



Participatory Strategies for Empowering Indonesian Migrant Worker Unions in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Improving Welfare and Rights

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia face various challenges, including legal uncertainty, discrimination, and unsafe working conditions. The presence of a union plays a crucial role in providing protection, advocacy, and support for these workers. This study aims to empower Indonesian migrant worker unions in Malaysia through a participatory approach that involves the workers themselves in the decision-making process and program development. The outcomes are the enhancement insight of the capacity and capability of Indonesian migrant worker unions in Malaysia in advocating for and protecting migrant workers' rights, encourage active participation of migrant workers in union activities and decision-making processes, development empowerment programs based on the real needs of migrant workers, and increasing migrant workers' awareness of their rights and available protection mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly globalizing economy of Southeast Asia, the migration of workers from nations such as Indonesia to Malaysia is a significant socio-economic phenomenon. According to Llewellyn (2021) from Aljazeera.com, Malaysia is one of the highest migrant-receiving nations in Southeast Asia, with the most significant number of migrants from Indonesia. More than 2.7 million migrants from Indonesia, with only around 1.6 million workers, went through legal channels (IOM, 2023). This migration, while offering economic opportunities, frequently exposes Indonesian migrant workers to various vulnerabilities, including limited legal protections, precarious employment conditions, and, often, a lack of adequate representation. Therefore, Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia (SBMI) or the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union, is a pivotal organization that advocates for the rights and welfare of Indonesian migrant workers.

Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (SBMI), established on February 25, 2003, is an organization of migrant workers and their family members. It was formerly known as the Federation of Indonesian Migrant Workers Organizations (FOBMI) before being recognized as a Labor Union in 2006 (SBMI.or.id, n.d). Beyond advocacy, SBMI also focuses on community engagement and empowerment (SBMI.or.id, n.d). They organize workshops and training sessions to equip migrant workers with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate their employment more effectively and safely. These activities aim to build a supportive community among migrant workers, reducing isolation and increasing collective bargaining power. SBMI's work in Kuala Lumpur is critical because of its strategic partnerships with various regional stakeholders, including higher educational institutions such as Universitas Islam Indonesia. Their collaborations with other migrant worker organizations amplify their advocacy efforts and facilitate more comprehensive support networks for migrant workers. The establishment and strengthening of worker unions represent a critical mechanism through which the rights and welfare of migrant workers can be safeguarded and advanced.

However, migrant workers often face a range of issues, including exploitation, discrimination, and poor living conditions. SBMI works to educate workers about their rights and provides legal support to those in need. Their efforts have brought significant improvements to the lives of many migrants, ensuring fair treatment and helping to resolve conflicts with employers.

This paper examines the role of participatory approaches in union activities, arguing that such strategies not only enhance the empowerment of migrant workers but also foster greater solidarity and resilience among them. As this paper navigates through these complex themes, it aims to shed light on the practical ways in which the conditions of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia can be improved, ultimately advocating for a more equitable and just treatment of all migrant workers in the region.

A Glance of Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (*Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia/ SBMI*)

The Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (*Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia/ SBMI*) is a labor union representing and advocating for the rights and welfare of Indonesian migrant workers at home and abroad. The union, known as *Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia (SBMI)*, was formed in 1998 to address the challenges and issues faced by Indonesian migrant workers, particularly those employed in domestic and other low-skilled sectors.

Indonesia is one of the top labour-sending countries in the world, with millions of its citizens seeking employment opportunities abroad, primarily in Southeast and East Asia. Many of these migrant workers, especially those employed in domestic work, are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and unequal treatment (Dewi & Rezasyah, 2018). The Indonesian government has recognized this issue and has taken steps to address it, such as implementing a "zero migrant worker roadmap" policy, which has drawn criticism for being discriminatory and violating the economic rights of the workers (Dewi & Rezasyah, 2018).

The *Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia (SBMI)* plays a crucial role in advocating for the rights and welfare of these migrant workers. The union provides various services, including legal assistance, pre-departure training, and reintegration support for workers returning to Indonesia (Probosambodo & Widiastuti, 2022). Moreover, the union works closely with the Indonesian government and other stakeholders to ensure that migrant workers are protected throughout the migration process, from pre-departure to post-return (Probosambodo & Widiastuti, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on Indonesian migrant workers, with many facing job losses, delayed repatriation, and limited access to services and social protection (Probosambodo & Widiastuti, 2022). The *Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia* has been actively addressing these challenges, working with the government and other organizations to ensure that migrant workers receive the necessary support and assistance during this challenging time (Anaf et al., 2022).

IMPLEMENTATION AND METHODS

This community service project employed a participatory approach by utilizing Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Counseling to engage Indonesian migrant workers and their union representatives in Malaysia. These methods were chosen to ensure a collaborative environment where union members and workers could actively contribute to identifying the issues they face and collaboratively devise solutions related to their rights, welfare, and capacity-building efforts. By involving the migrant workers directly in discussions, this approach ensured that the programs developed were relevant to their needs, making the overall intervention more effective.

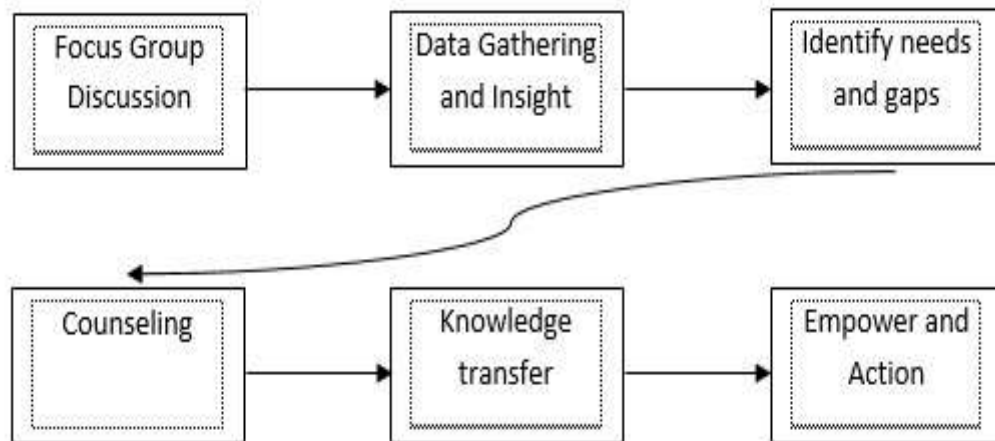


Figure 1. Arrow Diagram for methodology

The first step in the methodology involved conducting a series of FGDs with members of the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia, SBMI) in Kuala Lumpur. The FGDs served as a platform to gather valuable insights into the challenges faced by Indonesian migrant workers and their unions in Malaysia. Additionally, the discussions allowed participants to exchange ideas on empowerment strategies. The FGDs were designed to achieve several objectives: identifying legal, social, and economic challenges, understanding the workers' awareness of their rights, and collecting input on how unions can enhance their support for migrant workers.

Each FGD was structured to encourage active participation, and the discussions were semi-structured, with the facilitators guiding the conversation while allowing participants to express their concerns freely. A speaker from Universitas Islam Indonesia led these discussions. The participants included migrant workers, union leaders, and legal experts, all selected based on their experience in the migration process and union activities. During these discussions, participants explored various topics, such as employment conditions, discrimination, access to legal support, and challenges in union organizing. The insights collected from the FGDs were crucial in shaping the project's next stage, as they helped identify gaps in workers' knowledge and guided the development of the counseling session.



Figure 2. Counseling Session

After the FGDs, the findings were used to design counseling session, which aimed to empower migrant workers by increasing their understanding of their rights and legal protections. This session focused on providing the workers with practical knowledge and skills, enabling them to navigate their employment conditions better and protect themselves from exploitation. The objectives of the counseling were to raise awareness about the rights of migrant workers under both Malaysian and international labor laws, train workers on negotiation and collective bargaining, and guide how to access legal aid and support. Additionally, the session fostered a sense of community and solidarity among workers, promoting collective action through union participation.

The counseling session was conducted in a community center, with around 100 workers participating. The content was tailored to the issues raised during the FGDs, ensuring the relevance and practicality of the counseling. Key topics included labor rights, legal protections, and the role of unions in advocating for workers' rights. The session also incorporated case studies and role-playing exercises, allowing participants to apply their knowledge in simulated real-life scenarios. Informational booklets were distributed, offering participants further resources on their rights and contact information for legal aid services.

Overall, the counseling session were highly effective in increasing participants' knowledge about legal protections and enhancing their confidence in taking action to safeguard their rights. The session also strengthened the role of the SBMI in advocating for migrant workers, as workers were now more aware of the union's role and how to participate in its activities. By the end of the program, participants demonstrated a greater understanding of their rights and felt empowered to engage in collective action. Additionally, the counseling session helped create a network of peer educators within the community, ensuring that the knowledge gained would continue to spread beyond the immediate participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participatory approach utilized in this study significantly empowered Indonesian migrant workers and their unions in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This section details the outcomes of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and counseling sessions, along with the broader implications for the welfare and rights of these workers.

FGDs as a Foundation for Empowerment

Through the FGDs, it became evident that Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia face several ongoing challenges, including limited legal protections, discriminatory work environments, and inadequate living conditions. These findings are consistent with previous studies, which emphasize that migrant workers, particularly those in low-skilled sectors, are often the most vulnerable to exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2020). Participants in the FGDs voiced concerns about their lack of knowledge regarding labor rights and the absence of accessible legal support systems. These sessions provided them a platform to share their experiences and collectively strategize how unions like SBMI can better support their needs.

One of the significant outcomes of the FGDs was the heightened awareness among workers regarding the importance of collective bargaining. Many participants reported feeling isolated in their struggles, but the discussions helped them realize the power of solidarity in confronting workplace issues. The FGDs revealed that workers joining forces through unions are more likely to achieve fair treatment and secure their rights (Smith, 2019). The participatory approach of these sessions empowered the workers by placing them at the forefront of the decision-making process, ensuring that the strategies developed were grounded in their lived experiences.

Counseling Sessions and Enhancing Legal Awareness

The counseling sessions conducted as part of this project further contributed to worker empowerment by increasing their understanding of the legal frameworks that protect migrant laborers in Malaysia. Before the sessions, many workers were unaware of the specific legal avenues available to them for seeking justice in cases of exploitation or discrimination. These sessions provided comprehensive training on Malaysian labor laws and international labor standards, equipping workers with the knowledge and confidence to protect their rights (Fernandez & Pandya, 2021).

The interactive nature of the counseling sessions allowed participants to engage with real-life scenarios through role-playing exercises and case studies. These practical learning tools enabled workers to apply their newly acquired knowledge in a simulated environment, boosting their confidence to handle such situations in their work settings. Post-session feedback indicated that participants felt significantly more empowered and knowledgeable about accessing legal aid, negotiating with employers, and seeking support from their unions (Abella, 2019).

Additionally, these counseling sessions helped bridge the gap between workers and SBMI by reinforcing the union's role as a protective body. Workers expressed a stronger sense of belonging to the union, with many indicating their willingness to participate more actively in SBMI's initiatives. This strengthened relationship between workers and their unions is crucial in fostering long-term collective action and safeguarding workers' rights.

Developing Sustainable Union Empowerment Strategies

The participatory approach addressed immediate needs and paved the way for sustainable empowerment strategies for the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union. A key strategy was the development of peer educator networks, where workers who participated in the counseling sessions would share their knowledge with other migrant workers, creating a multiplier effect. This approach ensures that the benefits of the training sessions extend beyond the initial participants, cultivating a more informed and empowered workforce (Brennan & McGee, 2020).

Moreover, the project highlighted the importance of forming partnerships between unions, legal experts, and educational institutions to create a comprehensive support system for migrant workers. Collaborating with entities like Universitas Islam Indonesia allowed SBMI to enhance its advocacy efforts and provide workers with more robust legal and educational resources. These partnerships ensure that unions can sustain their advocacy and support work even as the legal and social landscapes evolve. The success of the participatory model used in this study suggests that migrant worker unions must continue to engage their members in decision-making processes. This will ensure that union strategies remain relevant and effective in addressing the evolving challenges migrant workers face in Malaysia. Additionally, adopting a participatory model promotes a sense of ownership among workers, encouraging more active involvement in union activities and fostering greater solidarity.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrated that a participatory approach involving FGDs and counseling sessions significantly contributes to the empowerment of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. By actively involving workers in discussions about their challenges and potential solutions, the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (SBMI) was able to tailor its strategies to meet its members' needs better. The FGDs and counselling sessions not only provided valuable insights into the legal and social difficulties faced by migrant workers but also empowered participants by enhancing their knowledge of labour rights and legal protections.

The recommendations from this project highlight several critical areas for improving the empowerment of Indonesian migrant workers through SBMI. First, enhancing union accessibility and awareness is paramount. SBMI should focus on expanding its outreach to ensure that more migrant workers are informed about the services and protections available through the union. Many workers remain unaware of their rights and the assistance they can receive, which limits the union's ability to protect and advocate for their interests. By increasing visibility and making their services more accessible, SBMI can ensure that workers can easily reach out for help when needed.

Another key recommendation is the sustaining of peer educator networks. These networks have proven to be an effective strategy for sharing knowledge and empowering workers by allowing trained participants to educate their peers. This approach fosters a continuous flow of information and ensures that the lessons from empowerment initiatives reach a broader segment of the migrant worker community. Supporting and maintaining these networks is crucial for the long-term success of the empowerment efforts, as it helps build a resilient and informed workforce capable of advocating for their rights.

Strengthening collaborations between SBMI and other stakeholders, such as legal experts, educational institutions, and governmental bodies, is essential. These partnerships can provide more comprehensive support to migrant workers by combining legal assistance, advocacy, and educational resources. By working closely with these entities, SBMI can ensure that migrant workers receive the necessary support throughout their employment, from pre-departure training to addressing legal challenges they may encounter while working in Malaysia.

Lastly, long-term union empowerment initiatives are critical for the sustainability of these efforts. SBMI and other unions should build durable programs that equip workers with the knowledge and skills to engage in collective action and self-advocacy. By emphasizing long-term initiatives, unions can ensure that workers are protected in the short term and empowered to assert their rights and improve their working conditions in the future. This holistic approach to empowerment will create a stronger and more resilient workforce capable of navigating the challenges of migrant labor.

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