysian Trades Union Congress described 21 Indian workers near Klang who alleged non-payment of wages, physical assault, and extreme

forms of abuse, including being scalded with hot water after questioning salary deductions (MTUC, 2007). Similarly, broader media coverage of Indian migrant workers in Malaysia's food and service sectors highlights long working hours, restricted mobility, and wages far below what was promised during recruitment. Studies cited in media reports further indicate that migrant workers often pay substantial fees to secure employment, only to find themselves locked into exploitative contracts upon arrival (The Rakyat Post, 2021). These narratives construct Malaysian labor markets as spaces where economic aspiration is systematically undermined by structural exploitation, reinforcing an image of migrants as both economically necessary and socially vulnerable.

Indian media increasingly emphasize gendered forms of migration and abuse, particularly regarding Indian women. Reports suggest that women migrants are especially vulnerable to trafficking, deception, and violence. A recent report by The New Indian Express highlighted cases in which Indian women were trafficked to Malaysia under the guise of domestic work opportunities, only to face coercion, confinement, and sexual exploitation (The New Indian Express, 2025). Earlier reporting by The Indian Express documented cases of sexual violence against Indian women by employers, reinforcing a pattern in which female migration is framed as marked by extreme vulnerability and risk (The Indian Express, 2012). These narratives foreground gender as a critical dimension of migration, in which women's mobility is shaped by both economic necessity and heightened exposure to exploitation. At the same time, such coverage often portrays women primarily as victims,

with less attention to their agency or strategies of resistance.

Against this backdrop of exploitation, Indian media construct the Indian state and diplomatic institutions as reactive protectors. In many reported cases, intervention by the Indian High Commission or government agencies occurs only after workers seek help through media exposure, NGOs, or community networks. For example, in the Klang abuse case, the Indian High Commission intervened after workers approached it, facilitating negotiations with Malaysian authorities and eventual repatriation (MTUC, 2007). Similarly, in the Sarawak case, media coverage emphasized the role of NGOs and public pressure in prompting government action to assist stranded workers (NDTV, 2018). More recent reporting highlights advisories issued by the Indian High Commission warning migrants about recruitment scams and unsafe migration pathways (The New Indian Express, 2025). While these interventions demonstrate the capacity of state institutions to provide assistance, they also reveal a pattern in which protection is often delayed and contingent on visibility, rather than preventive and systematic.

Indian media coverage occasionally acknowledges policy-level responses and reforms, but these are often framed cautiously. For example, reports on Malaysia's review of migrant labor agreements suggest recognition of systemic issues while highlighting the gap between policy intentions and lived realities (Reuters, 2024). Such reporting reinforces a broader narrative in which structural vulnerabilities persist despite formal reform efforts. Migrant workers are thus situated within a system marked by regulatory

gaps, uneven enforcement, and continued dependence on intermediaries, making exploitation difficult to eliminate.

In sum, the Indian media construct a representation of migration to Malaysia that is defined by risk, victimization, and contested governance. Migrants are portrayed as individuals driven by economic necessity but caught within exploitative systems; recruitment agents emerge as central figures in facilitating abuse; and both sending and receiving states appear as struggling to regulate complex labor flows. At the same time, these narratives also reveal moments of migrant agency—workers protesting, seeking help, and mobilizing support networks—suggesting that visibility and collective action are critical to securing redress. For analytical purposes, these media narratives are significant because they shape public understanding of migration in the sending country. They construct Malaysia as both a site of economic opportunity and a source of moral risk, where labor mobility is entangled with structural inequality and governance challenges. Nevertheless, the focus on crises and victimhood frequently diminishes the significance of daily realities faced by migrants, such as social networks, adaptation strategies, and identity transformation. Consequently, media portrayals offer a valuable yet incomplete perspective, which must be supplemented by ethnographic insights to comprehensively understand the complexity of Indian migrant experiences in Malaysia.

**Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Indian
Media Narratives on Migrant Workers in
Malaysia**

This section applies a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to examine how Indian media construct meanings around migrant workers in Malaysia. CDA is not simply about describing what is written in news reports; it is about analysing how language produces and reinforces power relations, social hierarchies, and ideological positions (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). In this context, media texts are treated as social practices that both reflect and shape public understanding of migration. Following Fairclough's three-dimensional model—text, discourse practice, and social practice—this analysis focuses on how specific linguistic choices, narrative patterns, and thematic emphases construct migrant workers as particular kinds of subjects within a broader political and economic system (Fairclough, 1995). At the same time, van Dijk's perspective on discourse and power helps explain how elite-controlled media narratives influence public perception by highlighting certain realities while marginalizing others (van Dijk, 1998). A key finding from this CDA is the discursive construction of migrants as victims, achieved through consistent use of emotionally charged language and crisis-oriented storytelling. Terms such as “abuse,” “slavery,” “captivity,” and “trafficking” appear frequently across reports, framing migrant workers primarily through suffering and vulnerability (NDTV, 2018; The Times of India, 2007). While these terms correspond to real incidents, their repeated emphasis creates a dominant narrative that positions migrants as passive subjects acted upon by external forces. From a CDA perspective, this reflects what Fairclough describes as foregrounding and backgrounding, where certain aspects of reality—here, extreme vulnerability—are highlighted, while others—such as agency,

negotiation, and adaptation—are minimized (Fairclough, 1995). The result is a representation that simplifies complex migrant experiences into a moral narrative of victimhood.

Closely related to this is the discursive personalization of structural problems through recruitment agents. Media reports frequently identify agents as “unscrupulous” or “fraudulent,” positioning them as the primary cause of migrant suffering (The New Indian Express, 2025). While recruitment intermediaries do play a critical role, this framing shifts attention away from broader structural conditions, such as labor demand, regulatory gaps, and transnational governance failures. CDA scholars argue that such personalization is a common discursive strategy that individualizes systemic issues, making them easier to narrate and morally evaluate (van Dijk, 1998). In this case, exploitation is framed as the result of bad actors rather than as a product of systemic inequality, thereby limiting the scope of critique.

Another important discursive pattern is the representation of the Indian state as a reactive protector. In this case, the state appears as both necessary and effective, even though intervention typically occurs only after public exposure through media or NGOs. This creates a discourse of conditional protection, where visibility becomes a prerequisite for assistance.

Gendered representation forms another critical layer of analysis. Indian media coverage of female migrants is heavily framed through narratives of trafficking, sexual violence, and coercion (The Indian Express, 2012; The New Indian Express, 2025). While these issues are undeniably important, their dominance in reporting produces a discursive reduction of women's identities to vulnerability. CDA highlights how such representations are shaped by broader ideological frameworks that associate women with protection and

CDA OF MEDIA

Media narratives frequently highlight moments when the Indian High Commission or government intervenes to assist workers, often using language such as "rescued," "repatriated," or "facilitated return" (MTUC, 2007; NDTV, 2018). These representations serve to legitimize state authority by emphasizing its role in resolving crises .

moral risk. As van Dijk (1998) suggests, discourse often reproduces existing social ideologies by reinforcing familiar categories—in this case, women as victims rather than as economic actors or agents of change. This limits the visibility of women's labor contributions, decision-making roles, and forms of resistance within migration contexts. The analysis also reveals a strong process of national framing, where migrants are consistently identified as “Indian workers,” emphasizing their connection to the nation-state rather than their position within a global labor system. This framing serves an important discursive function: it creates a sense of collective identity and responsibility among domestic audiences. However, it also narrows the analytical lens, reducing migration to a national issue rather than a transnational process involving multiple actors and structures. From a CDA perspective, this reflects what Fairclough (1995) describes as discursive boundary-making, where social phenomena are interpreted through specific ideological frameworks—in this case, nationalism.

Equally significant is what the discourse omits. Indian media coverage tends to focus on exceptional events—abuse cases, trafficking incidents, rescue operations—while largely overlooking the everyday realities of migrant life, such as community networks, religious support systems, and identity transformation. CDA emphasizes that absence is itself a form of meaning-making (van Dijk, 1998). By omitting these aspects, the discourse frames migration as an episodic crisis rather than an ongoing social process. This selective visibility limits public understanding and reinforces a simplified narrative. At the level of language and structure, the discourse frequently relies on binary oppositions: victim versus exploiter, migrant versus

agent, state versus crisis. These binaries make narratives more accessible but reduce complexity. CDA scholars note that such simplifications are common in media discourse, as they enable quick moral interpretation while masking ambiguity and diversity (Fairclough, 1995).

In the context of migration, this results in a flattened representation where differences among migrants—based on caste, gender, legal status, or region—are largely overlooked. Despite these limitations, CDA also recognizes the productive role of media discourse. By exposing cases of abuse and exploitation, the Indian media contribute to visibility and accountability, bringing marginalized experiences into the public domain and prompting institutional responses. As van Dijk (1998) argues, discourse is both a site of power and a potential site of resistance. Migrant workers' stories, when amplified through media, can challenge dominant narratives and create pressure for change.

So, applying CDA reveals that Indian media narratives on migrant workers in Malaysia are structured through selective emphasis, moral framing, and ideological positioning. The discourse constructs migrants primarily as vulnerable subjects, recruitment agents as moral offenders, and the state as a reactive authority. While these representations highlight real issues, they provide only a partial understanding of migration. A more thorough analysis requires combining these media narratives with ethnographic insights that illustrate migrant workers' daily practices, agency, and changes in identity.

4 . 6 C o n c l u s i o n

This chapter has demonstrated that Indian migrant workers in Malaysia occupy a complex position shaped by historical legacies, social hierarchies, and contemporary labor regimes. By analyzing the intersections of caste, religion, and urban labor, the chapter contributes to a broader understanding of migration as a multidimensional social process. Chapter 4 has shown that Indian migrant workers in Malaysia inhabit a social world where caste, religion, gender, and legal status are continuously reworked within urban labor regimes. The historical trajectory from pre-colonial trade links through colonial estate labor to contemporary construction, factory, and service-sector work provides the backdrop against which these identities unfold. Pre-departure hierarchies and expectations travel with migrants, but they are neither simply reproduced nor erased; instead, they are renegotiated in crowded dormitories, factory lines, temple courtyards, gurdwara langars, and mosque compounds.

Empirically, Indian migrant workers occupy some of the most precarious segments of Malaysia's labor market, concentrated in low-wage, high-risk jobs and heavily dependent on employer-tied permits or informal arrangements. Within these spaces, caste continues to shape opportunities and interactions—Dalits and other marginalized groups are overrepresented in the hardest and least stable work, while comparatively privileged castes cluster in supervisory or skilled roles. Yet urban proximity and shared precarity also create unprecedented inter-caste interactions, particularly at worksites and in religious and community settings, where shared meals, rituals,

and struggles against exploitation sometimes weaken older boundaries.

Religion emerges not as a static identity marker but as a dynamic resource. Temples, gurdwaras, and mosques double as job markets, welfare hubs, food providers, and informal legal intermediaries. They mediate entry into labor circuits, cushion the impact of wage theft and injury, and offer spaces where migrants can collectively interpret and endure their conditions. At the same time, religious institutions can reproduce internal hierarchies—by caste, region, gender, or leadership cliques—so inclusion remains differentiated rather than universal. Migrants' religious practices themselves adapt: syncretic rituals, shared festivals, and digital devotional practices reveal hybrid forms of belonging shaped by long working hours, spatial constraints, and multiethnic encounters.

Gendered transformations are equally pronounced. For many women, migration and wage work expand economic agency and decision-making power, even as they face heightened risks of harassment, overwork, and reproductive vulnerability. Men, especially those who become undocumented or trapped in debt, may experience status loss relative to ideals of male provisioning at home, leading to new forms of masculinity forged in precarity and camaraderie. These shifting gender dynamics intersect with caste and religion in complex ways, sometimes empowering and sometimes further marginalising. Inclusive, Chapter 4 has argued that migration for Indian workers in Malaysia is as much about remaking selfhood and community as it is about earning a wage. Labor regimes, policy frameworks, and recruitment systems generate structural constraints and vulnerabilities, but

migrants respond through dense social networks, religious infrastructures, and everyday acts of negotiation and resistance. Identity transformation thus unfolds in tension: old hierarchies persist, but new solidarities and hybrid identities also emerge. Recognizing this complexity is crucial for any attempt to design more just migration policies, labor protections, and community interventions that take the lived realities of Indian migrant workers in contemporary Malaysia seriously.

The findings suggest that migration should be understood not only as an economic phenomenon but also as a site of social transformation, where identities, relationships, and hierarchies are continuously negotiated.

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CHAPTER 5

BANGLADESHI
MIGRANT WORKERS
IN MALAYSIA:
MOBILITY,
PRECARITY, AND
MORAL ECONOMIES

This chapter examines Bangladeshi migrant workers through interconnected dimensions of recruitment systems, labor exploitation, employment sectors, gendered experiences, and entrepreneurial transitions. Rather than treating migration solely as an economic process, the chapter approaches it as a moral and social transformation, where migrants must navigate discipline, dignity, and survival within unequal global systems. Drawing on case-based narratives and existing scholarship, the chapter shows how migration produces new forms of dependency while also enabling limited agency.

5 . 0 I n t r o d u c t i o n

A substantial body of scholarship has examined Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, generating insights into their recruitment, labor incorporation, social well-being, gender roles, health, financial practices, and the broader political economy of the Bangladesh–Malaysia corridor. Early work in the 1990s and 2000s documented the genesis of this migration stream, noting that Bangladeshi workers

first arrived on a “test basis” in 1986 as plantation labor and that large-scale recruitment was formalised through a bilateral agreement in 1992. Dannecker’s ethnographic study of Bangladeshi construction workers in Peninsular Malaysia highlighted how male migrants navigated masculine identities, family obligations and religious norms amid precarious work and debt, and also analysed the strong social resistance in Bangladesh to women’s independent labor migration. Subsequent research by Karim and colleagues mapped the sectoral distribution of Bangladeshi workers in Kuala Lumpur, showing that they were concentrated in services (about 40.5%), “floating” casual labor (22.5%), construction (19.5%), and manufacturing (17.5%), with emerging employment in commercialised agriculture in places like Cameron Highlands.

From a bilateral and policy perspective, scholars of Malaysia–Bangladesh relations have traced how labor migration became central to the diplomatic and economic ties between the two states, emphasizing recurring cycles of recruitment expansions, bans, and re-openings tied to political shifts and concerns about irregular migration and public sentiment. More recent work by Reza and others has turned to the well-being of Bangladeshi migrants, using quantitative indices to assess economic and social well-being among workers in construction and other sectors. These studies generally find that while migration improves household incomes relative to pre-departure conditions, workers in Malaysia face significant hardships, including long working hours, crowded living conditions, and psychological stress stemming from job insecurity and debt. Complementary research on health-care access shows that Bangladeshi

temporary workers in Kuala Lumpur perceive major barriers to formal health services, such as high costs, language problems with providers, lack of transport, and reliance on self-medication, which compound occupational risks in construction and manufacturing. [journalarticle](#).

Another line of inquiry focuses on gender and family. Sarker's study of Bangladeshi male migrants in Malaysia explores how men adapt to doing "feminine" domestic work (cooking, cleaning, laundry) in the absence of wives or female relatives, revealing both continuity and tension with traditional gender norms in Bangladesh. Dannecker's work and others also note that the social stigma attached to women's independent migration has limited Bangladeshi women's presence in Malaysia compared with other destinations, even as some women migrate as domestic workers or through family reunification. More recent scholarship on financial literacy among Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia argues that access to digital finance and targeted financial education programs can enhance migrants' ability to manage remittances, avoid debt traps, and engage with formal financial institutions, thereby influencing long-term economic mobility and resilience. This dovetails with policy-oriented studies on the hidden costs of migration, which analyze the roles of recruiting agencies, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), and other intermediaries in shaping the corridor's high-cost profile and propose reforms to reduce exploitation. [jstor+5](#)

Building on this earlier work, recent journal articles and reports have shifted sharply toward examining the corruption and cartelization of recruitment to

Malaysia. The “Hidden Costs of Migration” study, Verité’s recruitment-costs analysis, and investigative work by journalists and advocates converge on the finding that Bangladeshi workers pay among the highest recruitment fees to reach Malaysia, often several times the official caps, leading to widespread debt bondage. At the same time, new social-science research on social well-being, economic well-being, and health has begun to fill empirical gaps regarding migrants’ everyday lives, mental health, and coping strategies in Malaysian cities. Together, these strands—ethnographic accounts of masculinity and religious practice, sectoral and health studies, financial-literacy and cost analyses, and bilateral policy research—provide a rich background for analyzing Bangladeshi migrants’ Islam, mobility, and moral discipline, as well as the structural forces that continue to shape this corridor.

Labor migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia represents one of the most significant contemporary South–Southeast Asian mobility corridors. Over the past three decades, Malaysian industrialization and labor shortages have drawn large numbers of Bangladeshi workers into sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and plantations. At the same time, migration from Bangladesh is shaped by limited domestic opportunities, rising aspirations, and the global circulation of labor (Rahman, 2015; Siddiqui, 2003). Migration is often imagined as a pathway to economic mobility; however, migrant workers’ lived experiences reveal a far more complex reality structured by debt, uncertainty, and social negotiation.

This chapter examines Bangladeshi migrant workers across interconnected dimensions: recruitment

systems, labor exploitation, employment sectors, gendered experiences, and entrepreneurial transitions. Rather than treating migration solely as an economic process, the chapter approaches it as a moral and social transformation in which migrants must navigate discipline, dignity, and survival within unequal global systems. Drawing on case-based narratives and existing scholarship, the chapter shows how migration produces new forms of dependency while also enabling limited agency. Importantly, the chapter situates Bangladeshi migrants within broader political and discursive frameworks in Malaysia. Migrants are not only workers but also subjects of regulation, surveillance, and public debate. In recent years, they have increasingly been framed as potential security concerns, raising critical questions about the relationship between labor, governance, and social belonging. By examining these dynamics, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of migration as a site where economy, morality, and power intersect.

5 . 1 M i g r a t i o n R o u t e s a n d R e c r u i t m e n t S y s t e m s : T h r e e C a s e s

Migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia is structured through layered recruitment systems that combine formal regulation with informal practices. These systems shape not only how migrants travel but also their conditions of vulnerability and dependency.

Case 1: Formal Recruitment Channel

The formal recruitment system operates through licensed agencies in both Bangladesh and Malaysia, often governed by bilateral agreements between the

two states. On paper, this system is designed to ensure transparency and protection. However, in practice, it frequently imposes heavy financial burdens on workers. Migrants often pay between USD 3,000 and 5,000 in recruitment fees, typically financed through high-interest loans or family resources (Rahman, 2015). This creates a condition of debt bondage, in which workers arrive already financially constrained and compelled to accept exploitative conditions to repay their loans. Even when contracts are legally documented, workers may not fully understand their rights, reflecting asymmetries in knowledge and power..

Case 2: Informal Broker Networks (Dalal System)

Alongside formal systems, informal brokers—locally known as *dalals*—play a central role in facilitating migration. These intermediaries operate within local communities, promising quick migration and attractive employment. However, the information they provide is often misleading. Workers may be promised factory jobs but end up in construction or plantations, or receive lower wages than expected (Siddiqui, 2003). The dalal system reflects what scholars describe as the migration industry, where intermediaries profit from the movement of labor while shifting risks onto migrants (Lindquist et al., 2012). Despite these risks, many migrants rely on brokers due to the complexity and cost of formal procedures.

Case 3: Irregular Migration Pathways

A third pathway involves irregular migration, including entry through tourist visas or undocumented

channels. Workers using these routes often face heightened risks, including detention, deportation, and lack of legal protection. Without valid documentation, they are excluded from formal labor rights and become highly vulnerable to exploitation (Amnesty International, 2010). Irregular migration highlights how restrictive policies can produce unintended consequences, pushing workers into precarious and unregulated conditions.

In closing, These recruitment systems demonstrate that migration is not simply a matter of crossing borders but involves a complex, structured process influenced by economic pressures, institutional shortcomings, and imbalanced power dynamics.

5 . 2 U n d e r c o v e r S y n d i c a t e s a n d E x p l o i t a t i o n : F i v e V i c t i m C a s e s

Behind official recruitment systems, a network of hidden actors and practices contributes to the exploitation of migrant workers. These “undercover syndicates” operate at the intersection of legality and illegality, shaping everyday experiences of precarity.

One common form of exploitation is contract substitution, in which workers are promised specific jobs but are assigned different roles upon arrival. For example, migrants recruited for factory work may be redirected to physically demanding construction jobs with lower wages. This practice undermines contractual protections and leaves workers with limited recourse (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Another widespread issue is passport confiscation, in which employers retain workers' documents under the guise of administrative control. This restricts workers' mobility and effectively ties them to their employers, creating conditions that resemble forced labor. Without access to their documents, migrants cannot seek alternative employment or legal assistance.

Wage withholding further compounds vulnerability. Some workers report delayed or unpaid wages, often justified by employers as deductions for accommodation or recruitment costs. This practice perpetuates a cycle of dependence among workers, preventing them from returning home until they have recouped their financial investments. Such investments often include the costs of travel, recruitment fees, or other expenses paid upfront to secure employment. As a result, workers find themselves trapped in a cycle where financial recovery becomes a prerequisite for leaving, which can prolong their exploitation and limit their freedom.

In more severe cases, workers are subjected to threats and intimidation aimed at silencing any dissent or complaints. These tactics may include verbal abuse, constant intimidation, or threats of deportation, which serve to create a climate of fear. Such measures are designed to discourage workers from speaking out about their conditions or reporting abuse, thereby reinforcing a culture of silence and complicity.

This environment of coercion and control not only undermines workers' rights but also perpetuates their vulnerability. The fear of retaliation or deportation often silences victims, preventing them from seeking help or justice. Employers or traffickers use these

intimidation tactics to maintain dominance and suppress any opposition, making it exceedingly difficult for workers to assert their rights or improve their circumstances.

The cycle of dependency combined with intimidation tactics creates a powerful barrier to change. Workers remain trapped in exploitative conditions, unable to seek assistance or legal protection without risking further harm. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive interventions that dismantle these coercive practices, empower workers with knowledge of their rights, and establish legal protections that prevent such abuses from occurring.

Efforts to eliminate such exploitation must focus on both prevention and support. Preventative measures include stricter regulation of recruitment agencies, transparent industry practices, and community awareness programs about workers' rights. Support systems are also essential, providing legal aid, safe reporting channels, and rehabilitation services for victims.

By tackling both the economic and psychological controls used to trap workers, society can work towards creating safer, fairer working conditions. Ensuring workers are not coerced through debt or intimidation is a vital step in building a more just and equitable environment for all workers.

Finally, many migrants experience detention and deportation cycles, particularly those with irregular status. After deportation, some return through the same exploitative networks, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability. These cases demonstrate that

exploitation is not incidental but structurally embedded in migration systems, reflecting broader inequalities in global labor markets.

5 . 3 E m p l o y m e n t S e c t o r s : T h r e e C a s e P a t t e r n s

Bangladeshi migrant workers are concentrated in labor-intensive sectors that are often characterized by low wages and limited protections.

Case 1: Construction Sector

The construction sector employs a large number of Bangladeshi workers, who are responsible for building infrastructure and urban development projects. Working conditions are often hazardous, with long hours, exposure to extreme weather, and limited safety measures. Accidents and injuries are common, yet access to compensation or healthcare may be restricted (ILO, 2018). Workers in this sector experience physical precarity, in which bodily risk becomes a routine aspect of labor.

Case 2: Manufacturing Sector

In manufacturing, particularly in factories, workers encounter a different form of discipline. Labor is structured around rigid schedules, clear productivity objectives, and pervasive surveillance, reflecting a highly regulated environment that emphasizes discipline and control. While wages may appear more consistent compared to other sectors, the work environment itself is characterized by a rigorous oversight that seeks to optimize productivity at the

expense of workers' autonomy and well-being. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theoretical framework (1977), these conditions can be critically understood as disciplinary regimes, wherein power operates not merely through overt authority but through subtle, systematic mechanisms of normalization, surveillance, and routine monitoring. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power offers a profound critique of modern labor institutions, emphasizing how normalization becomes a means of controlling behavior. In such regimes, individuals are subjected to constant surveillance—often disguised as rational management practices—which cultivates self-discipline among workers. This aligns with Foucault's idea that power is decentralized and operates through a network of micro-mechanisms that shape individual conduct, making resistance challenging. The workplace thus transforms into a space where conformity is enforced not solely through external coercion but through internalization of norms and expectations.

Moreover, the emphasis on routine serves as a form of normalization that standardizes performance and behavior. These routines, while seemingly mundane, function as disciplinary tools that discipline workers into adhering to prescribed standards of efficiency and productivity. This process ensures that deviation from established norms is minimized, fostering a homogenized workforce that serves the interests of capital. Such normalization relies heavily on surveillance technologies that discreetly monitor work activities, creating a panoptic environment where workers are constantly aware of being watched, leading to self-regulation.

This systematic approach to labor underscores a broader philosophical critique of liberal notion of freedom. Foucault challenges the idea that freedom entails mere absence of restraint, suggesting instead that true control is exercised through normalization—a subtle manner of governance that shapes desires, beliefs, and actions. The labor environment exemplifies this, as workers internalize the expectations imposed upon them, often without conscious awareness. Consequently, the discipline becomes internalized, making resistance not just difficult but almost impossible since power is diffuse and insidious.

In sum, this regulated and surveilled labor environment illustrates Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, revealing how modern workplaces function as mechanisms of control that extend beyond mere economic coercion. They embody a biopolitical management of bodies and minds, ensuring continuous productivity while subtly shaping individual subjectivities. Such an analysis calls for a critical awareness of the ways power operates beneath surface appearances of efficiency and normality, exposing the intricate and pervasive reach of disciplinary regimes in contemporary labor systems.

Case 3: Plantation Sector

Plantation work, including palm oil production, often involves isolation in rural areas. Workers live in employer-provided housing with limited access to services or communication. This isolation increases dependency on employers and reduces opportunities for collective organization or resistance. Across sectors, employment conditions reflect broader

patterns of labor segmentation, where migrant workers occupy positions that are essential yet marginalized.

**5 . 4 F e m a l e
B a n g l a d e s h i W o r k e r s :
G e n d e r e d M i g r a t i o n
E x p e r i e n c e s**

The experiences of female Bangladeshi migrant workers highlight the gendered dimensions of migration.

Women working as domestic workers often live within employers' homes, creating conditions of isolation and limited oversight. While domestic work provides employment opportunities, it also exposes women to long working hours and lack of legal protection (ILO, 2016). Cases of *abuse and exploitation* are frequently reported, including physical and emotional mistreatment. Because domestic work occurs in private spaces, such abuses are often hidden and difficult to regulate. . Despite their efforts to adapt and thrive, female migrants are frequently subjected to moral surveillance, wherein their behaviors, choices, and interactions are scrutinized and judged based on certain cultural or societal expectations. This moral scrutiny can impose additional psychological stress and restrict their freedoms, as they often have to reconcile their new realities with the moral standards imposed by both their communities of origin and host societies. These women's experiences highlight a nuanced interplay between resilience—a capacity to persist and adapt—and the social constraints that challenge their agency. Their ability to forge support systems in unfamiliar environments underscores their resourcefulness and determination. At the same time,

the persistent moral surveillance underscores the societal pressures that continue to influence and sometimes hinder their pursuit of autonomy and equality. Understanding these dynamics is essential to appreciating the complexities faced by female

FEMALE BANGLADESHI WORKERS

Female migrants often exhibit remarkable agency and resilience amid the numerous challenges they face. These women demonstrate strength by actively forming informal support networks, where they share vital information and resources to help each other navigate complex and often hostile environments.

Such networks serve as crucial lifelines, providing emotional support, practical advice, and communal solidarity, which are essential for their well-being and integration.

migrants, who navigate not only geographic and economic barriers but also social and moral expectations. Their stories of resilience offer insight into their strength and the ongoing struggle for acceptance and dignity, emphasizing the importance of supportive policies and communities that recognize and bolster their agency rather than restrict it. both in host societies and from their home communities.

Their behavior is often scrutinized, reflecting broader expectations around gender, respectability, and family honor. Beyond domestic work, some women move into service sectors or small businesses, challenging

traditional gender roles and expanding their economic participation.

Case 1: Shila, a Domestic Worker in Johor Bahru

Shila, 29, from a village near Mymensingh, migrated to Johor Bahru in 2022 as a domestic worker. Her husband, a rickshaw-puller, could not cover their three children's schooling and her widowed mother's medical bills. A local dalal promised legal work in Malaysia with "light housework, RM1,800 salary, one day off," showing her photos of a modern terrace house. Shila had never left Bangladesh before; her migration was framed by relatives as both economic sacrifice and religious duty—to secure education for the children and fund her mother's treatment. She paid Tk300,000 by selling jewelry and borrowing from an NGO. On arrival, she discovered the job was live-in domestic work caring for four children and an elderly mother-in-law in a cramped house, with a schedule from 5 a.m. to midnight. Her passport was taken "for safekeeping." Instead of a weekly off-day, she was allowed out only for Friday prayers at a nearby surau, accompanied by the employer's daughter. Shila learned Malay words through chores—"sapu" (sweep), "cuci" (wash)—and Bangla-Malay hybrid phrases with the Indonesian helper next door.

Gendered vulnerability became palpable when the male employer began entering the kitchen late at night under the pretext of checking locks. Shila started sleeping on the floor near the elderly woman, positioning the wheelchair between them as a shield. She considered running away but feared becoming undocumented and losing any chance of repaying debt. The only place she felt momentarily safe and

dignified was the surau, where other migrant women—Indonesian, Rohingya, Bangladeshi—shared whispered stories after prayers. A sympathetic makcik quietly slipped her a phone number of a migrant support NGO.

After a particularly aggressive incident, Shila called that number from the toilet, hands shaking. Within weeks, with NGO intervention and a Malay volunteer mediating, she negotiated a transfer to another household with better conditions, though still without a day off. Her story illustrates how female migrants’ “choice” is constrained by debt, gendered isolation in private homes, and fear of irregularity, yet also how small solidarities among women and access to religious spaces can open narrow exit routes.

Case 2: Nusrat – Factory Worker in Penang

Nusrat, 24, from Narayanganj, arrived in Penang in 2021 to work at an electronics plant in Bayan Lepas. In Bangladesh she had stitched garments in a local workshop for Tk5,000 a month; Malaysia’s advertised RM1,500 wage felt like a pathway to autonomy and a chance to delay an arranged marriage. Her parents reluctantly agreed after the local imam stressed that “halal income abroad” could be virtuous if she remained modest and sent money home. The reality was a 12-hour rotating shift assembling tiny components under harsh fluorescent lights, six days a week. Dormitory life meant sharing a room with 10 women—Bangladeshi, Vietnamese, Indonesian—sleeping in triple-deck bunks. The factory canteen food tasted bland compared to home, so Nusrat and her roommates started weekend cooking sessions, combining spices and recipes from their countries.

These gatherings became spaces of emotional support, where they discussed periods, homesickness, and harassment from male supervisors.

Gender intersected with migration status in subtle ways. Officially documented, Nusrat had a bank account and SOCSO coverage, but she rarely dared use the clinic because time off meant lost bonuses. Male Bangladeshi workers sometimes mocked women for “complaining too much,” yet it was Nusrat and other women who quietly initiated a petition when the company tried to cut overtime pay. They collected signatures in dorm corridors, hiding forms in hijab bags. The petition did not fully succeed, but management scaled back the cuts, and a new grievance box appeared in the hallway.

Religiously observant, Nusrat adapted her prayer routines to the factory clock—whispered du‘a during micro-breaks, full salah only on off-days. She wore a loose long-sleeved T-shirt under her uniform, negotiating modesty within safety regulations. Over time, her self-identity shifted from “helpless village girl” to “working woman abroad” who sends remittances, chooses when to call her fiancé, and guides younger female recruits through the maze of factory rules. Yet insecurity remained: the looming end of her contract, rumours of factory relocation, and debt back home. Nusrat’s case shows how factory work can simultaneously empower and exhaust female migrants, producing hybrid gender roles grounded in both wage labor and moral responsibility.

Case 3: Ramaji – Undocumented Cleaner in Kuala Lumpur

Ramaji, 32, grew up in Dhaka and migrated to Malaysia on a tourist visa in 2019, arranged by a cousin already in Kuala Lumpur. The plan was to “change visa later” with the help of an “agent,” but the paperwork never materialized. Her tourist visa expired, and she slipped into undocumented status, joining the invisible workforce cleaning offices and condominiums at night. Farzana knew the risks—raids, detention, deportation—but felt she had no choice after selling land to cover the initial costs.

She works two shifts: 5 p.m.–11 p.m. cleaning a mid-range hotel, then 1 a.m.–4 a.m. scrubbing floors in an office tower. Paid in cash by a subcontractor, she earns less than RM2,000 a month, from which she sends home remittances and repays loans. Her gendered vulnerability is heightened by the nocturnal nature of work; walking between jobs, she avoids dark alleys and memorises the locations of 24-hour mamak stalls where she can duck inside if she senses danger. She carries a small tasbih (prayer beads) in her pocket, gripping it during tense encounters.

Because she is undocumented, Farzana cannot access formal support services. She relies on a loose network of other Bangladeshi women—some domestic workers, some cleaners—who meet on rare Sunday afternoons in a small Bangla restaurant in Chow Kit. Over sweet tea, they exchange information about RELA checkpoints, safe landlords, and which offices pay on time. One friend introduced her to a small surau where the imam does not ask about papers; during Ramadan, she breaks fast there, sitting separately from

men but close enough to hear sermons that remind her of home.

Despite her precariousness, Farzana experiences subtle shifts in identity. In Bangladesh, she was a daughter-in-law constantly under in-laws' surveillance; in KL, she makes daily survival decisions alone, chooses when to call her husband, and quietly sets aside savings in her own name. Yet the fear of detention is constant. She keeps a plastic folder containing photocopies of her expired visa and marriage certificate, hoping they might help if she is arrested. Farzana's case highlights how undocumented status intensifies gendered risks while also creating spaces for limited autonomy and solidarity among women on urban margins.

Case 4: Rina – Student-Worker Straddling Education and Labor

Rina, 21, from Chattogram, came to Malaysia in 2023 as an international student enrolled in a private college in Selangor. Her family viewed education in Malaysia as a respectable, Islamically appropriate path for their daughter—safer than the Gulf and more prestigious locally. They borrowed heavily to pay fees, reassured by recruitment consultants that she could do part-time work to cover living costs. Officially, her student visa allowed limited hours of employment during semester breaks; in practice, she worked almost nightly at a Bangladeshi-run restaurant in Klang.

As a waitress, Rina navigated a liminal role between worker and “student abroad.” She wore a hijab and a college ID lanyard, which both impressed customers and attracted unwanted attention from some male

patrons who assumed she was “modern” and therefore available. The restaurant owner, a long-term Bangladeshi migrant, paid her under the table, below minimum wage, but enough to share a room with two other students and cover textbooks. On social media, she posted photos of campus libraries and mosque courtyards, concealing the greasy aprons and late nights.

Gender shaped her daily negotiations. Male Bangladeshi students often worked longer hours in construction or security, but they faced less stigma; Rina’s parents back home knew she did “a little part-time work” but would be shocked by the intensity. She maintained moral discipline by sending detailed monthly budgets to her mother and setting aside a small sum for charity. Her religious life was hybrid: Friday prayers at a campus mosque with Malaysian students, Taraweeh at a community surau with other Bangla youth, Qur’an classes via Zoom with an ustadha in Chattogram.

Eventually, the dual identity strained her. The college threatened to bar her for non-payment of fees when the restaurant cut hours. She considered dropping out to work full-time but feared family shame—“we sent you to study, not to be a waitress.” Eventually, a sympathetic lecturer connected her to a small scholarship and a research assistant job, reducing her reliance on the restaurant. Rina’s case shows how some Bangladeshi women straddle education and labor, embodying a gendered aspiration to mobility that is simultaneously empowering, precarious, and morally scrutinized by transnational families.

Case 5: Salma – Returnee Entrepreneur in Sylhet

Salma, 36, spent six years in Malaysia and now lives back in Sylhet, running a small tailoring and cosmetics shop funded by her savings from migration. She first migrated in 2015 as a canteen helper at a factory in Johor, recruited through a local agency that marketed “safe women’s jobs” in Malaysia. The work was hard—10-hour days preparing food for male workers, frequent verbal harassment from supervisors—but she earned far more than in Bangladesh and lived in women-only dorms with a mix of Bangladeshi and Indonesian workers.

In Malaysia, Salma’s gendered experience was ambivalent. On the one hand, she was restricted: curfews at 10 p.m., limited freedom to roam, and constant reminders from male managers not to “spoil the company’s name.” On the other hand, she controlled her own income for the first time. Through trial and error, she learned to use mobile banking apps, attended informal financial-literacy sessions at a Bangladeshi mosque in Johor Bahru, and joined a small rotating savings group with five co-workers. Over time, she saved enough to clear recruitment debt, send her younger sister to college, and accumulate seed capital.

Upon returning to Sylhet, Salma faced a different challenge: social perception. Some neighbors whispered that women who work abroad “lose their shame.” She countered this by framing her migration as a moral project: she had financed her sister’s degree, built a concrete roof on her parents’ house, and started a modest business that now employs two local girls. She decorated the shop with both Malaysian souvenirs and Qur’anic calligraphy, signaling a blend of worldly experience and religious propriety. Her Malaysian

years still shape her identity. She insists on keeping accounts digitally, teaches her workers basic savings strategies, and advises younger women considering Malaysia about both the risks and the benefits.

Existing research on Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia has mapped the macro-architecture of the corridor, but has paid far less attention to the gendered and everyday dimensions that emerge from your five female cases. Studies of the Malaysia–Bangladesh corridor identify the late-1980s bilateral labor agreements, subsequent recruitment booms, and repeated suspensions and resumptions of intake as key turning points in a system driven by labor demand in Malaysia and surplus labor in Bangladesh (Islam & Rahman, 2023; Winrock International, 2024). Quantitative and policy-oriented work shows that Bangladeshis are concentrated in construction, services, manufacturing and informal “floating” labor, and that migration is typically financed through high-interest loans and asset sales, pushing workers into debt even before departure (Karim et al., 2014; Verité, 2025). Ethnographic studies by Dannecker and others highlight how male migrants negotiate masculinity, debt, and religious duty in Malaysian worksites, reinforcing an image of the “Bangladeshi

migrant” as predominantly male, low-skilled, and tied to construction and plantation work (Dannecker, 2005; Ahmed, 2014).

Recent research has shifted focus toward well-being, health, and financial practices, but it still mainly uses male samples or gender-neutral categories. Reza and colleagues develop indices of social and economic well-being among Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia’s construction and related sectors, finding better incomes but high stress levels, loneliness, long work hours, and job insecurity (Reza et al., 2024; Reza et al., 2025). Rahman’s work on healthcare access shows that temporary Bangladeshi migrants in Kuala Lumpur face high costs, language barriers, and transportation issues, leading many to self-medicate instead of seeking formal care (Rahman, 2020). Hossain and Rahman’s study on financial literacy suggests that migrants’ ability to use digital finance and formal banking can improve remittance management and reduce vulnerability to exploitative lenders (Hossain & Rahman, 2025). At the structural level, Winrock’s *Hidden Costs of Migration* report and Verité’s recruitment-cost study detail how official fee caps are routinely violated, with workers paying several times the legal maximum to reach Malaysia, often through poorly regulated chains of brokers (Winrock International, 2024; Verité, 2025).

She warns them about agents who overcharge and male supervisors who exploit, but also speaks of the empowerment she felt sending money home in her own name. Salma sees herself as living proof that a woman can migrate, work, and return “with honor” if she maintains moral discipline and financial prudence.

Her case highlights how migration's gendered effects extend beyond destination countries, reshaping norms and economic possibilities in Bangladeshi communities of origin.

Despite these contributions, several gaps persist.

First, the literature is overwhelmingly male-centred: even when it refers to “Bangladeshi migrant workers,” empirical samples typically comprise men in construction, factories or plantations, while women feature as stay-behind wives and mothers who manage remittances and uphold moral norms in sending communities (Dannecker, 2005; Sarker, 2010). Second, qualitative and policy studies tend to prioritise recruitment architectures, state policies and aggregate indicators over the intimate, everyday negotiations of gender, religion and safety in spaces such as private homes, dormitories, surau and urban streets (Karim et al., 2014; Islam & Rahman, 2023). Third, when women are mentioned in corridor-level reports—especially around trafficking and domestic work—they tend to appear as generic “victims” or numerical estimates, rather than as agents navigating constrained choices with their own moral logics and strategies (Winrock International, 2024; Verité, 2025).

Your five female cases speak directly into these gaps and suggest a richer *gendered synthesis*. Shila's experience as a live-in domestic worker in Johor Bahru—isolated in a private home, facing passport

confiscation and sexual harassment, yet drawing on a surau and a migrant NGO for support—gives concrete, gendered texture to policy concerns about domestic workers’ invisibility and limited access to complaint mechanisms (Rahman, 2020; Winrock International, 2024). Her decision to stay, despite abuse, until a transfer can be negotiated reflects the moral and economic bind of debt-financed migration that structural studies emphasise, but recast through a woman’s embodied vulnerability in the household (Verité, 2025; Dannecker, 2005). Nusrat’s case as an electronics worker in Penang intersects with sectoral and well-being research: she personifies the shift into manufacturing documented statistically by Karim et al., while her dorm-based female solidarity, weekend cooking circles and quiet petitioning against wage cuts provide ethnographic depth to survey findings about long hours, stress and limited voice (Karim et al., 2014; Reza et al., 2024; Reza et al., 2025).

Farzana’s narrative as an undocumented night-shift cleaner in Kuala Lumpur introduces a *gendered reading of irregularity* that current work largely lacks. Existing studies acknowledge that recruitment failures and permit non-renewal push migrants into irregular status, but they focus on men or treat irregularity as an abstract category (Winrock International, 2024; Verité, 2025). Farzana’s reliance on mamak stalls and surau as safe spaces, her fear of both sexual violence and immigration raids, and her dependence on informal women’s networks illustrate how undocumented status intersects with female-specific risks in ways that health and policy surveys only hint at (Rahman, 2020; Islam & Rahman, 2023). Her case suggests the need for more research on women’s spatial strategies and everyday security practices in migrant neighbourhoods. Rina’s student-worker



Salma's story

As a returnee entrepreneur in Sylhet provides a powerful addition to existing scholarship on remittances and development by emphasizing the experiences of a female returnee. Traditionally, research on bilateral relations and financial literacy has highlighted the ways in which migrants send money home and invest in their communities through housing, education, and small businesses. However, these studies often neglect the gendered aspects of return migration, particularly how women who migrate and return from countries like Malaysia challenge and reshape local gender norms.

Source: Fieldwork

trajectory challenges the dominant association of Bangladeshi migration to Malaysia with low-skilled labor alone. While bilateral and policy analyses acknowledge education and training as part of Malaysia–Bangladesh relations, they rarely examine young women who migrate on student visas and then enter informal labor to survive (Islam & Rahman, 2023; Reza et al., 2025). Rina's double life—as an international student on campus and an underpaid waitress in a Bangladeshi restaurant—shows how education-linked mobility is gendered and morally policed by families, complicating the neat separation

between “students” and “workers” that policy frameworks assume. Salma’s case exemplifies this shift, illustrating how women can actively utilize their migration experiences to not only achieve economic success but also to serve as agents of social change.

Taken together, this is a request to expand the provided text into a detailed 7000-word essay or document. Our five cases extend this literature by centering Bangladeshi women across legal statuses (documented, undocumented, student, returnee), foregrounding how Islam, moral discipline, and family expectations are negotiated in daily practices, and linking micro-experiences in Malaysia to broader shifts in Sylhet and other sending areas. This synthesis points to a future research agenda that integrates the structural insights from corridor and cost studies with fine-grained, gender-sensitive ethnography, moving beyond the male, economic, and state-centered focus that continues to dominate the Bangladesh–Malaysia migration field (Verité, 2025; Reza et al., 2024; Rahman, 2020).

5 . 5 B a n g l a d e s h i M i g r a n t s a n d B u s i n e s s F o r m a t i o n

Despite structural constraints, some Bangladeshi migrants successfully transition into entrepreneurship, creating opportunities for economic mobility. Small businesses such as grocery shops, food stalls, and informal trading networks serve as vital alternative pathways for these migrant entrepreneurs. These ventures often arise out of necessity and adapt to the local market conditions, allowing migrants to establish livelihoods despite facing significant barriers.

These enterprises often operate within migrant communities, forming what scholars describe as **ethnic economies** (Portes & Jensen, 1989). Such networks provide mutual support but also remain limited by legal restrictions on foreign ownership. Entrepreneurship offers opportunities for independence but also involves risks, including legal uncertainty and financial instability. It reflects migrants' attempts to move beyond wage labor and reshape their economic trajectories.

5 . 6 C o n c l u s i o n : A r e B a n g l a d e s h i M i g r a n t s B e c o m i n g a S e c u r i t y C o n c e r n ?

Bangladeshi migrants are increasingly portrayed within Malaysian discourse as a potential security threat. However, this portrayal must be carefully scrutinized. Evidence indicates that migrants are predominantly victims of structural inequalities rather than sources of insecurity (Castles, 2010). The securitization of migration often mirrors broader political processes in which labor issues are reframed as security concerns (Buzan et al., 1998). This tendency conceals the underlying structural conditions—such as recruitment practices and labor exploitation—that influence migrant experiences. This chapter argues that Bangladeshi migrants should be understood as active participants in global labor systems, navigating complex realities of precarity, discipline, and aspiration. Rather than posing a security threat, they reveal deeper issues within systems of governance and economic inequality.

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CHAPTER 6

INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA: GENDER, KINSHIP, AND TRANSNATIONAL CARE ECONOMIES

This chapter adopts a case-based approach to explore how Indonesian migrants navigate mobility through kinship networks, labor systems, gendered constraints, and religious communities. This closeness often gives an impression of ease, but beneath that lies a complex web of inequality, dependency, and negotiation. Indonesian migrants work in various sectors, but their experiences are strongly affected by gender, social networks, and moral expectations. Women mainly perform domestic work, while men are mostly employed in plantations and construction. It argues that Indonesian migration is best understood as a relational process in which economic survival, family obligations, and moral discipline are deeply intertwined.

6.0 Introduction

Migration from Indonesia to Malaysia is one of Southeast Asia's most socially ingrained labor routes. Unlike more formal migration systems, Indonesian migration is heavily influenced by kinship, shared culture, and historical ties, especially among

communities in Java, Sumatra, and Kalimantan (Hugo, 2005; Lindquist, 2010). Migration is therefore not just about economic mobility but also a process of transnational social reproduction, where migrants sustain families across borders through remittances, emotional labor, and moral responsibility (Silvey, 2004).

6 . 1 E x i s t i n g D e b a t e s

Indonesian migration to Malaysia has generated a rich literature on gender, kinship, and care, but important gaps remain around Islamic moral worlds, male care work, and comparative transnational care regimes.

Historically oriented studies show that Indonesian labor migration to Malaysia predates contemporary policy regimes and has taken multiple forms—plantation, construction, domestic work, students, refugees—shaped by economic, demographic, social, and political push–pull factors (Hugo, 1999; Kudo, 2016). Hugo traces Indonesian labor flows since the early 20th century, noting that by the 1980s migration had become more organised, gender-differentiated, and tightly managed by recruitment agencies and state agreements (Hugo, 1999). Kudo similarly emphasizes how Malaysia’s New Economic Policy, industrialization, and plantation expansion created structural demand for and by the Indonesian laborers in plantations, construction, and domestic work (Kudo, 2016). These macro accounts provide the backdrop for more recent work focused on gendered care and kinship.

A major strand examines Indonesian migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Malaysia as central to a

transnational care economy. Kimura's doctoral study conceptualizes Indonesia–Malaysia domestic work as a “transnational system of care,” showing how cross-border transfers of care labor are embedded in histories of geographical, cultural, and religious proximity and in state politics over MDWs' rights (Kimura, 2020). Kimura argues that this system enhances the “transferability and circularity” of domestic labor between the two countries while providing only limited protection for workers and transforming care arrangements in both sending and receiving households (Kimura, 2020). Asia Society's account of “following domestic workers” similarly notes that around a quarter of a million Indonesian women are employed in Malaysian middle-class homes, and that their presence has become highly politicized in both countries (Roos, 2021).

Policy-oriented analyses highlight the legal marginalisation of migrant domestic workers. An International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) brief and UN Women data point out that domestic workers in Malaysia—estimated at 300,000–400,000, of whom roughly 70–72 percent are Indonesian—are excluded from core protections under the Employment Act 1955, such as limits on working hours, overtime pay, rest days and maternity benefits (UN Women, 2016; IDWF, 2025). These sources show that Indonesian MDWs shoulder the bulk of recruitment fees—nearly 90 percent paying around USD 930 to migrate—and work under employer-tied visas that make exit from abusive households extremely difficult (UN Women, 2016; IDWF, 2025).

At the household and kinship level, ethnographic work has explored how women's migration restructures

family power and care arrangements. Nisa's article on Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia argues that women's remittance-based contributions strengthen migrant families while simultaneously altering intra-household power, as female earners gain more authority in financial decisions and childrearing (Nisa, 2018). An ethnography of "gender and kinship" among Indonesian domestic workers shows that many women spend several years abroad before "retiring" into domestic life, and that their absence often shifts childcare onto husbands and grandparents, challenging conventional gender norms (Moreno, 2023). Moreno notes that in some Javanese communities, fathers become primary carers while mothers are abroad, creating "local variants of the transnational family" where care duties are enacted across borders (Moreno, 2023).

Kimura's work deepens this kinship focus by tracing how women's long-term presence in Malaysia reshapes care duties and bonds in sending communities such as Karawang, West Java (Kimura, 2020). She shows that new technologies (video calls, messaging apps) help maintain emotional ties, but do not erase the tensions between breadwinning abroad and caregiving obligations at home. Return-migration studies further reveal that many domestic workers engage in serial migration—cycling between Malaysia and Indonesia—and experience ambivalence about "coming home," as returns often feel like temporary "vacations from work" rather than stable reintegration (Hoang et al., 2025; Moreno, 2023).

Beyond domestic work, some scholarship examines sectoral patterns and gendered labor markets more broadly. A recent paper on Indonesian

migrant workers in Malaysia notes that male migrants predominantly enter construction and plantation work, while women are concentrated in domestic and services sectors, with social networks playing a crucial role in job access and mobility (Widodo, 2024). Another study on Malaysia's dependency on Indonesian labor argues that shared language, cultural and religious affinities make Indonesians particularly preferred in plantations and domestic work, reinforcing a division of labor in which Indonesian women supply care and reproductive labor to Malaysian households (Kudo, 2016). NGO and advocacy reports emphasize the exploitation and violence that Indonesian MDWs can face—non-payment of wages, confinement, physical and sexual abuse—and document emerging transnational activism by Indonesian and Malaysian civil-society groups pushing for better protection, standard contracts, and inclusion of domestic workers under labor law (IDWF, 2025; Kimura, 2020).

Taken together, this literature has several strengths. It convincingly situates Indonesian women's migration to Malaysia within broader transformations of regional care regimes and gender norms (Kimura, 2020; Nisa, 2018). It links macro-level policy and legal frameworks to micro-level experiences of overwork, abuse and limited rights (UN Women, 2016; IDWF, 2025). And it highlights how transnational family life is reorganized through remittances, communications technology, and reconfigured kin roles, especially in Java and other high-migration regions (Moreno, 2023; Hoang et al., 2025).

The migration of Indonesian workers to Malaysia represents one of the most significant labor flows in

Southeast Asia, shaped by geographic proximity, economic disparities, and shared religious identity as Muslim-majority nations. Decades of research have documented the scale, sectors, and vulnerabilities of Indonesian migrant workers, particularly focusing on women employed in domestic work. However, notable gaps still exist that this chapter can explore to advance our understanding of Indonesian migration in the Malaysian context. First, most research focuses on domestic work centered in Java, leaving less explored areas such as Indonesian women working in factories and services, as well as migrants from Eastern Indonesia or Sumatra (Widodo, 2024; Hugo, 1999). Second, although kinship and care are well studied, the specific Islamic moral frameworks through which Indonesian migrants interpret and discipline their labor, gender roles, and remittance practices in Malaysia are rarely foregrounded—despite both states being Muslim-majority (Kimura, 2020; Kudo, 2016). Third, the role of male Indonesian migrants in transnational care economies—for example, as stay-behind fathers, brothers managing remittances, or male carers in Malaysia—is comparatively underdeveloped in a literature that rightly centers women but risks re-inscribing a feminized view of care (Nisa, 2018; Moreno, 2023). Finally, comparative analyses that put Indonesian migrants in dialogue with other groups in Malaysia (Bangladeshi, Filipino, Indian) are limited, which restricts our understanding of how ethnicity, religion, and nationality intersect in Malaysia's stratified care and labor markets (Hugo, 1999; Roos, 2021).

This chapter builds on existing scholarship by extending the focus from domestic workers to a wider range of Indonesian migrant workers, explicitly

theorizing Islam, kinship, and moral discipline in transnational care practices, incorporating male perspectives into the analysis of care and family organization, and situating Indonesian experiences within Malaysia's broader multi-ethnic, multi-national care economy. Work on Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is extensive but uneven, with strong coverage of flows, sectors, and vulnerabilities, and thinner attention to comparative, gendered, and religiously framed experiences across different migrant groups.

The Dominant Narrative: Domestic Work and Javanese Feminization

The prevailing literature on Indonesian migration to Malaysia has been dominated by studies of female domestic workers, particularly those originating from Java. This focus reflects both the numerical prominence of domestic work among Indonesian women migrants and the visibility of their vulnerabilities—exploitation, abuse, confinement, and limited legal protection. Scholars have documented how Indonesian domestic workers navigate restrictive immigration policies, employer control, and gendered expectations that frame their labor as "natural" extensions of women's caregiving roles (Kimura, 2020). The feminization of Indonesian migration to Malaysia has been framed as a response to global care chains, where women from the Global South fill care deficits in wealthier nations while leaving care gaps in their home communities.

However, this dominant narrative obscures significant dimensions of Indonesian migration. The concentration on Java masks the geographic diversity of migrant origins. Indonesia encompasses thousands of islands and diverse ethnic groups, yet research has

scarcely examined migrants from Eastern Indonesia (such as Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, or Papua) or from Sumatra, where distinct cultural traditions, economic pressures, and migration networks shape different migration experiences (Hugo, 1999). Migrants from these regions may face different recruitment pathways, sectoral placements, and forms of social marginalization compared to their Javanese counterparts. For instance, ethnic minorities from Eastern Indonesia may encounter additional layers of discrimination within Malaysia's already stratified labor market, where nationality intersects with intra-national ethnic hierarchies.

Furthermore, the emphasis on domestic work obscures the substantial number of Indonesian women employed in manufacturing, agriculture, and service sectors. Indonesia is one of the largest sources of migrant workers in Malaysia's plantation and construction industries, yet these sectors receive comparatively little scholarly attention. Women working in factories producing electronics, textiles, or palm oil, or in palm oil processing, face different labor regimes, workplace cultures, and forms of exploitation than domestic workers confined to private households. Their experiences challenge the assumption that Indonesian women migrants are primarily care workers and reveal how gender, class, and sector intersect to produce varied migration trajectories.

Islam as a Moral Framework: The Unexamined Religious Dimension

One of the most significant gaps in the literature concerns the role of Islam in shaping Indonesian migrants' experiences in Malaysia. Both countries are Muslim-majority nations, with Islam playing a central

role in public life, policy, and moral discourse. Yet the specific Islamic moral frameworks through which Indonesian migrants interpret and discipline their labor, gender roles, and remittance practices remain under-theorized. This omission is striking given that Islam provides a vocabulary for understanding work, family obligation, charity, and moral identity that deeply informs how migrants navigate their transnational lives.

Islamic teachings on labor emphasize the dignity of work, the obligation to provide for one's family, and the moral significance of earning *halal* (permissible) income. For Indonesian migrants, these teachings may frame their migration not merely as economic necessity but as religiously meaningful sacrifice. The remittances sent home may be understood not simply as financial transfers but as acts of fulfilling religious obligations to support parents, siblings, and children. The concept of *zakat* (almsgiving) and *sadaqah* (charity) may shape how migrants allocate their earnings, including supporting religious institutions or community members both in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Islamic moral frameworks also inform gendered expectations around migration. The notion of *mahram* (male guardian) influences how women's mobility is regulated, with some families preferring male relatives to accompany women migrants or insisting on particular types of employment deemed morally appropriate. The discourse of *hijrah* (moral transformation) has gained prominence in contemporary Indonesian Islam, emphasizing personal piety, moral discipline, and resistance to perceived Western moral decay. For migrants working in Malaysia—a country that also promotes Islamic modernization and moral regulation—this discourse may shape how they understand their labor, their

relationships with employers, and their moral standing within transnational communities.

The religious dimension is further complicated by differences in Islamic interpretation between Indonesia and Malaysia. Indonesia's Islamic tradition is characterized by diversity, with Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah representing major organizations with distinct theological orientations. Islam in Malaysia is more standardized under state control, with particular emphasis on Sunni orthodoxy and moral regulation. These differences may create tension or negotiation as Indonesian migrants navigate Malaysian Islamic institutions, religious authorities, and moral expectations. Understanding how Indonesian migrants interpret, resist, or adapt to Malaysia's Islamic moral regime is crucial for understanding their everyday experiences.

Male Migrants and the Transnational Care Economy: Beyond Feminization

The literature on migrant care work has rightly centered women's experiences, recognizing how global care chains disproportionately rely on women's reproductive labor. However, this focus risks reinscribing a feminized view of care that obscures the roles of men in transnational care economies. Indonesian male migrants in Malaysia occupy positions that demand scholarly attention: as stay-behind fathers who remain in Indonesia while their wives migrate, as brothers managing remittances and family finances, as male care workers in Malaysia's growing care sector, and as migrants whose labor enables their families' care infrastructure. The phenomenon of "transnational fatherhood" remains underexplored in the Indonesian-Malaysian context.

As more Indonesian women migrate for work, men increasingly assume roles traditionally associated with women—managing households, caring for children, and coordinating family finances remotely. This role reversal challenges conventional gender norms and raises questions about how masculinity is reconfigured in transnational contexts. How do stay-behind fathers negotiate their identity when their wives become the primary breadwinners? How do children understand their fathers' caretaking roles in the absence of mothers? What emotional and social costs do men bear in these arrangements?

Simultaneously, Indonesian men working in Malaysia also participate directly in care economies. While domestic work is feminized, men work in elderly care, childcare in institutional settings, and healthcare support roles. The invisibility of male care workers stems from assumptions that care is inherently feminine labor, yet empirical evidence shows men increasingly fill care gaps in aging societies like Malaysia. Understanding how Indonesian male care workers navigate gendered expectations, employer prejudices, and their own moral frameworks is essential for a complete picture of transnational care.

Brothers and male relatives also play crucial roles in managing remittances and making care-related decisions on behalf of migrant sisters or mothers. In many Indonesian families, financial authority remains with male relatives even when women are the earners. This dynamic shapes how remittances are allocated, what care priorities are emphasized, and how migrants' labor is understood within family hierarchies. These male intermediaries mediate between migrants and their families of origin, influencing migration

decisions, return timing, and the moral meaning of remittances.

Comparative Perspectives: Indonesian Migrants in Malaysia's Multi-Ethnic Labor Market

Perhaps the most significant gap in the literature is the lack of comparative analyses that situate Indonesian migrants within Malaysia's broader multi-ethnic, multi-national migrant landscape. Malaysia hosts significant migrant populations from Bangladesh, the Philippines, India, Nepal, Myanmar, and other countries, each with distinct migration histories, legal statuses, sectoral concentrations, and social positions. Yet Indonesian migrants are rarely studied in dialogue with these other groups, limiting our understanding of how ethnicity, religion, and nationality intersect to produce stratified labor markets.

The comparative dimension is crucial because Malaysia's labor market is not simply divided between citizens and migrants but hierarchically organized along national and ethnic lines. Indonesians share religious commonality with the Malay majority, which may afford certain advantages in terms of cultural recognition, religious accommodation, and moral legitimacy. However, this shared religion also creates expectations of cultural similarity that may lead to disappointment or conflict when Indonesian migrants are perceived as not meeting Malay-Muslim standards. Indonesians may face stereotyping as "less civilized" or "backward" compared to Malays, despite shared religious identity.

Bangladeshi migrants, by contrast, are Muslim but from a South Asian context with different cultural traditions. They are heavily concentrated in construction and informal sectors and face different forms of racialization that emphasize South Asian identity rather than Southeast Asian proximity.

Filipino migrants, predominantly Catholic, occupy different sectors (including skilled nursing and professional work) and may be perceived through lenses of Western education and English proficiency. Indian migrants, both Malaysian Indians and newly arrived Indians from India, navigate complex racial politics within Malaysia's established Indian diaspora.

Comparing these groups reveals how religion functions differently across national boundaries. Shared Islam between Indonesians and Malays does not guarantee equal treatment, while religious difference for Filipinos may be offset by other forms of cultural capital. Understanding these intersections requires moving beyond single-nationality studies to examine how Malaysia's migrant labor regime produces differentiated subjectivities based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, and class.

Roos (2021) argues that Malaysia's migration governance produces "hierarchies of belonging" that place migrants in ranked positions relative to citizens and to each other. Indonesian migrants occupy an ambiguous position—geographically and religiously close but economically subordinate. This ambiguity shapes their experiences in ways that single-nationality studies cannot capture. Comparative analysis would illuminate how different migrant groups navigate similar structures of constraint while drawing on distinct cultural resources, social networks, and moral frameworks.

Toward an Expanded Framework: Four Contributions

This chapter responds to these gaps through four interconnected contributions. First, it extends the focus from domestic workers to a wider range of Indonesian migrant workers, including women in factories and services and migrants from diverse geographic origins beyond Java. By examining Indonesian workers across sectors and regions, the chapter reveals the heterogeneity of Indonesian migration experiences and challenges the homogenizing effect of domestic work-centered narratives.

Second, the chapter explicitly theorizes Islam, kinship, and moral discipline in transnational care practices. Drawing on Islamic moral frameworks, it examines how Indonesian migrants interpret their labor as religiously meaningful, how Islamic teachings shape gender roles and remittance practices, and how they navigate Malaysia's Islamic moral regime. This approach foregrounds religion as a central analytic rather than treating it as background context.

Third, the chapter incorporates male perspectives into the analysis of care and family organization. By examining stay-behind fathers, male relatives managing remittances, and male care workers in Malaysia, the chapter disrupts the feminized view of care and reveals how men participate in and are transformed by transnational care economies.

Fourth, the chapter situates Indonesian experiences within Malaysia's broader multi-ethnic, multi-national care economy through comparative analysis. By placing Indonesian migrants in dialogue with Bangladeshi, Filipino, and Indian migrants, the chapter illuminates how ethnicity, religion, and nationality intersect to produce stratified labor markets and differentiated migrant subjectivities.

Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia represent a complex, diverse population whose experiences cannot be fully captured by existing literature focused on domestic work, Javanese origins, and female migrants. The gaps identified—geographic and sectoral limitations, under-theorized religious dimensions, invisibility of male care participation, and lack of comparative analysis—point to the need for a more expansive framework. This chapter responds to that need by examining Indonesian migration across sectors and regions, theorizing Islam as a moral framework for labor and care, incorporating male perspectives into transnational care analysis, and situating Indonesian experiences within Malaysia's multi-ethnic migrant landscape. By addressing these gaps, the chapter contributes to broader debates on migration, care, religion, and gender in Southeast Asia. It demonstrates that understanding transnational care economies requires attention to religious meaning-making, male participation, geographic diversity, and comparative dynamics. For scholars of Indonesian migration, Malaysian labor markets, and Southeast Asian transnationalism, this expanded framework offers new analytical tools for understanding how migration transforms families, communities, and moral economies across borders.

The Indonesian-Malaysian case, with its shared religious identity yet stratified labor relations, provides a particularly rich site for examining these dynamics, offering insights that extend to other migration corridors in the Global South.

However, notable Gaps still exist that our chapter can explore. First, most research focuses on domestic work centered in Java, leaving less explored areas such as Indonesian women working in factories and services, as well as migrants from Eastern Indonesia or Sumatra (Widodo, 2024; Hugo, 1999). Second, although kinship and care are well studied, the specific Islamic moral frameworks related to these topics are less examined through which Indonesian migrants interpret and discipline their labor, gender roles and remittance practices in Malaysia are rarely foregrounded—despite both states being Muslim-majority (Kimura, 2020; Kudo, 2016). Third, the role of male Indonesian migrants in transnational care economies—for example, as stay-behind fathers, brothers managing remittances, or male carers in Malaysia—is comparatively under-developed in a literature that rightly centres women but risks re-inscribing a feminized view of care (Nisa, 2018; Moreno, 2023). Finally, comparative analyses that put Indonesian migrants in dialogue with other groups in Malaysia (Bangladeshi, Filipino, Indian) are limited, which restricts our understanding of how ethnicity, religion and nationality intersect in Malaysia's stratified care and labor markets (Hugo, 1999; Roos, 2021). So, this Chapter 6 can thus build on existing scholarship by: (1) extending the focus from domestic workers to a wider range of Indonesian migrant workers; (2) explicitly theorising Islam, kinship and moral discipline in transnational care practices; (3)

incorporating male perspectives into the analysis of care and family organisation; and (4) situating Indonesian experiences within Malaysia's broader multi-ethnic, multi-national care economy. Work on Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is extensive but uneven, with strong coverage of flows, sectors and vulnerabilities, and thinner attention to comparative, gendered and religiously framed experiences across different migrant groups.

Major directions in the literature

Historical and structural studies trace the long genealogy of Indonesian migration to Malaysia, showing that cross-Straits labor mobility has existed since the colonial period and intensified from the 1970s onwards (Hugo, 1999; Hugo, 1993). Hugo's work identifies economic, demographic, social, environmental and political drivers of Indonesian migration and maps diverse forms of movement—workers, students, refugees, asylum seekers—underlining that labor migration is only one component of a broader Indonesia–Malaysia mobility regime (Hugo, 1999). Recent syntheses reiterate that poverty, unemployment, rural underdevelopment and demographic pressures in Indonesia, combined with Malaysia's demand for low-wage labor, are enduring push–pull factors (Ahmad, 2024).

Sectoral and dependency-oriented studies highlight Malaysia's structural reliance on Indonesian workers in plantations, construction and domestic work (Kudo, 2016; Mohammad, 2006). Kudo argues that plantations are “the most demanding sector for Indonesian foreign labor” because employers value perceived cultural and religious similarity and shared

language with Malays, while Indonesians accept difficult work due to poverty and limited opportunities at home (Kudo, 2016). Research on the construction industry similarly documents a heavy reliance on foreign labor, particularly Indonesians, and shows how policy shifts—such as the 2002 decision to limit Indonesians to the plantation and domestic sectors—disrupted labor supply and project delivery (Mohammad, 2006). Case studies from Sabah show Indonesian migrants concentrated in plantations but also involved in town-based small trade, restaurants, laundromats, and tire shops, indicating a broader economic footprint (Yusoff, 2011).

A large body of work examines irregular migration and the status of undocumented workers. Grounded theory and qualitative studies explore “illegal journeys” and the role of social networks in facilitating border crossing, employment, and survival in Malaysia (Nuh, 2018; Nuh, 2022). These studies show that friendship, brotherhood, neighborhood, and ethnic grouping expand migrants’ social capital, enabling them to bypass formal controls but also exposing them to rights deprivations, blame for social ills, and lack of access to services (Nuh, 2018). Recent analyses underscore that irregular migration persists despite Indonesia’s economic growth due to structural inequalities, limited social protection, and powerful migration networks that normalize Malaysia as a destination—even through irregular channels (Ahmad, 2024).

Well-being-oriented research asks whether Indonesian migrants are “happy” in Malaysia, how they perceive their work and life, and how they adapt to the host culture. Survey-based work finds that many legal and

illegal migrants report satisfaction with higher wages but express concerns about job security, discrimination, family separation, and limited rights (Djarmika et al., 2021). A more recent study on intercultural communicative competence (ICC) identifies three concerns: limited host-culture knowledge, language barriers, and unequal power relations at work, and shows that ICC can be improved through participation in community and religious organizations (Djarmika et al., 2024). These studies begin to move beyond purely economic frames toward social and cultural integration.

Rights-based and legal analyses focus heavily on Indonesian domestic workers. Human Rights Watch's classic report documents abuses—non-payment of wages, confinement, physical and sexual violence, passport confiscation—and links them to legal exclusion of domestic workers from Malaysia's Employment Act (Human Rights Watch, 2004). More recent advocacy by Tenaganita and others calls for standalone domestic-worker legislation, quoting Indonesian embassy data that “about 90%” of complaints received relate to abuse of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia (Business & Human Rights Resource Center, 2025). Case-based journalism on Adelina Lisao and other maids further illustrates systemic vulnerabilities in live-in domestic work (Al Jazeera, 2019; Free Malaysia Today, 2024).

Another important aspect involves religion, kinship, and subjectivity. Nisa illustrates how Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia arrange unregistered marriages through Indonesian religious preachers (ustadz), using religious legitimacy (nikah kampung) to navigate legal restrictions and temporary statuses

(Nisa, 2018). Her research, along with studies on Indonesian domestic workers and women's piety, suggests that Islam offers both a moral language for migration and a framework for managing relationships and sexuality (Nisa, 2018; Williams, 2008). Kimura views Indonesian domestic worker migration as a "transnational system of care," linking women's labor in Malaysian households to redefined caregiving duties and religious practices in their home communities (Kimura, 2020). Surau-based case studies in Kuala Lumpur reveal Indonesian migrants creating their own religious spaces that foster "moderate Islam," tolerance, and work ethics while offering social support (Djakfar, 2025).

Finally, emerging work examines remittances and post-migration entrepreneurship. The Malaysia–Indonesia remittance corridor has been analyzed in terms of costs, channels, and regulatory frameworks, revealing a strong historical reliance on informal transfer systems and the role of financial inclusion in leveraging remittances (World Bank & Bank Indonesia, 2004; World Bank, 2022). Studies of return-migrant entrepreneurship in Indonesia show that overseas experience in Malaysia and elsewhere can translate into small-business ventures, with remittances and "social remittances" enhancing household resilience and local development (Hadi, 2022; Sitorus, 2024). Placing Indonesian workers comparatively within Malaysia's multi-national labor regime, rather than treating them in isolation.

- Extending attention beyond domestic work to include plantation, construction and informal trade, with attention to everyday religious and kinship practices.

- Analyzing *religious and community networks not just as support structures but as arenas where labor, law, and security intersect.
- Bringing the Malaysian side—employers, religious actors, local communities—into the story of Indonesian migration, highlighting relational dynamics rather than one-sided victim narratives.

6.2 Migration Pathways and Kinship Networks: Three Cases

Indonesian migration to Malaysia is best understood not as an individual economic decision, but as a socially embedded, kinship-mediated process shaped by long-standing historical ties, family obligations, and transnational networks of care. Migration routes, documentation strategies, and employment opportunities are often organised collectively through siblings, cousins, neighbours, and village intermediaries, while responsibilities of remittance and caregiving circulate through the same relational structures. Historically, these movements are rooted in deep cross-Straits connections that predate modern national borders. As Hugo (1999) demonstrates, Javanese settlement in Malacca dates back several centuries, and Malay, Bugis, and Javanese communities have long maintained shared linguistic, cultural, and religious ties. These continuities mean that migration between Indonesia and Malaysia is frequently perceived not as entry into a foreign space, but as movement within an extended socio-cultural region. Contemporary labor migration—both documented and undocumented—builds upon these

historical linkages, with kinship networks providing information, legitimacy, and access to employment across sectors such as plantations, construction, and domestic work.

Recent research on irregular migration further highlights the centrality of social networks. Studies show that undocumented Indonesian migrants rely heavily on relational forms of social capital—friendship, kinship, and community affiliation—to navigate border crossings, identify brokers, and secure initial employment (Nuh, 2022). Similarly, borderland research in Borneo demonstrates how cross-border households sustain circular migration practices, facilitated by kin on both sides of the Indonesia–Malaysia divide (Yuniarto et al., 2025; Rahman & Sari, 2024). These findings indicate that migration pathways are not shaped solely by formal recruitment systems but are actively produced through everyday social relations.

For domestic workers in particular, migration is deeply intertwined with transnational care arrangements. Kimura (2020) conceptualizes Indonesian domestic labor migration as part of a broader “transnational system of care,” in which women’s mobility is organized through kin-based networks and accompanied by the redistribution of caregiving responsibilities among extended family members. In sending communities such as Karawang, migration generates “transnational family forms,” where childcare and eldercare are delegated to grandparents, spouses, and siblings. While digital communication enables emotional connection across distance, it does not eliminate tensions over care responsibilities or social expectations.

Emerging scholarship also highlights the role of diaspora-based kinship and community structures in Malaysia. Autoethnographic research shows that migrant families develop dense networks of mutual support that facilitate access to employment, education, and informal welfare systems (Sari, 2025). These networks reinforce the idea that migration is sustained through collective strategies rather than isolated individual mobility. Despite these advances, important analytical gaps remain. Much of the literature treats kinship in broad terms without differentiating between types of relationships and their distinct roles in shaping migration pathways. There is also limited attention to gendered dynamics—particularly how women’s migration routes, often mediated through domestic work channels, differ structurally from men’s pathways in plantations or construction sectors. Furthermore, although shared Islamic norms are frequently acknowledged, few studies systematically examine how religious concepts—such as obligation, charity, and moral discipline—actively shape decisions about migration, caregiving, and remittance allocation.

Addressing these gaps, Section 6.2 conceptualizes migration pathways as structured kinship projects. Through selected cases, it demonstrates how family networks organize mobility, distribute risks, and sustain transnational care economies across the Indonesia–Malaysia corridor. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from migration as movement to migration as a relational and moral system embedded in everyday life.

Case 1: Family-Based Migration Chains

In many Indonesian rural communities, migration is not an isolated decision but part of a collective family strategy. A typical pathway begins with one family member—often a woman—migrating to Malaysia as a domestic worker. Once established, she facilitates the migration of siblings, cousins, or neighbours. These chains reduce costs and risks, as new migrants rely on existing social ties for accommodation, job placement, and emotional support (Hugo, 2005). However, these networks also generate moral obligations. Migrants are expected to send remittances regularly, support extended family members, and sometimes finance the migration of others. Failure to do so may result in social stigma or strained relationships. Thus, migration becomes both an opportunity and a burden, embedding individuals within a web of expectations that extend beyond economic necessity.

Case 2: Village-Based Migration Systems

Certain regions in Indonesia have developed into “migration villages,” where overseas work is normalized. In these areas, local brokers—often known personally within the community—coordinate migration processes. Their familiarity creates trust, yet it also masks power imbalances. Migrants may accept unfavourable terms because they trust intermediaries or lack alternative options (Lindquist, 2010). These village-based systems represent a socially embedded migration economy, where mobility is institutionalized within local culture. Migration becomes a rite of passage, particularly for young adults seeking to contribute to household income. However, the normalization of migration can obscure risks, as exploitation is often interpreted as an

unavoidable part of the journey rather than a structural problem.

Case 3: Religious Network Pathways

In some cases, migration is facilitated through religious networks, including Islamic organizations and informal *pesantren* connections. These pathways provide migrants with a sense of trust and moral guidance. Religious leaders or community members may assist with job placement, accommodation, and social integration. At the same time, these networks reinforce expectations of *moral discipline*, encouraging migrants to maintain religious practices and avoid behaviours considered inappropriate. While such networks provide essential support to their members, they also facilitate subtle mechanisms of regulation, where the sense of belonging is intimately linked to conforming to shared norms and expectations. These norms can encompass a wide range of behaviors, beliefs, and practices that members are encouraged to uphold, reinforcing a collective identity that binds individuals together. This regulatory aspect often operates implicitly, shaping members' actions and affiliations in ways that may not be immediately visible but are deeply embedded within the social fabric of the network.

Migration through religious channels serves as a compelling example of how mobility, faith, and social regulation intersect. Religious networks often transcend geographical boundaries, offering migrants not only spiritual guidance but also social security and community integration. For many, these channels provide a pathway to preserve cultural and religious identities amidst the challenges of displacement or new environments. At the same time, they impose

certain expectations and responsibilities that reinforce the community's norms, ensuring continuity and cohesion.

This intersection of mobility, faith, and social regulation highlights the complex role of religious networks in shaping migrant experiences. Movement across borders is not merely a physical relocation but a journey intertwined with spiritual pursuits and social navigation. Religious channels act as both conduits for mobility and as mechanisms for social control, guiding migrants in their adaptation processes while maintaining the integrity of their cultural and religious practices. Furthermore, these networks often serve as bridges between different social worlds, facilitating interactions that can influence migrants' identities and relationships. They foster a sense of solidarity and shared purpose, anchoring individuals within a community that offers support and stability. Simultaneously, this anchoring can entail adherence to specific norms, rituals, and behavioral standards that delineate insiders from outsiders.

In essence, the use of religious channels for migration exemplifies how faith-based networks operate at the nexus of personal mobility and social regulation. They provide essential support and stability for migrants, but they also subtly delineate boundaries of belonging and conformity. Understanding this dual role helps to appreciate the nuanced ways in which religion, social cohesion, and mobility interact in contemporary society.

6.3 Labor Experiences: Indonesian Migrant Workers in Practice

Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia have been at the centre of some of the country's most disturbing migrant-abuse cases, revealing structural weaknesses in protection systems, labor enforcement, and the live-in domestic work arrangement (Human Rights Watch, 2004; Malaysian Trades Union Congress, 2020). Evidence from media reports, rights investigations, and court proceedings consistently points to patterns of physical violence, unpaid wages, confinement, and, in extreme cases, death in employers' custody (Al Jazeera, 2019; Free Malaysia Today, 2024; Says, 2025).

One of the most widely cited cases is that of Adelina Lisao, a young Indonesian domestic worker who died in Bukit Mertajam, Penang, in February 2018 after prolonged abuse (Al Jazeera, 2019). She was found severely injured and living in degrading conditions, and died shortly after hospitalisation (Al Jazeera, 2019). Advocacy groups identified her case as indicative of structural vulnerabilities, including lack of rest days, isolation within private households, and delayed access to healthcare (Human Rights Watch, 2004; Al Jazeera, 2019). While the employer was acquitted in criminal court, a 2024 civil ruling awarded damages to Adelina's family, highlighting both the limitations and partial possibilities of legal redress within existing frameworks (Free Malaysia Today, 2024).

An earlier landmark case is that of Nirmala Bonat, whose 2004 abuse—including burning, beating, and severe mistreatment—became a defining moment in

public awareness of domestic worker exploitation in Malaysia (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Detailed documentation shows that such abuse is rarely isolated, but instead reflects recurring patterns: excessive working hours, wage withholding, psychological and physical violence, mobility restrictions, and threats linked to immigration status (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Recruitment systems further exacerbate vulnerability through deception, debt bondage, and passport confiscation (Human Rights Watch, 2004).

These cases reveal a consistent structural pattern: Indonesian domestic workers are employed within private homes that remain largely outside formal labor regulation, often under employer-tied visa systems and without guaranteed rest days or mobility rights (Human Rights Watch, 2004; UN Women, 2016).

Consistent structural pattern

More recent cases demonstrate the persistence of these patterns. In 2016, Suyanti Sutrinso suffered severe injuries, including brain trauma and fractures, after being assaulted by her employer (The Straits Times, 2016). Similarly, a 2020 rescue case involving an Indonesian worker revealed signs of prolonged starvation and physical abuse, prompting

condemnation from labor organisations (Malaysian Trades Union Congress, 2020). Reports from 2023 and 2025 continue to document extreme violence, including daily beatings, trafficking-related abuse, and degrading treatment within private households (Free Malaysia Today, 2023; Says, 2025; New Straits Times, 2024).

Limited inspection mechanisms and fear of retaliation or deportation further constrain workers' ability to seek protection (Malaysian Trades Union Congress, 2020). As labor advocates argue, such cases reflect systemic institutional gaps rather than isolated incidents, rooted in the exclusion of domestic work from standard labor protections and the asymmetrical power relations embedded in live-in arrangements (Human Rights Watch, 2004; Malaysian Trades Union Congress, 2020). From a broader analytical perspective, these dynamics illustrate the intersection of gender, migration status, and legal precarity within transnational care economies.

Domestic work, situated within the intimate space of the household, becomes both a site of care provision and a source of structural vulnerability, where Indonesian women's labor is shaped by overlapping hierarchies of nationality, class, and gender (Kimura, 2020; Nisa, 2018).

Case 1: Domestic Workers

Domestic work is the most common occupation for Indonesian women in Malaysia. Workers live within employers' homes, performing tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and caregiving. This arrangement blurs the boundary between work and private life, often leading

to extended working hours and limited rest (ILO, 2016). Because domestic work occurs in private spaces, it is difficult to regulate, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation. Some migrants describe feelings of isolation, as they are cut off from social networks and have limited opportunities to leave the household. Yet others develop strategies to cope, such as maintaining contact with fellow migrants through mobile phones or participating in community gatherings on rest days. Domestic work thus embodies both vulnerability and resilience.

Case 2: Plantation Workers

Indonesian migrants working in plantations experience a different form of labor. Tasks are physically demanding, involving harvesting, land clearing, and crop maintenance under harsh environmental conditions. Workers often live in employer-provided housing located in remote areas, which limits access to healthcare, education, and communication. This isolation reinforces dependency on employers and reduces opportunities for collective organization. At the same time, plantation communities can develop strong social bonds, as workers rely on each other for support. These environments highlight the tension between collective solidarity and structural isolation.

Case 3: Informal Service Sector

Some Indonesian migrants work in informal sectors such as restaurants, retail shops, or small businesses. These jobs offer greater mobility compared to domestic or plantation work, but they lack formal contracts and legal protections. Workers must

constantly navigate uncertainty, including the risk of raids or deportation. Despite these challenges, the informal sector provides opportunities for skill development and networking. Migrants often move between jobs, seeking better conditions or higher wages. This fluidity reflects both vulnerability and adaptability within precarious labor markets.

6.4 Gender and Migration: Five Cases of Feminized Mobility

Case 1: Transnational Care Chains in Indonesia

The female migrants play a central role in sustaining households across borders, forming what scholars describe as transnational care chains. In Malaysia, many Indonesian women work as domestic workers, nannies, or caregivers, providing essential emotional and physical care to Malaysian families. At the same time, their own children, elderly parents, and households in Indonesia depend on the care of relatives—often grandmothers, sisters, or older daughters. This creates a layered system of care redistribution, where care is passed from one woman to another across national boundaries (Silvey, 2004).

This arrangement produces both economic benefit and emotional tension. On one hand, women's migration brings income that supports children's education, housing, and daily needs. Remittances often improve the long-term well-being of families and can elevate women's status as key providers. On the other hand, this economic contribution comes at the cost of physical separation and emotional distance. Many migrant mothers describe feelings of guilt for not being present during important moments in their

children's lives, such as schooling, illness, or everyday upbringing.

The emotional burden is not only personal but also relational. Children left behind may develop close bonds with substitute caregivers, sometimes leading to distance or conflict when mothers return. Communication technologies—such as video calls and messaging—help maintain connections, but they cannot fully replace physical presence. Care becomes mediated through screens, creating a form of “virtual motherhood” that is both sustaining and incomplete.

At the same time, the care chain reflects global inequalities. Women from lower-income households in Indonesia provide care labor that supports middle-class families in Malaysia, enabling local women to participate in professional work. Thus, one woman's mobility creates opportunity for another, but this redistribution is unequal and often invisible.

Importantly, these care chains are not only economic structures but also moral systems. Many migrant women interpret their sacrifice as a form of duty (*tanggung jawab*) and moral commitment to family. Their migration is often framed not simply as labor, but as an ethical act of providing and caring from a distance. This makes transnational care chains both a structural and deeply human experience, shaped by love, obligation, and sacrifice.

Case 2: Vulnerability and Abuse

Female migrant workers, especially those in domestic work, face significant vulnerability due to the conditions of their employment. Unlike factory or

construction workers, domestic workers operate within private households, which are largely hidden from public view. This isolation reduces oversight and increases the risk of exploitation.

Many reports document cases of overwork, delayed or unpaid wages, restricted movement, and in some situations, physical or psychological abuse. Because domestic workers often live in their employer's home, the boundary between work and rest becomes blurred. Long working hours without clear limits are common, and workers may lack access to rest days or personal time.

A key factor behind this vulnerability is the legal and institutional framework governing migrant labor. In many cases, workers' legal status is tied directly to their employer, meaning that leaving an abusive situation can result in loss of legal status or risk of detention. This creates a situation of dependency, where workers may endure difficult conditions because alternative options are limited or risky.

Recruitment systems also contribute to vulnerability. Many women take loans to pay recruitment fees before migrating. This financial pressure makes them more likely to accept poor working conditions in order to repay debts. The migration journey itself can involve deception about wages, job roles, or working conditions, leaving workers unprepared for the realities they encounter.

At the same time, vulnerability is not only structural but also gendered. Women are often expected to be obedient, patient, and compliant, which can discourage resistance or reporting of abuse. Cultural

and social expectations may also silence women, particularly when issues involve harassment or violence.

However, it is important to note that vulnerability does not mean total helplessness. Many women develop strategies to cope with or resist exploitation, such as seeking help from embassies, NGOs, or informal networks. Nevertheless, their experiences highlight the need for stronger legal protections, better regulation of recruitment systems, and recognition of domestic work as formal labor deserving of rights and dignity.

Case 3: Agency and Negotiation

Despite structural constraints, Indonesian female migrants demonstrate significant agency in navigating their migration experiences. Rather than being passive victims, many actively negotiate their working conditions, make strategic decisions, and use available resources to improve their situations.

These actions show that migrants are not simply controlled by systems, but engage with them in flexible and adaptive ways.

Social networks play a crucial role in enabling this agency. Friends, relatives, and fellow migrants provide information about job opportunities, safer employers, and ways to handle difficult situations. These networks also offer emotional support, helping women cope with loneliness, stress, and uncertainty. In many cases, experienced migrants guide

newcomers, sharing practical knowledge that is not available through official channels.

Agencies

One important form of agency is job mobility. Some migrants change employers when conditions are unfavourable, either through formal channels or informal networks. Others negotiate wages, working hours, or responsibilities over time, especially after gaining

At the same time, agency is often constrained and negotiated rather than absolute. Choices are made within limited options, shaped by legal restrictions, economic pressures, and social expectations. For example, a woman may choose to stay in a difficult job because it offers stability, even if conditions are not ideal.

Importantly, agency should be understood not only as resistance but also as everyday practice. Small decisions—how to manage time, build relationships, or communicate with family—are forms of

agency that shape migrants' lived experiences. Recognising these practices allows for a more balanced understanding of migration, where women are seen not only as vulnerable but also as active

subjects shaping their own lives within structural limits.

Case 4: Moral Surveillance

Indonesian female migrants are subject to multiple layers of moral surveillance, both in Malaysia and in their home communities. Their behaviour is closely observed, evaluated, and judged according to expectations of respectability, honour, and gender norms.

In host societies, migrant women are often viewed through stereotypes that associate them with vulnerability or moral risk. Employers and communities may impose rules on dress, movement, and social interaction, aiming to control behaviour within the household. These expectations are not only about work performance but also about maintaining moral order within the family space.

At the same time, surveillance extends across borders. Families and communities in Indonesia monitor women's behaviour through communication and social narratives. Migrant women are expected to remain “good daughters,” “good mothers,” and “respectable women,” even while living abroad. Any perceived deviation—such as forming relationships, adopting new lifestyles, or failing to meet remittance expectations—can lead to social criticism or stigma.

Religion plays an important role in shaping this moral framework. As migrants move between two Muslim-majority societies, their conduct is often interpreted through Islamic values related to modesty, discipline, and responsibility. Women may internalise these

expectations, regulating their own behaviour to align with moral ideals. In this sense, surveillance is not only external but also internal, forming part of a self-disciplining process.

This moral pressure creates tension. On one hand, women seek independence and opportunity through migration. On the other hand, they must maintain a reputation that aligns with family and community expectations. Navigating this balance requires careful negotiation of identity, behaviour, and relationships.

Moral surveillance thus operates as a powerful social mechanism that shapes migrant experiences. It influences how women work, communicate, and present themselves, reinforcing gender norms while also creating space for subtle forms of resistance and reinterpretation.

Case 5: Return and Reintegration

Return migration is often imagined as a moment of closure, where migrants reintegrate smoothly into their home communities. However, for many Indonesian women, the return is a complex and uncertain process marked by both opportunities and challenges.

Economically, returning migrants may bring savings, skills, and new perspectives. Some invest in small businesses, housing, or education, contributing to local development. Their migration experience can enhance social status, particularly if it results in visible improvements in family living conditions.

However, reintegration is not always smooth. Women may face difficulties adjusting to local social norms

after experiencing different ways of life abroad. Changes in behavior, expectations, or identity can create tension within families and communities. For example, women who have gained financial independence may find it challenging to return to traditional roles where decision-making power is limited.

Family relationships can also be affected. Children who grew up without their mothers may have formed stronger attachments to other caregivers, making emotional reconnection difficult. Husbands or other family members who assumed new roles during migration may resist changes when women return.

Moreover, many migrants experience what can be called “incomplete return.” Due to limited economic opportunities in Indonesia, returns are often temporary. Women may plan to migrate again, creating a cycle of movement rather than a final settlement. This cyclical migration reflects structural inequalities between sending and receiving countries.

Social perception is another challenge. While successful migrants may be respected, others may face stigma, especially if their migration experience is seen as unsuccessful or morally questionable. This highlights how return is not only an economic process but also a social and moral one.

In this context, reintegration requires more than financial stability. It involves renegotiating identity, relationships, and social expectations. Understanding return as a dynamic and ongoing process allows for a more realistic view of migration, one that recognises

both its transformative potential and its enduring challenges.

6 . 5 R e l i g i o u s a n d C o m m u n i t y N e t w o r k s

Religious networks play a central role in shaping Indonesian migrant experiences. Islamic study groups, prayer gatherings, and community organizations provide spaces for social interaction and emotional support (Lindquist, 2010). These networks help migrants cope with isolation and maintain a sense of belonging. At the same time, they function as sites of *moral regulation*, reinforcing expectations around behaviour and identity. Participation in religious activities can strengthen solidarity among migrants while also shaping their everyday practices.

Religious and community networks are central to how Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia endure, interpret, and morally regulate their lives. These networks are not simply “support groups”; they are infrastructures of care, identity, and regulation that link migrants to each other, to Indonesian religious authorities, and to Malaysian Muslim publics (Kimura, 2020; Williams, 2008). Early work on Indonesian migration and religion already pointed to the importance of mosques and prayer groups in migrant circuits. Lindquist’s broader analysis of Indonesian migration infrastructures describes Lombok as “the island of a thousand mosques,” showing how religious institutions and idioms saturate mobility projects from the pre-departure stage onward (Lindquist, 2010). Recruiters, village leaders, and aspiring migrants interact in spaces framed by mosque fund-raising and religious talk, and the same moral

idioms of piety, sacrifice, and family obligation travel with migrants to Malaysia (Lindquist, 2010). This work suggests that religious infrastructures are present not only at the destination, but also at the origin, shaping how migration is imagined as a morally legible project.

More recent studies offer detailed accounts of religious spaces created by migrants themselves in Malaysia. A qualitative case study of Surau Syaichona Moh. Cholil in Kuala Lumpur shows that this surau, established by Indonesian migrant workers, functions as a center for worship, religious teaching, social support, and cultural development (Djakfar, 2025). Most congregants are long-term Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) who have made the surau a hub where they perform prayers, attend religious lectures, organize cultural events, and maintain ties with fellow Indonesians (Djakfar, 2025). The study concludes that this congregation can be characterized as practicing “moderate Islam,” emphasizing tolerance, nonviolence, acceptance of local traditions, and a work ethic of honesty and professionalism in a multiethnic Malaysian context (Djakfar, 2025). Surau-based networks thus function as both spiritual refuges and spaces where migrants cultivate a moral self aligned with ideals of religious moderation and good citizenship.

Other research focuses explicitly on dakwah communication and women’s religious communities. A study of dakwah communication among female Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia finds that women create their own religious spaces—halaqah, study circles, Qur’an classes—where they can learn, teach, and express religiosity while sharing

experiences of work and family separation (Rofiq, 2022). These women's communities operate as platforms for Islamic education, mutual counseling, and moral support, and they also serve as channels through which religious messages about patience, modesty, and family obligations are circulated (Rofiq, 2022). Similarly, Javanese ulama and religious leaders who have migrated to Malaysia maintain dense transnational ties to pesantren networks in Java, reinforcing flows of religious authority, preaching, and ritual across the Indonesia–Malaysia corridor (Sari, 2024). This research highlights how Indonesian migrants do not merely consume Malaysian religious life; they actively recreate and extend Indonesian Islamic authorities and practices in Malaysian settings.

Work on religion and women's subjectivity provides further analytical depth. Williams, studying returnee migrant women from East Nusa Tenggara, shows how low-skilled Indonesian migrant women use religion as a spiritual resource to navigate vulnerability, exploitation, and moral scrutiny (Williams, 2008). Women interviewed described migration as a journey through "trajectories of power," in which prayer, fasting and religious fellowship enabled them to endure harsh labor conditions while re-crafting themselves as morally strong subjects responsible for family welfare (Williams, 2008). Although her study spans multiple destinations, its insights resonate strongly with the Malaysian case, where Indonesian domestic workers and factory workers similarly draw on Islam to frame their sacrifices as ibadah (worship) and to sustain a sense of dignity. Studies of religious moderation and migrant adaptation in Malaysia further underline the social role of these networks. Research on moderate Islam among Indonesian

migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur shows that surau and mosque-based communities promote values of tolerance and harmonious living amid Malaysia's religious and ethnic diversity, helping migrants negotiate intergroup relations and discrimination (Djakfar, 2025). Social solidarity in these settings—collective iftar, shared fundraising for sick members, assistance with funerals—builds a sense of belonging and mitigates isolation (Djakfar, 2025). At the same time, religious networks function as moral regulators, setting expectations around acceptable behavior, dress, relationships, and spending, and advising workers on issues like alcohol, gambling, or romantic relationships in ways that can both support and constrain individuals (Rofiq, 2022; Williams, 2008). More broadly, community organizations and intercultural interaction also intersect with religious life. A recent study on intercultural communicative competence among Indonesian migrant workers notes that participation in religious and community organisations enhances migrants' ability to interact with Malaysian employers and neighbours, providing both language practice and cultural cues (Azizah et al., 2024). Religious gatherings often become sites where knowledge about Malaysian norms, law and workplace expectations is exchanged alongside religious teaching (Azizah et al., 2024). Autoethnographic work on Indonesian migrant families and children born in Malaysia similarly shows that community-based religious events—Majlis Maulid, tahlilan, Qur'an recitations—are crucial in constructing a transnational Indonesian Muslim identity and in transmitting cultural memory to the second generation (Sari, 2025).

At the same time, scholars caution against romanticising religious networks as purely protective. Lindquist's analysis of migration infrastructures notes that religious idioms and institutions can be entangled with exploitative recruitment practices: mosque-linked fund-raising and moral rhetoric sometimes obscure the debt and risk inherent in migration projects (Lindquist, 2010). Studies of undocumented Indonesian migrants to Malaysia also show that while church or mosque communities may provide limited assistance, irregular migrants often remain wary of formal religious institutions for fear of exposure, and instead rely more on informal prayer groups and small home-based pengajian (Nuh, 2022; Sari, 2025). This points to a stratification of religious belonging: documented workers may join visible surau communities, while undocumented or highly vulnerable migrants stay on the margins.

Case 1: Transnational Care Chains

Indonesian female migrants play a central role in sustaining households across borders, forming what is widely understood as transnational care chains. In Malaysia, many work as domestic workers, caregivers, or nannies, providing daily emotional and physical care for Malaysian families. At the same time, their own families in Indonesia depend on substitute caregivers—often grandmothers, sisters, or extended kin. This creates a layered system where care is transferred across women and across borders, linking two households through one worker’s mobility (Silvey, 2004). Migration therefore does not remove care responsibilities; instead, it redistributes them unevenly across space. While remittances improve household welfare, they are tied to a constant absence that reshapes family relationships and emotional bonds. This process produces deep emotional tensions. Migrant mothers often describe guilt and anxiety about leaving children behind, especially during illness, schooling, or key life events. Communication technologies help maintain connection, but cannot fully replace physical presence, creating what may be understood as “distant motherhood.” At the same time, children may develop stronger attachments to substitute caregivers, making reunification complex. These care chains also reflect global inequalities: women from lower-income Indonesian households provide reproductive labor that sustains middle-class Malaysian families. Yet, many migrants interpret this sacrifice through moral duty and responsibility, seeing migration not only as economic survival but as an ethical commitment to family wellbeing

Case 2: Vulnerability and Abuse

Female migrant workers, especially in domestic work, face high levels of vulnerability due to the hidden and private nature of their labor. Unlike workers in factories or construction sites, domestic workers operate inside households where monitoring is limited. This isolation increases the risk of overwork, restricted movement, delayed wages, and, in some cases, physical or psychological abuse. The boundary between work and rest is often unclear, with many workers expected to be available at all times. Such conditions highlight how domestic work remains undervalued and weakly regulated within labor systems.

Structural factors further intensify this vulnerability. Work permits are often tied to employers, making it difficult for workers to leave abusive situations without losing legal status. Recruitment systems also place financial burdens on migrants, as many pay high fees and enter employment already in debt. This economic pressure reduces their ability to resist exploitation. At the same time, gender norms shape expectations of obedience and patience, discouraging women from reporting abuse. However, vulnerability is not total; many migrants seek support through informal networks, embassies, or NGOs. These experiences demonstrate that exploitation is not accidental but embedded in migration systems that combine legal dependency, economic pressure, and gendered expectations.

Case 3: Agency and Negotiation

Despite structural constraints, Indonesian female migrants actively negotiate their working conditions

and life trajectories. Many demonstrate agency through everyday decisions, such as changing employers, renegotiating tasks, or seeking better opportunities through informal networks. Over time, experienced workers develop knowledge about employers, contracts, and labor systems, allowing them to make more strategic choices. This challenges the common perception of migrant women as passive victims and instead highlights their role as active participants navigating complex systems.

Social networks are central to this agency. Fellow migrants, relatives, and community contacts provide information about job opportunities, safer employers, and survival strategies. These networks also offer emotional support, helping migrants cope with isolation and stress. Financial agency is equally important, as many women manage remittances and invest in family welfare, housing, or small businesses. This economic contribution can shift power within households, increasing women's influence in decision-making. However, agency remains constrained by legal and economic structures, meaning that choices are often negotiated within limited options rather than freely made. Recognizing this balance between constraint and action allows for a more realistic understanding of migrant women's experiences.

Case 4: Moral Surveillance

Indonesian female migrants are subject to continuous moral surveillance across both host and home societies. In Malaysia, employers and communities often impose expectations regarding behaviour, dress, and interaction, reflecting broader ideas of

respectability and control. These expectations extend beyond work performance and into personal conduct, positioning migrant women within a moral framework that regulates their everyday lives. Surveillance operates subtly through rules, monitoring, and social judgement, shaping how women behave within domestic and public spaces. This scrutiny also extends transnationally. Families and communities in Indonesia monitor migrants through communication and social expectations, requiring them to maintain honour and fulfil responsibilities such as sending remittances. Religion plays a significant role in this process, as Islamic values related to modesty, discipline, and duty influence both external judgement and self-regulation. Women often internalize these expectations, shaping their behaviour even in private spaces. This creates a tension between autonomy and obligation, where migrants must balance independence with moral accountability. Moral surveillance therefore becomes a powerful force shaping identity, behaviour, and social positioning within migration.

Case 5: Return and Reintegration

Return migration is often imagined as a smooth transition back to normal life, but for many Indonesian women, it is complex and uncertain. Returning migrants may bring financial savings and new experiences, which can improve household conditions and social status. However, reintegration often involves adjusting to changed expectations, both within the family and the community. Women who gained financial independence abroad may struggle to return to traditional roles, leading to tension in household relationships.

Religious and community networks

The literature establishes that religious and community networks:

- Provide social support and coping resources, helping migrants deal with loneliness, homesickness, and workplace stress (Kimura, 2020; Williams, 2008).
- Act as sites of moral regulation and identity work, reinforcing norms of modesty, piety, and family responsibility, and framing migration as a morally meaningful endeavor (Rofiq, 2022; Djakfar, 2025).
- Facilitate practical assistance and solidarity, including help with jobs, housing, health emergencies, and legal problems, often mediated through mosque committees or informal leaders (Djakfar, 2025; Azizah et al., 2024). Anchor transnational religious authority, linking migrants to Indonesian ulama, pesantren and dakwah movements, and circulating discourses of moderate Islam and proper migrant conduct (Kimura, 2020; Sari, 2024).
- Family dynamics can also be affected. Children who grew up with substitute caregivers may find it difficult to reconnect emotionally with returning mother,

often limit opportunities, making the return temporary rather than permanent. Many migrants plan to migrate again, creating a cycle of movement rather than final settlement. Social perception further complicates reintegration, as success is judged not only economically but also morally. Return, therefore, is not an endpoint but part of an ongoing migration process involving identity negotiation, social adjustment, and economic uncertainty.

Yet several gaps remain. First, much of the work focuses on domestic workers, Javanese communities, or specific *surau*, leaving less known about how Indonesian plantation, construction or irregular workers—especially men—participate in or are excluded from these networks (Nuh, 2022; Djakfar, 2025). Second, while studies acknowledge moral regulation, they rarely analyze the tensions and conflicts within religious communities—for example, how norms around gender, romance, or debt are contested among migrants themselves (Williams, 2008; Rofiq, 2022). Third, there is limited comparative work on how Indonesian religious networks interact with other migrant and Malaysian Muslim communities (Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Rohingya), and how this shapes hierarchy and solidarity in Malaysia’s multi-ethnic Islamic field (Djakfar, 2025; Azizah et al., 2024). Finally, few studies explicitly link religious networks to labor organizing or rights advocacy, even though some *surau*-based groups and women’s *dakwah* circles may be quietly involved in raising awareness about abuse, law, and support services (Kimura, 2020; Malaysian Trades Union Congress, 2020). Section 6.5 in our thesis can therefore build on this literature by: (1) treating religious networks as transnational care

infrastructures, not just spiritual refuges; (2) foregrounding the gendered dynamics of religious participation among Indonesian migrants in different sectors and legal statuses; and (3) examining how Islam, kinship, and migrant organising intersect in Malaysian surau, mosques and community halls to shape both compliance and resistance in Indonesia–Malaysia care economies.

6 . 6 T r a n s n a t i o n a l B u s i n e s s a n d I n f o r m a l E c o n o m i e s b y I n d o n e s i a n w o r k e r s i n m a l a s y i a

Some Indonesian migrants transition into small-scale entrepreneurship, operating food stalls, tailoring services, or trading businesses. These activities often rely on community networks and shared resources. While entrepreneurship offers opportunities for economic mobility, it also involves risks due to legal restrictions and financial instability. Migrants must navigate complex regulatory environments while sustaining their businesses. Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia are often represented primarily as wage laborers in plantations, construction, factories, and domestic service. Yet such a narrow framing overlooks an important dimension of migrant life: many Indonesian migrants also actively participate in transnational business and informal economies, using small-scale enterprises to diversify income, reduce dependence on employers, and build a modest degree of economic autonomy (World Bank, 2022; Yusoff, 2011). These entrepreneurial activities do not usually begin as formal businesses. Rather, they emerge

gradually from everyday needs, family obligations, religious networks, and opportunities created within migrant-dense neighbourhoods. In this sense, enterprise among Indonesian migrants is not separate from labor migration; it is one of the ways migrants respond to the instability, low wages, and legal precarity that characterize migrant life in Malaysia.

Research on the Malaysia–Indonesia remittance corridor shows that migrants do not merely send money home; they also spend, invest, and circulate resources within the host society itself (World Bank, 2022). This is especially visible among migrants who bring spouses or children with them, or who remain in Malaysia for many years and become embedded in local social life. In Sabah, for example, Yusoff (2011) notes that Indonesian migrants are involved in a range of town-based economic activities, including restaurants, tyre shops, laundromats, and petty trade. This suggests that migrants are not simply an appendage to plantation labor, but participants in broader urban and peri-urban economies. Their economic roles extend beyond wage work into forms of small trade that anchor them locally and connect them to everyday Malaysian economic life.

This entrepreneurial dimension also extends beyond Malaysia itself. Studies of return migrants in Indonesia show that savings earned abroad, together with what Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011) call “social remittances,” such as skills, habits, commercial discipline, and new contacts, often become the basis for small businesses after return. Former migrants open warung, tailoring shops, delivery businesses, repair services, and other micro-enterprises in Java and elsewhere, using migration not only as a survival

strategy but as a pathway toward longer-term household resilience (Hadi, 2022; Sitorus, 2024). The economic significance of migration, therefore, cannot be reduced to remitted cash alone; it also includes entrepreneurial knowledge and transnational business imagination.

At the same time, this entrepreneurial world is deeply shaped by legal status and regulatory exclusion. Many Indonesian migrants, especially those who are irregular, semi-documented, or tied to restrictive employment contracts, cannot easily access formal financial institutions, business registration, or legal licenses. As a result, they often turn to kinship ties, religious communities, trusted intermediaries, and digital platforms to run food businesses, market stalls, service counters, or informal remittance arrangements (Nuh, 2022; Azizah et al., 2024). Informality, then, is not simply a cultural preference; it is frequently a response to structural barriers.

Entrepreneurship may offer an avenue toward economic mobility, but it is also fraught with risk, including immigration raids, municipal enforcement, licensing restrictions, unstable cash flow, and vulnerability to intermediaries (Kusuma, 2019). Indonesian migrant enterprise in Malaysia is therefore best understood as network-driven, informally regulated, and transnational in orientation. It is sustained not only by profit-seeking but also by moral obligations to family, religious trust, and collective survival.

The following cases illustrate how these dynamics unfold in lived experience.

Case 1: Siti – Home-Based Food Business in Kuala Lumpur

Siti, a 35-year-old woman from Solo, arrived in Kuala Lumpur in 2014 as a domestic worker. For several years, her labor was defined by the enclosed and highly controlled environment of household service. Her work was intimate, repetitive, and largely invisible, shaped by the employer's routines rather than her own aspirations. After marrying an Indonesian construction worker, however, she left live-in domestic service and moved into a rented room in a migrant-populated neighborhood on the urban outskirts. This shift in residence also transformed her economic role. With a newborn child to care for and her husband's wages fluctuating due to project-based construction work, Siti began cooking Javanese food—such as *opor ayam*, *tempe bacem*, and *sambal terasi*—and selling meal boxes to Indonesian workers living in nearby hostels.

At one level, Siti's enterprise appears small and ordinary. Yet, analytically, it reveals several important features of migrant informal economies. First, her business grew out of reproductive labor, that is, skills associated with cooking, care, and household management, which were then converted into income-generating activity. This reflects a broader pattern in migrant women's entrepreneurship, where domestic competence becomes commercial capital, especially in contexts where formal employment alternatives are limited. Second, her initial capital did not come from a bank, a microcredit scheme, or any formal institution. It came from small personal savings and informal loans from women in her *pengajian*, or religious study group, who also became her first

customers. Her case, therefore, demonstrates how religious circles can function not only as moral communities but also as practical infrastructures of credit, trust, and market access (Kimura, 2020; Djakfar, 2025).

Siti's business remains entirely informal. She has no business license, and her rented housing is designated for residential rather than commercial use. To reach customers, she relies on WhatsApp groups and Indonesian Facebook pages used by migrants across Kuala Lumpur. In this way, digital communication expands the scale of her home kitchen and allows her to maintain a mobile customer base without entering formal commercial space. Demand rises sharply around payday and during Ramadan, when Indonesian workers seek not only inexpensive food but emotionally familiar food that evokes home. Her kitchen thus becomes more than a site of production; it becomes a social node where migrants exchange job information, discuss employers, share religious advice, and reproduce a sense of Indonesian communal life in exile. Her enterprise stabilizes household income when her husband's overtime falls, and in doing so it changes her position within the family from dependent spouse to co-earner, echoing findings that migrant households with accompanying spouses often become more deeply embedded in local consumption and informal business life (World Bank, 2022; Yusoff, 2011).

Yet informality also makes Siti vulnerable. Neighbours sometimes complain about smoke, noise, or foot traffic. She fears municipal inspection, landlord sanctions, and immigration checks, especially because her work exists outside the terms to her official status.

To reduce these risks, she builds relationships with the local surau committee, which occasionally hires her for religious events. These connections do not legalize her business, but they provide a certain level of protection. of social legitimacy and protection. Siti's case reveals how Indonesian migrant women transform domestic skills, religious trust, and kin-like solidarity into a micro-enterprise, while simultaneously carrying the burden of regulatory exposure. Her business exists at the intersection of household survival, moral economy, and urban informality.

Case 2: Arif – Informal Remittance and Phone-Shop Operator in Johor

Arif, a 29-year-old migrant from Pontianak, works officially as a warehouse loader in Johor Bahru. But his wage work is only one part of his livelihood. On weekends and evenings, he runs a side business that combines mobile-phone top-ups, second-hand phone sales, and informal remittance services for fellow Indonesian workers. His “shop” is not a formal shop at all; it is a small counter inside a mini-market owned by a Malaysian acquaintance, located near a bus stop used by plantation workers and low-wage migrants on their days off. This location is significant. It is a point of flow, waiting, and conversation, making it an ideal site for services built on accessibility and trust.

Arif had initially migrated through irregular channels, and that experience shaped his understanding of the barriers many migrants face in using formal financial services. Workers without proper documentation, with limited literacy, or with fear of official institutions often avoid banks and licensed remittance counters,

even when they need to send money home urgently (Nuh, 2022). Arif began modestly by selling prepaid phone credit, since communication with family is one of the most basic migrant needs. Over time, he expanded into second-hand phones and then into facilitating remittance transfers. He developed ties with a licensed remittance agent in town and began collecting multiple small remittance orders from workers, bundling them, and taking a fee for the service. Although this arrangement falls into a grey zone, it addresses a very real need within migrant communities.

Research on the Malaysia–Indonesia remittance corridor has long shown that migrants often prefer informal transfer channels because they are cheaper, more convenient, and built on personal trust rather than bureaucratic procedure (Bank Indonesia & World Bank, 2004; World Bank, 2022). Arif’s enterprise reflects exactly this logic. His customers are not merely paying for money transfer; they are paying for familiarity, flexibility, and reduced intimidation. Instead of navigating forms, identification requirements, transport costs, and long queues, they deal with a person who speaks their language and understands their constraints. Arif’s business also functions socially. Workers stop not only to transfer money or buy phone credit, but to exchange news, ask about jobs, compare exchange rates, and discuss problems with employers. Like many migrant micro-enterprises, his counter becomes a site of informal community infrastructure.

Nevertheless, the risks remain significant. Regulatory frameworks strictly govern the individuals authorized to operate remittance services, and Arif’s position as

an intermediary is legally precarious. Delays in transfers, currency fluctuations, or technical failures could undermine confidence and adversely affect his reputation. The Malaysian friend who hosts his counter also carries risk. Yet without such improvised arrangements, many low-income migrants would face greater barriers to sending money home. Arif's case thus shows how Indonesian migrant entrepreneurship often emerges within gaps left by formal institutions. His enterprise is not simply commercial; it is a form of informal financial intermediation that converts migrant trust into livelihood. At the same time, it illustrates how migrants assume significant personal liability in order to create economic niches within systems that exclude them from full formal participation (Kusuma, 2019; Nuh, 2022).

Case 3: Lina and Budi – Pop-Up Market Traders in Sabah

Lina and Budi, a married couple from Flores, live in Tawau, Sabah, where Budi works on a plantation and Lina sells goods at a weekly pasar malam, or night market. Their household includes two children and a cousin, and their everyday life is structured by the need to stretch limited plantation wages across a fragile family economy. Lina's trading activity arose from this pressure. She buys vegetables, packaged snacks, and basic household items in bulk and resells them at a modest markup, mainly to Indonesian and Filipino workers from nearby plantations.

Their case illustrates a pattern identified in research on Indonesian migrants in Sabah: migrants who live with families often remit less frequently because a larger share of income must be spent in the destination

country itself, where food, schooling, transport, and medical needs must be met locally (Yusoff, 2011). Rather than seeing reduced remittances as a sign of weak transnational commitment, it is better understood as evidence of local embedding. Lina's stall exists because the family must survive in Sabah as well as support relatives in Flores. Her business therefore occupies a middle ground between settlement and mobility, between local necessity and cross-border obligation.

However, Lina's enterprise depends on a precarious legal arrangement. Because non-citizens face restrictions in obtaining market permits, the stall is registered under the name of a local acquaintance who charges a monthly fee. This arrangement grants access to commercial space but also creates dependency and vulnerability. If the intermediary changes terms, demands more money, or withdraws support, the business can collapse overnight. Such dependence on local "fronts" reflects a broader pattern in borderland economies, where migrants rely on citizens or semi-formal brokers to navigate licensing barriers and enforcement risks (Rahman & Sari, 2024). Informal trade, in other words, is not free from hierarchy; it often reproduces new forms of dependency even as it offers alternatives to wage labor.

Yet the stall is more than an economic outlet. It is a social gathering point. Migrants come not only to buy goods but to share information about transport, clinics, school matters, and employment. The stall helps the family smooth cash flow, manage school expenses, and maintain a modest level of household resilience. Still, the business remains insecure. Rain, market closures, health inspections, and rising wholesale

prices can quickly erode profits. Relatives with irregular documentation risk arrest if enforcement sweeps take place nearby. Lina and Budi's case captures the unstable but meaningful role of petty trade in migrant livelihoods. Their enterprise allows them to move beyond sole dependence on plantation wages and to root themselves, however precariously, in Sabah's informal urban economy. It also reveals how family migration often generates hybrid livelihood strategies that combine wage labor, trade, and community-based social capital.

Case 4: Dani – Return-Migrant Entrepreneur Linking Kuala Lumpur and Malang

Dani's story shows that migrant entrepreneurship does not end at the border or with return; it can become an enduring transnational bridge. Dani, now 40, spent twelve years in Kuala Lumpur, first as a cleaner and later as a storekeeper in a logistics company. During those years, he lived in a shared flat in Cheras and regularly attended an Indonesian surau that served as a place of worship, social support, and practical learning. There he met older migrants who had returned to Java and opened small businesses. Inspired by them, Dani began saving seriously, joined informal savings groups, and learned basic bookkeeping and stock management from a co-worker.

Studies of return-migrant entrepreneurship show that the economic value of migration often lies not only in saved money but in acquired habits, discipline, skills, and relational networks (Hadi, 2022). Dani's experience reflects this clearly. When he returned to Malang in 2020, he used his savings and contacts to open a small logistics and parcel service specializing

in shipments between East Java and Malaysia. His clients include families sending food, clothes, and gifts to migrant relatives in Malaysia, as well as returnees sending goods back to Indonesia. He also leverages his prior relationships with courier workers and shopkeepers in Kuala Lumpur to negotiate reliable schedules and reduced transport costs. Over time, he added a small warung at the front of the business, serving Malaysian-style dishes alongside Javanese food, thereby turning his migration history into commercial identity.

Dani's business is significant because it reveals how migration can generate bi-directional economic circuits. He is no longer simply a former migrant laborer; he is now a small entrepreneur operating across the social and economic space created by migration itself. His work links Indonesian families, Malaysian-based workers, transport networks, and everyday material culture across borders. In this sense, he embodies the transition from labor migrant to transnational intermediary. His case supports findings that return migrants who combine financial capital with social remittances and strong local ties are better positioned to reintegrate economically and even become small employers (Hadi, 2022; Sitorus, 2024).

Nevertheless, Dani's enterprise is not without risk. Customs rules, parcel delays, exchange-rate changes, and the fragility of informal trust-based shipping arrangements remain constant challenges. Yet the business allows him to employ two local youths, advise potential migrants more realistically, and maintain active ties with Kuala Lumpur. His trajectory blurs the boundary between migrant worker and entrepreneur, showing how years of modest wage

labor can evolve into a transnational business model rooted in kinship, migration memory, and religiously inflected trust. Dani's story reminds us that migration can produce not only dependency but also commercial imagination and post-migration reinvention.

Taken together, these four cases show that Indonesian migrant enterprise in Malaysia is not a side issue but a central part of how migrants negotiate life under conditions of low wages, unstable work, and legal restriction. These activities are rarely formal, fully secure, or institutionally recognized. Yet they matter deeply. They sustain households, circulate trust, create social nodes, and connect Malaysia to Indonesian local economies. They also reveal that migrants are not merely passive laborers governed by policy; they are active economic actors who improvise, strategize, and build limited autonomy within structurally unequal conditions. To understand Indonesian migration in Malaysia fully, one must therefore look not only at contracts and wages but at kitchens, market stalls, transport counters, prayer groups, and returnee shops. It is in these spaces that migrants reshape labor into livelihood, obligation into enterprise, and mobility into a fragile but meaningful form of economic life.

6 . 7 C o n c l u s i o n

Indonesian migration to Malaysia demonstrates how labor mobility is embedded within kinship, gender, and religious networks. Migration is not only an economic process but also a social and moral transformation. Migrants navigate complex systems of dependency and agency, shaping their identities and relationships across borders. Indonesian migration to Malaysia reveals that labor mobility cannot be understood solely through economic explanations.

While the search for income and employment remains a central motivation, the experiences of Indonesian migrant workers demonstrate that migration is deeply embedded within wider social structures shaped by kinship, gender, and religious life. Migrant journeys are rarely individual projects; rather, they are often organized through family networks, village connections, and community-based knowledge that guide decisions, routes, and expectations. In this sense, migration emerges as a relational process that links households across borders and sustains livelihoods through transnational ties.

At the same time, the Indonesian case highlights how migration is structured by gendered labor regimes. Women, particularly those engaged in domestic work, occupy positions that blur the boundaries between work and private life. Their labor is not only economic but also emotional and reproductive, forming part of broader global care chains (Parreñas, 2001). These conditions create specific vulnerabilities, including isolation, restricted mobility, and dependence on employers. Yet, they also reveal forms of agency, as women navigate these constraints to support families, manage remittances, and make strategic decisions about their futures. Migration thus operates as both a site of constraint and a space of negotiation.

Religious and community networks further shape the everyday lives of Indonesian migrants in Malaysia. Mosques, prayer groups, and informal gatherings provide not only spiritual guidance but also practical support, information sharing, and emotional connection. These spaces enable migrants to maintain a sense of identity and belonging while living in unfamiliar environments. As Levitt (2007) suggests,

religion often travels with migrants, becoming a key resource for coping with uncertainty and sustaining moral frameworks in transnational contexts. However, Indonesian migration is also shaped by systems of governance that regulate mobility and labor. Temporary work permits, recruitment systems, and employer-linked contracts create conditions of dependency that limit workers' autonomy. Migrants are incorporated into the labor market as essential workers, yet their rights and mobility remain restricted. This reflects a broader pattern in migration regimes, where economic inclusion coexists with social and legal marginalization (Anderson, 2013).. Ultimately, the Indonesian case illustrates that migration is not merely a movement of labor but a transformation of life. Migrants continuously negotiate their identities, relationships, and aspirations across borders, creating complex social worlds that extend beyond national boundaries. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing a more nuanced and humane perspective on migration in Malaysia and beyond. The Indonesian case, when read alongside the earlier discussions of Indian and Bangladeshi migrant workers, points toward a broader pattern that extends beyond any single national experience. While each community enters Malaysia through distinct historical pathways and occupational niches, their lives are shaped by similar structural forces—labor demand, migration governance, and the need to build social worlds in unfamiliar environments. These shared conditions suggest that migration in Malaysia cannot be fully understood through isolated case studies alone. Instead, it requires a more integrated perspective that brings these experiences into dialogue with one another. At the same time, the Indonesian case introduces important

nuances that complicate a purely structural reading of migration. The centrality of gender, particularly in domestic work, reveals how migration systems are not neutral but are deeply shaped by social hierarchies and cultural expectations. The prominence of religious and community networks further demonstrates that migrants are not simply positioned within systems of control but actively participate in creating spaces of belonging and meaning. These dynamics highlight the need to move beyond a narrow focus on labor and policy toward a broader understanding of migration as a lived and relational process. Taken together, the cases explored in this book raise a set of important analytical questions. How do different migrant communities experience similar structures of labor and governance in distinct ways? What common patterns emerge across these experiences, and where do meaningful differences remain? How do migrants negotiate the tensions between dependency and agency, control and autonomy, exclusion and belonging? Addressing these questions requires a shift from description to synthesis—from examining migration as a series of separate narratives to understanding it as a coherent social formation.

The following chapter takes up this task by bringing together the experiences of Indian, Bangladeshi, and Indonesian migrant workers into a unified analytical framework. It explores how migration in Malaysia operates simultaneously as a labor system, a governance regime, and a social world, and reflects on what these interconnected dimensions reveal about the broader dynamics of migration in the contemporary Global South.

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CHAPTER 7

FROM LABOR TO LIFE: MIGRATION, GOVERNANCE, AND SOCIAL WORLDS IN MALAYSIA

This chapter undertakes the task of synthesis by moving beyond the descriptive richness of individual cases toward a conceptual integration of findings. It argues that migration in Malaysia should be understood as a multidimensional process that simultaneously operates as a labor regime, a governance apparatus, and a lived social world. Such an approach aligns with broader developments in migration studies, which have increasingly emphasized the need to bridge macro-level structural analyses with micro-level lived experiences (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014; Hollifield, Martin, & Orrenius, 2014). By situating migrant experiences within this integrated framework, the chapter seeks to demonstrate that migration is not merely an economic transaction but a transformative process that reshapes identities, relationships, and moral worlds.

7.0 Introduction

The preceding chapters have traced the trajectories of Indian, Bangladeshi, and Indonesian migrant workers

in Malaysia through distinct empirical lenses, revealing a complex interplay between labor systems, migration governance, and everyday social life. When considered individually, each case appears embedded in specific historical, cultural, and occupational contexts. However, when these cases are brought into analytical conversation, they reveal a deeper structural coherence that transcends national origin. Migration in Malaysia is not a fragmented phenomenon composed of isolated migrant communities; rather, it constitutes a patterned social system in which economic demand, regulatory frameworks, and social relations converge to produce shared yet differentiated experiences. At the heart of this synthesis lies the recognition that migrant workers in Malaysia occupy a paradoxical position. They are indispensable to the functioning of key economic sectors, yet their social and political recognition remains limited. This tension reflects what has been conceptualized in earlier chapters as the *politics of presence*—a condition in which migrants are simultaneously included as labor and excluded as full social subjects. The following sections explore how this paradox unfolds across economic structures, governance systems, and social practices.

7 . 1 M i g r a t i o n a s S t r u c t u r a l C o n d i t i o n : B e y o n d I n d i v i d u a l C h o i c e

Migration to Malaysia, as evidenced by cases from India, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, cannot be adequately explained by individual decision-making models alone. While personal aspirations and economic motivations certainly play a role, the broader patterns observed in the empirical chapters point toward structural forces that shape migration

flows. These forces include global economic inequalities, regional labor market dynamics, and historical migration corridors that connect sending and receiving countries.

Theoretical frameworks in migration studies have long emphasized the limitations of purely individualistic explanations. Neoclassical economic models, which conceptualize migration as a rational choice based on wage differentials, provide only a partial account of migration processes (Massey et al., 1993). More recent approaches, such as the new economics of labor migration, highlight the role of households and communities in shaping migration decisions, framing migration as a collective strategy for risk diversification and income stabilization (Stark & Bloom, 1985; Massey et al., 1993). The cases examined in this book strongly support this perspective, as migration pathways are often embedded in kinship networks and facilitated by community-based knowledge systems.

In the Malaysian context, these dynamics are further shaped by the structural demand for labor in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, plantation agriculture, and domestic work. As Piore (1979) argued in his theory of segmented labor markets, advanced and rapidly developing economies generate a persistent demand for migrant labor in secondary sectors characterized by instability, low wages, and limited upward mobility. Malaysia exemplifies this pattern, as migrant workers are systematically channeled into occupations that are physically demanding and socially undervalued. At a global level, these patterns are connected to broader processes of economic restructuring and uneven

development. World-systems theory, for instance, situates migration within the expansion of capitalist markets and the incorporation of peripheral regions into global production networks (Wallerstein, 1974; Castles et al., 2014). From this perspective, migration is not simply a response to local conditions but a consequence of historical and structural transformations that link labor-sending and labor-receiving regions. Malaysia's position as a middle-income, labor-importing country within Southeast Asia reflects these broader dynamics, as it draws workers from less economically developed regions while simultaneously integrating into global supply chains.

Thus, migration emerges not as a voluntary act of mobility but as a structurally conditioned process shaped by economic necessity, institutional frameworks, and social expectations. Migrant workers are not merely choosing to move; they are navigating a system that both enables and constrains their mobility.

7 . 2 M i g r a t i o n G o v e r n a n c e a n d t h e I n s t i t u t i o n a l i z a t i o n o f P r e c a r i t y

While structural economic conditions drive migration, state governance determines how migration is organized and experienced. In Malaysia, migration governance is characterized by a regulatory framework that emphasizes temporariness, employer control, and restricted mobility. Migrant workers are typically admitted under temporary work permit systems that bind them to specific employers, limiting

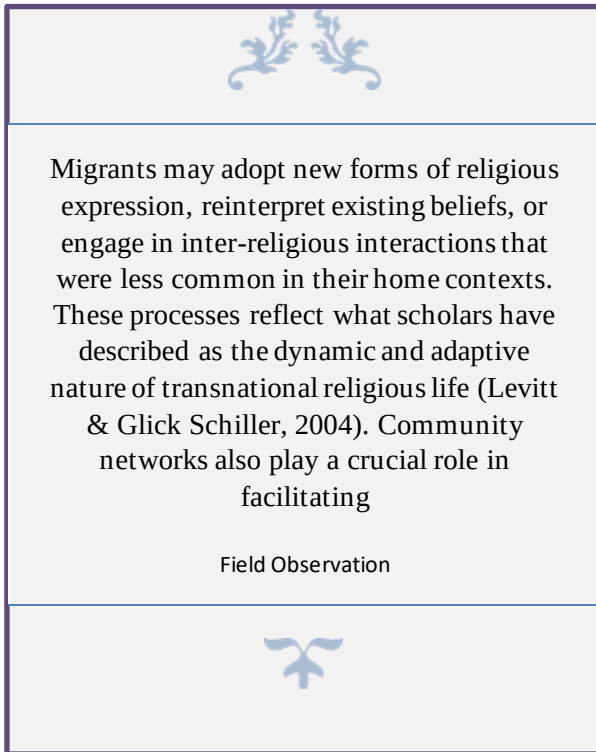
their ability to change jobs or sectors without official authorization (Hassan & George, 2015; Piper & Foley, 2021). This system of governance produces a condition of institutionalized precarity. As Standing (2011) has argued, contemporary labor markets increasingly rely on a “precariat” characterized by insecurity, limited rights, and dependency on employers. Migrant workers in Malaysia exemplify this condition, as their legal status is contingent upon continuous employment within a specific contractual arrangement. The loss of employment can lead not only to economic hardship but also to the loss of legal status, thereby exposing workers to the risk of detention or deportation. Scholars have highlighted that such governance systems are not merely administrative mechanisms but deeply political. Anderson (2013) argues that immigration controls function to produce categories of people—citizens, migrants, legal workers, and “illegals”—that are differentially valued and governed. In Malaysia, these categories shape the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, determining who is entitled to rights, protections, and social recognition. The empirical cases discussed in earlier chapters illustrate how these governance structures manifest in everyday life. Bangladeshi construction workers, for example, often face wage-related disputes and unsafe working conditions, while their ability to seek alternative employment remains limited by legal restrictions. Indonesian domestic workers, working within private households, experience a different form of dependency, as their living and working conditions are closely tied to their employers. Indian migrant workers, particularly those in urban labor markets, navigate a combination of contractual obligations and informal networks that mediate their access to

employment. These variations across sectors highlight the flexibility of migration governance in adapting to different labor demands, while maintaining a consistent underlying logic of control. Migrants are incorporated into the labor market as temporary, replaceable workers, ensuring a stable labor supply without long-term social integration. Ruhs (2013) describes this as the “price of rights,” whereby states trade off migrant rights in order to maintain control over labor migration. Thus, migration governance in Malaysia operates as a system that simultaneously facilitates economic growth and reproduces social inequality. It enables the circulation of labor while restricting the mobility and rights of those who provide it.

7 . 3 S o c i a l W o r l d s o f M i g r a t i o n : R e l i g i o n , C o m m u n i t y , a n d B e l o n g i n g

Despite the constraints imposed by economic and legal structures, migrant workers actively construct social worlds that provide meaning, support, and a sense of belonging. These social worlds are shaped by networks of kinship, nationality, and religion, which serve as crucial resources for navigating life in a foreign environment. Religion, in particular, plays a central role in the social lives of migrant workers. As Levitt (2007) has argued, religious practices often travel with migrants, becoming key sites for the reproduction of identity and community. In Malaysia, mosques, temples, and churches function not only as places of worship but also as social hubs where migrants gather, exchange information, and support one another.

These religious spaces serve multiple functions. They provide emotional comfort in the face of separation and uncertainty, offer practical assistance in navigating employment and legal systems, and reinforce moral frameworks that guide everyday behaviour. For Bangladeshi and Indonesian migrants, mosque communities often become spaces of solidarity and mutual aid, while Indian migrants draw



on temple and church networks to maintain cultural continuity.

At the same time, these social worlds are not static. Migration introduces new forms of interaction and

exchange, leading to the transformation of religious practices and identities. . However, these social worlds are not without tensions. Differences in nationality, religion, and legal status can create divisions within migrant communities, reflecting broader social and political dynamics. Nevertheless, migrants' ability to create and sustain social networks demonstrates their agency in shaping their experiences within the constraints of migration systems.

7 . 4 G e n d e r e d D i m e n s i o n s o f M i g r a t i o n a n d L a b o r

Migration is deeply gendered, and the experiences of migrant workers in Malaysia reflect significant differences based on gender. These differences are not merely incidental but are structurally embedded in labor markets and social expectations. Male migrants, particularly from Bangladesh and India, are predominantly employed in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and plantation agriculture. These sectors are characterized by physically demanding work, exposure to occupational hazards, and relatively limited social interaction outside the workplace. The challenges faced by male migrants are therefore closely linked to labor conditions and economic pressures.

In contrast, female migrants, especially from Indonesia, are concentrated in domestic work and care-related occupations. These roles are situated within private households, where the boundaries between work and personal life are often blurred. As Parreñas (2001) has shown, domestic work is a central component of global care chains, linking households across borders through the movement of female labor.

The gendered nature of domestic work creates specific vulnerabilities. Live-in domestic workers may experience isolation, restricted mobility, and limited access to external support networks. At the same time, they may also develop close relationships with employers and household members, leading to complex and sometimes contradictory experiences. However, it is important to avoid viewing female migrants solely through the lens of vulnerability. Many women demonstrate significant agency in managing migration, supporting families, and making strategic decisions about work and mobility. Elias (2013) highlights how migrant domestic workers navigate power relations within households, often asserting autonomy and negotiating their conditions.

Thus, gender shapes not only the types of work migrants perform but also the forms of agency and vulnerability they experience. Understanding migration in Malaysia, therefore, requires attention to the intersection of gender, labor, and governance.

7 . 5 T r a n s n a t i o n a l L i v e s : M o b i l i t y , M e m o r y , a n d E m o t i o n a l L a b o r

Migration is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that extends across borders and over time. Migrant workers maintain strong connections with their home countries through remittances, communication technologies, and periodic visits. These transnational ties form an integral part of migrant life, shaping both economic and emotional experiences. Remittances play a central role in sustaining households in sending countries, contributing to education, healthcare, and local

development. At the same time, they create expectations and obligations that can place significant pressure on migrants. The responsibility to support family members often influences decisions about work, savings, and future plans.

Communication technologies have transformed the nature of transnational relationships, allowing migrants to maintain regular contact with their families. However, these connections also highlight the emotional costs of migration. Migrants often experience feelings of homesickness, guilt, and longing, particularly when separated from children and close relatives. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) describe these dynamics as part of transnational social fields, where individuals are embedded in multiple locations simultaneously. Migrants live “here” and “there” at the same time, navigating overlapping social worlds that shape their identities and experiences.

Migration thus involves not only physical mobility but also emotional labor. Migrants must manage their own feelings while fulfilling expectations from both host and home societies. This dimension of migration underscores its deeply human character, extending beyond economic and policy considerations.

7 . 6 T o w a r d s a H o l i s t i c F r a m e w o r k o f M i g r a t i o n

The synthesis presented in this chapter points toward the need for a holistic framework that integrates the multiple dimensions of migration. Migration in Malaysia cannot be reduced to a single explanatory model; it requires an approach that connects labor

systems, governance structures, and social life. From this perspective, migration can be understood as operating across three interconnected dimensions. First, it functions as a labor system that sustains economic production through the incorporation of migrant workers into specific sectors. Second, it operates as a governance system that regulates mobility, employment, and legal status. Third, it unfolds as a social world in which migrants create networks, identities, and meanings. These dimensions are mutually constitutive. Labor demand shapes policy decisions, governance structures influence social experiences, and community networks mediate the effects of both. A holistic approach therefore provides a more comprehensive understanding of migration as a complex and dynamic process.

7 . 7 M a l a y s i a i n t h e G l o b a l S o u t h M i g r a t i o n C o n t e x t

Malaysia's migration system reflects broader patterns observed across the Global South, where labor-importing countries rely on migrant workers while maintaining restrictive policies. This duality is characteristic of contemporary migration regimes, which seek to balance economic needs with political concerns about sovereignty and social cohesion (Castles et al., 2014). By situating Malaysia within this broader context, the findings of this book contribute to a deeper understanding of global migration dynamics. They highlight the ways in which economic, political, and social factors interact to shape migration systems, while also raising important questions about rights, recognition, and justice.

7 . 8 C o n c l u s i o n o f t h e C h a p t e r

This chapter has synthesized the experiences of Indian, Bangladeshi, and Indonesian migrant workers to demonstrate that migration in Malaysia is a structured and multidimensional process. It is shaped by economic necessity, regulated through governance systems, and lived through complex social relationships. Migrant workers, while facing conditions of precarity and limited recognition, actively construct meaningful lives through networks of support, religious practices, and transnational connections. Their experiences reveal the deeply human dimensions of migration, reminding us that migration is not only about labor but also about identity, belonging, and transformation.

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CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION:
RETHINKING
MIGRATION, LABOR,
AND MORAL WORLDS
IN MALAYSIA

This book has examined migrant labor in Malaysia as more than an economic phenomenon, showing that migration is a complex process shaped by labor systems, governance structures, and lived human experiences. Across the chapters, migrant workers from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Thailand were analysed not simply as workers, but as social actors navigating relationships, identities, and moral expectations. The concept of the politics of presence has been central to this analysis, demonstrating how migrants are physically visible within workplaces and economic systems, yet remain socially and politically limited in recognition. Migration in Malaysia is therefore not only about labor supply but about how individuals are positioned within systems of inclusion and exclusion. This perspective shifts the discussion away from narrow policy debates and toward a broader understanding of migration as a social condition that affects both migrants and the societies they enter.

8.1 Migration as a
Structural Necessity
and Social
Contradiction

The chapters collectively show that migration produces transformation at multiple levels. At the structural level, labor markets and policies shape the opportunities and constraints migrants face. At the social level, migrants build networks, maintain families across borders, and adapt to new environments. At the personal level, migration reshapes identity, belonging, and everyday life. These layers interact in complex ways, making migration a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed condition. This conclusion brings together these insights and argues that migration in Malaysia should be understood through a more human-centered lens. Rather than focusing solely on economic outcomes or regulatory systems, it is necessary to recognize migrants' lived realities and the broader social implications of migration. By doing so, the book contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of migration as both a structural necessity and a deeply human experience.

One of the most important findings of this study is that migrant labor has become a structural necessity within Malaysia's economic system. Key sectors such as construction, manufacturing, plantation agriculture, and domestic work rely heavily on migrant workers to sustain productivity and growth. Without this labor force, many industries would struggle to operate effectively. Migration is therefore not temporary or optional but embedded within the country's development model. At the same time, this economic reliance coexists with a social contradiction. Migrants are welcomed as workers but not fully accepted as members of society. Their presence is essential for economic functioning, yet their recognition remains limited within social and political frameworks. This

creates a dual condition in which migrants are both central and marginal. This contradiction is reinforced through legal and institutional arrangements that define migrants as temporary and conditional participants in society. Work permits tied to specific employers, restrictions on mobility, and limited access to rights all contribute to a system of controlled inclusion. Migrants are allowed to work and contribute economically, but their long-term belonging is restricted. This situation reflects a broader global pattern in which labor-receiving countries depend on migrant workers while maintaining boundaries around citizenship and social inclusion. In Malaysia, this tension is particularly visible due to the scale of migrant labor and the structure of governance systems. Understanding this contradiction is essential because it highlights the limitations of current migration models and raises important questions about fairness, sustainability, and the future of labor systems.

8 . 2 L a b o r R e g i m e s a n d t h e P r o d u c t i o n o f P r e c a r i t y

The analysis in this book shows that migrant labor operates within structured labor regimes that actively shape working conditions and social experiences. These regimes organize migrants into specific sectors and roles, often concentrating them in low-wage, labor-intensive jobs with limited security. Construction sites, factories, plantations, and domestic households all depend on migrant workers who perform essential tasks under challenging conditions. The structure of these labor regimes produces precarity, characterized by long working hours, limited bargaining power, and restricted mobility.

Recruitment systems further contribute to this condition by placing financial burdens on migrants, often through high fees that lead to debt before employment begins. This creates a cycle of dependency that limits workers' ability to challenge unfair conditions. Employer-tied visa systems reinforce this precarity by linking migrants' legal status directly to their employment. Leaving a job can result in loss of legal status, making it difficult for workers to escape abusive or exploitative situations. These structural arrangements show that precarity is not accidental but embedded within the labor system itself. At the same time, migrants are not passive within these conditions. They develop strategies to navigate and negotiate their circumstances, using networks, experience, and knowledge to improve their situations where possible. However, these efforts occur within constrained environments, highlighting the need to address systemic issues rather than focusing only on individual resilience. A more equitable labor regime would require reforms that reduce dependency, improve protections, and recognize migrant workers as essential contributors rather than disposable labor.

8 . 3 M i g r a t i o n G o v e r n a n c e a n d t h e P o l i t i c s o f C o n t r o l

Migration governance in Malaysia plays a central role in shaping how migrant labor is organized and regulated. Through legal frameworks, administrative systems, and enforcement mechanisms, the state controls the entry, employment, and mobility of migrant workers. These systems are designed to balance economic demand with concerns about

national sovereignty, security, and social order. However, governance is not only about regulation; it also involves classification and control. Migrants are categorized into different legal statuses, such as documented or undocumented, each with distinct rights and vulnerabilities. These categories shape migrants' experiences by determining access to employment, legal protection, and social services.

The governance system creates a tension between inclusion and exclusion. On one hand, migrants are recruited to support economic development. On the other hand, strict controls limit their integration into society. Enforcement practices, including inspections and deportation policies, further reinforce this control. At the same time, the existence of undocumented migrants reflects gaps in the system, where labor demand exceeds formal regulatory capacity. Migration governance is therefore not a fixed system but a dynamic process shaped by economic needs, political priorities, and regional relationships. Understanding this process requires recognizing that governance structures do not simply manage migration; they actively shape the conditions under which migration occurs. A more balanced approach would involve policies that protect migrant rights while addressing economic and social realities.

8 . 4 R e l i g i o n , I d e n t i t y , a n d M o r a l W o r l d s

The book has emphasized that migration is not only shaped by economic and legal structures but also by cultural and moral frameworks. Migrant workers carry with them religious beliefs, social values, and cultural practices that influence how they interpret their

experiences abroad. In Malaysia, religious institutions such as mosques, temples, and churches play a significant role in providing support, community, and a sense of belonging. These spaces allow migrants to maintain connections with their cultural identity while adapting to new environments. Religion also offers a framework for understanding hardship, resilience, and purpose, helping migrants cope with challenges such as separation from family and demanding working conditions.

At the same time, migration can transform these moral worlds. Exposure to new environments and interactions with different communities can lead to changes in beliefs, practices, and identities. Migrants often reinterpret their experiences through moral narratives of sacrifice, responsibility, and hope. This process highlights the importance of viewing migration as not only a structural or economic process but also a deeply personal and transformative journey. Recognizing the role of religion and moral frameworks provides a more complete understanding of migration, one that goes beyond policy and labor to include the meanings and values that shape migrant lives.

8 . 5 G e n d e r e d M i g r a t i o n a n d t h e F e m i n i z a t i o n o f L a b o r

The case of Indonesian migrant workers illustrates the gendered nature of migration, particularly in sectors such as domestic work and care. Female migrants play a central role in sustaining households across borders, forming transnational care chains that connect families

in Malaysia and Indonesia. While they provide care in host societies, their own families rely on substitute caregivers, creating a redistribution of care that reflects global inequalities. These dynamics highlight how migration is shaped by gender roles, with women often expected to balance economic contribution with moral and familial responsibilities. At the same time, female migrants demonstrate agency in navigating these conditions. Through remittances, decision-making, and negotiation of work conditions, they reshape family dynamics and challenge traditional gender roles. However, this empowerment is often accompanied by constraints, including vulnerability to exploitation and moral surveillance. Women are expected to maintain respectability and fulfill social expectations even while living abroad. This creates a complex interplay between autonomy and control. Understanding gendered migration is essential for developing policies and frameworks that address the specific needs and challenges faced by female migrants while recognizing their contributions and agency.

8 . 6 C o m p a r a t i v e I n s i g h t s : D i v e r s i t y a n d C o m m o n a l i t y

The comparative analysis of migrant groups from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Thailand reveals a complex interplay between diversity and patterned similarity within Malaysia's migration system. Each migrant group is embedded in distinct historical trajectories and socio-cultural formations that shape their labor market positioning and everyday experiences. Bangladeshi migrants are largely concentrated in construction, manufacturing, and

service sectors, often entering through highly commercialized recruitment systems that produce debt dependency and structural vulnerability. Indian migrants, by contrast, carry a layered historical presence rooted in colonial plantation economies, with contemporary migration reflecting both continuity and diversification into urban labor and skilled sectors. Indonesian workers occupy a central position in domestic and care labor, highlighting the feminization of migration and the emergence of transnational care chains. Thai migrants, particularly in northern border regions, engage in more fluid and semi-formal labor mobility shaped by geography, kinship proximity, and cross-border economic exchange. These differences are not merely descriptive; they reflect how migration corridors, state agreements, cultural familiarity, and labor demand intersect to produce differentiated migrant subjectivities within the same national space.

Despite these variations, a set of shared structural conditions cuts across all migrant groups, revealing the underlying architecture of Malaysia's migration regime. Migrants, regardless of nationality, are incorporated into a system defined by temporality, restricted rights, and employer dependency. Legal frameworks classify them as short-term labor rather than long-term social participants, limiting their access to mobility, protection, and recognition. Across communities, migrants rely heavily on informal networks—co-nationals, kinship ties, religious institutions, and community organizations—to navigate everyday challenges and mitigate institutional gaps. Mosques, temples, and churches become not only sites of worship but also hubs of information exchange, emotional support, and collective resilience. This convergence of diversity

and commonality demonstrates that migration in Malaysia is both fragmented and structurally unified. A comparative approach is therefore essential, not only to highlight differences between groups but to reveal the shared systemic logic that governs all migrant lives. Such an approach allows us to move beyond isolated case narratives toward a more integrated understanding of migration as a relational and interconnected system.

8 . 7 P o l i c y I m p l i c a t i o n s a n d F u t u r e D i r e c t i o n s

Workers are generally regarded as mere economic inputs within labor markets, valued primarily for their productivity and efficiency. This narrow view often leads to their recognition as disposable resources rather than as social actors with rights, identities, and long-term contributions to society. Consequently, there is an urgent need for a significant policy shift—one that redefines the role of migrants and workers, positioning them not only as laborers but as integral participants in the social fabric. Such a transformation would acknowledge their multifaceted identities and contributions beyond economic output.

A comprehensive approach must prioritize the strengthening of labor protections across all sectors, with particular emphasis on industries where regulation is weak and vulnerabilities are pronounced. Domestic work exemplifies this challenge, as many workers in this sector operate without adequate legal safeguards, leaving them exposed to exploitation and abuse. Improving enforcement of existing laws,

introducing new regulations, and ensuring accessible mechanisms for redress are essential steps toward safeguarding these workers.

Furthermore, a holistic policy framework should include measures that promote social inclusion and recognition. This involves addressing systemic



In addition, long-term social contributions of workers extend beyond their immediate economic roles. Many migrants and workers engage in community-building activities, support networks, and cultural diversification, enriching the social landscape. Policies need to appreciate and bolster these contributions through community engagement programs, cultural recognition, and support for civic participation.

Field Observation



barriers that hinder migrants' access to healthcare, education, and social services, thereby facilitating their full integration into society. Recognizing migrants as valuable contributors requires dismantling discriminatory practices and fostering inclusive policies that affirm their rights and agency. To implement these changes effectively, governments

must collaborate with civil society, worker organizations, and international bodies. Developing comprehensive policy frameworks that incorporate the voices of migrants and workers themselves ensures that reforms are responsive, equitable, and sustainable. Education and awareness campaigns can also play a vital role in shifting societal perceptions, fostering respect and appreciation for migrant workers.

Ultimately, framing workers as social actors and not just economic units is essential for building inclusive, resilient societies. By elevating labor protections, ensuring social recognition, and fostering societal integration, policies can create a more equitable environment where all workers, regardless of their origin, can thrive and contribute meaningfully over the long term. Legal recognition of domestic labor, enforcement of working-hour standards, and access to grievance mechanisms are essential steps toward reducing exploitation. Equally important is reforming recruitment systems, which currently place disproportionate financial burdens on migrants. Transparent recruitment processes, regulation of intermediary agencies, and bilateral monitoring mechanisms can help reduce debt bondage and improve pre-departure conditions. Such reforms would not only protect migrants but also contribute to more stable and ethical labor markets.

At the same time, migration governance must move beyond a narrow logic of control toward a framework of inclusion and fairness. Temporary migration systems may continue to play a role in addressing labor shortages, but they should not result in long-term marginalization or social exclusion. Policies that facilitate access to justice, healthcare, and basic social protections are essential for ensuring dignity and well-

being. Community integration initiatives, including language support, legal awareness programs, and partnerships with civil society organizations, can help bridge the gap between migrants and host communities. Regional cooperation is also crucial, as migration is inherently transnational. Stronger collaboration between Malaysia and labor-sending countries can improve recruitment practices, ensure accountability, and create more coherent migration pathways. Looking forward, future research should expand beyond economic and policy analysis to engage more deeply with the social, cultural, and moral dimensions of migration. Understanding migrants' lived experiences, aspirations, and ethical frameworks will be key to developing policies that are not only effective but also just and sustainable.

8 . 8 F i n a l R e f l e c t i o n

Migration is not simply a movement of people across borders; it is a transformative process that reshapes economies, social structures, and individual lives. The experiences of migrant workers in Malaysia reveal a complex reality where opportunity and vulnerability coexist. On one hand, migration offers pathways for economic mobility, allowing individuals to support families, build livelihoods, and pursue aspirations beyond the limitations of their home contexts. On the other hand, it exposes migrants to systems of control, precarity, and social marginalization. Their labor sustains industries, builds infrastructure, and supports everyday life in Malaysia, yet their contributions often remain under-recognized in public narratives. At the same time, migrants demonstrate resilience and adaptability, navigating unfamiliar environments, forming new communities, and negotiating identities

across borders. Their stories highlight the human capacity to endure, adapt, and transform within challenging conditions.

This book has argued for a rethinking of migration through a more human-centered and relational perspective. Migration should not be reduced to statistics, policy categories, or economic functions. It must be understood as a lived experience shaped by relationships, values, and moral worlds. Recognizing migrants as full human subjects requires moving beyond the idea of temporary labor toward a broader vision of inclusion and dignity. As Malaysia continues to develop and integrate into global labor systems, the question is not whether migration will remain central—it will—but how it will be understood, governed, and valued. A more inclusive and ethical approach to migration has the potential to transform not only policy but also social attitudes, creating a society where migrant workers are recognized as integral contributors rather than invisible labor. In this sense, migration is not only about movement; it is about the possibility of building more just and humane futures.

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