

The Well-Being of Muslim Migrant Workers in Malaysia Oil Palm Plantation: An Exploration of Expert Opinion

Chyairreil Annwar Akmal^{1*} , Mahazan Abdul Mutalib², Wan Mohd. Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali³

¹Faculty of Leadership and Management, University Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.

Email: chyairreil@gmail.com

²Faculty of Leadership and Management, University Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.

Email: mahazan@usim.edu.my

³Faculty of Leadership and Management, University Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.

Email: wmfazrul@usim.edu.my

ABSTRACT

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Chyairreil Annwar Akmal
(chyairreil@gmail.com)

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For several decades, palm oil is one of the main drivers of Malaysia's economy and responsible in producing 8.5% of the world's oil and fat. In spite of its reputation as a main producer of palm oil, this industry depends heavily on migrant labor. In 2016, there were 429,351 laborers employed in the palm oil plantation industry. From this figure, 330,185 or 77% were foreign workers mostly from Bangladesh and Indonesia. Nonetheless, in recent developments, there were several issues that allegedly affected this industry, specifically in labor that impacted their well-being. Labor exploitation, debt bondage, abuse of vulnerability, deceit, and restriction of movement were among frequent issues that linked to migrant workers' well-being. Their well-being is essential in contributing to higher productivity of the workforce. Thus, the goal of this study is to explore the probable indicators that could affect their happiness.

Contribution/Originality: The paper's primary contribution is finding that there are additional significant indicators that influence the migrant workers' well-being specifically religiosity, welfare – treatment of workers and workers' right – freedom of movement and freedom of association that crucial to stakeholders in order to cultivate a more productive worker.

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a well-known country that produce palm oil and palm oil products since 1960s through rapid expansion and encouragement from Malaysian Government (Nambiappan et al., 2018). The oil palm tree (*Elaeisguineensis*), an indigenous crop from palm family (Arecaceae) cultivated in West Africa as a source of vegetable oil (Malaysian Palm Oil

[Council, 2021](#)). The crop was initially brought to Malaysia as an ornamental plant. Later in 1917, the first commercial oil palm was planted at Tennamaram Estate, Selangor ([Malaysian Palm Oil Council, 2021](#)). From here, palm oil sector has become the leading export commodity for Malaysia plantation. Throughout the years, Malaysia is ranked as the second world's largest exporter of palm oil and second largest producer of the oil after neighboring Indonesia in 2021 ([Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodities, 2021](#)). With many competitors from producing countries and from substitute products such as soybean and rapeseed, palm oil has always prevailed due to their uniqueness. For instance palm trees produce 4-10 times more oil than other crops per unit of cultivated land ([RSPO Secretariat, 2013](#)).

The oil palm sector is labour intensive, especially in activities such as harvesting, collecting fruits, weeding and general work. It was estimated that a total of 429,351 labourers worked in the plantation sector in 2016 and out of this total, 77% or 330,185 were foreign workers ([Azman et al., 2018](#)). According to [International Organization for Migration \(2023\)](#), almost half a million workers employed in the palm oil sector and 80% of them are migrant workers. This indicates that the palm oil sector is heavily dependent on foreign workers, particularly from Indonesia and Bangladesh. However, the high dependency of foreign workers has over the years created negative impacts to Malaysia in areas, such as social, health, and economic ([Crowley, 2020](#)). Nowadays, these negative impacts have been broadened by labor violation issues, specifically forced labor. This issue was highlighted by various media, such as The Wall Street Journal in 2015 and International Organization for Migration report in 2023 ([Al-Mahmood, 2015](#); [International Organization for Migration, 2023](#)).

In the well-being context, more organizations are starting to show concerns about the working conditions and well-being of migrant workers. According to [Bretones et al. \(2020\)](#) indicated that psychosocial risks at work were higher among migrant workers compared to native workers. Additionally, according to a report by [David et al. \(2019\)](#), migrant workers were among the vulnerable group due to the government and society's incompetence to safeguard them by all means. A similar view was echoed by the [Global Migration Group \(2013\)](#), which indicated that migrant workers were highly exploited because of their vulnerability.

Since migrant workers are vital as a major source of labour to the oil palm plantation sector, their well-being is the main concern. In recent years, we have witnessed a growing interest in well-being approaches to better reflect the well-being condition from multiple perspectives, such as economic, social, personal, subjective, and a combination of all of them. Therefore, this study aims to explore indicator of well-being among Muslim migrant workers in oil palm plantation.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study aimed to explore the indicators of migrant workers well-being in the oil palm plantations. Among the objectives are to investigate the issues migrant workers faced in their daily life and to explore the indicators of well-being among Muslim migrant workers in oil palm plantations in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Concept of well-being

Well-being, which refers to a multifaceted phenomenon, has been vigorously studied throughout the century. The evolution of the concept of well-being can be traced back to the ancient Greek civilization or Hellenistic era. There are two main streams in understanding well-being: hedonic and eudemonic (Keyes, 1998; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Waterman et al., 2008; Waterman, 1993). The concept of well-being is ambiguous and forms different views of human nature.

The first stream of well-being is associated with hedonic happiness. A Greek philosopher named Aristippus introduced hedonism, which indicated the principle in determining the morality of a potential course of action lies in a desire to increase pleasure and decrease pain (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Joshanloo, 2013; Waterman et al., 2008; Waterman, 1993). In other words, hedonic happiness is achieved through experiences of pleasure and enjoyment. A happier person is considered to have well-being, and maximizing the person's well-being has been viewed as maximizing the person's feelings of happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The philosophy behind this stream has influenced many renowned scholars such as Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and Henry Sidgwick (1838–1901) (Driver, 2014).

The second stream, eudemonic happiness, was introduced by Aristotle in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* and is defined as the highest good for humans (Huta & Waterman, 2014). Eudemonic happiness is achieved through experiences of meaning and purpose. It is very much about living a life in accordance with virtue (Aydin & Khan, 2021). Eudemonic happiness represents an approach that associates happiness with living life in a full and deeply satisfying way (Deci & Ryan, 2008). It is based on the realization of human potential and achieving it can lead to happiness. The philosophy behind this theory influenced many great scholars such as Abraham Maslow in his study about self-actualization and Karen Horney in her study about the real self (Huta & Waterman, 2014).

According to Huta and Waterman (2014), the distinction between hedonic happiness and eudemonic happiness can be identified by these four broad categories: orientations such as values, motives, and goals; behaviors; experiences; and functioning such as mental health and flourishing. These concepts have become the main approach to how people define well-being and have become central to the study of well-being. In short, people view well-being from multiple perspectives, either in terms of pleasure and enjoyment or achieving their potential, which leads to greater purpose and meaning. To date, there are a growing number of theories and models being developed by scholars all over the world. Among the notable theories are the Theory of Human Motivation by Abraham Maslow and Subjective Well-Being by Diener (Maslow, 1943; Diener, 1984).

2.2. Theory of Human Motivation

One of the major theories related to eudemonic happiness is the theory of human motivation by Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1943). He introduced Maslow's hierarchy of needs that indicated individuals are motivated by the desire to achieve or maintain a set of basic needs. These include the physiological needs (food, shelter, and clothes), safety needs (protection and security), love and belonging needs (human interaction and social), esteem needs (achievement and recognition), and self-actualization needs (self-fulfillment, self-confidence and potential) (Maslow, 1943). The hierarchy of needs is depicted in Figure 1. In this hierarchy, the physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, and esteem needs were categorized as basic needs. According to Maslow

(1943), basic needs were the essential needs that every human try to achieve. When these basic needs are fulfilled, the human is motivated to achieve the last category, which is self-actualization needs. It started from basic needs and went toward a more complex need. By fulfilling these needs, the human is considered to be in a well-being status.

Figure 1: Hierarchy of Needs



Source: Maslow (1943) and McLeod (2018)

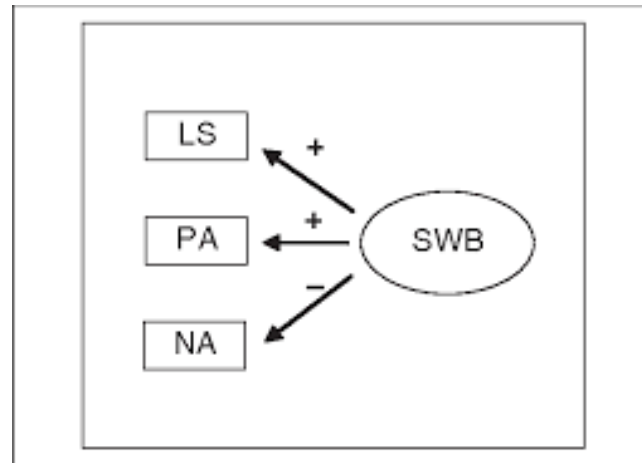
The theory of human motivation has been used extensively in work settings to foster employees' motivation. Consequently, this theory is still significant nowadays and to attest it, several research has been using this theory. For examples, in a study to identify the relationship between motivation and work performance (Bush, 2021), and in a study to explore the relationship between employees' productivity, motivation, wages and benefits, and welfare facilities (Alam et al., 2020). Additionally, a study by Al-Musadieq et al. (2018) highlighted significant relationship between the performance of human resources and work design, with work motivation as the mediating variable. This evidence indicates that the theory of motivation is still relevant and being applied throughout all sectors, as a way to link between performance of work and motivation.

2.3. Subjective Well-Being

Subjective Well-Being (SWB) is one of the leading studies in the area of well-being. The term SWB was introduced by Diener (1984), who suggested that well-being was associated with life satisfaction, and positive and negative affect. In contrast to OWB, Diener (1984) introduced the tripartite model for SWB, which consisted of three primary components: life satisfaction (LS), positive affect (PA), and negative affect (NA). For an individual to achieve high SWB, LS and PA (e.g., happy and optimism) should be experienced frequently with infrequent NA (e.g., anger and sadness), and vice versa for an individual to achieve low SWB (Proctor, 2014). The model is shown in Figure 2.

However, SWB is more on personal traits and there are several factors that may influence an individual's SWB, such as emotions or moods, and feelings and thoughts that may cause the overall outcome of well-being. For example, if a person experiences a bad mood or mood swing on that particular day, he or she may experience a more frequent negative affection, and thus reflecting on the low SWB even though the overall life satisfaction is satisfactory.

Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.: Tripartite model for SWB

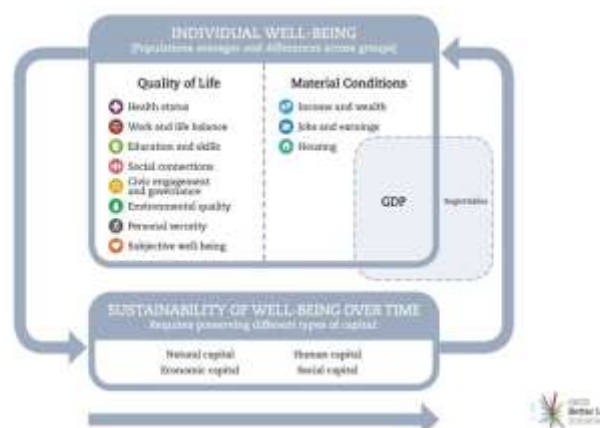


Source: [Diener et al. \(1999\)](#)

2.4. Indicators of Well-Being

There is no exact definition of well-being, and therefore various versions of definitions of well-being have been used throughout the literature. Despite the absence of a definition of well-being, many experts and researchers have a common understanding that the main indicators of well-being can be recognized as economic well-being, social well-being, and personal or subjective well-being. In relation to this, the OECD has proposed a comprehensive framework that includes various indicators and elements that are able to assess well-being from multiple perspectives ([OECD, 2011](#)). This framework is based on the view of the researchers and experts that there are certain criteria for human needs that are essential and comprise various elements such as life satisfaction and happiness. The three major pillars that have been identified by the OECD are economic well-being, quality of life, and sustainability of the socio-economic and natural systems ([OECD, 2011](#)). The indicators of OECD framework for well-being are income and wealth, work and job quality, housing, health, knowledge and skills, environmental quality, SWB, safety, work-life balance, social connection, and civil engagement [Figure 3](#) shows the OECD framework for well-being.

Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.3: OECD Framework of Well-Being



Source: [OECD \(2011\)](#)

3. Research Methods

This study is using a qualitative approach and semi-structured interview as data collection. The selection of sample for migrant workers is using purposive sampling method in order to obtain information from specific target group ([Sekaran & Bougie, 2016](#)). Nevertheless, for this article, the focus is on the experts' opinions. The interviews session aims to explore the experts' view of the phenomena and their opinion regarding the subject matter. It will enable the researcher to explore the realities that surround the phenomena and identify key issues that may influence the outcome of the study.

5 credible experts in various fields were consulted for this study in order to get their insights on migrant workers' well-being. The panel of professionals engaged includes the Department of Labour Peninsular Malaysia, Malaysian Palm Oil Board, International Labour Organization (ILO), and Academician (expert on law, migrant workers, religiosity, and spirituality). Expert interviews are widely used in qualitative studies as one of the methods to explore and obtain data or information in a specific area ([Döringer, 2021](#)). It is a preferred method, especially during the exploratory phase of a study, because it is efficient and shortens the time-consuming data gathering process ([Bogner et al., 2009](#)). According to [Bogner et al. \(2009\)](#), expert interviews add an advantage since they possess exclusive knowledge in a specific field that is inaccessible to others. In this context, expert can be defined as someone who possesses comprehensive and authoritative knowledge in a particular area and is recognized for their expertise ([Caley et al., 2014](#)).

The recorded interviews were transcribed manually using the Descript software. This step required the researcher to upload the recorded interviews into the software, and then transcribed manually. The researcher used this approach by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to obtain a full understanding of its contents and highlighting possible answers pertaining to the research questions. Thereafter, the transcripts were analyzed using Nvivo version 12 software. There were two types of analyses performed for this study, word frequency and thematic analysis. The transcripts were analyzed based on the words that have similar meanings, expressions, and emotions attached to them. The purpose of using this technique was to determine which words appeared the most. Therefore, the researcher would be able to draw any emerging themes based on the most frequent words used in the interview. Later, the researcher should again review the documents to identify any themes that are missed in the first reading. At the same time, the theme explanations should be revised accordingly.

4. Results

4.1. Word Frequency

According to [Brysbaert et al. \(2018\)](#), word frequency is described as an observation of high frequency words that were processed more efficiently compared to low frequency words. It has a remarkable effect in determining the correlation between the frequently used words than what is likely to be encountered in the real world. It will help the researchers to focus on specific words, and serve as a connection between ideas, concepts, and beliefs to identify the demand pattern ([Vasconcellos-Silva et al., 2013](#)). This will lead to the formation of themes to encapsulate the whole gist of the content analysis. In relation to this, a word cloud is used to illustrate the word frequency in the form of a graphic representation. Words that are frequently used, displayed with bigger font size

Word	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)*	Similar Words
standards	39	0.27	standard, standards
welfare	39	0.27	
policies	37	0.25	policies, policy
spirituality	37	0.25	
orang	36	0.25	spiritual, spirituality, spiritually
labour	35	0.24	
coming	34	0.23	comes, coming
terms	33	0.23	
dalam	32	0.22	
pergi	32	0.22	
really	32	0.22	
wellbeing	32	0.22	
dengan	31	0.21	
social	31	0.21	
untuk	31	0.21	social, socialize
example	29	0.20	
benda	28	0.19	
kerja	28	0.19	
tidak	27	0.18	
undang	27	0.18	
industry	26	0.18	Undang industri, industrial, industries, industrialization
kepada	26	0.18	
enforcement	26	0.18	enforce, enforcement, enforcing protect, protected, protecting, protection, protections, protects
protection	26	0.18	
betul	25	0.17	
bukan	25	0.17	
manager	24	0.16	management, manager, managers provide, provided, provident, provide: providing
provide	24	0.16	
religion	24	0.16	religion, religions
memang	24	0.16	

*Weighted Percentage—the frequency of words in relation to total words counted

Based on [Table 1](#), among the most frequent words used that related to this study were right, standards, welfare, issues, policies, spirituality, labor, well-being, social, enforcement, protection and religion. The frequent words used act as indicators or signs of what would be the content analysis in this study. Therefore, it is useful in pointing to the right direction for this analysis.

4.2. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is used as one of the techniques to explore the themes produced from the content of the interview. The transcripts of the interviews were read through a few times in order to get a whole story about the thinking of the experts. This process was to identify the semantic and latent meanings in the text that are important and significant to the purpose of this study. It may be comprised of words, sentences, or paragraphs that concern the topic discussed. Later, these words were condensed and assigned a code. In this study, deductive coding is applied to the coding process. The coding process involves establishing predefined codes first through a literature review. As explained in the previous section, the construct of well-being as defined by the OECD involved 11 indicators such as income and wealth, work and job quality, housing, health, knowledge

and skills, environmental quality, work-life balance, social connections, civic engagement, safety, and subjective well-being (OECD, 2011). Based on these constructs, it acts as guidance for the coding in this stage, which is known as initial coding. The words and sentences that contain similarities and patterns are examined and coded. The themes that emerged from this method are shown in Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 2: The indicators of well-being

Theme 1: The indicators of well-being				
Category	Esteem need	Social need	Physiological and safety need	Religion and spiritual need
Codes	Workers' right Freedom of association Freedom of movement Welfare Treatment of workers Dignity Decent	Social connection Social mobility	Transportation Accommodation Basic facilities Safety Health Income and wages	Religiosity and spirituality

Table 3: The issues of migrant workers

Theme 2: The issues of migrant workers				
Category	Inadequate Resources	Personnel problem	Policies issues	Exploitation
Codes	Lack of resources Lack of expertise Lack of enforcement and implementation Lack of facilities	Financial problem Lack of career advancement Negative perception	Bureaucracy Inconsistent policies and laws Contracting issues Lack of awareness Lack of accessibility	Religion and spiritual exploitation Excessive working hours Discrimination Restrict the movement Debt bondage Unscrupulous agent Employers' attitude

Table 4: The advantages of good labour practice

Theme 3: The advantages of good labour practice		
Category	International recognition	Economy growth
Codes	Leader of workers' right	Jobs opportunity

National image	Access to global market
Labour standards	Productivity

Another way to illustrate the connection between codes and sub-codes with the respective themes was by mapping it through project maps. By using a project map, it gives flexibility to the researcher to examine data more holistically, gain greater understanding about the project, and able to identify connections between items by visually observing the link. The project map for Theme 1, Theme 2, and Theme 3 are shown in Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7.

Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.: The indicators of well-being

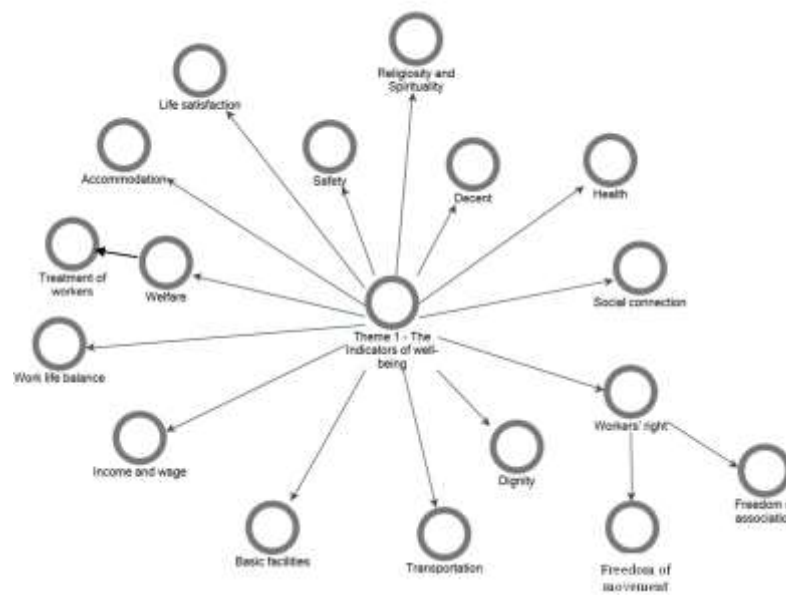


Figure 6: The issues of migrant workers

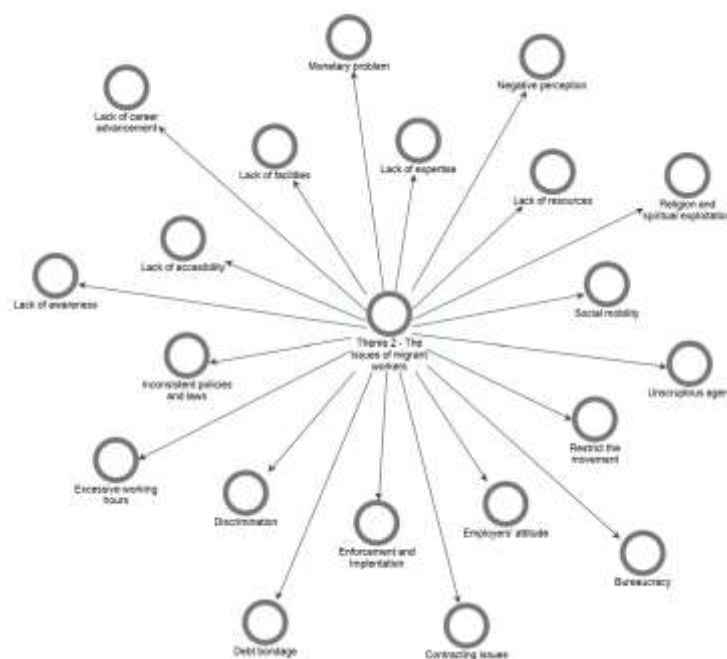
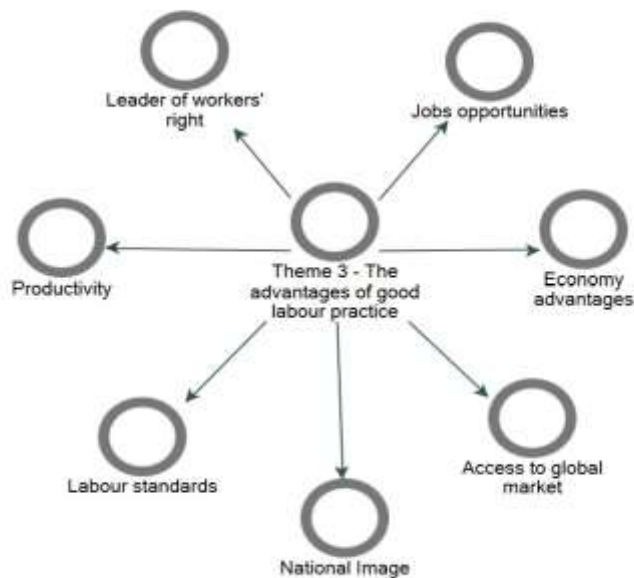


Figure 7: The advantages of good labour practice



5. Discussion

5.1. Theme 1 – Indicators of Well-Being

The first theme of the expert interviews, the indicators of well-being, had to do with the elements of well-being. These findings concur with the theory of human motivation that humans are motivated by certain needs that progress from basic to complex (Maslow, 1943). This can be seen where the categories of the indicators were clustered into Esteem Need, Social Need, Physiological and Safety Need, and Religion and Spiritual Need. The discussion will focus on the additional indicators, as they may suggest more comprehensive indicators of well-being that can be used to determine the well-being of migrant workers more precisely. In respect to this, most of the experts agreed on the conventional indicators as being highlighted by the OECD framework of well-being. For example,

5.1.1. Income and wages

“Um, of course, number one is income. Compensation. I think fair compensation is important, but also fair price for small holders. So when it comes to compensation to expect it. One is compensation for workers and the other is compensation for smallholders.” (Expert interview 1)

5.1.2. Housing and work life balance

“The major factor that influences the well-being of the migrant workers is the working condition which also include the housing facilities and working time.” (Expert interview)

5.2. Workers' right

Workers' rights under [theme 1](#) are the epitome of justice that is constantly pursued by migrant workers. Migrant workers were among the vulnerable groups that were frequently denied their rights. Some of them suffered labor exploitation starting in their origin countries and continuing during their working period. Labor exploitation can take many forms, such as debt bondage, deception, abusive working and living conditions, restriction of movement, intimidation, and threats. According to Malaysian law, various forms of labor exploitation are considered illegal and subject to penalties such as heavy compounding and whipping. According to the [International Labour Organization \(2022a\)](#), the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, adopted in 1998 and amended in 2022, is an expression that all parties involved at work must uphold basic human values. It encompasses a wide variety of human rights, from freedom of association, freedom of movement, and the right to decent work to protection against labor exploitation and forced labor. It shows the commitment of various parties to uphold human rights in order to create a safe, fair, and harmonious working environment. Workers' rights are essential to workers, as they provide employees with working environments that are free from threat and risk and promote a decent working condition. The majority of the experts agreed that workers' rights are the main factor that influences well-being. For example,

"Number two, when it comes to welfare is the rights to enjoy labour rights or human rights." (Expert interviewee 1)

"Um, and it's, it's so less in a sense that, uh, the person is, uh, able to, you know, um, exercise their rights and at the same time, um, enjoy life, freedom, uh and dignity." (Expert interviewee 3)

5.2.1. Freedom of association

Freedom of association under [theme 1](#) is recognized as one of the important indicators. The majority of experts agree on the importance of this indicator. Hence, the government did allow the migrant workers to participate in the union, but with the condition that they could not be at the management level. Some of the expert opinions regarding the importance of freedom of association can be observed in the example below.

"The freedom association aspect to this because that's, that's very important actually for, for workers to be part of the trade union, as you know, uh, the trade union has the legal mandate to represent them in industrial court or even, you know, with, um, discussions with the employers and collective agreements. So, um, giving them that, uh, expanding that the, that, uh, membership of the trading and helping them, um, carry out for this mandate market to be as well. Yeah." (Expert interviewee 3)

"So in actual term, kebanyakan pekerja asing yang ada in Malaysia, there are deprived from this right. So for example, if you want easy example, under fundamental freedom, uh, right to association, they can join union, but they cannot form their own union." (Expert interviewee 1)

The experts' opinions on this issue are clear and consistent in regard to the right of workers to freedom of association. It is vital that every worker, including migrant workers, has a platform to express their rights, not only as an ordinary member but also as a part of the governing bodies or forming a new union. To have their voice heard and be part of the collective bargaining process is essential for workers. This is a formal platform that is recognized by the authority under the umbrella of the tripartite system—employers and their organizations, employees and their unions, and the government—which forms the industrial relations system in Malaysia. Among the issues that can be brought up during this collective bargaining process are stated in Section 13 (2A) of the Industrial Relations Act 1967 [Act 177]:

“(2a) A proposal for a collective agreement may provide for one or more of the following:

- (a) provision for training to enhance skills and knowledge of the workmen;
- (b) provision for an annual review of the wage system; and
- (c) provision for a performance-based remuneration”

([Industrial Relations Act, 2021](#))

5.2.2. Freedom of movement

Despite various laws enacted by the Government of Malaysia, such as Article 9 of the Federal Constitution Malaysia, which states that every citizen has the right to move freely throughout the Federation, there were numerous cases reported about the restriction of movement for migrant workers. The restriction of movement, such as passport retention, seems to be a common practice for employers to control the movement of migrant workers. Such a practice is considered illegal, as stated under the Passport Act of 1966, which states that only those with lawful authority can hold the passport ([Passport Act, 1974](#)). Migrant workers have the right to move freely throughout Malaysia. At the same time, Malaysia has ratified the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (P029) by the ILO on March 21, 2022, that emphasizes the protection of "persons, particularly migrant workers, from possible abusive and fraudulent practices during the recruitment and placement process" ([International Labour Organization, 2022b](#)). These practices also included withholding passports, being underpaid, working excessive days or hours, and various other illegal practices that cause labor exploitation. According to [Putul & Mia \(2018\)](#), the hassle suffered by the migrant workers because of the retention of their passports would cause them to be liable to arrest by authorities as suspects of illegal workers and during emergency situations where they need a passport to travel to other places. A few experts agreed that freedom of movement is essential to the well-being of migrant workers. For example,

“Other than that, the salary and the freedom of movement also might influence the well-being of the workers.” (Expert interviewee 4)

“Um, mm-hmm to, to also, um, ensure that this is, uh, going to, you know, to really be supporting the wellbeing of that migrant workers and not, um, control movements or, you know, so looking at it like, um, um, the past positive, um, for, to, in terms of the wellbeing as well. Um, yeah.” (Expert interviewee 3)

5.3. Welfare of migrant workers

The welfare of migrant workers is also being highlighted by experts as one of the factors that may determine their well-being. Welfare in this case refers to efforts made by employers to make life worth living for their employees beyond their responsibility as required by regulation (Bashir & Nika, 2022). It is a broad expression that can contain various initiatives such as providing and improving working and living conditions, services, facilities, resources, and mental health as well. This is accomplished with the main purpose of providing comfort and motivating their employees to live in a better and safer environment, thus gaining well-being benefits (Bashir & Nika, 2022). For example, one of the experts said:

"Um, well, I don't have the technical, might not be able to give you the technical definition, but overall, what I understand about well-being is the state of welfare of all the groups, uh, concern with particular issue of study um, and that the components of well-being that maybe people may vary according to what standards we are looking at." (Expert interviewee 6)

"So, as I said, the welfare, the big problem for migrant workers is social protection and social security." (Expert interviewee 6)

From the view of the experts, we can conclude that the term welfare is associated with initiatives or efforts being provided by employers to improve their quality of life. Welfare in this context does not constrain itself to external efforts such as social security or monetary aid but also includes internal efforts such as good human relationships. It is best explained by the words from one of the experts that show the importance of welfare for migrant workers, as shown below. The treatment of employers towards their employees must be humane and respectful in order to achieve a harmonious relationship between them.

5.3.1. Treatment of workers

Good treatment of workers is considered vital to any employer-employee relationship. From the responses of the experts, most of them agreed that the treatment of workers may influence their well-being. Good treatment can be given in many ways, such as by visiting them at their house during illness or lending money. All of these are beyond the obligation of the employer towards their well-being. For example,

"Yang ketiga satu lagi yang paling penting juga, dari segi layanan majikan. Kalau majikan bayar betul, rumah cantik tapi cara bayarnya kasar macam aku ini hamba kamu pulak, pekerja pun tak selesa juga." (Expert interviewee 4)

Translated

"The third important thing is the treatment of workers by their employer. If the employer pay correctly, provide good accomodation but the way of treatment is like a slave, the worker will not be comfortable either." (Expert interviewee 4)

Some of them view good relationships as developing not only during the workplace but also outside of working hours. This will encourage the workers to be grateful to their employers and may increase their job satisfaction and performance. According to a study by [Ataíde et al. \(2023\)](#), there was a significant relationship between gratitude and job satisfaction, with 8% of job satisfaction being influenced by gratitude. Another study by [Cortini et al. \(2019\)](#), suggests that gratitude is a predictor of job satisfaction and job performance among workers.

5.4. Religiosity

The religiosity indicator, particularly Islam, is being emphasized in this part of Southeast Asia. According to [Eryilmaz and Kula \(2020\)](#), there are three important principles of well-being based on Islamic perspectives: believe in the basic principles of Islam, surrender to Allah wholeheartedly, and lastly, every individual must accept Allah's will in order to be happy. The Islamic indicator is based on Islamic teaching and mostly derives from two main sources: the Quran and Hadith. The Islamic indicators are varied, and among the common usages are faith and worship purposes, coping mechanisms, and Maqasid Shari'ah governance.

There are several studies that highlight the positive relationship between faith, worship, and well-being. For instance, findings from the study by [Eryilmaz and Kula \(2020\)](#) indicated that the group of people who perceived the highest level of faith achieved the highest score in Islamic well-being, while the group of people who perceived the lowest level of faith gained the lowest score in Islamic well-being. Similar findings from studies by [Hodge et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Tiliouine et al. \(2009\)](#) are also in tandem with the finding by [Eryilmaz and Kula \(2020\)](#) that religious practice has a strong relationship with well-being. These findings are in line with the principle of happiness by Islamic scholars such as Al-Ghazzali and Al-Farabi, which indicated true happiness can be discovered when turning to Allah ([Al-Ghazzali, 1909](#); [Mahdi, 1962](#)). At the same time, a recent report by the [Pew Research Center \(2019\)](#) highlighted that people who conduct religious congregations actively have a tendency to be happier than non-active people, and they possess healthier behaviors such as less smoking and drinking alcohol. Besides that, a study by [Syazwan et al. \(2022\)](#) highlighted that practicing religious activities such as praying and fasting has a significant impact on the quality of life and cognitive function of its followers. For example, an expert mentioned that:

"it's, you can check out, um, the reports also. Um, and then, so those kind of, you know, like, um, what would respect, uh, their religion, uh, or let's say their, um, again, the ability to, to have their prayer times, um, the, or have go to the, the religious, um, business/facilities. Yeah. So those, those kind of things, um, there's room for improvement there. Um, and especially, you know, like for example, um, the companies, uh, could include this in their, their policies to, to also look at the wellbeing of the worker holistically, including their spiritual, um, needs." (Expert interviewee 3)

Other experts also concur with the importance of religiosity for the well-being of migrant workers. Example as below:

"The religious practices are important to fortify the inner strength of the migrant workers. As far as family is concerns, migrant workers in Peninsular Malaysia are not allowed to bring in their spouses and children

to Malaysia. Thus, strong relationship with God is vital for them to fill in the gap and to support the emotional needs. Apart from that, religiosity and spirituality are also important in safeguarding the relationship between the co-workers. A mutual respect between the co-workers particularly while practising their respective religion is pivotal in ensuring well-being of the workers are preserved.” (Expert interviewee 4)

5.5. Theme 2 - Issues of migrant workers

The findings from experts’ interviews also highlighted the current issues or problems faced by the migrant workers, as shown in [theme 2](#) - the issue of migrant workers. The issues of migrant workers were varied and could be categorized as inadequate resources, personnel problems, policies issues, and exploitation. Under these main categories, the issue faced by the migrant workers could be underlined as lack of resources, lack of expertise, lack of enforcement and implementation, financial problems, lack of career advancement, negative perception, bureaucracy, inconsistent policies and laws, contracting issues, religion and spiritual exploitation, excessive working hours, discrimination, movement restriction, and debt bondage. This showed that the situation and condition of migrant workers were in peril and some measures should be taken to improve the livelihood of migrant workers. The findings from these experts’ interviews were consistent with the problems that occurred in this sector, as mentioned in the introduction section. It verified those statements that migrant workers were suffering from labour misconduct and labour exploitation. For example,

5.5.1. Discrimination

“When they face, uh, issues such as wage deduction against the law. When they face intimidations at the workplace, uh, passport retention. Are they aware these are against their rights?” (Expert interviewee 2)

5.5.2. Debt bondage

“Some are responsible. So you see when the law doesn't say explicitly, there's a lot of grey area in between during recruitment and migration process and eventually migrant workers are trapped and they are in debt bondage situation.” (Expert interviewee 1)

5.6. Theme 3 - The advantages of good labour practice

The last finding from the experts’ interviews is shown in Theme 3 (the advantages of good labour practice). The advantages of good labour practice can be identified as leader of workers’ right, good national image, sustain labour standards, jobs opportunity, access to global market and productivity which can be grouped as international recognition and economy growth. Among the negative impacts, not adhering to good labour practice can affect profitability of the companies specifically and the economy of the nation as a whole. For instance palm oil and palm oil products, and derivatives supplied by FGV Holdings Berhad and Sime Darby Berhad were ban from entering all United States of America (U.S.) ports in 2020 because of allegation of using forced labour in palm oil production process ([U.S. Custom and Border Patrol, 2020a](#); [U.S. Custom and Border Patrol, 2020b](#)). This stern action had tarnished the image of Malaysia at the international platform. Therefore, a good conduct in labour practice would gain international recognition, and thus transform

into a better economic growth for Malaysia. Furthermore, this initiative would lead to higher productivity for the workforce in Malaysia. For example,

5.6.1. Productivity

“Workplace spirituality and religiosity can stimulate employees’ motivation to work hard and smart which will eventually drive better organizational performance.” (Expert interviewee 5)

5.6.2. Access to global market

“And it has also, so economically, you know, um, the, the buying countries, uh, would see this as, um, as something that's, uh, very compliant to, to agreements like international GP, international labor standards and, uh, human rights, um, uh, conventions as, as well as, you know, even trade agreements, uh, bilateral agreements. So there's, there's, I would say that there's more cooperation internationally, uh, with, with Malaysia, um, and, and eh, at the, this will impact as well, local economy.” (Expert interviewee 3)

6. Conclusion

The findings from expert interviews suggested a few vital indicators that could be used to define the well-being of migrant workers more inclusively. Among them are the rights of workers, which include freedom of association and freedom of movement; welfare, which includes better treatment for workers; and religiosity.

These indicators are important since freedom of association provides a platform that gives migrant workers the opportunity to engage in collective bargaining and fight for their rights. The current law permits them to join any existing union. However, they could not form their own union and could not hold any position in the union organization. This is a bit of a setback for them since their voice needs to be heard instead of relying on other people to fight for them. This is in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims freedom of association as a fundamental human right ([International Labour Organization, 2016](#)). While the ILO Constitution has underlined collective bargaining as a fundamental right and reaffirmed it in the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work ([International Labour Organization, 2022a](#)).

Apart from this, welfare is also being highlighted as one of the possible indicators of well-being for migrant workers. It is the act of the employers that goes beyond their obligation that constitutes welfare. It can be in the form of providing financial assistance or other aid, including treatment of workers. This will assist them in coping with the hardships of working in a foreign land. It could bolster their well-being if they received it during a time of need, for example during pandemic Coronavirus 19, or COVID-19, in 2020. This is the time when people in general are in dire situations that require full support and assistance from multiple sources, such as employers, family, and friends. This also includes formal assistance from Government and Non-Government Organizations. In this case, the expectation of migrant workers is not necessary in monetary or reward form but in fair and decent treatment, such as visiting them during illness or having a cup of tea together after working hours. These are the acts that warrant a good relationship between

employer and employee. The employer ought to see from different perspectives that their subordinate is also another human being and deserves humane treatment. This is in accordance with the teachings of Islam, which emphasize the importance of treating or helping other human beings.

Religiosity, which in this case is Islam, is the way of life for Muslim migrants. This is in tandem with some of the experts' opinions that religion plays a vital role in well-being and subjective well-being. With the evidence presented, it is imperative to include Islam as one of the main indicators of subjective well-being, as suggested by some prominent scholars. This is due to the fact that Islam is the way of life for Muslims. It has become the main construct that leads to true and authentic happiness. The religiosity domain is considered one of the most important indicators to better evaluate the subjective well-being of Muslim migrant workers. The peril of migrating, living, and adapting to the destination country has brought out undesirable challenges in them. Those challenges can take many forms, such as exploitation, debt, excessive workload, and adherence to rules and regulations. Despite those challenges, Muslim migrant workers often depend on religion as a way to seek comfort, develop coping mechanisms, and uplift their spirituality. Since their everyday lives revolve around religious practices like fasting, prayer, and *zakat* (charity), the sense of religiosity permeates their conception of happiness. Thus, incorporating religiosity in the overall evaluation of subjective well-being is essential to get a better perspective of migrant workers' well-being.

The issues that being highlighted by the experts were part of the challenges faced by the migrant workers. Despite those challenges, the lucrative of economic gain surpass it that drive them to Malaysia. Therefore, the Government, Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and civil society must play their part to address the issue faced by the migrant workers in order to curb the negative issue from becoming worse. As a reward from this, it will generate more economic gain towards nation and provide a better place for migrant workers.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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