

COVID-19 Impact towards Domestic Immigrant Worker in Malaysia: Case Study in Petaling

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Abstract

This research is conducted to observe the survival among domestic foreign workers in Malaysia. The objective of this research is to examine the survival of these domestic foreign workers before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. This article also analyses the strategy to overcome significant issues faced by these workers due to Covid-19. Grounded Theory is applied in this article to analyse the condition of foreign workers during and post Covid-19 pandemic. Methods that are used to gather preliminary data in this research are through observation and interview. These foreign workers always receive negative stereotypes within the community and the situation has worsened since the Covid-19 outbreak. However, these immigrants have to continue relying to any kind of available sources to sustain their life.

Keywords: domestic workers, immigrants, Covid-19 pandemic, Grounded Theory, life sustenance

1 Introduction

The world is facing a global pandemic of dire and spreading outbreak which is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) or also known as Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19). This illness was first identified in China and has spread globally to every part of the world in early January 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia is divided into three clusters. The first cluster to commence in Malaysia is the Sri Petaling Mosque cluster which caused a total of 2,766 positive cases. However, the country was unprepared at that point of time as Malaysia is in the midst of political upheaval.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) plays an important role in combating against the spread of Covid-19. According to Shah et al., (2020), among the initiative taken to contain the spread of Covid-19 is through the enforcement of stringent screening process at all entries to identify any visitors with symptoms such as fever upon arrival from other countries. Moreover, another initiative rolled out is the new additional hospitals specialised in treating Covid-19 illness. The most substantial step taken by MOH to break the chain of Covid-19 is by enforcing the Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020. This action was executed to ensure that all citizens stay at home and practice social distancing to avoid Covid-19 from spreading within the community. The MCO enforcement has urged the whole nation to stay at home and only essential services are allowed to operate within this period.

Although MCO has contributed to the improvement of the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Malaysia, there are many parties that have been negatively affected by the enforcement. Among the parties are both legal and illegal immigrants. These immigrants are involved in various economic sectors in Malaysia such as domestic sector, agriculture and construction. Domestic work can be classified as basic work or also known as 'dirty job'. This sector is

categorised as basic work due to its requirement of acquiring fundamental skills such as sweeping, cleaning, taking care of children or individual with special health needs or persons with disabilities (PWD).

Domestic work is not only popular among the developed nations such as United States and Korea, but it is also a booming sector in a developing country such as Malaysia. Domestic workers receive high demands from Malaysians either for companies or private residences (Hamzah & Daud, 2018). However, previous study had shown that domestic workers do not receive any recognition and appreciation from the society (Kontos, 2014). This situation is aggravated with the emergence of Covid-19 outbreak globally. Domestic workers have been adversely affected by the current pandemic crisis due to their illegal status within the country. A lot of companies are not able to operate their businesses as usual and this matter has lead to the termination of foreign workers to reduce the companies' loss (MyMetro, 2020). The Government has announced the enforcement of Movement Control Order (MCO) in March 2020 and this restriction order has significantly halted most of the economic sectors. For instance, companies have to resort to employees' termination and shutting down their businesses.

The Covid-19 pandemic has equality effects towards locals and domestic workers as they need to face several life crisis pertaining to its impact. Hence, the impacts are severe towards the foreign workers community as they could not afford sustainable living due to limited job vacancies etc. Based on a report published (Mohd Syalmizi, 2021) in Kosmo Newspaper on 21 June 2021, Chief Minister, Chow Kon Yeow has stated that according to a statistic by Polis Diraja Malaysia (PDRM), a total of 19 attempted suicide cases were reported since the enforcement of Movement Control Order (MCO).

2 Problem Statement

The Movement Control Order (MCO) is a paradigm effort by the government to contain the Covid-19 outbreak progressively. However, MCO has lead to the closure of various sectors such as economic sector, industrialisation sector, construction sector, manufacturing sector, business sector and etc. Only essential services are allowed to operate, for instance, water, electricity, energy, communication, post and courier, transportation, irrigation system, oil and gas, fuel, lubrication, broadcasting, finance, banking, health, pharmacy, firefighter, investment, jail, airport, security, cleaning services, defense, retail and food supply.

Consequently, majority of Malaysian citizens are affected by the enforcement of MCO. Besides the locals, the impact of MCO enforcement has also hard hit the foreigners who work in Malaysia. Nevertheless, how serious does the impact of Covid-19 pandemic and Movement Control Order (MCO) towards the foreigners in Malaysia? Does this group of people use their stimulus-response mechanism to overcome the problem? Based on the issue highlighted above, researchers have observed the life sustainability of these foreign workers during pre and post Covid-19 pandemic and their stimulus-response mechanism towards the crisis.

3 Research Objectives

1. To study the life sustainability of foreign workers before the emergence of Covid-19 outbreak and post Covid-19 pandemic.

2. To analyse the strategy applied by the foreign domestic workers to overcome the challenges encountered during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4 Methodology

Researcher has used the observation and interview method to gather data by understanding the life sustainability of foreign domestic workers. Basic theory or also known as ‘Grounded Theory’ is applied to analyse the data. Grounded theory is commonly used by researchers in the social science discipline.

According to Sbaraini et al (2011), Grounded Theory is focused on process or action in general: or in other words, researcher will ask “what is happening” and how people interact. This exemplifies the psychological approach which focused on the underlying meaning of people’s action. The theory will be initiated with open question and researcher believes that they have prior knowledge towards the meaning which encourages respondents’ action. However, researcher requires answers from the respondents in a practical manner. Sbaraini also justified that Grounded Theory consists of 7 elements, which are, openness, analysing immediately, coding and comparing, memo-writing, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation and production of Grounded Theory which is known as production of a substantive theory.

Chong (2015) mentioned that Grounded Theory is part of qualitative research design. Opie (2004) also outlined that Grounded Theory is part of data collection process and conduct data analysis to generate category for phenomena and situation description. Creswell (2012) also believed that Grounded Theory acts as an essential instrument to explain certain situation towards the natural phenomena.

4.1 Data Collection

All data is collected through field study which is made available via observation and conducting interviews. The selection of location study is determined by the total Covid-19 cases based on the districts reported by the Ministry of Health (MOH). There are 9 districts in Selangor which are Kuala Selangor, Sabak Bernam, Klang, Hulu Langat, Petaling, Hulu Selangor, Gombak, Sepang and Kuala Langat. Comparison has been made among the total number of Covid-19 cases from all districts. Therefore, district with the highest Covid-19 cases is Petaling district which is aimed as the location study for researcher to collect data. As a result of that, the target group will be janitors who work within Petaling district. Ideally, both methods will demonstrate the daily life of foreign domestic workers holistically.

4.2 Location Study

Location study is determined based on the total daily cases reported by the Ministry of Health (MOH) after the Movement Control Order 1.0 is lifted. Nonetheless, the total case of Covid-19 has surged due to various factors such as Sabah election, inter-state travel and etc. The Covid-19 cases reports are taken from 1st September 2020 to 31st August 2021. A 1 year or 12 months report has shown that Petaling district recorded the most infections with 169,220 cases. Hence, Petaling district is chosen as the location study for data collection purpose.

3.3 Data

(i) Primary Data

The aspect that should be reviewed in the research scope will be monitored through extensive observation during the field study. A total of 30 respondents were interviewed to obtain detailed information for the research. Majority of the foreign workers were uncooperative during the interview due to the language barriers (unable to speak fluently in Malay or English) and concern of their own safety.

(ii) Secondary Data

The secondary data applied in this study consist of reliable and published data. This data set is used as supporting data to close the loopholes in the study. The data set derives from newspapers, journals and reports published by authorities such as academician, journalists and etc.

4.4 Sampling Frame

The approach used in this study is through random sampling method. Observation has been made within targeted areas where the foreign workers reside in Klang Valley, which is located in Petaling district. The district is chosen due to the highest number of Covid-19 cases reported within the span of 12 months.

Data Collection Method

During the data collection process, researcher has applied three procedures as a guideline together data. Figure 1 shows data collection process flow.

Research Data

- i) Identify the location study which is Petaling
- ii) Conduct observation and interview within Petaling district

Data Collection

- i) Research data refers to a group of foreign workers who reside in Petaling, Selangor
- ii) Research data is selected based on the highest number of Covid-19 cases reported in Petaling district which is 169,220.

Data Analysis

- i) To use qualitative method based on “Grounded Theory”
- ii) To analyse the observation and interviews conducted based on the field study

5 Results and Discussion

From the study, it is observed that foreign workers are facing a hard time working in Malaysia. Based on the interview conducted, there are a lot of challenges faced by the foreign workers in various aspects. The significant aspects which are viewed in this study are divided into three, which are, economical, social and psychological aspects.

Aspect	Before Pandemic	During Pandemic
Economy	Uncertain working opportunities	Less working opportunities/ No vacancies due to MCO
	Unfixed salary	Termination of employment
	Must acquire permit applied by employer	Workers who travel to their home country are denied entry to Malaysia due to the closure of borders
	Earn a lower salary rate paid by employers	Most employers prefer local workers compared to foreign workers
	Offer services via booking through third party/ mobile phone	Stringent working procedures
	No health requirements	Frequent swab test (RTK.PCR) is required
	Compulsory to wear uniforms/ attire according to the requirements set by employers	Compulsory to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to avoid from Covid-19 infection (facemask, gloves) Difficulty to obtain vaccination appointment (later list)
	Able to work from anywhere but paid with low salary	Always at risk due to working
Social	Live in uncomfortable workers' accommodations	Accommodation which requires segregation Accommodation to provide room for social distancing (higher cost)
	Use daily public transport to move from one place to another	Restrict movement due to 50% capacity for public transport announced by the government
	Being oppressed by employers (migrant workers are not paid for their services)	Being deceived by certain parties regarding their permit issue
Psychology	Terrified of being captured due to failure to provide working permit	Feeling anxious (Covid-19, afraid of being captured by the authorities)
	Mentally depressed due to being unfairly treated by employer	Mentally depressed due to movement restriction during MCO
	Death due to workplace incidents or suicide	Additional death cases due to Covid-19 and suicide

Table 1: Situation faced by Foreign Workers Before and After Pandemic

Challenges during Pandemic	Stimulus-response Mechanism
Less working opportunities/ No vacancies due to MCO	Travel back to home country and seek new job Apply for assistance from employment agency in Malaysia but they are required to switch their working field. For instance, the individual works as a building janitor before pandemic but he needs to switch his job to become a dish cleaner or security guard during pandemic.
Termination of employment	
Workers who travel to their home country are denied entry to Malaysia due to the closure of borders	
Most employers prefer local workers compared to foreign workers	
Stringent working procedures	Receive vaccination from the Government of Malaysia
Frequent swab test (RTK.PCR) is required	Employment agency will provide the swab test or offer jobs that do not require for swab test to be conducted
Compulsory to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to avoid from Covid-19 infection (facemask, gloves)	Wear the basic protection such as apron, facemask and gloves.
Difficulty to obtain vaccination appointment (later list)	-
Always at risk due to working	Find new jobs which are less risky and practice social distancing (if necessary)
Accommodation which requires segregation	No options available and need to stay at the accommodation (hostel) provided by their employer
Accommodation to provide room for social distancing (higher cost)	Find a house to rent with affordable price but do not have many tenants Find employers who provide hostels
Restrict movement due to 50% capacity for public transport announced by the government	
Being deceived by certain parties regarding their permit issue	-
Feeling anxious (Covid-19, afraid of being captured by the authorities)	Always bring personal document and look for employment agent who could provide assistance if captured by the authorities.
Mentally depressed due to movement restriction during MCO	-

Additional death cases due to Covid-19 and suicide	Assistance from NGO and the society to avoid the foreign workers from initiating any form of action that is harmful to themselves.
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Table 2: Stimulus-response of Foreign Workers during Covid-19 Pandemic

Based on the interview conducted, the foreign workers are forced to seek new working opportunities which do not require stringent procedures and rules. However, they are being paid lesser compared to their initial jobs. During the Movement Control Order (MCO), foreign workers stated that they rely on public assistance such as NGO or their own neighborhood. There are workers who receive assistance such as food from their employers. Food assistance funded by the local society also provide ease to the foreign workers' burden.

For the vaccination issue, foreign workers have no choice other than waiting for the vaccine provided by their employers or the government. Even though the workers need to queue for a longer time, they do not have any options but to follow as Covid-19 vaccine is not available to be purchased anywhere. There are a few workers who opt for new jobs which do not require them to be vaccinated such as labour jobs regardless being paid with a low salary. This matter has taken a toll on foreign workers, nevertheless, it is the only way to ensure their survival during this pandemic.

In terms of psychology, these workers are working hard to survive and earn money for their family abroad. Subsequently, they are feeling depressed, worried and anxious regarding the pandemic issue but continue to brace the situation as they are left with no choice. In addition, all borders are strictly secured by the authorities which deny the workers' opportunity to travel to their home country or come back to Malaysia.

6 Conclusions

The Government of Malaysia has provided financial assistance, employment opportunity and vaccination to all affected local citizens. Therefore, majority of employers are inclined towards recruiting local workers due to their health history and easier to locate their whereabouts. Local workers can be easily traced because they are able to provide valid information compared to the migrant workers who do not have a valid information regarding their accommodation and health history. Researcher can review the strategy used by migrant

workers to survive the Covid-19 crisis based on the economic, social and psychological aspects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you to all foreign janitors in Petaling district who have been cooperative during the interview session to complete this research. We hope that this study will be expanded within the domestic sector especially in cleaning services.

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