

## “Is there peace?”: Discrimination and the refugee experience in Malaysia

### “Adakah kedamaian?”: Diskriminasi dan pengalaman pengungsi di Malaysia

Atika Shafinaz Nazri<sup>1\*</sup>, Zarina Othman<sup>2</sup>, Kartini Aboo Talib@Khalid<sup>1</sup>  
& Emyzai Zainuddin<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Ethnic Studies, National University of Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Research Center for History, Politics and International Affairs, National University of Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>Ministry of Human Resource, Putrajaya, Malaysia

Address: <sup>1,2</sup>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>Persiaran Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, Presint 1, 62000 Putrajaya, Wilayah

Persekutuan Putrajaya, Malaysia

E-mail: atikshafinaz@ukm.edu.my

Article History: Received 11 October 2024; Accepted 5 March 2025; Published Online 28 April 2025

#### Abstract

Many factors, such as societal neglect, issues related to UNHCR, non-traditional legal frameworks, and international laws, contribute to the difficulties refugees face in Malaysia. However, in Malaysia, identify government discrimination as the primary factor contributing to the imbalance in refugees' lives. Based on the experiences of refugees living in Malaysia, this research explores rights often denied by the government, regardless of their age, community background, or duration of stay. The study continues to delve into refugee challenges as long as they hold UNHCR cards. The method used in this study utilizes a qualitative approach. As a result of these challenges, this study presents the lived experiences of refugees as types of government discrimination based on their refugee status. This aspect has not been extensively explored in previous research. In conclusion, the study argues that those not involved in refugee management may perceive Malaysia as a country that practices democracy and upholds humanitarian values due to hosting nearly 180,000 refugees. However, the reality reveals existing shortcomings, including unrecognized UNHCR cards, fragility and susceptibility to detention, deprivation of the right to work, exposure to persecution, legal aid barriers, lack of access to healthcare treatment, and restricted access to formal education.

**Keywords:** discrimination against refugees; refugees in Malaysia; state discrimination

#### Abstrak

Banyak faktor, seperti pengabaian oleh masyarakat, isu-isu yang berkaitan dengan UNHCR, kerangka hukum non-tradisional, dan hukum internasional, berkontribusi terhadap kesulitan yang dihadapi pengungsi di Malaysia. Namun, di Malaysia, diskriminasi pemerintah diidentifikasi sebagai faktor utama yang berkontribusi terhadap ketidakseimbangan dalam kehidupan pengungsi. Berdasarkan pengalaman para pengungsi yang tinggal di Malaysia, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi aspek-aspek hak yang sering kali ditolak oleh pemerintah, tanpa memandang usia, latar belakang komunitas, atau durasi tinggal mereka. Penelitian ini juga menggali lebih dalam mengenai tantangan-tantangan yang dihadapi oleh para pengungsi selama mereka memegang kartu UNHCR. Metode yang digunakan dalam studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Sebagai hasil dari tantangan-tantangan tersebut, penelitian ini menyajikan pengalaman hidup para pengungsi sebagai bentuk diskriminasi pemerintah berdasarkan status pengungsi mereka. Aspek ini belum banyak dieksplorasi dalam penelitian sebelumnya. Sebagai kesimpulan, penelitian ini berpendapat bahwa mereka yang tidak terlibat dalam manajemen pengungsi mungkin menganggap Malaysia sebagai negara yang mempraktikkan demokrasi dan menjunjung tinggi nilai-nilai kemanusiaan karena telah menampung hampir 180.000 pengungsi. Namun, kenyataannya menunjukkan kekurangan yang ada, termasuk kartu UNHCR yang tidak diakui, kerapuhan dan kerentanan terhadap penahanan, perampasan hak untuk bekerja, terpapar penganiayaan, hambatan bantuan hukum, kurangnya akses terhadap perawatan kesehatan, dan terbatasnya akses terhadap pendidikan formal.

**Kata kunci:** diskriminasi terhadap pengungsi; pengungsi di Malaysia; diskriminasi negara

## Introduction

Although Malaysia is a transit point for refugees, based on international law and the international community, as a transit country, it remains obligated to safeguard this group (Riadhussyah 2016, Krustiyati et al. 2021). Given the current situation of refugees in Malaysia, they have been in the country for an extended period, spanning several generations, with their children marrying, having their children, attending school, and some becoming elderly individuals who have passed away. Unfortunately, despite having settled in Malaysia for an extended duration, their fate and stories remain inadequately heard by the surrounding community, particularly the government. Indeed, our insight is clear that refugees still have the right to the city (Oliveira 2023).

Numerous prior studies have discussed refugee life challenges, particularly regarding basic needs such as the right to work, education, health, and housing. However, most studies have predominantly focused on specific communities rather than encompassing an entire country, specifically the Rohingya ethnic group (Hamzah et al. 2016, Wahab & Khairi 2019, Mat et al. 2023). Other studies have explored the experiences and challenges of international refugees from various regions, such as Syria (Nazri et al. 2019), Palestine (Muhammad & Rokis 2019), Yemen (Al-Majdhoub et al. 2020), and Afghanistan (Raofi & Barna 2023). However, in our research, we aim to encompass all layers of refugees without focusing on any community and categorize the root causes of the issues that arise among them as attributed to the government.

This paper investigates the challenges refugees face while in Malaysia in sustaining their livelihoods. In understanding the life narrative of migrants in Malaysia, we do not perceive these refugees as a marginalized group, as indicated by Kok et al. (2021) and Aung et al. (2021). Instead, we view them as vulnerable individuals who can still reside within the local community, afforded opportunities for communication, friendship, engagement in informal sectors, schooling under local NGOs, and continued support from their surroundings; classify them as vulnerable and fragile, yet not devoid of their qualifications as ordinary humans. Diverse factors contribute to the hardships confronted by refugees in Malaysia, including societal neglect, UNHCR issues, and non-traditional and international laws.

Therefore, based on the experiences of refugees residing in Malaysia, our study aspires to explore numerous aspects of the rights often denied to them by the state, irrespective of age, community background, or the duration of their stay. However, as long as they hold UNHCR cards, we persist in delving into their challenges. Instances of discriminatory practices are frequently linked to the plight of refugees (Bender et al. 2022, Oyebamiji et al. 2022). It is a prevalent issue observed across different contexts arising from national conditions, socio-political concerns, a flawed international system, and indigenous or non-traditional communities that render them victims of circumstances. Besides cases involving regulations that directly protect them, refugees and asylum seekers are often impacted by discriminatory rules due to their status as foreign nationals (Perocco & Francesco 2023).

Refugees are inherently fragile and susceptible to multiple types of persecution due to their refugee status. Lacking resources such as water, shelter, and food correlated with depression. Individuals who experienced a more significant number of traumatic events faced a higher risk of depression, as trauma can induce feelings of hopelessness and reduce interest in activities (Hameed et al. 2018). Local communities also consistently discriminate against refugees, resulting in a negative stigma towards them and ultimately rendering them victims of social isolation. Furthermore, refugee children and adolescents frequently encounter this supplementary narrative, which impacts their developmental process (Shahimi et al. 2024).

In this study, we consider denial to be one of the contributing factors to discriminatory practices. The survey by Streeter et al. (2021) elucidates that denying refugee status refers to rejecting the recognition of individuals as refugees according to the legal definition outlined in the 1951 Convention on Refugees. This denial leaves climate migrants unprotected and vulnerable, as the convention does not cover them. Article 3 of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees mandates states to apply the provisions of the Convention without discrimination based on race, religion, or country of origin (Costello et al. 2022). Simultaneously, rejecting asylum for refugees in transit nations or those falling outside the purview of the

1951 Refugee Convention necessitates adherence to the principle of non-refoulement. This foundational principle mandates that nations should not repatriate refugees to their nation of origin due to the inherent risk of encountering persecution or violations of human rights. Furthermore, any country located at its border should not deprive refugees of the right to access (Amnesty International 2010).

According to Oberman (2020), discrimination against refugees involves the differential treatment of refugees within the refugee regime based on factors such as social group or other criteria - this discrimination could occur through intentional actions by states within the refugee regime and because of structures inherent in the government itself. Discrimination is prevalent in the current refugee regime, with some types being more overt, such as discrimination formulated by states. In contrast, others are more subtle, originating from within the government. Even in cases where discrimination may be pragmatically justifiable due to political constraints, it remains ethically incorrect when compared to the principles of equality and human rights.

Most prior studies have discussed the existence of discriminatory factors against refugees based on race (Costello et al. 2022), ethnicity, religion (Menge 2023), race and gender (Pittaway & Bartolomei 2001), and nationality (Blair 2022). Nevertheless, in this study, we draw from Zhao & Zhang (2023), who elucidate how France and Germany are compelled to engage in discrimination due to the prevailing circumstances of the country. They found that even though the governments of France and Germany respond to the refugee crisis and provide humanitarian support to those suffering from the effects of war, conflict, and famine, there exists a gap between what they aspire to do and what they achieve under the responsibility and mandate of the United Nations. What is even more concerning is that sometimes discrimination and restrictions are merely part of the intended goals, leading to discrimination in the refugee acceptance process. The dilemmas faced by these governments occur from time to time in all types of refugee policies: on the one hand, in humanitarian considerations, the government opens its doors and offers protection; on the contrary, the public opposes refugees who enter the country and society, under its authority the government imposes restrictions on refugees and asylum seekers, embedding discrimination in its policies. In the policy implementation process, due to the lack of objective material conditions, the impact of policies sometimes does not meet expectations, and refugees are often inadequately protected in terms of housing, medical care, and education. Simultaneously, individuals usually subject refugees to hidden discrimination based on their religious and cultural backgrounds.

This study provides an in-depth examination of the forms of discrimination faced by refugees based on their status as UNHCR cardholders, as opposed to discrimination based on race, religion, gender, or nationality, which has been extensively explored in previous research. This approach aims to understand how refugee status is a primary factor leading to unequal treatment. By employing the concept of discrimination as an analytical framework, this study seeks to uncover the underlying causes of such discrimination and ultimately identify its specific forms. Additionally, it explores how legal constraints further marginalize refugees, placing them in a particularly vulnerable position and shaping a distinct form of discrimination that differs from identity-based discrimination.

## **Research Method**

This study aims to investigate refugees in Malaysia and identify the types of state discrimination they experience. The primary case consists of international refugees from various countries, and it employs a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews and participant observation to investigate refugees. The study locations were limited to Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Johor, Perak, Penang, and Kedah, as most refugees reside in these states.

This study successfully interviewed 15 informants (see Table 1), including refugee children, refugee parents, refugee teachers, and UNHCR representatives in Malaysia- had the opportunity to obtain information from former ministers in the Ministry of Defense- conducted face-to-face for most interviews while some were via email due to time constraints faced by the informants. The refugees interviewed had been residing in Malaysia for an extended period, possessed UNHCR identity cards, were awaiting

the asylum process, were capable of effective communication, and exhibited openness to sharing their experiences. Due to time constraints, we focused on interviewing refugees from Rohingya, Chin, Pakistan, Syria, and Somalia. For other refugees, such as those from Yemen, Afghanistan, and Myanmar (Muslim and non-Muslim), primarily engaged in participant observation with them. Additionally, this study utilizes informants' initials to protect their privacy.

**Table 1.**  
List and details of informants

Participant	Status	Interview date
Informant SAM	UNHCR officer	28 August 2020
Informant ATI	Somali refugee	14 July 2019
Informant KEN	Somali refugee	11 February 2020
Informant IMI	Somali refugee	11 February 2020
Informant MOF	Syrian refugee	20 January 2020
Informant ALE	Syrian refugee	20 January 2020
Informant MUT	Syrian refugee	22 January 2020
Informant ADI	Syrian refugee	1 Oktober 2019
Informant SAP	Syrian refugee	16 January 2020
Informant MUN	Syrian refugee	16 January 2020
Informant KIR	Rohingya refugee	16 January 2020
Informant SAI	Rohingya refugee	2 November 2023
Informant BUM	Chin refugee	11 February 2020
Informant MUH	Pakistani refugee	30 November 2019
Informant ANE	Former Minister in the Ministry of Defence	26 February 2020

Source: Created by the author

Before conducting interviews, researchers introduced themselves as conducting a study on refugees from UKM in Malaysia. Permission is requested before proceeding, and if individuals refuse to participate, no pressure is applied; alternative informants are sought. Additionally, consent is asked to record the interview session, explaining the purpose of recording for transcription and research findings.

Most refugee informants are Muslims, with only one non-Muslim, Chin. This selection reflects the demographic reality that most refugees residing in Malaysia are Muslim. Furthermore, Muslim refugees tend to be more open in sharing their experiences, while non-Muslim refugees are often more cautious with strangers—aligning with the principle of non-coercion. The central question posed to refugees is brief: *“What challenges do you face in Malaysia?”* Space is provided for them to add any insights they wish to share. Interviews remain uninterrupted, with an opportunity given at the end for informants to express any further thoughts. The sessions are conducted informally and relaxed, focusing on open discussions and emotional expression.

This study employs thematic data analysis, a qualitative research method that can be widely applied across various epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al. 2017:2). Thematic analysis was chosen as it is the most suitable technique for uncovering interpretations. It provides a systematic approach to data analysis, enabling researchers to relate the frequency of themes to the overall content. This technique ensures accuracy and complexity and enhances the overall meaning of the research (Mohammed Ibrahim 2012:40). We identify themes—patterns within the data that are significant or compelling—and utilize these themes to address the study's objectives, as a well-executed thematic analysis allows for interpretation and deeper understanding. In the initial phase, we systematically generate preliminary codes from the data, ensuring equal attention to each data item while identifying noteworthy elements that may contribute to recurring thematic patterns. The coding process encompasses all data sources, including interview transcriptions. For instance, when coding an interview excerpt from

a refugee- “*I was detained five times by the Police and Immigration from 2015 to 2016 despite holding a valid UNHCR card*”-we interpret this as an indication of Malaysia’s approach to refugee arrests. Based on this interpretation, we develop themes such as fragile and subject to detention. These themes undergo continuous review to ensure their alignment with the research objectives and to validate the accuracy of the interview data.

## Results and Discussion

The study has effectively pinpointed seven types of discriminatory practices enacted by the government against refugees in Malaysia, namely: (1) Unrecognized UNHCR card; (2) Fragile and subject to detention; (3) Deprived of the right to work; (4) Subject to persecution; (5) Legal aid barriers; (6) Lack of access to healthcare treatment; and (7) Restricted access to formal education.

### Unrecognized UNHCR card

The UNHCR task is responsible for issuing a type of identification, namely the UNHCR refugee card, through interview processes, investigations, and coding for each refugee entering Malaysia (Suan 2006, Sahak et al. 2020). However, despite possessing a valid UNHCR refugee card, it does not guarantee their safety in Malaysia due to the country’s non-signatory status to the 1951 Refugee Convention - Malaysian law classifies this vulnerable group as illegal immigrants. A UNHCR card is unrecognized as a valid pass or entry permit for lawful entry into Malaysia as per the Immigration Act 1959/63. UNHCR identity documentation lacks formal legal validity in Malaysia and does not function as a passport. Nevertheless, Malaysia often normalizes individuals holding UNHCR cards as refugees.

Malaysia acknowledges the humanitarian aspect of addressing refugee issues. It collaborates with UNHCR to align national policies, practices, and laws with international standards. The cooperation involves working with various stakeholders, including the government, NGOs, the private sector, civil society, and individuals. The focus is on enhancing the protection environment for refugees, especially in critical areas such as preventing arrest, detention, and deportation. NGOs and refugee communities also actively direct efforts toward facilitating the support of refugees through welfare assistance programs. The collaboration aims to create a more supportive and rights-based framework for refugees within the national context (Informant SAM).

### Fragile and subject to detention

Most studies (see Seet 2013, Nazri et al. 2019) indicate that despite having a UNHCR card that allows refugees to move freely within the country without boarding an airplane or Malaya Railway train, domestic movements (requiring personal identification cards) do not guarantee immunity from detention and arrest. Therefore, refugees still experience a sense of fear and dilemma, particularly concerning authoritative figures such as the police and immigration officers:

“but some in my community, community leaders I met many times for the arrested people like for the Somalian people, Yamani people arrested by the police. Sometimes, they have a UC letter. If you have a card, the police cannot arrest you, but if you have an appointment or a paper from UNHCR, they will catch you for the police. Then, after 14 days, you are released because of UNHCR; they can.” (Informant ATI).

Based on the reported data by Zainuddin (2020), the statistics of arrests of illegal immigrants holding UNHCR cards under Section 6 (1) (C) of the Immigration Act 1959 indicate the absence of a valid pass or permit to reside in the country increased. In 2015, authorities apprehended approximately 65 individuals, and there was a substantial rise to 258 detentions in 2016. However, there was a reduction in arrests in 2017, with around 125 cases, and in 2018, there were 127 detentions. Nevertheless, in 2019, there was an increase to 151 detentions. Additionally, female refugees holding valid UNHCR refugee cards are subject to arrests for immigration offences, leading to their detention in centers or repatriation to their home countries (CEDAW 2018). The findings align with the interview:

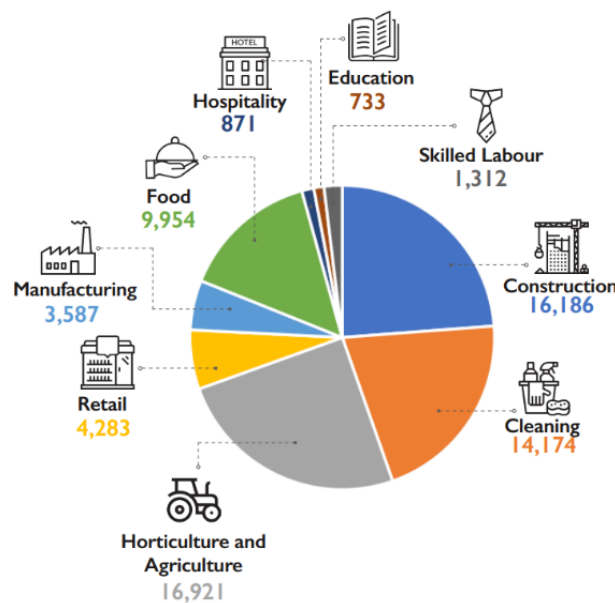


“I was detained five times by the Police and Immigration from 2015 to 2016 despite holding a valid UNHCR card. They claimed that the Malaysian government does not recognize the UNHCR card, and I had to pay them between RM200 and RM2500 each time I was arrested to avoid imprisonment.” (Informant MOF).

Informant MOF mentioned that he had been arrested several times for possessing only a valid UNHCR document despite having expired travel documents or passports. In similar circumstances, Informant Ale, a Syrian refugee residing in Penang since 2018, narrates being arrested three times by the police during enforcement operations due to the expiration of his Social Visit Pass. Meanwhile, a study conducted by Kassim (2015) found that Rohingya refugees are often exposed to arrests, especially during immigration enforcement operations, as their UNHCR cards are not subject to any laws within the country. This situation results in their legal status being similar to that of undocumented immigrants.

### Deprived of the right to work

The Malaysian government has not allowed refugees to engage in any sector, formal or informal. Malaysian law denies employment opportunities because it does not distinguish between undocumented foreigners and refugees. The limited assistance provided by UNHCR compounds this situation.



**Figure 1.**  
Population distribution of refugees by employment sector in Malaysia 2019  
Source: Todd et al. (2019)

Based on Figure 1, most refugees are employed in the construction, plantation, and agriculture sectors (24%), followed by the cleaning sector (22%). Meanwhile, participation in skilled labor, hospitality, and education is minimal, likely because these sectors require citizenship status and minimum academic qualifications. The right to work is crucial for the survival and sustenance of refugees to avoid complete dependence on assistance from the host country. However, they have been denied the right to work, leading many to live in poverty (Suan 2006). This situation has jeopardized the economic security of refugees, hindering their ability to obtain essential income sources through employment or financial assistance from public institutions (UNDP 1994, Acharya 2001).

To substantiate our argument, we conducted non-participant observation in the living area of Rohingya refugees in Kampung Sungai Sekamat, Kajang, Selangor. The observation revealed numerous piles of used items such as newspapers, plastic goods, electrical equipment, old furniture, and others, as depicted in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.**

Rohingya refugees run the stall at Kampung Sungai Sekamat, Kajang, and Selangor  
Source: Taken by the author during the fieldwork

Informant KIR mentioned that he had tried to apply for jobs in eateries and supermarkets, but no employer dared to hire them. Consequently, he had to work independently as a barber and house repairman, estimating a monthly income of RM1600 to RM1800. He supports a family of five children, while his wife is unemployed, relying solely on his income source - the earnings for daily expenses and to cover a monthly house rent of RM500 and school fees for four of his children attending Al-Madrasah Al-Islamiah Rohingya Tahfiz school (Informant KIR).

The challenge of obtaining employment is not exclusive to Rohingya refugees; it is a predicament shared by Syrian refugees in Malaysia as well. According to Informant MUT, he works as a shawarma maker specializing in Arabic cuisine at a restaurant in Penang, with a monthly income of RM2500. Despite holding a degree in architecture from a university in Syria, his status and documentation issues prevent him from applying for formal employment. Another interviewer, Informant ALE, is employed in the same establishment as Informant MUT, serving as a shop assistant with a monthly salary of RM1800. Informant ALE and Informant MUT were fortunate to secure employment, as the restaurant owner is also a Syrian national married to a resident. Informant SAP confronts a different circumstance; he operates a bakery beneath his apartment to sustain his daily living. However, he cannot sell bread as he would face apprehension from authorities. His monthly income is unpredictable as his customers are limited to the residents of his apartment. He has three sons attending school, and his wife is a homemaker.

Informant BUM works as a volunteer teacher at the Learning Centre for the Chin community. Serving as a volunteer instructor, she teaches Science and Mathematics, earning a monthly salary ranging from RM80 to RM150. This compensation depends on contributions provided by parents who are Chin refugees facing financial difficulties. Studies conducted by Nungsari & Flanders (2018) and Suan (2006) on Rohingya refugees reveal that they engage in unauthorized employment despite the risk of being apprehended by authorities. Meanwhile, Informant KEN serves as a volunteer teacher at the Somali Refugee Community School in Gombak, Malaysia, receiving a monthly payment of RM800. Moreover, during the interview, the researcher observed a volunteer instructor teaching basic sewing skills to single mothers.

### **Subject to persecution**

The persecution referred to in this context is not exploitative, as elucidated in the study by Wahab (2018), but instead signifies injustices perpetrated by government officials against refugees. A substantial number of government officials recognize that refugees residing in Malaysia have the right to move freely, even during the waiting period for UNHCR card applications. However, there remains a considerable lack of awareness among some officials regarding the system and laws, leading to issues of exploitation against this vulnerable group. Nonetheless, among those officials who are knowledgeable about the procedures and the legitimacy of UNHCR, instances have been observed where they engage in detainment, arrest, extortion, bribery, and forced deportations, thereby violating Malaysian laws.

One notable narrative is that of Informant ALE, whom the police once detained during a crackdown operation in Penang. Despite presenting his UNHCR appointment card at the time, the police still demanded a bribe of RM 50.00 for his release. According to him, if he did not have the money, the police would seize other belongings, such as a mobile phone, as compensation.



**Figure 3.**

Stall in Bukit Pinang, Kedah

Source: Taken by the author during the fieldwork

A stall in Bukit Pinang, Kedah (Figure 3), serves as a meeting place for Rohingya refugees every evening. Despite living in a manner that does not disturb the local population and possessing identification, namely the UNHCR card, unfortunately, the police and the Road Transport Department frequently conduct patrols, causing disturbances, issuing threats, and soliciting bribes. Consequently, the authorities' arrival compels Rohingya refugees in the area to live in a state of fear, prompting them to flee into the bushes. Hoffstaedter's study (2014) also narrates this persecution during the raids conducted on Chin refugees, where RELA members confiscated their UNHCR cards.

### Legal aid barriers

Legal aid involves providing services to individuals who cannot access legal counsel within the justice system, making it an integral aspect of the right to justice. In Malaysia, refugees constitute one of the most vulnerable populations facing unequal treatment and discrimination, further exacerbated by ineffective mechanisms to ensure their right to justice (see details in Wahab & Khairi 2020). Refugees often encounter security threats from law enforcement, especially those who are employed, as *"refugees are at risk of arrest and detention for immigration offences. Refugees are also unable to work legally in the country."* (Informant SAM).

Refugees encounter precarious situations while navigating legal processes within the Malaysian system, particularly in family matters such as marriage, childbirth, and divorce. According to Informant ANE, a refugee's life narrative is consistently entwined with social issues. Despite their non-citizen status in Malaysia, individuals seeking marriage must register at the nearby religious office, following established procedures to legitimize their marital status. However, some refugees solely engage uncertified religious officials within their community, either due to a lack of knowledge regarding the necessary steps or a perception that the matter is trivial. Similarly, when refugees give birth in hospitals, they must register the birth at the National Registration Department (JPN) for birth confirmation and obtain a birth certificate.

Nevertheless, our research found that mainly Rohingya refugees prefer delivering at home with uncertified midwives to evade the required procedures, resulting in cases that pose risks to maternal or child mortality. Some Arab refugees were also observed not registering their children's births with the JPN due to language barriers, complicating their ability to apply for passports at their respective embassies as proof of citizenship.



status. Similar challenges arise in divorce cases requiring refugees to navigate Malaysian legal processes. In cases of death, when a family member or acquaintance of a refugee passes away, they must acquire a burial permit at the nearby police station. Simultaneously, they need to coordinate with the mosque congregation to facilitate the identification of available burial grounds.

Informant SAP encountered legal troubles when arrested for illegal work while awaiting an appointment with the UNHCR. The predicament stemmed from the need to work and provide for his family while adhering to legal constraints. Unfortunately, his situation worsened when immigration authorities apprehended him during his employment. He endured almost three months in the Immigration detention center, eventually securing release with UNHCR's assistance. During the detainment, he disclosed the challenges of being prohibited from communicating with family members. Adding to the ordeal, some immigration officers exploited the situation by demanding modest financial contributions from individuals seeking to communicate with their family members via telephone.

### **Lack of access to healthcare treatment**

While Malaysia provides a 50% discount to refugees receiving treatment at government hospitals, most refugees express dissatisfaction upon arrival. Some hospitals do not recognize the UNHCR card status, leading to refugees eventually having to make payments as foreign nationals. Refugees also file complaints even though the government still grants a 50% subsidy. However, due to employment issues, they cannot bear additional payment costs, particularly for treatments that involve substantial fees. According to Informant Sai, he is currently handling a case involving a young male refugee who suffered an accident resulting in a broken leg. However, the refugee cannot continue the treatment as the expenses reach nearly 100,000 ringgits. Saiful also sought assistance from UNHCR and NGOs, but they could not help due to a lack of funding.

Examining the demographic profile of refugee admissions in Malaysia reveals that the majority are victims of conflict. As a result, a significant portion of them experience trauma, leading to adverse effects on mental health and easily disturbed emotions. Before migrating abroad, they experienced adversity in their home country, including being victims of war, detained and imprisoned for political or religious reasons, subjected to physical and mental abuse, victims of sexual assault, and witnessing murders firsthand (Mollica et al. 1987, Lindencrona et al. 2007, Lindert et al. 2009, Akinyemi et al. 2016). However, it is noteworthy that the Malaysian government is less concerned about the current state of mental health issues. Refugees face difficulties in obtaining psychiatric treatment at government hospitals, reflecting a lack of attention and support given to the mental health of refugees, which, in turn, may contribute to less effective recovery.

This study found the harrowing experiences of refugees during visits to the Somali refugee community center in Gombak, Selangor. Based on the information gathered, a significant number of single mothers who lost their husbands in their home country experienced mental health disorders, leading to disruptions in their lives in Malaysia. In addition to the trauma experienced in their home country, the current living conditions of the refugees could also trigger emotional distress. Trauma could also arise from the consequences of being detained and imprisoned in Malaysia:

“Subsequently, they sent me to Semenyih. Semenyih. I stayed there for maybe six months and two weeks before the UN allowed me to be released, but during these six months, it was difficult until I felt like pleading for death from God.” (Informant ADI).

The unsatisfactory conditions within the prison, such as its uncleanness and frequent mistreatment by prison officers, caused him to feel stressed and traumatized:

“They are cruel there. They never care about people. They hit forcefully. Many times, I got injured, had to be sent to Kajang Hospital for itching or painful wounds, swollen like this, had to be sent to the hospital.” (Informant ADI).

The statement conveys the harsh conditions within the prison facility. It emphasizes the cruelty of the personnel, their lack of concern for the well-being of individuals, and the use of forceful physical punishment. The speaker recounts instances of being subjected to beatings, resulting in injuries that required medical attention at Kajang Hospital. The injuries included conditions such as itching, painful wounds, and swelling, necessitating visits to the hospital for treatment. In another case, we found that negative stigma and poor treatment from the local community towards refugees can contribute to emotional disturbances, as expressed by a Pakistani refugee- their children have specific time limits to play outside the house because local neighbors, who are native residents, prohibit refugee children from playing together.

### **Restricted access to formal education**

The primary challenge faced by refugee children in Malaysia impedes securing places in public schools due to the lack of identification documents. This assertion aligns with the findings from an interview with Informant KIR, who acknowledged his inability to enroll his children in government schools due to the absence of identification documents, possessing only UNHCR refugee documents. Consequently, he has enrolled one of his children in the Al-Madrasah Al-Islamiyah Rohingya, a Rohingya community Tahfiz school in Kajang, Selangor, incurring a registration fee of RM1500 and a monthly fee of RM270. Meanwhile, another child aged 5 attends the Rohingya Community School, Kampung Cheras Baru, from 8:00 AM to 12:00 PM. Informant Mun, a mother of three sons aged 8, 7, and 4, respectively, mentioned that she had sent her children to the Alternative Guidance Center School KITA, owned by the NGO Cinta Syria Malaysia, located in Bangi, Selangor.

From a humanitarian perspective, the persecution and discrimination faced by refugee children in accessing education in Malaysia jeopardize their safety. The condition of the premises used as schools for these refugees is highly uncondusive. In addition, the Somalia Refugee Community Center, established in 2008, serves as a school and a two-story terrace building rented for RM2,500 per month, a community center for Somali refugees. Simultaneously, it provides skills training for Somali single mothers. In an interview with the principal of the Somali Refugee School, the school has five classrooms with a total of 80 students aged between 4 and 18 years. Each class accommodates 15 to 20 students (Informant IMI).

Meanwhile, the Jasmine Ash-Sham Education Center accommodates approximately 150 students, including two from Jordan and Iraq, aged between 7 and 18. Each student is charged a fee of RM50, covering tuition, transportation, meals, and other expenses, depending on contributions from external donors. The two-story terrace house, functioning as the school, includes a hall, dining area, and NGO administrative office. As a result, the majority of schools under NGOs or those run by the refugee communities themselves are in non-condusive environments, as illustrated in Figure 4, consequently impacting overall comfort:



**Figure 4.**

NGOs and the community run the school

Source: Photo taken by the author during the fieldwork

Informant BUM revealed that the premise, a rented shophouse, serves as an educational hub for approximately 94 Chin refugee children aged between 5 and 14, with a monthly fee of RM80. Observations at refugee schools indicate a shortage of teaching staff, with most teachers being volunteers from within the refugee community. Additionally, some refugee schools operate with non-standardized curricula, often developed independently without formal recognition or proper structure. Frequent teacher changes, along with instructors who lack adequate education and experience, further undermine the quality of student learning.

### **State discrimination**

The factor of rejection acts as a driving force for refugees to leave their home country due to conflicts within their nation. The study conducted by Baharuddin & Enh (2018) substantiates this argument by finding that the rejection factors for Vietnamese refugees coming to Malaysia are rooted in the political, economic, and social instability in Vietnam. These challenges compel the Vietnamese to flee their country, seeking protection in Malaysia. However, Malaysia's open stance in accepting refugees does not guarantee the sustainability of their livelihoods here, as refugees have the right to seek protection in transit countries or destination countries.

Refugees initially see transit countries as the first ray of hope (see in Sahak et al. 2020). Nevertheless, we reveal that the reality faced by refugees is often far from their expectations, as this group compels them to live in vulnerable conditions. In this study, state discrimination has been introduced as a significant contributor to the precarious lives of refugees (Zhao & Zhang 2023). The state plays a crucial role in safeguarding refugees, as Purkey's (2013) research emphasizes that states have a duty and responsibility to protect and fulfill the human rights of refugees within their borders- this implies that the role of states in refugee issues is to respect, protect, and assist refugees.

However, the nationalist nature of a nation-state may limit the state's role in refugee protection (Triceseria et al. 2017). However, if a country has opened its doors without imposing any restrictions, even initially utilizing refugee entry permits, especially at airports, the state should be accountable for such entries. The state discrimination examined in this study is not based on religious, ethnic, national, or gender factors but rather on their status as refugees, compounded by Malaysia's non-membership in the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, the government can still refrain from directly suppressing the rights of refugees. For instance, in the case of discrimination against unrecognized UNHCR cards, despite Malaysia's cooperation with UNHCR, many government enforcers remain unaware of the existence and function of UNHCR cards, which verify the presence of refugees in Malaysia. Refugees should be free to move, but due to the perceived insignificance of UNHCR cards, they are susceptible to various forms of persecution, closely related to fragility and susceptibility to detention. The government should establish the foundation that every individual has the right to live in a society that respects their fundamental rights - this involves the relationship between the government, acting as the implementer of state policies, and the community, which either benefits from or is adversely affected by these policies, thereby impacting refugees.

Statistics reveal an increasing number of refugees with UNHCR cards being detained under immigration laws in recent years in cases of being subject to detention. Documented cases include female refugees and refugees of various nationalities, such as Syrians, Rohingyas, Somalis, etc., being detained despite holding valid UNHCR cards. Interviews and complaints shed light on refugees being threatened, extorted, and coerced into paying bribes to avoid imprisonment, even when possessing UNHCR cards. However, our study finds that among the communities most vulnerable to being subject to detention are the Rohingya ethnic group due to their straightforward nature compared to other communities and their lack of education, especially those residing in rural areas like Bukit Pinang, Kedah, as opposed to those living in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. They more frequently encounter arrest issues and need to know how to handle them. Additionally, those in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor find it easier to seek direct assistance from UNHCR because the headquarters are in the city center. Furthermore, many humanitarian NGOs assist in addressing the detention of refugees as most organizational offices and activities are more concentrated in these urban areas.

### How can it be less prevalent?

To address the issues of unrecognized UNHCR cards and refugee detention, it is recommended that the Ministry of Home Affairs of Malaysia issue a directive formally acknowledging UNHCR's role in verifying refugee identities and ensuring its dissemination across all government offices. Many detentions involve refugees engaged in employment—whether self-employed or working in the informal sector—who remain vulnerable to arrest due to the lack of valid documentation. This legal uncertainty discourages employers from hiring them, exacerbating financial hardship and making it difficult for refugees to afford rent, education fees, and necessities. Denying them employment opportunities ultimately burdens the government more, underscoring the need for policies that permit refugees to work, at least within the informal sector.

The precarious status of refugees also exposes them to exploitation, particularly by enforcement authorities engaging in corrupt practices. Fear of mistreatment, neglect, or retaliation discourages many from reporting abuses, compelling them to pay bribes despite financial struggles, especially in emergencies. NGOs serve as vital intermediaries, offering support and a platform for refugees to voice their grievances. MacTavish's (2016) study on Zaatari Camp, Jordan, highlights that refugees were more likely to report incidents of sexual harassment to NGOs rather than to UNHCR, the police, or other agencies, underscoring the trust placed in these organizations.

Mistreatment by law enforcement, particularly within the Malaysian police and immigration departments, includes demands for bribes, threats of detention, and, in severe cases, physical abuse. Ananthalakshmi's (2023) Reuters report revealed that 150 foreigners, including refugees and asylum seekers—seven of whom were children—died in Malaysian detention centers in 2022. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and inadequate access to food, water, and healthcare exacerbate detainees' suffering. While Malaysia presents itself as a nation upholding democratic values and human rights, these incidents highlight systemic governance failures, revealing that such principles remain aspirational rather than a lived reality.

Legal aid is essential for detainees and securing civil documentation, including marriage registration, birth certificates, and other vital records. Restricting access to these legal processes exacerbates refugees' hardships, highlighting the urgent need for policy reforms. Many refugees also lack formal education, limiting their awareness of legal procedures. NGOs play a key role in bridging this gap. Kersch & Mishtal (2016) found that ARCI works to resolve refugee detention cases in Europe by providing legal representation and expediting trial processes. Similarly, Gerver (2016) found that NGOs in Israel assist refugees in voluntarily returning to their home countries, as detention conditions there are often more feared than the challenges of repatriation.

Despite these challenges, the Malaysian government has taken some positive steps, such as offering refugees a 50% discount on medical treatment at government hospitals. However, inconsistencies in recognizing UNHCR cards continue to limit healthcare access. Refugees are often deprioritized in favor of local communities, resulting in long waiting times. Many must seek costly private treatment or endure illnesses without proper emergency care. Psychological support for trauma remains inadequate, yet it is essential for refugees' well-being. The government should prioritize mental healthcare by providing regular and free treatment in collaboration with health-based NGOs and social support organizations.

Most refugee children attend NGO-run schools, but the quality varies significantly, particularly in rural areas with inadequate infrastructure and non-standardized curricula. While allowing refugees to enroll in government schools remains unlikely due to concerns over quotas and local opposition, the government could take steps to centralize and regulate educational institutions established by NGOs or refugee communities under a dedicated committee. This would ensure standardized curricula, alignment with Malaysian education policies, and the prevention of extremist teachings.



## Conclusion

The findings of this study can guide how the state can take productive steps to safeguard the rights of refugees in Malaysia. This research demonstrates that the state cannot act alone in managing refugees, and thus, the presence of non-state actors, particularly NGOs, and fostering cooperation among them can strengthen assistance to refugees. This study observes that NGOs have extensive experience handling refugees due to their frequent fieldwork and comfort in sharing their experiences with NGOs. This study believed that with the presence of NGOs in refugee management policies, state discrimination would decrease.

To sum up, individuals indirectly involved in refugee management may perceive Malaysia as a country that practices democracy and upholds humanitarian values because it hosts nearly 180,000 refugees. However, a closer examination reveals shortcomings: unrecognized UNHCR cards, fragility and susceptibility to detention, deprivation of the right to work, exposure to persecution, barriers to legal aid, lack of access to healthcare treatment, and restricted access to formal education. This research successfully answers the hypothesis that State discrimination contributes to several challenges encountered by refugees in Malaysia. In Malaysia's context, this study categorizes all these issues as state discrimination, primarily based on refugees' status, not nationality, religion, or ethnicity. Therefore, to prevent these challenges from escalating further, this study opens a debate to future research on whether Malaysia should consider ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Geran Galakkan Penyelidikan Muda (GGPM-2023-036), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, for supporting this research project and funding this publication.

## References

- Acharya A (2001) Human security: East versus West. *International Journal* 56 (3):442-460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702001056003>.
- Akinyemi OO, Owoaje ET, & Cadmus EO (2016) In their own words: Mental health and quality of life of West African refugees in Nigeria. *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 17 (1):273-287. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-014-0409-6>.
- Al-Majdhoub FM, Hamzah A, Ree FHA, & Ariffin MYM (2020) Voices from the displaced: A focus group discussion with the Yemeni women refugees in Malaysia. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Islamic and Humanities* 2 (1):55-64.
- Amnesty International (2010) Abused and abandoned refugees denied rights in Malaysia. Amnesty International, 16 June. [Accessed 2 September 2024] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA28/010/2010/en/>.
- Ananthalakshmi A (2023) Malaysia pressed to probe deaths of 150 foreigners in detention last year. Reuters, 23 February. [Accessed 15 October 2024]. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysia-pressed-probe-deaths-150-foreigners-detention-last-year-2023-02-23/>.
- Aung ST, Fischer BT, & Wang Y (2021) Conceptualization of health and social vulnerability of marginalized populations during COVID-19 using quantitative scoring approach. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2021.1882023>.
- Baharuddin AS & Enh MA (2018) Pelarian Vietnam: Satu isu global dalam sejarah hubungan luar Malaysia. *Journal of Nusantara Studies* 3 (1):1-18. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol3iss1pp1-18>.
- Bender M, Osch VY, He J, Derya Güngör D, & Eldja A (2022) The role of perceived discrimination in linking religious practices and well-being: a study among Muslim Afghan refugees in the Netherlands. *International Journal of Psychology* 57 (4):445-455. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12854>.
- Blair CW (2022) Book review: Discrimination and delegation: Explaining state responses to refugees. *International Migration Review* 57 (1):475-477. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183221105260>.
- CEDAW (2018) Overview: Refugee and asylum-seeking women asylum access Malaysia. [Accessed 20 May 2024]. [https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Annex\\_Asylum-Access-Malaysia-Shadow-Report-Submission-CEDAW\\_January-2018.pdf](https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Annex_Asylum-Access-Malaysia-Shadow-Report-Submission-CEDAW_January-2018.pdf).

- Costello C & Foster M (2022) (Some) refugees welcome: When is differentiating between refugees unlawful discrimination? *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 22 (3):244-280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13582291221116476>.
- Gerver M (2016) Refugee repatriation and the problem of consent. *British Journal of Political Science* 48: 855-875. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000193>.
- Hameed S, Sadiq A, & Din AU (2018) The increased vulnerability of refugee population to mental health disorders. *Kansas Journal of Medicine* 11 (1):1-12. <https://doi.org/10.17161/kjm.v11i1.8680>.
- Hamzah SI, Daud S, & Idris AN (2016) Pelarian Rohingya dan isu-isu kontemporari di Malaysia. *Malaysia Journal of Society and Space* 12 (9):11-23.
- Hoffstaedter G (2014) Place-making: Chin refugees, citizenship and the state in Malaysia. *Citizenship Studies* 18 (8):871-884. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2014.964549>.
- Kassim A (2015) Pendatang asing tanpa izin (PATI) sebagai musuh nombor dua negara? In: Othman Z & Idris AN. *Migrasi dan Keselamatan*. Malaysia: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Kuala Lumpur. 25-49.
- Kersch A & Mishtal J (2016) Asylum in crisis: Migrant policy, entrapment, and the role of Non-governmental organizations in Siracusa, Italy. *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35 (4):97-121. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdw017>.
- Kok J, Khor K, Hon K, & Van Schalkwyk GJ (2021) Refugee children in Malaysia: Perceptions of family and coping mechanisms. *The Qualitative Report* 26 (12):3926-3947. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5114>.
- Krustiyati JM, Atik A, & Widi E (2021) Transit country protection towards refugees during the COVID 19 pandemic: Practice in Indonesia. In: *Social Work, Law, Economics, Public Administration Community Participation and Welfare Society*. India: Novateur Publication. 1-9.
- Lindencrona F, Ekblad S, & Hauff E (2007) Mental health of recently resettled refugees from the Middle East in Sweden: The impact of pre-resettlement trauma, resettlement stress and capacity to handle stress. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 43 (2):121-131. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-007-0280-2>.
- Lindert J, Ehrenstein OSV, Priebe S, Mielck A, & Brähler E (2009) Depression and anxiety in labor migrants and refugees - a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Social Science & Medicine* 69 (2):246-257. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.04.032>.
- MacTavish E (2016) Barriers of reporting sexual violence in Syrian refugee camps. Thesis, Royal Roads University, Victoria.
- Mat BB, Pero MBDS, & Amir KNK (2023) Refugee discourse in Malaysia: issues and concerns from human security perspective. *The Journal of Strategic Studies & International Affairs* 3 (1):30-49. <https://doi.org/10.17576/sinergi.SI1.2023.03>.
- Menge T (2023) Discriminating borders: nationality, racial ordering, and the right to exclude. *Genealogy+ Critique* 9 (1):1-4. <https://doi.org/10.16995/gc.9250>.
- Mohammed Ibrahim A (2012) Thematic analysis: A critical review of its process and evaluation. *West East Journal of Social Sciences* 1 (1):39-47.
- Mollica RF, Wyshak G, & Lavelle J (1987) The psychosocial impact of war trauma and torture on Southeast Asian refugees. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144: 1567-1572. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.144.12.1567>.
- Muhammad I & Rokis R (2019) The barriers to education among the Palestinian refugee children in Malaysia. *Journal of Islam in Asia* 16 (2):370-399. <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v16i2.714>.
- Nazri AS, Talib KA, & Sulaiman N (2019) Syrian Muslim refugees in Malaysia: The narratives and survivability. *Journal of Islamic & Social Studies* 5 (1):130-144. [https://doi.org/10.30983/islam\\_realitas.v5i2.2106](https://doi.org/10.30983/islam_realitas.v5i2.2106).
- Nowell LS, Norris JM, White DE & Moules NJ (2017) Thematic analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16 (1):1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.
- Nungsari M & Flanders S (2018) A comprehensive study of Rohingya construction workers in Peninsular Malaysia and recommendations for a future work pilot program. ASIA School of Business. Kuala Lumpur, 13 August.
- Oberman K (2020) Refugee discrimination – the good, the bad, and the pragmatic. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 37 (5):695-712. <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12448>.

- Oliveira DGL (2023) Refugees and refugee applicants' voices in Brazilian cities. *International Journal of Population Studies* 9 (3):84-97. <https://doi.org/10.36922/ijps.438>.
- Oyebamiji IS, Oyebade OO, Cohen HJ, & Okechukwu DAB (2022) Echoes of colour discrimination in refugee protection regime: The experience of Africans fleeing the Russia-Ukrainian war. *Migration Letters* 19 (5):695-707. <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v19i5.2776>.
- Perocco F & Francesco DP (2023) The racialized welfare discourse on refugees and asylum seekers: The example of “scroungers” in Italy. *Social Sciences* 12 (2):59. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020059>.
- Pittaway E & Bartolomei L (2001) Refugees, race, and gender: The multiple discrimination against refugee women. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 19 (6):21-32. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.21236>.
- Purkey AL (2013) Questioning governance in protracted refugee situations: The fiduciary nature of the state-refugee relationship. *International Journal of Refugee Law* 25 (4):693-716. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eet056>.
- Raofi N & Barna AE (2023) An exploratory investigation of refugees personal values and subjective well-being in Malaysia. *International Journal of Social Science Humanity & Management Research* 2 (7):543-548. <https://doi.org/10.58806/ijsshmr.2023.v2i7n10>.
- Riadhussyah M (2016) Tanggung jawab Indonesia sebagai negara transit bagi pengungsi anak berdasarkan hukum internasional. *Jurnal Hukum* 2 (23):230-250. <https://doi.org/10.20885/iustum.vol23.iss2.art4>.
- Sahak S, Nordin R, & Ishak KM (2020) The plight of refugees in Malaysia: Malaysia as a transit country in protecting refugees' rights. *Journal of Nusantara Studies* 5 (1):378-394. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol5iss1pp378-394>.
- Seet M (2013) Can Islam and “Islamization” be a force for refugee rights in Malaysia? *Pacific Basin Law Journal* 31 (1):57-95. <https://doi.org/10.5070/P8311021821>.
- Shahimi F, Block K, & Alisic E (2024) Sense of identity among young people with refugee backgrounds: A scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review* 157: 107378. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107378>.
- Streeter E & Cloward J (2021) Climate migrants and the denial of refugee status. *Journal of Student Research* 11 (4):1-15. <https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v11i4.3736>.
- Suan TP (2006) Kehidupan Rohingya di Malaysia: perjuangan dalam ketidakpastian hidup. *Akademika* 68: 111-122.
- Todd L, Amirullah A, & Shin WY (2019) The economic impact of granting refugees in Malaysia the right to work. Kuala Lumpur: Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs. Policy Ideas No. 60.
- Triceseria DIAA, Zayzda AN, & Prabaningtyas FR (2017) A new approach to refugee's welfare through the role of community: Case study of refugee's community centre in Sewon. *Global South Review* 2 (1):1-11. <https://doi.org/10.22146/globalsouth.28847>.
- UNDP (1994) Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security. Report dated 01 January 1994. <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-1994>.
- Wahab AA & Khairi A (2019) Moving onward: Transnationalism and factors influencing Rohingyas' migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia. *Journal of Nusantara Studies* 4 (1):49-68. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol4iss1pp49-68>.
- Wahab AA & Khairi A (2020) Right to justice and legal aid barriers to the vulnerable non-citizens in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space* 16 (1):13-23. <https://doi.org/10.17576/geo-2020-1601-0>.
- Wahab AA (2018) The colours of exploitation: smuggling of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Malaysia. *Journal of Southeast Asia Social Sciences and Humanities* 88 (1):5-16. <https://doi.org/10.17576/akad-2018-8801-01>.
- Zainuddin E (2020) Amalan terbaik meknisme pengurusan pelarian dan keselamatan insan di Malaysia. Dissertation, National University of Malaysia, Selangor.
- Zhao D & Zhang Q (2023) Discrimination in French and German refugee policy. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 11: 314-322. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v11i.7681>.

## Author Biographies

**Atika Shafinaz Nazri** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), UKM. Her research focuses on migration, particularly refugees, civil society—especially Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)—humanitarian aid, and Middle Eastern conflicts. She is actively involved in volunteer work assisting refugees in Malaysia through local NGOs such as Malaysia for Syria and Malaysian Humanitarian Aid and Relief.

**Zarina Othman** (PhD, University of Denver, Colo., USA), is an International Relations Professor at the Program of Strategic Studies and International Relations, UKM (National University of Malaysia). Her research interests focus on international relations theory, human security, non-traditional security issues, regional and East Asian security.

**Kartini Aboo Talib Khalid** obtained her Ph.D in Law, Policy and Society at Northeastern University Boston, USA. A Professor in public policy and ethnicity, she is also a Deputy Director at the Institute of Ethnic Study (KITA) UKM. Her full CV and publications can be viewed at <https://scholar.google.com/citations?authuser=1&user=UksS7h0AAAAJ>.

**Emyzai Zainuddin** holds a Master's degree in Strategic and Security Studies under the supervision of Professor Dr. Zarina Othman. Her research focused on best practices for refugee management in Malaysia. She is a diplomatic administrative officer and currently serves at the Ministry of Human Resources. Emyzai frequently represents Malaysia in Geneva, addressing issues related to the labor rights of foreign nationals, including refugees.