

CHALLENGES FACED BY THAI MIGRANT WORKERS RETURNEE FROM MALAYSIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Covid-19 started and impacted people regardless of their background. One of the most vulnerable groups is the migrant workers group as many of them experience various challenges during this time. Thus, this research is designed to identify the challenges of the returnee migrant workers once they returned to their hometown, specifically who live in Pattani, Yaring area based. This research is qualitative in nature and there are sixteen (16) migrant workers who have been willingly involved in an in-depth interview process. A thematic analysis is used to analyze the data. The key findings of the study highlight the challenges of the returnee migrant workers. The findings show that there are four (4) main challenges were faced by them, those are on the financial, health, social and educational issue. It is clear that the returnee migrant workers, still, have limited services offered for them and in order to combat, the aid given by government together with social inclusion is needed.

Keywords: *Pandemic Challenges, Social Support, Migrant Workers*

1.0 Introduction

A migrant according to International Organization for Migration (IOM) is any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether her movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; and (4) what the length for the stay is. Thus, a migrant can migrate within or outside boarder with various purposes because the different factors that play as a main cause such as climate change, wars and dictatorship, sexual identity, education, land grabbing, religion, economic development, and jobs [3]. Indeed, migration is an old as humankind. People migrate with the hope to search for a better living.

Previously, in Asia, labor migration is a product of history. Linguistic and cultural connection, diaspora networks and geographic proximity are the cause that forcing and shaping migration decisions. Unlike currently where people migrate because the economic growth rates between countries, the power of newly digital technology, and the climate change which these are to reshape the migratory movement [1]. In 2017, over a third of international migrants worldwide also originate from Asia together with the Pacific with 258 million. International migrants from the region almost doubled from 48.3 million in 1990 to 86.9 million in 2017. India had the most out-migrants with 17 million then followed by China with 10 million. Other key resources in this region were Bangladesh with 7.5 million, Pakistan with 6 million and the Philippine with 5.7 million [9]. It is no doubt that Asia is a key component of international migration flows.

Because of migration, the migrant workers have boosted the economics by sending remittances to their loved in the original countries and spending power in origin countries, with an estimated USD702bn channeled across countries in 2020, accounting for a large share of economies, such as Nepal (23.5%), Pakistan (9.9%), the Philippines (9.6%) and Bangladesh (6.6%) [22]. Additionally, the migrants also can boost the transfer of skills and knowledge as well as the networks of migrants while they work aboard [1].

Thailand is also one of the largest destinations for migrant workers in the region. The Thai government accepts a huge number of migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar since the early 1990s and at the same time, Thailand also has sent its own nationals to the Middle East, East Asia, and the neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. Specifically, Thailand's southernmost provinces referring to Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat have the highest number migrant workers who work in Malaysia [2]. The reasons many Thai in such areas decide migrating to Malaysia is mainly for employment because the similarities in terms of cultural, religious, ethnic, and linguistic frontier. Thus, such characteristics, it invited many people in those areas to Malaysia for a better employment and to uplift their quality of life [6]. The types of working for the Thais in Malaysia are various such as construction sector, agriculture and farming sector, industrial sector, tourism sector and service sector including massage or spa sector and Thai restaurant [13]

After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Covid-19 as a pandemic. Over 5.7 million people infected and close to 400,000 deaths by the end of May 2020. Malaysia also announced and confirmed on its first case on 25 January 2020 and took early prevention action by implementing the Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020 in which people are not allowed to travel more than 10 km in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19 [17]. Later, the migrant workers in Malaysia are required to return to its original countries by 21 April 2021 without getting penalty if they overstay due to the MCO [5]. Once, the Thai migrant workers arrived their homes, the problems for them still occurred even in their hometown. Therefore, this article is meant to study the challenges of the returned Thai migrant workers from Malaysia during the Covid-19.

2.0 Problem Statement

The Covid-19 first started in the end of 2019, and it impacted at the beginning of 2020. Thus, people around the globe were affected by the Covid-19. International Labour Organization stated that this pandemic has the unequal impact on certain groups of population in which it can trigger worsening inequalities, those groups are (1) those who have health problems and the older people with health issues, (2) the youngsters who face with the higher rates of unemployment under the global financial crisis, (3) the unprotected workers including the self-employed, casual and gig workers as they are less protected by the social protection mechanism, and finally (4) those migrant workers who are directly impacted as some might experience in not getting access to the destination countries while some are unable to return to their original home countries [7]. Or if they are still able to return, they were considered as the cause to the rapid transmission of infection of Covid-19 [18]. Thus, people in general might be afraid to interact and have a negative perception towards them. United Nation also supported and mentioned that these workers are exposed to xenophobia and racism and are often accused of spreading the virus. Migrant workers are often the first group to be laid-off [16]. However, they are the last group to obtain access to testing or treatment in line with nationals. Most of them are often excluded from national COVID-19 policy responses, such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits or social security and social protection measures [8]. Additionally, most of the migrant workers worry that the pandemic will worsen their own employment prospects which causing them significant anxiety about the future. Many migrant workers fear that having spent so much time working abroad, their occupational skills do not make them 'employable' in their hometown. They also feel that salaries in their hometown will be significantly lower than wages abroad. While working overseas has always been difficult, it afforded them greater prospects for income generation and sustainable livelihoods. Without doubt, limited opportunities to resume or take up work overseas due to COVID-19 are a major concern [19].

It is estimated that about 25 migrant workers worldwide lost jobs immediately while in ASEAN, the number recorded at the end of 2019 was 10 million [14]. In Thailand, over 150,000 migrant workers working in Malaysia in various states especially in Thai restaurant which have more than 35,000 over there. Monthly, they are able to send the remittance to their homes around 1.5 million baths in total [12]. Most of them living in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat province which located nearby to Malaysia. However, since the Covid-19 started, they were returned to their homes. Thus, the article is mainly to search for the challenges faced by the Thai migrant workers, who live in Pattani, Thailand, after returning from Malaysia who live in Pattani, Thailand.

3.0 Methodology

The problems faced by the returnee migrant workers required a detailed explanation. Therefore, this study uses the qualitative approach which supported by Lawal mentioned that the qualitative approach covers the various aspects of social relationships which people engage with including within family, at work, at school and in every sphere of social life. It gives us the most insightful information that available on social relationship [11]. Thus, this research is based on qualitative type with the use of case studies as the research design. This is because the qualitative research allows the researcher describes and interprets the issues or the phenomena systematically from the data provided by the individuals [15]. Additionally, the qualitative research focuses on the clear understanding and in-depth explanation of a certain phenomenon that is being researched and not based on measurements or calculations as this research analyses the problems of Thai migrant workers after returning to Thailand. In order to get data, purposive sampling techniques is chosen and used in this study to fulfil the need for sampling research. Purposive sampling is mostly used in qualitative research to identify and choose the information-rich cases of available resources [4]. Thus, a researcher must search for people who are suitable and willing to provide sufficient information into the issue. This is to ensure researcher have obtained the data that in line with the objective of the study. The choice of respondent is purposive. Regarding data collection techniques, researchers use an in-depth interview process to obtain the verified and relevant information. After researchers have obtained data from the interviews, it later was then analyzed into themed analysis. The below part is a summary of demographic background of the informants.

Demographic Background

This study involved of 16 returned migrant workers who faced the challenges when returning to their homes. The informants consist of men and women who have worked in Malaysia for more than 2 years.

Table 1

Summary of Informant Demographics

| Code | Gender | Age | Types of Working | Working Period in Malaysia |
|------|--------|--------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| 001 | Female | 60 years old | Thai Restaurant | 30 years |
| 002 | Female | 58 years old | Thai Restaurant | 32 years |
| 003 | Female | 24 years old | Thai Restaurant | 9 years |
| 004 | Female | 27 years old | Thai Restaurant | 12 years |
| 005 | Female | 56 years old | Keropok Industry | 23 years |
| 006 | Male | 23 years old | Keropok Industry | 9 years |
| 007 | Male | 25 years old | Fisherman | 10 years |
| 008 | Female | 52 years old | Thai Restaurant | 25 years |

| Code | Gender | Age | Types of Working | Working Period in Malaysia |
|------|--------|--------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| 009 | Male | 23 years old | Fisherman | 5 years |
| 010 | Male | 44 years old | Fisherman | 15 years |
| 011 | Male | 26 years old | Thai Restaurant | 8 years |
| 012 | Female | 24 years old | Thai Restaurant | 7 years |
| 013 | Male | 33 years old | Mama Restaurant | 17 years |
| 014 | Female | 66 years old | Thai Restaurant | 30 years |
| 015 | Female | 53 years old | Thai Restaurant | 16 years |
| 016 | Female | 27 years old | Thai Restaurant | 2 years |

4.0 Results of Research

The result of the study found that the information given by all the informants can be classified into four (4) different issues. Those four (4) main challenges are on the financial, health social and educational issue.

1. Financial Issue

At the beginning of interviewing, most of the information received is about the financial problem after returning to their homes. The question asked towards them was: “What is your problems regarding the economics?”.

Respondent 3

“I gave birth a week before the covid started in Malaysia. After I gave birth, I came back to Thailand to take the marriage certificate to make a birth certificate. But then there was announcement that Malaysia closed the country. All my items used were still in Malaysia. At that time, I notified my child’s birth in Pattani instead although I gave birth in Malaysia. But the maternity cost around RM 3,000, I still owed it there. I used my aunt’s address to ensure and confirm to the hospital that I would pay for that cost because she married and lived there now. The hospital called them because they scheduled the payment within 3 months, but now it’s too long.”

Respondent 4

“Since I came back, I never have income, but the expenses are always there. I and my husband have debt almost 100,000 baht together. I have 2 kids and now I rely on my husband only. I wish the boarder opened too soon, I wanted to go to Malaysia for working because we had a restaurant there.”

Respondent 5

“Now, I have no work. Previously, I worked in Malaysia. After I came back, I wanted to work in industry but could not. I am too old now, the industry I applied for a job did not accept me, so I just stayed home with my mother who is sick and cannot move anymore. She is a bedridden patient. I now only have income by receiving from my child that can support me, but he can provide me with limited amount. The income I received from my child; I must share to my mother too. It is not enough to eat because the cost of living is too high. Plus, I have debt for building a new house which still cost 20,000 baht.”

Respondent 7

“When I came back, I always get stress because I am unemployed. I tried to apply many jobs, but I did not get any. I am now go fishing with people I know but I rarely got fishes. When there is no fish, the owners of ship just gave me money 40-50 baht. I have too many debts. Now, I had to borrow money from my neighbors and friends for feeding to my family. Only for food, I have debt around 30,000 baht just only for food to feed my family.”

Respondent 10

“I came back for 2 years already, and I worked as fisherman since I was 15. The first year I arrived home, I did nothing, I feel lost. Money that I kept, I spent it all. Then in the year later, I wanted to have my own ship, so I borrowed money from the boss. The ship cost almost 100,000 baht. But the problem now is when I go fishing, the fishes I got, I must sell to the boss I borrowed money with a low price. He will make the price by himself; I cannot make higher price. The boss will sell fishes to the market later which he can make the price double from me. I do not have profit from this. I feel I will be in this circle for a long time. I want to clear the debt from the boss, so I can sell the fishes I got to the market by myself. I think that will be better for me and my family. I have three children, one of them is disabled which will need more money to be spent especially she needs to wear pampers always.”

2. Health Issue

In addition, it appears that not only about the financial issue that challenged them, but they also faced with the health issue especially when it comes to the mental health issue. Most of them intended to get the treatment at hospital nearby their locations, but still problems occurred and pushed them further for receiving services provided by government.

Respondent 5

“I am now having depression because usually there are father, mother, my husband, and my son. However, before I went to Malaysia for working, my father passed away then later my mom also passed away afterwards. Then I went to Malaysia for working with my husband, only my child lives in Thailand who is soldier now. When I worked in Malaysia, I got sick, my husband was the only one who helped me till I relieved. When I got better, my husband also passed away there. So, I did his funeral there. When I came back, I am now living alone. My child is still working in different province, not coming back yet. When I wanted to work, the working place did not accept me because I am disabled person, my body is not strong as I had muscle weakness. No one wanted to hire me. I want to see doctor, but I don't dare to go hospital alone. I want to have someone to accompany me to hospital or there should have doctor to come and visit me in community.”

Respondent 10

“I have stress. When I do not have money, I do not know what to eat and feed my family. I do not have money to buy pampers for my child. Sometimes my stress too much that I can feel pain in my stomach. I also do not want to have fight with my wife in front of my child and in my home. I feel very disappoint with myself.”

Respondent 14

“I admitted when I was alone and I was too stress, I was thinking to do suicide even I am Muslim. I have no one beside me. I lost my husband and my son already. I think it is better if I die.”

Respondent 15

“I have feeling of pain at my both knees. I think it is result since when I worked in Malaysia, I worked as chef which in a day I stand for 17-18 hours a day without getting rest. When I was there, I started working since 8 am to 1 am. I once fell from the bus in Malaysia after buying stuff before going to the restaurant. I wanted to see doctor but if I go to hospital then on that day, I won't have money. I am also about the paying, I am poor, so I must be patient. Now I work without a day off. I only off only Ramadhan. If I have many days off, I am afraid I will have nothing to eat.”

Respondent 7

“I have depression. When I do not have anything to eat, I went to my neighborhood asking for food.”

3. Social Issue

Another challenged occurred on the returnee migrant workers in Pattani is on searching for a new job in their own country. As the researcher has asked them by mentioning that “Please share to me, do you have any social problems since you returned to your home.” Most of the answer received mention about the difficulties in applying for a job in Thailand because of the situation, and some of them also never have experiences in working in Thailand before since they started working at the early age in Malaysia. Some also just left Thailand before completing high school.

Respondent 2

“I wanted to apply a new job at the industry, but they requested and accepted only for those who got fully vaccine. I got only one and I was too old, a person in working I applied for a job told me.”

Respondent 8

“For me, getting a job here is too difficult. I also never work in Thailand before, I started working in Malaysia since I was young.”

Respondent 11

“I am about to apply for a job, but I do not know If they will hire me. I do not have degree; I went to work in Malaysia since I was young. I never have experiences working in Thailand.”

Respondent 16

“I think it is difficult to find job. For me, it is also difficult to work in town because I do not have motorcycle for commuting from my home to town and my child is still young. My family is here, I do not want to move.”

Respondent 13

“I find it is difficult for me to work in Thailand because I worked in Malaysia since I was 16. I do not have skills much, I only worked as a chef and in restaurant only. That’s all I have.”

Respondent 10

“I find it is too hard to get a job and mingle with people here. Some of them saw me and considered me as someone that not belong as a Thai. Like when we see the Myanmar working in Thailand, I feel in that way. I didn’t feel they treat me as a Thai.”

4. Educational Issue

Furthermore, the returnee migrant workers also shared and express the problems about the education for their children after they were asked “Do you have other problems you want to share, please.” They have shown their concern both verbally and physically.

Respondent 10

“I have 3 children to be taken care of and give support, one of them is a disabled person. She must be sent to specific place for study, my wife looks after her. But I find it is difficult because now I work as fishermen. I have no time to look after and support the rest of my children. The money I received in a day is not enough to support and buy new smart phone for them to study. I want school to open fast, so they can go learning there.”

Respondent 15

“I have 3 children, 2 of them already completed studies, only one still on her journey. She just completed her high school and wanted to continue for the degree at university. But under this situation, I cannot afford her anymore. I want, if possible, the government to provide free cost university or they should decrease the tuition fees. The two children now worked at different provinces. One is at Bangkok and another one is still at Malaysia. I now worked as a single mother; my husband passed away for too long. I went to Malaysia since my last child was 2 years old. I wanted to help my last child, but it is too difficult for me now.”

Respondent 7

“I have 4 children, they are 8 years old, 6 years old, 3 years old and the youngest just only 3 months year old. All of them now did not go to school, but study from home. For me, it is too difficult to afford mobile phones for each to study. It will cost too much even the food to be fed daily, I still cannot afford them. I and my wife have been fighting a lot now. I did not want to, but what I faced now was so hard to be handled. I felt so hopeless. I wanted government to help my family.”

Respondent 12

“I have 2 children, the youngest one, I just gave birth recently. But honestly speaking, since I came back, I also needed to look after for my husband. I mean I worked and gave him money. I worked as a cleaner at the hotel, I did not have a stable income. My income depended on the travelers. When there had many travelers, the hotel would call me to go to do job, but if there had no travelers then I stayed home. I wanted my husband to get a job so he could help me too because the expense in family is too much

especially for the newborn baby and the first child is also about to enter to school. I think it is better if the tuition is free during this time. I have too many responsibilities, I am so tired.”

In conclusion, as the returnee migrant workers have faced various type of challenges after they have come back towards their homes including financial issue, health issue, job issue and education for their children. Thus, in order to reduce their burdens from all these problems, the central government together with local government, community leader, NGOs in the local area or any department that relevant to this target must corporate and work closely to assist and facilitate them so that they can be independent and stand by themselves again.

5.0 Discussion

When the challenges of those returnee migrant workers have been identified, the support from different parties should be provided and prioritized to this group as they are considered as the most vulnerable group, yet little attention and assistance given towards them. However, their needs can be supported by various parties which explained below.

Social Inclusion

The inclusion or the involvement in community development should be implied in this community in order to improve the quality of people especially for those returnee migrant workers. It, thus, requires the efforts and form of support from different parties. However, the need of support must be first coming from the community itself. With regards to the financial issue, the involvement of members in the community can be seen as a key component of assisting the other members in the community by having a central fund in that community. This is similarly concept to Syed Zafar Mahmood's Zakat Foundation of India in which people do not have to loan money from the bank as the bank is found on the principle of interest. For example, the leader of community should collect money from each member for some amount which they can offer equally per month and when the residents have problems, they can loan from here without getting interest.

Once they are independent, they return money to that fund. This way can ensure that the residents contribute and improve member's quality of live. It also strengthens the relationship and shows the entrust among the members itself as they are part of that community. This approach also can be considered as example for other communities to get involved in the process of community development especially in the field of finance. Hence, people within community itself are the main character of socialization in improving during the tough time. It is because a family living in a community is a social group that will work together to improve their institution through social actions [10]. Thus, it is clearly seen that social inclusion is significant in the sense that it requests the commitment and efforts in enhancing the people in community.

In order to reduce the stress among them, setting schedule and visit the one who shows the symptoms for both mental and any physical health risks can be carried out from members. This will make that one feel that they are not being left from that community. This also in line with theory of human ecology which suggests the microsystem is the closest environment to a person. It refers to familial relationships and interactions within it. For example, the one who shows any symptoms either for the physical or mental health with the members in community. Thus, the interactions between friends and neighbors are significant in the process of improving the quality of live as a whole. Because talking to someone in a tough time can release the stress and not feel being alone. Therefore, this will also in line with social inclusion in which the members commit not only for their own self, but also for their member who living in the same community.

Many classes under educational institution changed from onsite to online platform during the pandemic. Thus, all educators and students need to adjust the style in conducting and learning along the situation. Hence, e-learning could be portrayed under a wider concept of technology-based learning. Some educators and students, both prefer having classes conducted via online because learning via online saves their time and gives them freedom to learn anywhere, anytime at any place [21]. However, not all the students, especially children of migrant workers, are not ready to adjust because of monetary problems. Accessing technology to them is limited as they need to have the smartphone, laptop, and a stable Internet [20]. One way to ease their burden about the children of those migrant workers in the urgent time is that parents who are more educated and or any volunteer who is willingly to help can set a special class or gathering only for those children who are not catch up with the lessons. The gathering can be held at mosque as it will be a center for all to enter or anyone's house that agrees to host for the house. It might be only once in a week to help them. By doing this, it will help to reduce parents' distress as their children are unable to catch up classes especially for parents who cannot help on this matter. By having this kind of help, the children can have chance in improving on their educational performances as well as the social skills in the process itself. Also, the guidance or volunteer plays an important role in upgrade for the community in the process as well.

The Top to Bottom Approach

Various financial aids given by the government from top to down. One way to improve and reduce the burdens from many challenging of those returnees is to get them involved in program trainings that suitable with their skills. It would be better if the trainings offered should be related to technology and language skills as these skills can enhance their qualifications for their future. Additionally, the government also needs to ensure that once they have completed in training, they have the markets which they are able to enter to that otherwise it will only waste of their time by both sides. Once they enter to the market domestically and internationally, this group later will pay back to the society, from being the lower hand to the upper hand. This way will also strengthen the relationship from the top such as central government, local government and politicians or NGOs as the giver with the migrant workers as the vulnerable from situation that extremely need the development in all aspects.

Also, government can provide in order to facilitate those returnee migrant workers with regards to their health issue is that offering the free hotline call center that available in Bahasa Melayu as most of them prefer to speak in this local language rather than Thai. Because the Covid has increased the stress towards them comparing before the pandemic in which the attitude of the public already found not positive in general. Now, the returnee migrant workers might be additionally faced stigmatized as the one bringing the virus to their home countries [8]. Additionally, to ensure that they are physically and mentally fine and good, the public health sector including the psychologist social workers should visit them at least once in a month. This way will ensure that it reduces the migrant worker's health risks especially for the mental health as most of them are getting the depression from situation and some also might experience the domestic violence which they are not dare enough to talk about. Thus, they may be experiencing more stress and have higher psychosocial needs during the pandemic and may require additional support.

Apart from that, as the learning is shifted due to the Covid-19, from learning on-site to online. Thus, the government also should be flexible in doing assessment on children. The curriculum also should be changed. School should better create and provide more activities for children. Also, children must not be analyzed similar to the normal situation. School can provide proper activities which can strengthen the relationship between kids and the parents. For example, some of parents are fisherman, children might learn on skills for fishing, how to use the equipment because some equipment requires for a specific skill that cannot learn in the usual class or how

to observe or differentiate the tidal current as it relates to the time for fishing. These all are some of examples that school might be corporate with parents in enhancing these skills to children. It will eventually help children in absorbing and improving the skills that they cannot learn from the classes.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, in this study, it is seen that the social inclusion that requests for the involvement of local community itself together with the top to bottom approach can offer proper assistance to improve the livelihood of migrant workers who facing problems since the Covid-19 occurred. When the concept of social inclusion working together with the help from government (top to bottom approach), it can strengthen the relationship among the parties including government, local authorities, leader of community and the migrant workers who are considered as the vulnerable group of the community itself. Thus, it is important for community where it has migrant workers as member to implement concept of social inclusion in enhancing the quality of member itself. Because the social inclusion will require for people to participate or take part in improving those disadvantages in the society including the migrant workers.

The light of Covid-19 pandemic occurred, it had impacted people regardless of the background. The returned migrant workers in Pattani had experienced various types of challenges during this tough time. Such problems can be from losing job, insufficient food daily since there is no income, having a health risk both mentally and physically, social issues including the exophoria, being stigmatized as the one who brings the Covid-19 to community and other types of challenges which these all are the result that interlinked caused by the pandemic.

In order to combat with these problems, it turns out that social inclusion and the right approach are required as this approach can facilitate and ease those who need the help. The cooperation from both parties (government and community-based) is also important and need to be smooth enough so that the help can be carried out systematically through the process. It is also a responsible for everyone in the society in searching ways to combat with those challenges in order to reduce the gap of inequalities that have existed otherwise there will be people that still be left out in the society. It also should be realized that the migrant workers are the one who have helped the economics, thus, their problems must not be ignored by the society.

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