

The media and migrant labour issues in Malaysia: a content analysis of selected Malaysian newspapers

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For centuries Malaysia has received several waves of immigrants from China, India, Indonesia and the Middle East. During the period of British colonial rule Chinese and Indian migrant workers were recruited to work in the tin mines, the sugar, rubber and coffee plantations, and also on the construction of roads and railways. This mass labour migration resulted in changes in the composition of the Malayan population and the development of a plural society where ethnicity was also identified with economic function. The Malays were identified with agriculture (padi and rubber) and public services; the Chinese with trade, industry and mining; and the Indians with plantation agriculture and employment in the transport sector.

In the late 1960s and 1970s the booming timber industry in Sabah attracted an influx of Filipino immigrant labour. This was followed by a wave of Muslim Filipinos from Mindanao seeking refuge in Sabah (Pillai 1992). They were allowed to reside in Sabah by the then Sabah government. Indonesians escaping poverty also crossed the Malacca Strait in droves to work in Peninsular Malaysia as well as in Sabah and Sarawak. Historical and cultural links between people in the Northern Peninsular Malaysian states and Thailand also resulted in Thais crossing the border to work in the padi fields during the harvesting season. The recruitment of foreign workers expanded in the 1980s and 1990s to meet Malaysia's labour shortages in the plantation, construction, and domestic work sectors.

International labour migration has captured public interest because of the long-term effects of reliance on cheap foreign labour. The large numbers of illegal immigrants and foreign migrant workers

in Malaysia have also been blamed for many of the social problems in the country (*Star*, 31 March 1994; *New Straits Times*, 12 December 1993). Some Malaysians also view foreign migrant workers and illegal immigrants as a threat to national security. Additionally, migrant workers are also perceived as a health threat particularly with the increase in the recent outbreaks of malaria, measles, cholera and tuberculosis (*New Straits Times*, 2 April 1994). This has partly been blamed on the unsanitary conditions under which most illegal immigrants and migrant workers live.

This has resulted in the demonisation of migrant workers in Malaysian society, who have been scapegoated for the social ills in the country. There appears to be a general denial of the poor circumstances under which the migrants live and work. They are paid lower wages than the locals and lack legal protections. Illegal workers are also at the mercy of their employers or agents and are open to exploitation (Interview with Aegile Fernandez, co-director of Tenaganita, 2003).

The national newspapers occasionally publish reports of foreign workers being abused, cheated, not being paid wages, threatened with arrest, or being treated like slaves. Most cases of mistreatment are not officially reported because of the fear of deportation on the part of the worker. Some of these workers, however, seek help from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like Tenaganita, especially in cases of non-payment of wages.

The growing problems and increasing international criticism has resulted in the implementation of measures to improve the regulation of foreign labour recruitment. In the 2004–5 state crackdown on illegal immigrants, these immigrants were advised to report themselves to the authorities and return to their respective countries. They could then return to Malaysia as documented workers. The Malaysian government has also diversified the recruitment of foreign workers to include workers from Vietnam, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Pakistan in order to reduce dependence on the Indonesians, who currently comprise about 75 per cent of the migrant workforce.

Economic background

Malaysia became a major player in the global economy in the late 1980s. By 1990 it had achieved a per capita income of US\$2,300, which put it in the mid-level range among world economies (Asian Development Bank 1992:289). Its shift to export oriented labour-intensive manufactures made it become increasingly reliant on the manufacturing sector. By the late 1980s, manufacturing contributed to a substantial proportion of its GDP, with a relatively high percentage of the workforce engaged in this sector. Nevertheless, it also continued to rely heavily on its agricultural sector, principally oil palm and timber exports. Apart from these competing demands for labour, the development of huge infrastructure projects and the real estate boom also required large labour inputs. Consequently, Malaysia faced labour shortages that could only be met from outside the country.

The rapid growth of the economy in the 1980s and early 1990s thus created job opportunities that local labour could not fill, and which were filled by foreign migrant workers. This migrant labour force was concentrated in sectors where the jobs were considered 'demeaning, dirty, and dangerous'. Initially, the demand for foreign workers was met by Indonesians who moved fairly freely between the two countries. In 1984, the Malaysian and Indonesian governments also signed an agreement for the importation of Indonesian migrant labour. These migrant workers were initially recruited for the plantation and forestry sector, construction and domestic work.

Migrant workers in Malaysia

As pointed out by an NGO worker:

In the construction industry, we can see that most of them are migrant workers. It is a hard tough job. Although the pay is good (RM35 to RM40 per day), Malaysians do not want to do it because it is a tough job and Malaysians are less likely to do hard and vigorous jobs (Tenaganita: Interview, 2004).

Domestic and construction workers were recruited in the early 1980s in Sabah, first from the Philippines and then from Indonesia. In the 1990s the manufacturing sector expanded following the establishment of joint ventures between Malaysia and foreign companies, creating

further labour shortages. Thus by the 1990s too, foreign workers were employed in three main sectors: plantation; construction (80 per cent of the workers in the construction sector are migrant workers); manufacturing work and services, including domestic work. In manufacturing they are hired in the small and medium-sized factories. In the service sector, they work in restaurants, fast food outlets, cleaning services, laundrettes, as gardeners and garbage collectors (*Star*, 11 May 2005).

Employers look for specific criteria in employing migrant workers, based on the source country and perceived physical attributes of the workers. For example, in construction, Indonesians are preferred and they are also found in the oil palm estates. Bangladeshis, the second biggest migrant group, work in vegetable gardens, fruit orchards and flower gardens. They are also employed in the manufacturing sector.

In 2005 there were about 800,000 migrant workers in the three main sectors (excluding domestic workers) of whom about 80 per cent were estimated to be Indonesian (*Star*, 11 May 2005). Of the 155,000 registered foreign domestic workers in Malaysia in 2002, 73 per cent were Indonesian (*The Sun*, 31 January 2002, cited in Tenaganita, 2002).

Governance of recruitment of migrant workers

The Malaysian government has alternated between tightening immigration controls and loosening them through bilateral agreements and amnesties. During the period, 1970–80, the government followed a liberal policy towards foreign worker recruitment. Employers either hired Indonesians who were domiciled in the country (from squatter settlements) or from Indonesia through private labour brokers for the plantation and construction sectors.

From 1981–8, foreign labour recruitment was legalised, an official channel was created for labour recruitment and bilateral agreements signed with governments of sending countries. In 1982 the Malaysian government established a Committee for the Recruitment of Foreign Workers. Two years later, the Malaysian government signed a bilateral agreement with the Indonesian

government for the government-to-government regulated supply of Indonesian workers for the plantation sector and for domestic work. Subsequently, in 1985 the Philippines and Malaysia also signed a memorandum of understanding for the recruitment of domestic workers. In 1986 employers in the plantation and construction industries were allowed to hire Bangladeshi and Thai workers for the plantation and construction sectors.

In 1989 the recruitment of foreign workers was frozen due to depressed economic conditions in the country. During the period 1989–96 a legalisation programme was also announced to halt illegal immigration. This programme was launched principally because of the economic recession. Employers of undocumented workers were encouraged to regularise their workers. However, this programme had limited success since not many employers were willing to change the status of their undocumented workers.

The Malaysian government also implemented an amnesty programme that was targeted initially at domestic workers and then extended to workers in the plantation and construction sectors. Under this programme all undocumented (illegal) workers were required to register themselves at special registration centres in order to remain in the country as legal workers (Kaur 2004a:ch.9; Kaur 2004b). The government also deployed the Police Field Force to patrol borders and guard against illegal landings on Malaysia's coastlines.

Further measures to control undocumented migration have been implemented and an amnesty programme was also introduced that allowed illegal migrants to depart without penalty. A work permit system was enforced and workers were categorised more rigidly than before. These employment permits are both location and employment specific.

In early 2002 foreign workers were permitted to be recruited only through bilateral government-to-government agreements to 'compel' the source countries to assure responsibility for their citizens. This was largely in response to rioting by Indonesian workers in a factory in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, in January 2002 (*Sun*, 8 February 2002).

Agreements were signed with 12 countries for foreign worker recruitment under the diversified labour force policy. These were:

Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal, Laos, Vietnam, Philippines, India, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (*Sun*, 8 February 2002). Indonesians were also restricted to the plantation, construction and domestic work sectors.

Then in 2002 the Malaysian Immigration Act was amended to deal with illegal foreign workers. These amendments included: mandatory prison sentences of up to five years; a fine of RM1,000 and up to six strokes of the cane for unauthorised foreigners; imprisonment of six months to five years and or up to six strokes of the cane for employers harbouring illegal workers. For persons who allowed their premises to be used by illegal immigrants, a fine between RM5,000 to RM30,000, or imprisonment up to 12 months, or both, for each illegal migrant harboured would be imposed (*New Sunday Times*, 15 August 2005). The state also deported 300,000 unauthorised foreigners in 2002. Nevertheless, illegal migrants from Indonesia and the Philippines continued to arrive, especially in Sabah, thus prompting another round of enforcement activities (*Migration News*, <http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn>, accessed on 6 November 2003).

Since late 2002 and the Ops Nyah 1 and Ops Nyah 2 campaigns to crack down on illegal foreign workers, there have been similar crackdowns. This is mainly because of the spate of violent crimes and also partly to ensure the effective implementation of the new identity card system (MyKad system), which will cover registered foreign workers as well (*Star*, 7 August 2004).

A 17-day amnesty was then announced from 29 October to 14 November 2004 to encourage illegal immigrants to return to their countries without penalty before the Muslim New Year celebrations. The deadline was extended at the request of Indonesia's Manpower and Transmigration Minister as well as the President of Indonesia. It was further extended to 31 January 2005 following a request from the Indonesians who were then battling with the 26 December 2004 tsunami disaster (*Star*, 2 February 2005). Moreover, there were many illegal Acehnese immigrants who had no homes or jobs to return to as a result of the disaster.

Subsequently, the Malaysian government embarked on a one-month long Ops Nasihat campaign in February 2005. During the

exercise, immigration department officials, accompanied by Rela members (community volunteers) went to squatter settlements and workplaces to round up illegal immigrants. Those caught during this period were given a warning and advised to return home within a week or face arrest, deportation, and blacklisting by the government (*Sunday Star*, 13 February 2005). The police did not carry out any arrests during this exercise.

Subsequently, the government launched Ops Tegas in March 2005 to crack down on, and arrest illegal immigrants as well as employers found harbouring them. In the first week of Ops Tegas, 1,127 illegal workers were arrested and several employers were charged (*New Sunday Times*, 6 March 2005). Of the estimated 1.2 million illegal immigrants in the country, only about 400,000 returned to their countries without facing any penalty during the three-month amnesty that ended on 31 January 2005 (*New Straits Times*, 2 March 2005).

One of the reasons for the low rate of repatriation was that many workers refused to leave because they had not been paid their wages. These workers were advised by the government to report to the Immigration department where they applied for amnesty (*Star*, 2 February 2005). They were also given the opportunity to return as legal foreign workers and take action against their former employers through official channels, although these channels were not clarified (*New Sunday Times*, 13 February 2005).

The government also put a freeze on the intake of fresh foreign workers during this three-month amnesty period to allow illegal workers who had taken advantage of the amnesty programme to return as legal workers through the proper channels (*Star*, 27 January 2005). Preference was given to illegal Indonesian immigrants wanting to return as legal workers (*Sunday Star*, 13 February 2005). One week, however, after the amnesty period ended at the end of February 2005, only 500 Indonesians had returned to Malaysia. The delay appeared to be on the Indonesian side where Indonesian agents were purported to be charging workers high fees to return. There were also attempts by the agents to encourage workers to go to countries like Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, where they earned higher commissions.

As of 31 May 2005, there was an estimated total of 1,615,863 foreign workers: Indonesians 69 per cent; Nepalese 10.19 per cent; Indians 6.19 per cent; and Vietnamese 4.56 per cent. They were working in manufacturing 31 per cent; plantations 26 per cent; domestic work 18 per cent; and construction and service sectors 25 per cent (*Star*, 6 July 2005).

The Malaysian government has also held discussions with the Indonesian authorities to simplify immigration procedures by doing away with induction courses for Indonesians who had previously worked in Malaysia. From August 2005 a simplified application process for foreign workers through the establishment of a one-stop centre was instituted by the Home Ministry. This has reduced the processing period from two to four weeks to one day (*Star*, 7 July 2005).

The Malaysian government has also held discussions with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to absorb about 40,000 documented refugees in the country into the foreign labour workforce to reduce the number of foreign workers recruited overseas in the interests of security (*Star*, 7 July 2005).

Health concerns and migrant workers

One of the major concerns in Malaysia is that migrant workers are carriers of diseases. Foreign workers are required to undergo medical examinations at designated medical centres or clinics in the sending country before a work permit is issued. Additionally, random checks for HIV-AIDS, Hepatitis B, and drug abuse were carried out on 10 per cent of foreign workers at selected entry points (Faizal 2002). With the establishment of the Foreign Workers Medical Examination and Monitoring Agency (FOMEMA), all migrant workers are now required to undergo medical examinations in Malaysia within a month of arrival. They also have to undergo annual medical examinations.

The media and migrant labour issues

The Malaysian media, as in other countries, plays an important role in society to keep Malaysians informed about issues that affect, or could affect them and those that they should pay attention to in order to continue living in a stable environment. The media has taken on the

primary role of informing and educating members of the society on issues of importance. Framing an issue in a language or codes explaining the challenges faced by all relevant parties involved in the matter and outlining the parameters surrounding it is a role that the media plays to help its audiences to better comprehend what may be of importance to them.

The new phase involving an influx of migrant labour is one such issue that has impacted on several societies around the world, primarily as a result of the global market for labour. The Malaysian media, although primarily privately owned, has strong links with political parties and is regulated by the government. The media has helped frame issues surrounding migrant labour in the country. The media was also requested to provide coverage on the official crackdown on illegal immigrants (*Star*, 2 February 2005). The media was thus used by the authorities to encourage voluntary repatriation, as well as to give warnings to those employers harbouring illegal migrant workers.

News framing of migrant labour issues

Much has been written about media representation of issues, which lends to a more comprehensive understanding by society of those issues and their development. Media serves this very function of keeping audiences informed of issues that concern them so that they can be more effective participants and contribute to social development. One area of media representation that has received some attention is news framing.

Three paradigmatic outlooks have been identified: cognitive, constructionist and critical, which provide researchers with specific images with which to examine the interaction of media frames and individual or social level reality. The power of frames that become embedded in news texts has been much studied (D'Angelo 2002).

This paper does not attempt to study the framing process or effects. It describes what a reader may understand of an issue or issues surrounding migrant labour in this case study. Conjectures are made of situations as stated below (D'Angelo 2002):

Content of frames: News frames are themes within news stories that are carried by various kinds of framing devices. Researchers are

concerned with textual items (words and images) and with contextual treatment they receive from framing devices.

News frames shape reality through impact on individual cognition.

Socialisation is via interpersonal discussion and generally influences public opinion.

News is from interaction with the cognitive and social behaviours that they shape.

Framing shapes public dialogues about issues and journalists provide citizens with information to gain understanding of the issue.

The complexity and subtlety of framing has not yet been fully explored. Nevertheless, framing can be assumed to couch the debate surrounding migrant labour issues in Malaysia in an appropriate manner to better understand it. It has in some way influenced Malaysian society's social and economic interaction with migrant workers by raising concerns that were put on the media agenda and, therefore the public agenda, by the media.

An analysis of media representation of migrant workers in Malaysia

This section examines how selected news reports in Malaysian newspapers have framed key issues concerning migrant labour including health, social problems, the economy, and society as a whole. The intention is to explain the main problems faced by migrant labour, which are of concern to the state, as reported in Malaysian newspapers; and examine what the print media depicts to be the economic and social impacts of migrant workers in Malaysia.

In this study English and Malay mainstream newspapers, some available online, as well as one online news agency and one alternative online newspaper were studied. These are two Malay language mainstream newspapers: *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*; two mainstream English language newspapers: *New Straits Times/New Sunday Times* and *Star/Sunday Star*; a city afternoon newspaper: *Malay Mail/Sunday Mail*; a new newspaper: *Sun*; the country's online news agency service: *Bernamea Online*; and an alternative online newspaper: *Malaysiakini*. These are read by the majority of the English- and Malay-speaking population in Malaysia.

The period selected was from January to August 2003 and an available sample of newspapers was analysed for content. A total of 104 news stories from the selected eight news media were analysed. In addition, some preliminary content analysis using SPSS was carried out on these articles to understand what issues were represented in the print media.

How have the migrant workers been portrayed? An analysis of these news stories was carried out to answer the following questions according to specific criteria:

How does the Malaysian news media frame stories regarding migrant labour?

What are the main problems faced by migrant workers in Malaysia?

What are the perceived economic and social impacts migrant workers may have on Malaysia?

What are the major health issues that migrant workers need to be concerned about when entering Malaysia?

1. Frequency and tone of news stories on migrant workers

The number of favourable and unfavourable articles that appeared in the sample media is shown in table 1.¹ The English daily broadsheet, *New Straits Times (NST)*, had the largest number of related stories (25),

	Tone of overall story			Total
	favourable	unfavourable	neutral	
<i>NST/Sunday</i>	11	10	4	25
<i>The Star/Sunday</i>	7	5	0	12
<i>Malay Mail/Sunday</i>	4	3	0	7
<i>Utusan Malaysia</i>	12	3	2	17
<i>Malaysiakini</i>	1	2	0	3
<i>Berita Harian</i>	6	4	0	10
<i>The Sun</i>	12	3	1	16
<i>Bernamea Online</i>	4	6	0	10
Others	4	0	0	4
Total	61	36	7	104

Table 1

News stories on migrant workers appearing in selected newspapers (January to August 2003)

followed by the largest Malay newspaper, *Utusan Malaysia* (17), and *The Sun*, an English tabloid, with 16 stories. *NST* carried an almost equal number of favourable and unfavourable stories related to migrant labour, compared to *Utusan*, which had a large number of favourable compared to unfavourable stories. Only *Malaysiakini* and *Bernama Online* appeared to have carried more unfavourable rather than favourable stories on this issue.

2. Types and frequency of main issues appearing in the media

Several main issues on migrant labour were depicted in the Malaysian press. Favourable stories on the recruitment of migrant workers and favourable stories on regulations imposed on such labour appeared to have a higher frequency. Other common issues about migrant workers included those relating to health, illegal status, abuse of workers, crimes by migrant workers (often among themselves, especially among Indonesian male workers), professional workers, human rights concerns, and other related social problems. These are shown in table 2.

3. Types and frequency of issues reported in the press as second stories

The frequency of types of issues that appeared as secondary stories in the sample of stories is shown in table 3. A higher number of stories seemed to be on regulations and the recruitment of workers as well as related problems that were resolved by authorities and employers. Again, there seemed to be more favourable stories on these issues. Among the issues noted, there was a higher incidence of unfavourable stories on abuse of migrant workers, crimes against and by the workers, as well as training of workers.

4. Categories of workers appearing in news articles

Another aspect that was analysed was the identification of categories of workers that were frequently portrayed in the Malaysian press. Several articles were about migrant labour in general and did not specify worker category. Some articles were on professional and other workers. But the worker category that was most frequently portrayed in the press included construction workers (25 stories or 24 per cent), domestic workers/maids (13 stories or 12.5 per cent) and plantation workers (6 stories or 5.8 per cent) as shown in table 2.

		Maid	Construction	Plantation	Information Technology	Others	Totals
Health	favourable	1	2	1	-	5	9
	unfavourable	-	-	-	-	1	1
Illegal status	favourable	-	3	-	-	5	8
	unfavourable	-	1	-	1	6	8
	neutral	-	1	-	-	-	1
Abuse of migrant	favourable	2	2	1	-	1	6
	unfavourable	1	1	-	-	-	2
Crime against migrant	favourable	1	2	-	-	3	6
	unfavourable	-	-	-	-	2	2
Recruitment of migrant	favourable	3	4	2	-	3	12
	unfavourable	1	1	-	-	3	5
	neutral	-	-	2	-	1	3
Training of migrant	favourable	-	1	-	-	2	3
Crime by migrant	favourable	-	-	-	-	5	5
	unfavourable	-	-	-	-	5	5
Human rights	favourable	-	-	-	-	1	1
	unfavourable	-	-	-	-	1	1
Other govt. regulations	favourable	4	2	-	-	4	10
	unfavourable	-	2	-	-	1	3
	neutral	-	1	-	-	-	1
Profess. workers	favourable	-	-	-	-	2	2
Related social problems	favourable	-	-	-	-	1	1
	unfavourable	-	-	-	-	1	1
Others	favourable	-	2	-	-	5	7
	unfavourable	-	-	-	-	1	1
Total		13	25	6	1	59	104

Table 2

Types and frequency of main issues appearing in selected sample together with category of worker

As the total picture suggests in table 4, the slant of stories is generally favourable, and this finding relates to each category of worker. The only exception was a single story on an information technology worker which had a negative slant.

None		17
Health	unfavourable	3
Illegal status	favourable	3
	unfavourable	5
Abuse of migrant	favourable	1
	unfavourable	3
Crime against migrant	favourable	2
	unfavourable	2
Recruitment of migrant	favourable	8
	unfavourable	1
	neutral	2
Training of migrant	favourable	1
	unfavourable	3
Crime by migrant	favourable	1
	unfavourable	2
Human rights	favourable	3
	unfavourable	1
Other govt. regulations	favourable	15
	unfavourable	3
	neutral	1
Pro workers	favourable	1
	unfavourable	2
Related social problems	favourable	8
	unfavourable	5
Related financial issues	favourable	1
	unfavourable	1
Others	favourable	6
	unfavourable	3
Total		104

Table 3
Types and Frequency of issues reported in the press as second stories

5. Gender of workers portrayed in news stories

Most stories did not emphasise the gender of the migrant workers. About 21.2 per cent of the stories affected both men and women workers, 13.5 per cent were on male workers and 9.6 per cent were about female workers, as shown in table 5. As indicated in the overall

	Tone of overall story			Total
	favourable	unfavourable	neutral	
Maid	11	2	0	13
Construction	17	5	3	25
Plantation	4	1	1	6
Information technology	0	1	0	1
Others	29	27	3	59
Total	61	36	7	104

*Table 4
Category of worker in news stories by tone of overall story*

analysis, there were more favourable than unfavourable stories for both sexes individually and when they were both mentioned together in the story.

Table 5 also shows that no male domestic workers or female plantation workers were reported in any of the stories. This is to be expected since the recruitment pattern for domestic workers is one of females and for plantation workers that of males. In addition, table 6 shows that the slant of stories that involved either male or female workers or both was positive in most cases.

Table 7 also shows the main issues of news coverage that male and female workers were involved in over the selected time period in the selected sample. However, the sample for each was too small to draw any worthwhile conclusions. Nonetheless, only females were reported as being abused and only males were reported as being propagators of crime.

	Male	Female	Male& female	Not indicated	Total
Maid	0	5	0	8	13
Construction	5	1	5	14	25
Plantation	1	0	2	3	6
Information technology	0	0	0	1	1
Others	8	4	15	32	59
Total	14	10	22	58	104

*Table 5
Category of worker in news coverage by gender*

	Male	Female	Male & female	Not indicated	Total
Favourable	8	5	9	39	61
Unfavourable	6	5	7	18	36
Neutral	0	0	6	1	7
Total	14	10	22	58	104

Table 6

Gender of workers in news coverage by overall tone of story

6. Sources of stories

Stories on migrant workers came from several sources as shown in table 8. The majority of the stories originated from the Human Resource Ministry (21) followed closely by the police (20) during the period the stories were analysed. Also, twelve stories originated from the immigration department. Very few stories reported were from the migrant workers themselves or the NGOs although several did not indicate a source other than the journalist.

7. Countries of origin of migrant workers

A quick survey was also undertaken on the country of origin of workers appearing in Malaysian media reports. About 30 per cent of the articles did not indicate the nationality of the worker. Twenty-two per cent of the stories were on Indonesian workers, while there were very few stories on other workers as a single national category. However, several stories involved a combination of workers of several countries.

Articles on migrant workers related to health issues

Health issues are an important concern in Malaysia. Only 12 stories in the sample of 104 touched on health issues. Most of them were in connection with medical tests for workers before they were recruited to ensure that only healthy workers were given work permits; medical surveillance of workers while they were in the country; and the spread of diseases like tuberculosis (TB) and HIV-AIDS were of concern to the Malaysian authorities.

The following is a list of health issues that appeared in the sample:

		Male	Male & female		Total	
			Female		Not indicated	
Health	favourable	2	1	2	4	9
	unfavourable	1	-	-	-	1
Illegal status	favourable	2	-	4	2	8
	unfavourable	-	1	3	4	8
	neutral	-	-	1	-	1
Abuse of migrant	favourable	-	-	-	6	6
	unfavourable	-	1	-	1	2
Crime against migrant	favourable	2	1	1	2	6
	unfavourable	2	-	-	-	2
Recruitment of migrant	favourable	-	2	2	8	12
	unfavourable	1	-	-	4	5
	neutral	-	-	2	1	3
Training of migrant	favourable	-	-	1	2	3
Crime by migrant	favourable	3	-	-	2	5
	unfavourable	1	-	1	3	5
Human rights	favourable	-	-	-	1	1
	unfavourable	-	-	-	1	1
Other govt. regulations	favourable	-	1	-	9	10
	unfavourable	-	-	1	2	3
	neutral	-	-	1	-	1
Profess. workers	favourable	-	-	1	1	2
Related social problems	favourable	-	1	-	-	1
	unfavourable	-	1	-	-	1
Others	favourable	-	1	2	4	7
	unfavourable	-	-	-	1	1
Total		14	10	22	58	104

Table 7

Main issue in news coverage by gender of workers

Effect of SARS.

Focus on diseases such as HIV-AIDS, TB, Hepatitis B, syphilis and malaria.

Government to introduce a new monitoring system to ensure only healthy foreign workers are recruited for the Malaysian work force.

Human resource minister	21
Immigration department	12
Employer	2
Police	20
International agency	2
Others	37
Immigration department, police	2
Immigration department, NGO	1
Immigration department, police, others	1
Police, maid employers	1
HR, others	1
NGO, international agency, others	1
Police, international agency	1
HR, immigration department	1
Immigration department, international agency	1
Total	104

Table 8
Sources of stories

Indonesian workers to undergo health checks by panel doctors recognised by Malaysia.

Diseases and how hospital authorities were taking precautionary measures.

Medical surveillance of foreign workers.

The establishment of private companies to monitor medical examinations.

Several inmates of detention centres infected with meningitis.

Workers without valid health documents not being allowed to enter the country.

The case of the recruitment agency that sent a domestic worker suffering from TB.

Ensuring that foreign workers undergo thorough medical examinations and are free from disease.

Preventing unhealthy foreign workers from entering Malaysia.

Additional media images of migrant workers

Several images have emerged about who the migrant workers are and what problems they face or are seen to cause society. Newspaper reports have often been accompanied by graphic photographs. These have led to some hostility among the different ethnic foreign worker groups, as well as between foreign workers and Malaysians.

Some of the more prominent images include gangsterism and clashes between different ethnic groups. Reports have appeared of clashes between Indonesian and Bangladeshi and Nepalese men; and Acehnese and Myanmarese men. Most of these clashes appear to have originated from groups wanting to protect or exert their territorial rights. For example, there were stories of several Indonesians extorting money from Bangladeshis and Nepalese, resulting in a violent clash between the two groups (*Sunday Star*, 13 February 2005). Myanmarese workers were accused by the Acehnese of stealing their water supply, resulting in the death of a 40-year old Myanmarese man. Parangs and knives were seized by the police in the incident (*Star*, 14 February 2005).

There were also reports of clashes between Malaysians and foreign workers. These have included attacks by Malay men on Bangladeshi men seen romancing Malay women. There was also an attack by several Vietnamese restaurant workers on a Malaysian man due to aggravated teasing on both sides, resulting in the death of the Malaysian man.

Malaysians have also been shown to be wary of foreign workers who appear to have 'invaded and taken over' shopping malls and other recreational areas in the bigger cities. However, at the same time foreign workers have also been depicted enjoying what the country has to offer them in terms of recreation.

Images of abused domestic workers are common. Domestic workers have been shown to have been physically abused by their employers, being forced into vice and prostitution or forced to work in sweatshops.

At the same time the foreign domestic worker has also been depicted as abusing the family of the employer, especially elderly members and young children, even sometimes resulting in the death of a family member (*Star*, 22 March 2005). They have also been accused

of having affairs with the man of the household, and stealing valuable items from employers.

Generally, there are media images showing the foreign worker both as a victim, abused and exploited, as well as images of the foreign worker as a trouble-maker contributing to crime and violence in the country.

Conclusion

Malaysia's Vision 2020 policy to enable the economy to achieve industrialised status by 2020 has led to rapid development of the industrial, service, and agricultural sectors. Malaysia has implemented a regulated migration system to recruit foreign workers for these sectors due to labour shortages. The government has signed bilateral agreements to ensure a shared responsibility between the host and source countries.

In general, the media representation of foreign workers focused on problems the workers faced, problems the employers faced, social ills attributed to foreign workers, and measures taken by the government to regulate the recruitment of foreign workers and to halt illegal immigration. These issues have contributed to public debate on the subject of recruitment of foreign workers. Media coverage created awareness of the need for foreign workers and their contribution to national development. It also emphasised, however, the visibility of the perceived social problems resulting from migrant workers' employment in Malaysia.

Both the English and the Malay press provide information on migrant workers. Reports are often framed from the Malaysian perspective and relate to what is being done by the government to manage migrant labour. The majority of the stories are written from a favourable viewpoint.

At the same time, problems that foreign workers face, such as abuse by employers, the different levels of crime committed by migrant workers from the same source country, the illegal status of some workers, and poor health and diseases among workers are also depicted in the media, sometimes with an indication of what government intervention measures are being taken, or are being considered, to resolve the problems.

The positive social impacts of these workers appear to have received limited discussion in the media. However, concern about documented and undocumented migrant workers spreading disease in the country and leading to an increase in the crime rate is emphasised in news reports.

The stories studied appear to indicate that migrant workers have contributed to the continuing expansion and development of the Malaysian economy, particularly in the agricultural, construction, manufacturing, and certain service sectors, including domestic work. Generally, the framing of the news appears to suggest a favourable report on the skills and diligence of the workers.

The category of worker recruited and the health of the worker appear to be of primary concern to the government. Most of the reports relating to health suggest an emphasis on the preventive regulations, policies, and Malaysian government measures to monitor threats to the health situation and the environment. Most stories included statements by the national health authority.

There has been criticism from certain quarters that a greater voice should be given to migrant workers in the media. Their economic contributions, their problems and needs, when framed effectively by the media, may increase awareness, better understanding, and acceptance by Malaysians.

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Interview with Aegile Fernandez, co-director of Tenaganita, September 2003.

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