

Developing a Demographic, Human Capital Values and Economic Profiling of Rohingya Refugees Workers in Malaysia

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Abstract

One of the most important trends with regards to forced migration is the growing number of refugees hosted in developing countries like Turkey, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. The unnoticed facts, but the truth is Rohingya ethnic are the longest staying refugees in Malaysia. In line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), whose primary objectives to leave no-one behind, protect the environment, and ensure peace, investigating who these people are in terms of their livelihood, skills, and other economic characteristics is imperative. The data was collected through a face-to-face structured questionnaire. The study findings suggested some valuable information to assist the government in delivering inclusive refugees' rights to work.

Keywords: Rohingya Refugees; Economic Profiling; Inclusive Employment; Sustainable Development Goals

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1.0 Introduction

One of the most important trends with regards to forcibly displaced persons is the increasing number of refugees hosted in developing countries like Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia. As of 2018, developing countries hosted 84% of the world's refugee population (UNHCR, 2019), while Germany is the only developed country listed as the top 10 major host countries of refugees. This trend reflects the deliberate policies of the developing host countries, including Malaysia, to increase refugees' economic self-sufficiency by allowing them to participate in the local labour market, reducing the economic, social, and welfare costs. However, the significant progress does not happen in Malaysia as the nation is not signatory parties to the United Nations Refugee Convention 1951, neither its 1967 protocol. In turn, refugees in Malaysia are considered undocumented migrants and impede them from basic human rights such as obtaining formal education, access to employment, affordable health care, and other public services.

Asia and Pacific regions should also accompany the milestone of refugee's migration. Accordingly, after we have seen a remarkable increase in global refugees' movement from Africa to the Middle East, Southeast Asia is now leading in producing refugees (Ullah, 2016). Resulting from this, it is recorded remarkably increased more than 10 % compared last year to 101, 010 Rohingya refugees fled to Malaysia in 2020. However, works of literature have acknowledged the role of Rohingya refugees in the host development. Thus, it is less clear whether Rohingya refugees also produce such effects on neighbouring host countries. As shown in table 1, the refugee population is mainly considered to be an entirely urban setting, with the majority of them are concentrated in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. This significant growth in urban areas has created tremendous challenges for the host to monitor mass sociodemographic implications brought by refugees, which indirectly impeding host's economic and social cohesion.

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Furthermore, refugees often face more enormous challenges to cope with the higher cost of living and other related urban problems, in a way to survive. Therefore, the refugees had to find their alternative to continue living and supporting their families in Malaysia. Most of them engage in the informal economy, prepare to take lower earnings, and occupy some dirty, dangerous, and difficult working circumstances which locals don't want (Akgündüz, Van Den Berg, & Hassink, 2015). Most of these refugees do not have high skills because they cannot complete their education while in their home country. However, it is undeniable that some of them may have high levels of experience and resources but are not recognized in Malaysia (Wake & Cheung, 2016).

Table 1: Refugees and Asylum-Seekers Registered with UNHCR in Malaysia.

States	Total PoC
Selangor	66,030
Kuala Lumpur	27,370
Pulau Pinang	18,660
Johor	14,332
Kedah	12,570
Terengganu	5,780
Pahang	5,630
Kelantan	4,520
Perak	3,780
Negeri Sembilan	2,670
Melaka	1,990
Putrajaya	450
Perlis	280

Source: UNHCR (2020)

Given the substantial inflows, economic inclusion is a critical base of successful integration. Therefore, the Malaysian Cabinet agreed in March 2016 to embark on a work pilot project to allow 300 ethnic Rohingya UNHCR-registered refugees to work in the plantation and manufacturing sectors legally (Todd, Amirullah, & Shin, 2019). However, the pioneer project has not been received well, with only 40 Rohingya stood up indicating they already enter into the informal labour market or the current scheme offered is not promising for them (Beh, 2016; Bernama, 2017; The Sun Daily, 2017). Meanwhile, Ying (2017) claimed that poor results on a work pilot project translate the Malaysian government do not seriously identify the demographic needs and other significant characteristics related to the Rohingya community. Additionally, the current employment scheme allocated refugees to work in manufacturing and plantations sectors only, mainly in rural or isolated areas, pulling them from their communities. Hence, it was considered imperative to investigate who these people are in terms of their livelihood, skills, and other economic characteristics.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate what these Rohingya refugees contain in terms of demographic, human capital values, skills, and other economic characteristics that helping them to earn livelihoods and survived, and what the potential benefits they can offer to the host country.

1.2 Objective of the study

The study's objectives were to develop the demographic, human capital values, and economic profiling of Rohingya refugees workers in Malaysia. Furthermore, the analysis may provide significant insights relating human capital and economic potential of Rohingya refugees, in turn, to give a clear stance on the role of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia's labour market.

2.0 Literature Review

Most empirical studies about the economics of forced migration have dealt with refugees' impacts on the host country. Yet, in Malaysia, only one study has been conducted involving the Rohingya refugees sample (Nungsari & Flanders, 2018). There is considerable debate among all the stakeholders in terms of potential opportunities and burdens about the presence and local integration of refugees into the host economy (Baloch, Shah, Noor, & Lacheheb, 2017). One example is the prevalent stigma of the refugee burden or ill,' widely accepted in the vocabulary of policymakers and the host country's society (Zetter & Ruaudel, 2016). As such, the spill-over effects of problems by adding additional welfare costs, increasing informal labour market, draining the public resources and other social ills have distorted government approach to allowing their participation in the host labour market (Baloch et al., 2017; Chambers, 1986; Clemens, Huang, & Graham, 2018; Jacobsen, 2002; Roger, 2012; Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2016; Shellito, 2016). As described by (Connor, 2010; Nungsari & Flanders, 2018), refugees, on average, have poor educational attainments, limiting their employment opportunities. As a result, they will expand the supply of lower-skilled workforce in the informal sector, which discursively drags the wage level. On the other hand, for less develop host countries, the presence of refugees has led to poverty issues and directly impacts social cohesion as well as demography structured (Rother et al., 2016). Meanwhile, Maystadt & Verwimp (2014) indicate that the refugee influx has raised competition among natives with less education. But this could offset by providing cheap labour and increase economic transactions through higher spending.

Despite the negative impacts of refugees present in the host countries, refugees also contribute significant positive outcomes. As found in the existing literature, refugees have been indicated as productive, resilient, and cost-effective labour supply. Moreover, some

studies highlight the refugee community's increased consumption of goods and services in local businesses, generating local employment. Be needed for the refugees population sides that, it also created business opportunities by providing products and services needed for the refugee population (Akgündüz, Van Den Berg, & Hassink, 2018; International Labour Organization, 2014; Tumen, 2016). Notably, past studies have provided shreds of evidence that refugees are highly motivated and willing to contribute back to their host country if they are given the legal right to obtain a job, access to formal education as well as access to other public facilities (DeVoretz, Pivnenko, & Beiser, 2004; Roger, 2012; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). As such, Jackson & Bauder (2014) similarly revealed in their study that refugee claimants in Toronto view legal employment opportunities not only to improve well-being but, much importantly, they are optimistic to contribute back to the host country.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Study Design

The comprehensive profiling methodology develop was based on Bloch (2004), Buber-Ennser et al., (2016), Jacobsen & Nichols (2011) and Nungsari & Flanders (2018) findings. The questionnaires were organized into five main themes:

- i. Respondent demographic profile: Age, gender, religion, marital status, household composition;
- ii. Human capital profile: Highest education attainment, type of schooling, language proficiency;
- iii. Employment profile: former participation in the labor market, current employment, job type, number of hours worked, years of work, average monthly income, frequency of salary payment
- iv. Economic profile: household economic situation, government/NGOs assistance, spending, saving & remittance features.

As to underline from the past studies, a hidden group including refugee's community is challenging to approach (due to many reasons; no fix address/location, sense of security, poor data management, bureaucracy barriers and so forth), as a result, no sampling frames are available. Accordingly, the present study was concentrated on individual Rohingya around the Klang Valley, currently employed with a minimum stay of 12 months in Malaysia.

3.2 Data Collection

The fieldwork has been carried out with the use of native Rohingya interpreters. This strategy was crucial to establish trust and explaining each survey item in making sure the respondent clearly understood the questions. A survey work conducted on Rohingya individuals who self-identified as having worked in at Klang Valley in the past year. Through snowball techniques, N=180 completed self-guided face-to-face surveys conducted at respondent workplaces, Rohingya community centers, and their dwellings with the average time for one session being 25 minutes.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Demography Profile

As shown in table 2, most of the respondents from the Rohingya group were male (99.4%). This is consistent with the traditional setting which men were working and women typically viewed as a caregiver. In terms of age, most of the respondents were below age 30 (82.5%), and the rest 10% are 31 to 34 years old, and the remaining 7.8% are 35 years and above. In terms of marital status, 65.6% were single, and 34.4% were married. As expected, the vast majority of the respondents are Muslim. Looking at the state of residence, an overwhelming majority (79.4%) stayed in Selangor for Rohingya, and the remaining 20.6% live and work around Kuala Lumpur. Almost all respondent flees to Malaysia through boat and land. In light of the traveling cost to enter Malaysia, about 26.9% paid RM5001 to RM10000 per person to the syndicate. About 65.2 % or majority on average, paid around RM2000 to RM5000, and 7.8% mentioned costs of RM10000 or more per person.

4.2 Family Structure and Living Conditions Profile

As the norm for the vulnerable community, only men were allowed to work with women usually as a caretaker at home. Regarding household composition, almost everyone (97.4%) still got their family members alive, with about 73% in Malaysia (either their parents, brothers, and sisters), and the remainder 27% are in Thailand, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. For a married couple, about a quarter have a child with an average of two children each, and 33% of the children were born in Malaysian. For those children under the school age, only 38% of them are going to school (NGOs school or religious/madrasah). The top two reasons for not attending the school were that parents feel it's useless since it doesn't bring any significant difference in their life here, and some want to send their kids but don't have the nearest school in their neighborhood.

Concerning living conditions, 66% of the sample residing with their refugee counterparts, with about 70% stayed within walking distance (less than 15 minutes) to their workplace. But, in getting to the nearest health facility and the nearest school, they need to travel, which took more than 40 minutes from their dwelling. Almost all the respondents have necessities like water, electricity, and mobile phone. Also, nearly more than two quarters have a fridge, stove, and washing machine. While less than 15% of Rohingya have bicycle and motorcycle and very few had cars. Overall from the sample, only 22.8% mentioned that they were received any assistance from NGOs, UNHCR, and other aid agencies. The top two types of support were on job searching and education assistance to their kids.

4.3 Educational Attainment and Language Competence Profile

The respondent profile analysis based on educational attainment can be divided into three levels based on the responses; 16.7% are obtained high school, and above education qualifications, 25.1% are with less than high school and the vast proportion 58.3% is not received any formal education before fleeing to Malaysia. Although many works of literature described Rohingya with low educational attainment, present data recorded about 6% of respondents with tertiary education qualifications. Based on language competence, this study briefly refers to Bahasa & English language, which can be divided into spoke and read of the word. For the English language, 47.2% of respondent said can communicate well and about 40.5% at least manage to read the words given. While for Bahasa, almost all respondents (94.4%) can speak in Bahasa fluently, and some of them managed to communicate with several accents like Kelantanese & northern dialects. But it was slightly different in reading ability; only 63.9% could read Bahasa language considerably.

Table 2. Analysis of Respondent Profile

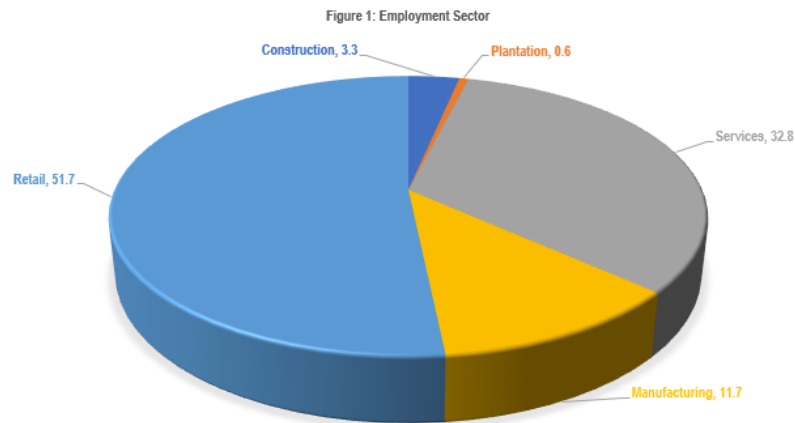
Characteristic	Measurement	Frequency	Percentage (%)			
Age	18 and below	20	11.1			
	19 to 25 years old	93	51.7			
	26 to 30 years old	35	19.4			
	31 to 34 years old	18	10.0			
	35 years old and above	14	7.8			
Gender	Male	179	99.4			
	Female	1	0.6			
Marital Status	Single	118	65.6			
	Married	62	34.4			
	Other	-	-			
Religion	Muslim	180	100			
	Others	-	-			
State of Residence	Selangor	143	79.4			
	Kuala Lumpur	34	20.6			
Highest Educational Attainment	None	44	24.4			
	Religious school	61	33.9			
	Less than elementary school	21	11.7			
	Elementary school	10	5.6			
	Less than high school	14	7.8			
	High school	19	10.6			
	Some college	3	1.7			
Language Competence:	Bahasa Melayu	SPEAK	None	10	5.6	
			A Little	117	65.0	
			Fluent	53	29.4	
			English	None	95	52.8
				A Little	65	36.1
				Fluent	20	11.1
	Bahasa Melayu	READ	None	65	36.1	
			A Little	100	55.6	
			Fluent	15	8.3	
	English	None	107	59.4		
		A Little	49	27.2		
		Fluent	24	13.3		
	Length of stay in Malaysia	1 year to 3 years	7	3.8		
3 year to 5 years		37	20.6			
6 year to 10 years		126	70			
11 year and above		10	5.6			
Travelling cost to Malaysia	RM1000 and below	4	2.2			
	RM1001-RM5000	113	62.8			
	RM5001-RM10000	50	27.8			
	RM10001 and above	13	7.2			

4.4 Employment Profile

Next, the analysis of the respondent's employment profile yielded valuable results. An overwhelming majority (95%) of respondents have already worked in their home country before fleeing to Malaysia with the majority (67%) worked in the agricultural sector as a

small-time farmer. In light of their participation in the local labour market, respondents are demarcated into five sectors (Construction, Plantation, Services, Manufacturing, and Retail). As shown in figure 1, the majority of respondents (51.7%) were in the retail sector, followed by the services sector (32.8%), manufacturing (11.7%), construction (3.3%), and plantation (1%). Looking at a specific job, most did manual/day labour or subsistence trade and services, including:

- Car washer;
- Cleaner;
- Factory workers;
- Wholesale market workers (Fishmonger, fruits seller, vegetable seller, and butchers);
- Gras cutter;
- Landscape workers, and;
- Restaurant workers



On the monthly income basis, the majority of respondents (59.4%) has monthly income level between RM1001-RM1500 while 16.1% respondents have a monthly income level between RM1501-RM2000, followed by the monthly income earners below than RM1000 (13.9%). Next, there is no significant difference in the weekly working hours, where almost all the respondents worked more than 35 hours on average each week. In terms of the working period, only 25% demarcated those who work on this current job for more than one year. Notably, almost half of the respondents receive their salaries monthly and directly by cash.

Table 3. Employment Characteristics of Respondent Profile

Characteristic	Measurement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Monthly Income	RM1000 and below	25	13.9
	RM1001-1500	107	59.4
	RM1501-2000	29	16.1
	RM2000 and above	19	10.6
Weekly Working Hours	5 to 9 hours	-	-
	10 to 19 hours	17	9.4
	20 to 34 hours	15	8.3
	35 or more hours	148	82.2
Working Period	1-3 months	15	8.3
	4-6 months	58	32.2
	7-11 months	38	21.1
	1 year	24	13.3
	1 year and above	45	25.0
Frequency of Salary Payment	Daily	70	38.9
	Monthly	90	50.0
	Other	2	1.1

4.5 Economic Profile

On average, respondents pay about RM300 in a month, with more than 11% paying no rent at all, often because their employer has provided free accommodation. They remit about RM 300-500 on average, in a month. On the monthly expenditure basis, this study classified into food, transportation, utilities, and education. For Rohingya, they were spent about RM 10,7540 in an entire month or RM 597.44 on a monthly average from their salary for food. For transportation expenditure, respondents spent about RM 203.33 a month, which accounted for around RM 36,600 of total spending from 180 respondents. Next, the allocation from the salary received to pay monthly bills, they were spent about RM 91.64 on a monthly average and accounted for RM 16,495 of total utility expenditure. While only RM 2090 has been allocated monthly to educational purposes. As depicted in table 4, with N=180, using food, transportation, utility,

and education in the past 12 months as a proxy for refugees' expenditure, the total estimated refugee contribution to the host economy was RM 1,946,100.

Table 4. Economic Components to Estimating Economic Contribution of Rohingya Refugees

Characteristic		Measurement	RM (N=180)
Monthly Expenditure	Food	Sum	10,7540.00
		Mean	597.44
		Median	600.00
	Transport	Sum	36,600.00
		Mean	203.33
		Median	200.00
	Utilities Bills	Sum	16,495.00
		Mean	91.64.00
		Median	70.00
	Education	Sum	2090
		Mean	11.61
		Median	.00
Remittance (12 past months)	Sum	56,9248.00	
	Mean	3162.49	
	Median	3300.00	

Source: author's calculations

5.0 Discussion

Moving on the discussion, present data is similar to Nungsari & Flanders (2018) and Todd et al. (2019) research findings, which reported refugees relatively low of education, who are illiterate but have different human capital values as an individual. In other words, we can't conclude that refugees or our present context, Rohingya, are only suited with 3D (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) jobs because some with excellent educational backgrounds are poorly matched to low paid work. Besides that, given this urban setting, refugees often more vulnerable to exploitation and likely to live in their community (Jacobsen & Nichols, 2011). Another important finding is that many of the respondents have mentioned they have to borrow from family and friends to finance their traveling costs to Malaysia. Given this situation, it might increase the tendency of these people to 'overstay' in Malaysia; perhaps the above statistics showed that 73.8 % of the respondents had stayed for more than ten years in Malaysia. Unsurprisingly, the researcher also found that almost all Rohingya never return to Myanmar since entering Malaysia.

Moreover, the language competence of this respondent also improve over time, respondents said during the interview that they took their initiative to spoke and understand another language to survive in a new setting and culture, besides there is some assistance on the human capital building has been provided toward them from several NGOs and UHCR team. On the same page, this study found that some educated Rohingya offered language classes for free to empower their community and help them to strive in the labour market. By a given majority of the respondent were below 30 years old, it's seen they are so hungry for education as well as inclusive rights to work. Regarding work experience, the majority worked in the agricultural sector as a small-time farmer. However, while access to the labor market is highly restricted for refugees in Malaysia, they can still make a good income.

Additionally, the norm for vulnerable people like Rohingya refugees to keep often changing their job could be explained by several factors. The workforce from refugees people typically lacks bargaining power, mainly due to their illegal status. Many of them are at risk of mistreating, exploiting, and abusing the employer and authorities (Nungsari & Flanders, 2018); as a result, they often change their locality and job to stay protected. Additionally, salaries were given directly by cash, and it would continue to increase the exploitation and indicated poor management of foreign workers. Finally, this present study also provides some expenditure contribution of Rohingya refugees into the host economy through higher spending. Although the present study is not able to break down specific expenditure items and estimate the amount of SST paid, this study believes that Rohingya refugee's total expenditure shares the same pattern with the local B40's income group and foresee to pay similar SST amount.

6.0 Limitation of Study

Several limitations have been identified; First, the study in the refugee population context is particularly challenging to achieve representative samples, as such degree of compromise on methodological is required. Second, given that the majority of the respondents were male, this study cannot compare gender differences on given characteristics. Third, the sample was focused on Rohingya living in Klang valley, another sample from urban areas and other refugees ethnic were not selected. Forth, the role of the employer, which may provide valuable insights into granting refugee's rights to work, was not explored.

7.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, the present study seeks to contribute the empirical evidence on who these Rohingya refugees in terms of their demography, human capital, and economic contribution to the host economy. Results indicated that Rohingya refugee profiling are significant differences with other economic migrants. Hence, to lubricate the engine of refugee contribution to the host economy, the pool of employment needs to be inclusive and broader, as well as providing refugees with job mobility and not confined to specific

industries or locations. This study concurs that if refugees are given 'dignity' to contribute, they can improve productivity over time, add to expenditure, pay tax, and probably be a 'Million Dollar Arms' to host economy. This present study may help the policymaker develop comprehensive employment projects while complying with all in granting refugees' rights to work. It is also in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), whose primary objectives are to end poverty, protect the environment, and ensure peace and prosperity. Besides, the SDGs stakeholders, including Malaysia, have shown the commitment to leave no-one behind, including the refugee population.

Further research is suggested to assess work performance, and how the physiological effect of being refugees, helping them to survive in the informal labour market. Besides that, it's called more mix-method research to investigate whether this Rohingya refugee can be potentially replacing the current migrant workers to mitigate detrimental reliance on migrant workers in the host economy.

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