

Navigating Borders, Barriers, and Belonging: The Lived Experiences of Non-Citizen Wives in Malaysia

Family Frontiers

Patricia Pek Wan Low and Nur Adilla

ACRONYMS

CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

DOSM Department of Statistics Malaysia

FGD Focus Group Discussion

IC Identity Card or Kad Pengenalan

LTSVP Long Term Social Visit Pass

NRD National Registration Department

PR Permanent Residence

RP Resident Pass

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees

IOM International Organization for Migration

COVID-19 Coronavirus Disease of 2019

ILO International Labour Organization

UN United Nations

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the individuals and organisations whose participation, support, and collaboration were instrumental to the completion of this research report.

First and foremost, we would like to thank all the non-citizen women spouses who participated in this research project through the focus group discussions, interviews, and surveys. We are truly grateful for your time, trust, and openness in sharing your lived experiences with us. We acknowledge that discussing these personal stories and challenges can be both difficult and stressful. Your courage in the face of such circumstances moves and inspires us.

Our heartfelt thanks go to the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) for making this endeavour possible through funding and unwavering support. We deeply appreciate their commitment to highlighting the issue of women marriage migrants in the region through research and advocacy. We are also profoundly grateful to the Migrants United and Act for Human Rights (MUAH) team for their vital guidance, insights, trust, and continuous encouragement throughout this journey.

We would also like to express appreciation to our fellow research partner organisations in this multi-country research initiative—TransAsia Sisters Association (Taiwan), Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy (South Korea), KABAR BUMI (Indonesia) and GABRIELA (Philippines) — your commitment to this critical work continues to inspire us, and we hope that this collaboration serves as a foundation for future partnerships that will drive further positive change in the region.

Thank you also to: Mashithah Abdul Halim for helping us with the facilitation of the focus group discussion in Kota Kinabalu, Elaine Sim and Cristian Baciú for their generosity in hosting the focus group discussions at their law firm, Agnes Padan for her insights and sharing on the border communities, Chin Siew Chien and Lee Chen Kang for their assistance with the fieldwork in Johor, Jenny Trieu Thi Mai Thuong for her excellent work in translating our research materials into the Vietnamese language, and Dr. Melati Nungsari and Dr. Lim Chee Han for their wisdom and guidance.

The very core, and heart of this research is teamwork and collaboration. Last but certainly not least, our immense gratitude to our colleagues at Family Frontiers—Bina Ramanand, Nur Aishah bt. Ahmad, Sarah Czarina Mashanis, Nathas Vari Karoonamoothi, Aaliyah Nadjmin bt. Danial and Alicia Dixon. Your hard work, creativity, and invaluable contributions were integral in making this project possible.

Table of Contents

ACRONYMS	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	8
PAST, PLACE, AND THE PRESENT	8
Past: A Look into History	8
Place: Country of Destination	9
Present: Patterns, Perceptions	11
CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK	14
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	14
METHODOLOGY	14
Focus Group Discussions	16
One-on-One Interviews	17
Timeline Mapping Sheet	17
Online Survey	17
Looking Ahead Beyond the Findings	18
CHALLENGES IN THE RESEARCH	18

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS 19

DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS: DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHARACTERISTICS	19
Online Focus Group Discussions	19
In-person Focus Group Discussions (by location)	20
Klang Valley	20
Sabah	21
Sarawak	22
Johor	24
THEMATIC ANALYSIS: NAVIGATING BORDERS, BARRIERS, AND BELONGING	25
1. Migration Pathways	25
A. Employment as Foreign Labour	26
B. Pursuing Higher Education	28
C. Matchmaking Services	29
D. Cultural and Security Considerations	29
2. The Legal Landscape	32
A. Long Term Social Visit Pass	32
B. Entry Permit or Permanent Residence (PR)	33
C. Residence Pass (RP)	34
D. Citizenship for non-citizen wives under Article 15(1)	35
E. Employment Pass	36
F. Student Pass	36

G. Other types of Long Term Social Visit Passes	37
i. Widow of a citizen (Balu kepada warganegara)	37
ii. Abused wife of a citizen (Isteri 'teraniaya' kepada warganegara)	37
iii. Divorced wife of a citizen (Janda kepada warganegara)	37
H. Work Endorsement or Permission to Work on the LTSVP	38
I. Undocumented or stateless	38
3. Barriers and Issues as Seen in Lived Experiences	39
A. Challenges in Navigating Immigration Processes	39
B. Restricted Rights to Employment	43
C. Issues with Access to Basic Services	47
D. Abusive Relationships	51
E. Change in Marital Status Impacting Visa Status	53
F. Social vs Political Acceptance	54
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION	57
RECOMMENDATIONS	59
REFERENCES	63
ANNEXES	67

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research delves into the migration pathways, the immigration and legal landscape, and the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by non-citizen wives of Malaysians. Through the use of a mixed-methods approach, this study combines qualitative and quantitative findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lives of these women—allowing their experiences and realities to shape the research, and their voices to speak through its pages.

A total of 62 non-citizen wives from 11 states and one Federal Territory participated in focus group discussions or one-on-one interviews, and 89 non-citizen wives from across the country responded to the online survey, which focused on the collection of quantitative data. The resulting findings in this research report are structured into four chapters, beginning with a historical and contextual overview of migration and cross-border marriages in the country, and followed by an elaboration on the research framework and methodology. The third chapter focuses on the description of the findings, detailing the demographics and characteristics observed, and a thematic analysis. The final chapter offers conclusions and recommendations for policy reform at various levels.

Some key findings include the varied migration pathways to Malaysia by non-citizen wives—which include employment and education, as well as motivating factors such as cultural proximity, religious affinity, and patrilocality—and the immigration laws and policies that govern them (*'borders'*). Non-citizen spouses face difficulty in navigating these documentation processes, and overcoming the resulting hurdles (*'barriers'*). This is further compounded when the non-citizen spouse is a woman, a perspective that needs further and due scrutiny as marriage migration is highly gender-specific.

Non-citizen wives face multiple structural challenges, including limited access to legal status in cases of separation, divorce, or widowhood; inequitable and burdensome immigration processes; employment restrictions; and enforced dependency on the Malaysian spouse. Consequently, many women are deprived of autonomy and are left in, or are at risk of, situations of precarity and gender-based violence.

Another aspect of the lived realities of non-citizen wives is their societal and political exclusion and the grappling of identities at the intersection of the home, cultural expectations, and societal inclusion and citizenship (*'belonging'*). While some non-citizen wives experience social acceptance due to cultural or linguistic similarities, they remain politically and legally marginalised. The lack of clear pathways to Permanent Residence and citizenship, and the restrictive nature of immigration policies reinforces their status as “perpetual outsiders”, despite their long-term residence, familial ties, and contributions to Malaysian society.

The experiences captured in this research report highlights the systemic inequalities and structural barriers faced by non-citizen wives in Malaysia. This underscores the need for inclusive and gender-responsive policies that recognise non-citizen spouses as an integral part of the social and economic fabric of the country, value their contributions, and provide them with rights and protection. This report also presents recommendations for

policymakers, the private sector, and international and regional migration governance frameworks. Through the findings and analysis put forth this research calls for reforms in immigration laws, employment rights, and access to basic services for non-citizen spouses, for the benefit and well-being of Malaysian binational families and the nation.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

PAST, PLACE, AND THE PRESENT

Cross-border marriages are not a new phenomenon in Malaysia. According to statistics by DOSM¹, these binational unions make up at least 10% of all registered marriages in the country, reflecting the growing prevalence of international partnerships in the Malaysian context. Due to factors such as economic conditions (Leng & Yeoh, 2021), security and life stability concerns, and cultural practices like patrilocality (Hirschman, 2016), women in binational marriages often migrate from their country of origin to live with their husbands. Their experiences as women, wives, and migrants in a new country are shaped by various socio-cultural and legal challenges, making their adjustment process complex and multifaceted. In the context of women married to Malaysian men, they frequently encounter multiple layers of vulnerability, facing obstacles related to legal status, employment, marital rights, financial dependence, and cultural adaptation—all of which affect their experiences of living in Malaysian society (Yoong & Lee, 2023).

This research seeks to explore the challenges and barriers experienced by women who migrated to Malaysia for marriage to Malaysian men, as well as those who met their husbands after migrating, through the lens of their lived experiences. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research to provide a comprehensive understanding of these women's lives.

Through an unprecedented extensive qualitative research, 62 non-citizen wives² in Malaysia were interviewed either in a focus group discussion (FGD) or through one-on-one interviews held in person across several states in the country and online through the months of July, August and September 2024. To complement these insights, a quantitative survey was conducted, gathering responses from 89 non-citizen wives to capture a wide range of data, deepen the analysis, and provide additional context to their experiences.

This study examines; (i) **their initial migration pathway into Malaysia**, (ii) **their legal status under the current Malaysian law**, and (iii) **their challenges in their day-to-day lives**.

Past: A Look into History

Malaysia's diverse marital landscape has been shaped by its history of migration. From the 19th century to the country's independence from the British in 1957, occurrences of large-scale influx of labour migrants that took place during the colonial era³ resulted in a multicultural society where cross-border marriages are commonplace (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). However, intermarriages, particularly with foreign women, can be traced before the

¹ Data is not publicly available and was provided by DOSM to the researcher on 3rd September 2024 through Data Request & Order, eStatistic Portal. The full data provided is appended in Annex D.

² While we would also use “women marriage migrants” interchangeably with “non-citizen female spouses/wives” we choose to use the latter as it is more widely recognised and understood. Some non-citizen wives would also eschew identification as a “migrant”.

³ The British Empire practiced the import of labour force (Trimmer, 2014), particularly from India, and the burgeoning of industry during this era also saw the arrival of the Chinese to British Malaya.

19th century, and are rooted in Malaysia's long-standing role as a maritime and trading centre (Yaapar, 2019), where marriages between people from different parts of the world have historically been typical. For instance, in ancient Malay states, marriages between local men and foreign women were common, such as the famous union between Puteri Hang Li Po and the Sultan of Malacca in the 15th century (Ruzy Suliza Hashim et al, 2012). During this period, trade with various regions, including the Middle East, China, Siam, Javanese lands and India, further normalised cross-cultural marriages, which were accepted and led to the emergence of mixed-heritage ethnic groups such as the Peranakans. Malaysians are being raised by these stories of intermarriages between locals and foreigners being part of the local cultural tradition.

With the arrival of European colonisation, the influx of European peoples from different empires created new social and ethnic groups. Intermarriages between Portuguese colonists and the local Malaccan population gave rise to the Serani, or Kristang, a community which blended both cultures and continues to exist today (Pillai, 2017). Next, to support the expansion of large-scale British industrialisation during the period of British colonisation, migrants from China and India were brought in en masse to work on plantations and in mining, resulting in some intermarrying with the local population (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). During this period, the transnational marriage migrations in this region became more characterised.

The practice of women migrating to their (prospective) husband's locality is also linked to the patrilocal culture embedded in Asian values (Rucas & Alami, 2021). This phenomenon refers to a situation where upon entering a marriage, the bride will usually move to a place that is more convenient from the perspective of the groom. Brides will be expected to move into the household of the groom or live near to the groom's family. Stemming from historically entrenched patriarchal norms, this practice has significantly shaped the mobility and identities of women in marriage migration, making it a crucial backdrop for understanding contemporary migration patterns and women's experiences in modern Malaysia.

Place: Country of Destination

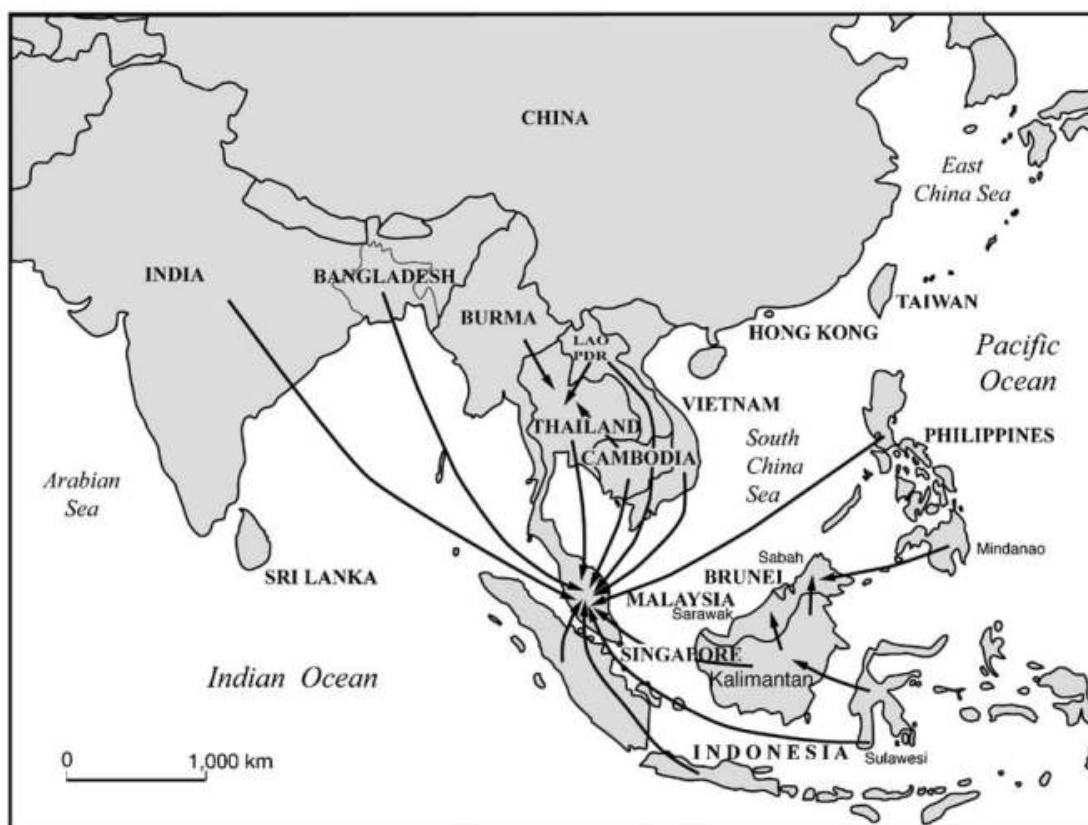
Following the Federation of Malaya's independence in 1957 and the subsequent formation of Malaysia in 1963 with the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak, the country retained a multicultural composition. As Malaysia developed as a newly independent nation and addressed its infrastructural needs and economic growth, the presence of migrant workers became increasingly significant over the decades.

This increasing reliance on a migrant workforce is not particular to Malaysia; it is also evident in the broader Southeast Asian region and beyond. Malaysia's geographic location and workforce demands position it as one of the major countries of destination.⁴ The number of documented migrant workers reached at least 2.1 million in Malaysia as of 15 February 2024, with the top five countries of origin being Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, Myanmar and India (Parliament Hansard, 13 March 2024, p. 55). The World Bank estimates that the total number of migrants (including undocumented workers and other categories) is within the

⁴ In the migration context, it is a country that is the destination for a person or a group of persons, irrespective of whether they migrate regularly or irregularly, as defined in the Glossary on Migration (International Migration Law, No. 34)

range of 2.6 to 5.5 million people (IOM, 2023)(Loh, Simler, Tan Wei, & Yi, 2019 p. 27). This suggests that international migrants could account for between 9 and 17% of Malaysia's population, arguably comprising mostly the migrant labour force.

Even though Malaysia hosts a substantial migrant population, especially from the ASEAN region, past academic research has primarily concentrated on male migrant workers, particularly those in labour-intensive industries (Ent, Wahab, Azlan et al, 2024)(Kassim & Zinn, 2011). The experiences of female migrants, including in marriage migration remain comparatively underexplored despite their growing presence and distinct challenges (Chee, 2011). Apart from the structural exclusion of women's experiences in migration studies, this imbalance in research may stem from the fact that Malaysia is unique among non-Gulf countries, where male migrant workers in this country significantly outnumber female migrant workers. A recent statistic shows that males make up around 62.5% of the migrant population, compared to 37.5% of females or a 5:3 ratio (IOM, 2024).



Map 1 : Direction of labour migration flows in Southeast Asia since the 1990s. Source: Adapted from Kaur, A. (2010), Labour migration trends and policy challenges in Southeast Asia, Policy and Society, 29(4), p. 388

Besides Malaysia's migration inflows caused by economic push and pull factors, political instability and security issues faced by its neighbouring countries also play an important role in determining the migration patterns in the region. In areas experiencing significant interethnic or intercommunity conflict such as parts of Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines and Myanmar, among others, it would be desirable for people, especially those

already facing multiple forms of intersectional discrimination, to seek safety outside their communities. Many of them have arrived in Malaysia as refugees. The 1970s and 1980s saw the arrival of the Chams from Cambodia escaping the Khmer Rouge atrocities, the landing of Vietnamese refugees by boat on Bidong Island after the end of the Vietnam War, and the migration of Filipino Muslims from Mindanao to Sabah due to the outbreak of civil war. At present it is estimated that as of September 2024, there are some 191,830 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, most of them consisting of Rohingyas and Chins fleeing persecution and conflict in Myanmar. This is despite Malaysia not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol.



Map 2: Migration Inflow into Sabah. Source: Adapted from Azizah, K. (2009). Filipino refugees in Sabah: State responses, public stereotypes and the dilemma over their future. *Japanese Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 47(1), p. 54

Present: Patterns, Perceptions

Data on non-citizen spouses is not readily accessible to the public. Family Frontiers has obtained some statistics by submitting parliamentary questions through Members of Parliament and engaging in the CEDAW reporting process. As of June 2022, there were **164,507 non-citizen spouses** holding Long-Term Social Visit Passes (LTSVP), comprising **40,688 men and 123,819 women** (Parliament Written Answer, 4 August 2022, Question No.101). As of 2023, there were **131,735 non-citizen wives** of Malaysians holding active passes, with the largest groups coming from Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and India according to the State reply to list of issues.⁵

⁵ Data provided by the State for the 6th CEDAW reporting cycle, submitted on 25 Oct 2023. See Annex C.

Between 2021 and 2022, slightly more Malaysian men married non-citizen women than Malaysian women married non-citizen men, according to official statistics from DOSM.⁶ However, a closer look at the gender distribution of non-citizen spouses reveals a significant disparity. Not only was the number of non-citizen women marrying Malaysian men higher than that of non-citizen men marrying Malaysian women, but the rate of increase was also notable during this period.

In 2021, the ratio of non-citizen women to non-citizen men marrying Malaysians was approximately 1:1. By 2022, however, this ratio had significantly increased to around 3:2. The number of non-citizen women marrying Malaysian men surged from 2,401 in 2021 to 6,360 in 2022, reflecting a sharp increase. In contrast, the number of non-citizen men marrying Malaysian women also grew but at a slower pace, rising from 2,369 to 4,558 over the same period.

Binational Marriages in Malaysia (2021-2022)

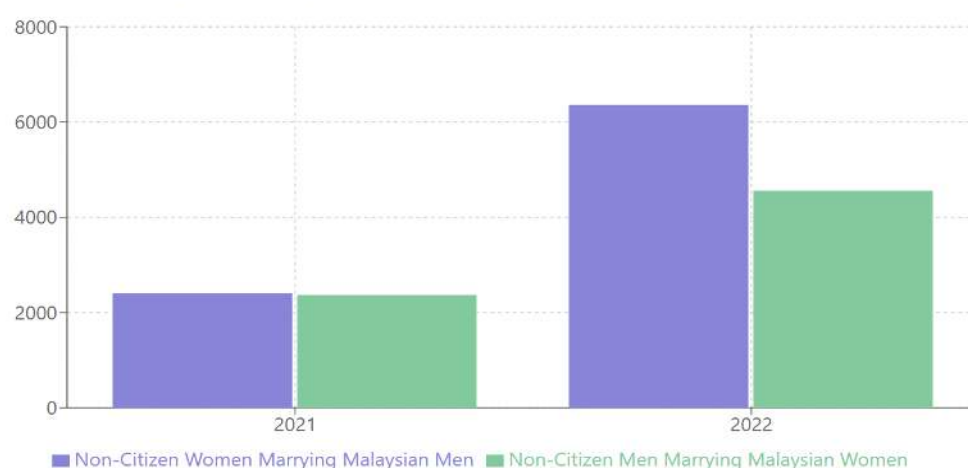


Figure 1: Chart showing the increase of marriages according to gender, based on statistics from DOSM

The sharp increase may also be attributed to the end of the Movement Control Order—Malaysia’s COVID-19 regulations—which involved border closures and the temporary shutdown of government offices. Nevertheless, the rates observed above, based on the gender of the non-citizen spouse, remain noteworthy.

It is also important to note that the marriages recorded in DOSM data are of those registered in Malaysia, as well as marriages initially registered abroad but later re-registered in Malaysia. Malaysia does not recognise the legal validity of marriages registered solely overseas and are therefore not part of this data. Based on data from DOSM (2024), the percentage of binational marriages is 10% of the total marriages registered in Malaysia in 2022.

⁶ Data is not publicly available and was provided by DOSM to the researcher on 3rd September 2024 through Data Request & Order, eStatistic Portal. The full data provided is appended in Annex D.

Understanding that migration has always been the norm of the region is crucial as a background against which we can situate the context of the experience of non-citizen nationals marrying Malaysian nationals. The construction of governing laws and social stereotypes against the migrant community in Malaysia is significantly shaped by large-scale migration driven by economic pull factors in Malaysia and push factors from less developed countries of origin. These dynamics create a complex environment where migrants are often viewed through a lens of prejudice, influenced by prevailing economic conditions and societal perceptions. In a survey on the public attitudes towards migrant workers in Malaysia, 68 percent of the respondents believe that the influx of migrant workers threatens our culture and heritage, and 83 percent hold the unfounded belief that migration has led to an increase in crime rates (ILO and UN Women, 2020). As a result, policies and public attitudes towards migrants are often informed by stereotypes that overlook the nuanced realities of their experiences and contributions to Malaysian society.

As a category that constitutes "foreigners" in Malaysia, women marriage migrants or non-citizen wives are not excluded and are made structural victims of these skewed prejudices. These prejudices aimed towards migrant women are made more difficult due to the culmination of several layers of identity markers that characterise these women—they are women, migrants, often of underprivileged economic status, and so on. Utilising the lens of intersectionality, the discrete experiences of the individual women migrants will be analysed to yield important insights for the use of our research.

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

While marriages between Malaysian citizens and non-citizens can occur anywhere in the world, this report centers on the issue within Malaysia, with the hope that it might be an instrument for meaningful policy reform. Applying the gender lens to this study is crucial, as the challenges faced by non-citizen spouses and their binational families are compounded for women—both the Malaysian wives and the non-citizen wives.

Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with groups of non-Malaysian women who are, or were, married to Malaysian men, this research aims to understand the everyday challenges that these women face beyond just legal or institutional hurdles. The data collected for this study were analysed qualitatively and are explained in this paper according to their respective themes. Therefore, the research objectives are as follows:

- I. To understand the lives of non-citizen female spouses in their country of origin prior to their marriage with Malaysian men, and their migration journey to Malaysia.
- II. To understand the experiences and challenges faced by non-citizen female spouses in Malaysia.
- III. To analyse the issues faced by non-citizen female spouses related to their migration pathways and lived experiences in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This research gathers data from non-citizen women who are or have been married to Malaysian men, and includes previously non-Malaysian women who had obtained Malaysian citizenship at the time of the research, as well as women who were no longer in marital relationships with Malaysian men due to widowhood, divorce, or separation.

We initially determined that respondents would be in a legal marriage, but during the research we encountered instances of customary or religious marriages (such as *kahwin kampung* or *kahwin adat*, or *nikah masjid*).⁷ Such marriages, when one spouse is a non-citizen, are largely not recognised by Malaysian law after 2006. In Sarawak, the Council for Native Customs and Traditions decreed that, as of September 21, 2006, non-Malaysians can no longer marry Sarawak natives under customary law; such unions are considered invalid.

Non-citizen women who are undocumented or stateless typically do not have the option to enter a legal marriage, as marriage registration under the law with a non-citizen is permitted only if the non-citizen holds valid documents and meets the necessary legal status

⁷ These marriages are not civil registrations, and may be officiated by an imam at a mosque, or a village head according to religious or traditional rites

requirements⁸. In our research in the state of Sabah, we observed and determined that these unions do exist and present as genuine marriages, functioning much like legally recognised ones. In response, we broadened the definition to include unions that are not legally recognised. Further elaboration, and the adverse consequences, will be discussed in further detail under 'Undocumented or stateless', p.39.

The study employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative data was primarily collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with selected groups of non-citizen wives. Quantitative data was gathered through an online survey designed for this research project, to help piece a broad picture of potential patterns and trends. Several past surveys on issues affecting binational families in Malaysia conducted by the Family Frontiers from 2020 to 2024⁹ were also utilised to complement the primary data collation for this study.

A total of **89 women** responded to the online survey, and **58 women** participants from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic statuses were involved in the 15 FGDs that were organised in-person in several parts of Malaysia and online. A total of **four women** took part in the one-on-one interviews online or over the phone.

To ensure inclusivity and diverse representation of data, where possible, the participants for interviews and FGDs were selected based on various unique factors such as geographical location, country of origin, age, marriage status (divorced, separated, widowed), occupation, and immigration status. For the online FGDs, the composition of the respondents was at random, based on those who registered and expressed their interest to participate in the discussion following the publicised call for participation.

To facilitate accessibility and to reduce some of the language barriers, we provided translations of FGD materials, the survey, and publicity content in Bahasa Malaysia (the national language), Vietnamese, and Mandarin.

To ensure the confidentiality and the safety of participants, the Chatham House rule was explained verbally, stated in the consent form, and applied at all FGDs. Written consent was obtained from the participants, which outlined how the information they provide will be used (anonymised with identifiers removed) and will only be limited to the researchers associated and in collaboration with Family Frontiers. Participants also gave verbal consent for photos to be taken for internal use and reporting. All responses by participants are to be voluntary and treated with utmost confidence.

⁸ For example, migrant workers holding a Pas Lawatan Kerja Sementara (PLKS) are prohibited from entering a marriage while in possession of this document.

⁹ Survey on Employment Challenges of Foreign Spouses Survey (2020), Survey on Employment Status of Spouses in Binational Marriages (2021), Survey on Gender Based Violence Experience Among Binational Families, Survey on Permanent Residence Applications of Foreign Spouses & Children of Malaysians (2022-2024)

Focus Group Discussions

This research employed, to some extent, Feminist Participatory Action Research (Maguire, 1987), aiming not only to gather data but also as a means of consciousness-raising among research participants. Data collection was therefore conducted primarily through focus group discussions.

There were 15 FGDs in total—10 FGDs were conducted in-person in the states of Selangor (three groups), Johor (four groups), Sabah (one group) and Sarawak (two groups), while five FGDs were conducted online. The locations for the physical FGDs were chosen to allow representative sampling from both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, given that the experiences between different states and regions within Malaysia itself are vastly different due to the distinct local cultures, governance, and geographical location. Participants in each session resided in the same states as the locations of the discussions.



Map 3 : Locations where the in-person FGDs took place (Kulai, Petaling Jaya, Kuching, Miri and Kota Kinabalu). Markers for interviews/FGDs by phone or online indicate the location of residence of the participants.

For the FGDs conducted online, the nature of it allowed for participation from different states of residence and background to gather in one same session. The online FGDs involved 21 participants. We disseminated the calls for participation and invitations across various social media platforms, including the Foreign Spouses Support Group (FSSG) community page on Facebook, which is managed by Family Frontiers and has a following of 35,000. Additionally, we shared this information through WhatsApp groups, civil society organisations, and community networks.

To increase inclusivity and ensure accessibility, the language used in the call for participation utilised familiar terms such as “Sharing of Experiences”, “Share your Stories” and “Discussion Session” instead of the academic jargon “Focus Group Discussion”. We wanted to avoid words that can appear intimidating or evoke fear, so as to reduce the barriers which might prevent the target population from responding. From our experiences at Family Frontiers, non-citizen spouses are often fearful or wary about speaking up or expressing concerns publicly, as many feel it is not safe in Malaysia for them to do so as it might land them in trouble with the authorities. The sample of the materials used for the call for participation in the online FGDs is attached as Annex E.

The FGDs were conducted by at least one Main Facilitator and a rapporteur, both of whom were the researchers or staff of Family Frontiers. Prior to the FGDs, all staff members received thorough briefings on the objectives and guidelines for conducting and coordinating the FGDs. This preparation ensured that everyone involved was aware of the goals of the discussions and understood the importance of creating a supportive environment for the participants. It was also important for the Main Facilitator to remain neutral and avoid overly inserting themselves into the discussions. This is to encourage participants to share their thoughts and experiences freely without feeling influenced or overshadowed by the facilitator's opinions.

One-on-One Interviews

As part of ongoing advocacy work, Family Frontiers often receives urgent requests for assistance from non-citizen wives with various time-sensitive problems that need immediate attention. To identify the need and the best resources to assist the women, we would conduct one-on-one interviews with these women, and questions about their migration pathways and experiences would be asked during the online call. Some of these calls were incorporated into this research; the respondents were informed beforehand and asked for their consent for their stories and challenges to be included in the research report, as well as in future advocacy materials.

Timeline Mapping Sheet

During the FGD, all participants were provided with a Timeline Mapping Sheet¹⁰ as a guiding structure for the discussion. The map outlines the typical life trajectory of a migrant spouse divided into three key stages: their life in their country of origin, their married life along with the challenges in Malaysia, and their future plans. This structure encourages participants to share their life experiences in a natural and fluid manner, fostering a sense of ease and openness, while avoiding tediousness and the appearance of an interrogation. The map also provides a visual anchor to help stimulate memory and reflection. The Timeline Mapping Sheet is attached in Annex B.

¹⁰ The Timeline Mapping Sheet is inspired by the life trajectory of the process flow of statelessness in Figure 2, Report on Human Rights and Statelessness in Peninsular Malaysia, Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), 2023, pg, 5

Online Survey

As a complement to the FGDs and interviews, an online survey, ‘Survey on Non-Citizen Wives in Malaysian Binational Families’, was conducted from 15 October 2024 until 8 November 2024. The survey focused on quantitative questions, with qualitative questions marked as optional. The survey was structured into multiple sections covering topics such as education, employment, marriage pathways, and challenges pertaining to their legal status, access to basic services and overall experiences. Respondents were given both closed-ended questions, enabling statistical analysis, and open-ended questions for qualitative insights. Participants were invited through multiple channels, including FSSG’s own Facebook community, and personal networks established during the FGDs and interviews. Efforts were made to ensure a diverse representation of non-citizen wives from different nationalities, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds, and the survey was available in English, Bahasa Malaysia, Vietnamese and Mandarin. A link to the copy of the survey form is attached in Annex H.

Looking Ahead Beyond the Findings

At the start of the FGDs, participants were informed that their sharing during the discussions would not only support the ongoing research and future advocacy efforts but also help raise awareness about the issues among themselves. From the outset, we wanted this research to incorporate the aspect of empowerment by highlighting their voices and experiences as integral to the process. By sharing their stories, they could collectively identify common challenges and aspirations, thereby creating a space of mutual support and understanding. They were encouraged to engage actively, respond to questions, and share insights or tips with one another throughout the discussion, with minimal intervention by the Main Facilitator. The transcripts and notes of the discussions were collated and analysed by the researcher using thematic coding for the findings and analysis section.

CHALLENGES IN THE RESEARCH

We acknowledge that there were limitations in the areas we could conduct FGDs in-person particularly in the vast states of Sarawak and Sabah. There are many remote interiors that are hard to reach. In an effort to address these constraints, we interviewed an activist based in Lawas, Sarawak who assists indigenous communities with documentation on the situation of non-citizen spouses of Malaysians in her area, as well as selecting a community of stateless wives of Filipino heritage in Kota Kinabalu, for our FGD in Sabah. Our approach in seeking participants relied heavily on social media to capture those who are not already within our networks. However, this strategy limited our ability to connect with those who are not active on these platforms or who may have limited internet access or digital literacy.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section is divided into **two** key sub-sections. The first subsection integrates descriptive findings from both the **quantitative data** and the **qualitative insights** gathered. The second subsection delves into a thematic analysis, where coded themes are identified and the personal narratives of the respondents are explored. This approach will allow a nuanced understanding of both the broader trends and the individual voices within this population.

DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS: DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHARACTERISTICS

In-person Focus Group Discussions (by location)

Klang Valley

The first focus group discussion (FGD) was held at the Family Frontiers' office in Petaling Jaya, Selangor on August 15, 2024. On the day of the discussion, 12 women residing within the Klang Valley¹¹ attended. Four were from Indonesia, three from Russia, two from the Philippines, and one each from Singapore, Morocco, and Zimbabwe. The participants were organised into three groups, primarily based on similarities in their country or region of origin.



Figure 3: Focus Group Discussion with participants at Petaling Jaya, Selangor, August 2024.

Despite their diverse nationalities, the majority of the participants in the Klang Valley FGD exhibited several common characteristics: they held at least a university-level qualification,

¹¹ The Klang Valley, or *Lembah Klang*, is an urban area nestled within the states of Selangor (the districts of Petaling, Klang, Gombak, Hulu Langat, Sepang and Kuala Langat) and the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya.

communicated fluently in English, were or had been employed in professional roles, and currently in the middle-class or upper-middle-class economic bracket. These common characteristics observed among the participants may be attributed to the Klang Valley being a melting pot and part of Malaysia's capital region (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor) where a high concentration of the population live. This population includes a large number of migrants, including educated and skilled professionals drawn by Kuala Lumpur's diverse and cosmopolitan nature (Nguyen & Valentine, 2020).

All participants have been following at least one of Family Frontiers' social media platforms and were aware of the organisation's past work and advocacy efforts. They demonstrated a high level of awareness about women's rights, with some serving as informal community leaders among their community of non-citizen wives. They shared not only their own experiences but also those of other women within their networks.

Sabah

This focus group discussion took place in Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah on 24 August 2024. Our public call for participation did not yield results, but we were able to gather a group of six non-citizen wives of Malaysian citizens through a local connection. These women were all of Filipino Muslim descent, most of whom arrived in Sabah as young children fleeing the civil war in the southern Philippine islands during the 1970s and 1980s. All have spent most of their lives undocumented, with only one in the group who was successful in obtaining a Philippine passport later in life. The rest held various different temporary papers issued by the state, such as IMM13.¹² As a result, five of them were unable to legally register their marriages, which rendered most of their offspring stateless. Three work in low-wage labour, and the rest are housewives. All live in relative poverty, with their husbands in occupations such as construction workers and manual labourers. The highest level of education attained among these women was primary school education at alternative schools. The language used during this FGD was Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Melayu Sabah, a local dialect and an offshoot of the national language.

¹² This is further elaborated in the section "Cultural and Security Considerations" on p.30



Figure 4: Focus Group Discussion with participants at Sabah, August 2024.

Sarawak

There were two focus group discussions that took place in Kuching, Sarawak. The total of seven participants were a mix of respondents to our public call out, as well as from the network of non-citizen spouses of our local connection. The participants were non-citizen wives from Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam, and the United Kingdom, and the groupings were based on language preferences. One group conversed in English, while the other, composed of all the Indonesians, spoke in a mix of Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Indonesia, and English. The participants in Sarawak were distinct in their diversity. The age bracket ranged from late 20s to 70s, with a wide range of educational backgrounds including secondary schooling and postgraduate education. The women also came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

A particularly striking commonality was that all participants believed they could not work due to their spousal visa status, despite the existence of a program unique to Sarawak that allows employment for non-citizen spouses under certain conditions.¹³ Most participants were housewives or quietly ran small, home-based businesses. Collectively, they conveyed their shared desire for the freedom to work without restrictions, and for the autonomy that it would bring. In this group, we also met the first—and only—non-citizen wife in the course of our research fieldwork who has successfully obtained Permanent Residence and is awaiting formal approval of her Malaysian citizenship application; she received PR between 2021-2022 after five years of waiting, applied for citizenship at the end of 2023, and received notification that it was successful in 2024. This contrasts with another participant in the group, who is ten years her senior and has had no success with her applications, remaining on a spouse visa, or Long-term Social Visit Pass (LTSVP). The group expressed surprise and frustration at this disparity.

¹³ This is further elaborated in the section “Employment issues in Sarawak” on p.47



Figure 5: Focus Group Discussion with participants at Sarawak, August 2024.



Figure 6: Focus Group Discussion with participants at Sarawak, August 2024.

Johor

In Johor, we visited a small, close-knit village in Kulai on 4 September 2024, home to a unique community of approximately 200 non-citizen women. There were 13 non-citizen wives from Taiwan, China, and Vietnam who participated, who were assigned into four groups based on nationality and language preferences. The first group were the wives from China and discussion was done in Mandarin and English; the second and third groups comprised of the Vietnamese wives, with one group using Bahasa Malaysia and

Vietnamese¹⁴, and the other Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin; and the fourth group were the women from Taiwan, who used Mandarin and English.

It is observed that some of these women came to Malaysia through agents or marriage brokers, to marry Malaysian men of Chinese ethnicity from rural areas. However, the women appeared reluctant to say anything definitive on the subject, but it was implied through their comments. One of them said that Malaysians do not like people who have come through matchmaking agents. In this community, there are also non-citizen wives who arrived first as migrant workers to work in the local factories, before meeting and marrying their Malaysian husbands.

Among the participants, many are housewives or assist informally with their husbands' businesses; their employment is not formalised, for the LTSVP contains a statement of prohibition from working, and the process for non-citizen spouses to acquire permission to work is challenging.



Figure 7: Focus Group Discussion participants from Vietnam at Kulai, Johor, September 2024

There were shared experiences of struggles with language and cultural barriers among the women, and they displayed a strong sense of resilience and camaraderie within their community. Notably, at the conclusion of the focus group discussions, all the Vietnamese women respectfully declined the per diems offered to participants. Accepting such compensation was culturally inappropriate for them, and there was also a desire to maintain a sense of dignity and autonomy, particularly in the context of coming from a lower income group.

¹⁴ One of the participants assisted with interpretation.

Online Focus Group Discussions

A total of 21 participants joined the online focus group discussions (FGDs) held in five different groups over four separate days. Participants were 10 Indonesians, six Filipinos, as well as one each from Singapore, India, Thailand, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan respectively. They reside in various states in Malaysia including Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Terengganu, Melaka, Sabah and Sarawak. The participants come from diverse educational and employment backgrounds and represent different age groups. Despite these differences, they often express a strong sense of solidarity in their shared struggles as "foreigners". During the discussions, they made concerted efforts to understand each other's challenges by asking questions to each other and offering recommendations and tips, with those in more privileged positions showing a willingness to support others in navigating their unique difficulties after the FGD.



Figure 2: One of the Online Focus Group Discussion with Participants Conducted on Zoom, August 2024.

The online FGD benefited from the country's relatively strong internet connection and high level of electronic device ownership, where ownership and access to smartphones is at around 95 per cent of the population as of 2021 (MCMC, 2021) with a nationwide internet penetration rate of 132 per cent (MCMC, 2023). Participants from rural areas, including in Sabah, used their mobile phones (typically, participants would use laptops) to join the online FGD hosted on Zoom. The language primarily used in the online FGDs was English due to the participants' preference, except on a few occasions when the participants preferred Bahasa Malaysia. The Main Facilitator assisted in translation as needed and encouraged to share in Bahasa Malaysia if they felt more comfortable doing so.

Online Survey Respondents

The 89 survey respondents exhibited diverse demographic profiles, representing 23 different nationalities, with the largest groups coming from the Philippines (22 respondents), Vietnam (13 respondents), and Indonesia (12 respondents). The respondents also included women from Austria, China, Germany, and the United States. While the age range was wide, the

majority (65%) was between 30 and 44 years old—an age bracket commonly associated with career advancement and family-building phases. Religiously, Islam (29%) was the most prevalent religion, a substantial proportion of respondents identified as Christians (33%, including Catholics and Protestants), or Buddhists (20%).

The geographic distribution of respondents also pointed to significant clustering in urban regions, with Selangor and Kuala Lumpur collectively accounting for two-thirds (66%) of the total responses. Findings on the level of educational attainment among respondents revealed that nearly half (49%) held a Bachelor's degree, and a further 23% possessed advanced degrees (Master's or PhD). Only 6% had completed secondary education or less.

On the legal and marital status of the respondents, 88% were currently married, while the remaining 12% comprised individuals who were divorced, separated, or widowed. Only 5% of respondents had achieved Permanent Residence with over half relying on Long-Term Social Visit Passes (LTSVP), either with (30%) or without (39%) work endorsements.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS: NAVIGATING BORDERS, BARRIERS AND BELONGING

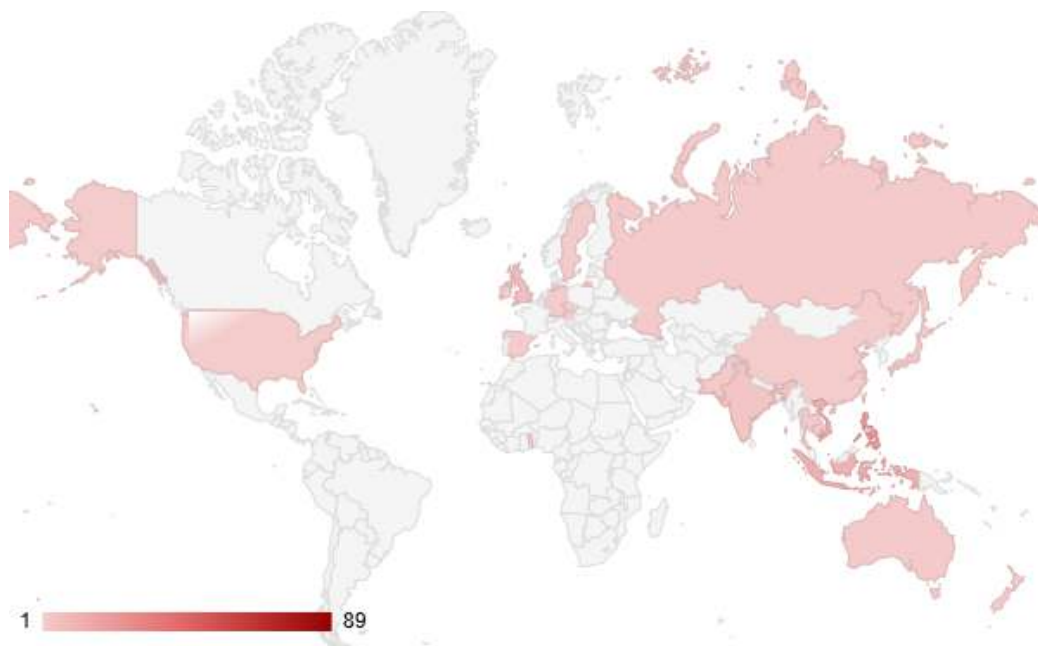
Thematic analysis is an approach to identifying specific common themes and subthemes through a thorough examination and coding of the qualitative dataset. Thematic analysis is recognised as a 'flexible' tool that would allow deeper exploration of the complexities of the phenomenon under study. For this study, we identified several themes that are mutually experienced and predominant in the women's life as non-citizen wives in Malaysia.

The key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis are migration pathways, documentation status and several main issues. The lived experiences of the women are included to further illustrate the specific situations.

1. Migration Pathways

Chiew & Yeoh (2021) stated that marriage migration is "a highly gendered phenomenon (...) because of the way female marriage migrants are incorporated into host societies". However, one cannot assume that women marriage migrants emigrated to Malaysia solely due to marriage and the findings of this research proves this thesis. In the era of globalisation, where increased mobility is accessible for many women, their migration and marriage experiences are shaped by a variety of factors including economic opportunities, education level, career, and security.

The participants in this study represent a diverse range of nationalities, with respondents originating from 23 countries. The regional proximity may explain the larger representation of Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines (22 respondents), Vietnam (13 respondents), and Indonesia (12 respondents). There are also respondents from regions as far-reaching as Austria, Togo, and New Zealand. This suggests that migration for marriage is influenced not only by regional proximity but also by factors such as professional opportunities, cultural affinities, and socio-political contexts, which will be further explored in the subsequent analysis.



Map 4: Geographical Diversity of Study Participants

Through thematic coding, we identified **four** main pathways of migration among non-citizen wives. These pathways reflect diverse motivations and challenges leading to or influencing their decision to migrate for marriage, and each pathway offers a distinct perspective on how migrant wives navigate the socio-political landscape of their host country. While they eventually migrate permanently for marriage, the data encapsulates that a significant portion of the women interviewed were initially migrating to Malaysia for various reasons other than marriage, except for the transnational matchmaking pathway. For most of them, only after spending a period in Malaysia, that these women get married and stay in Malaysia. Quantitative data indicates that 40% of respondents were already residing in Malaysia before meeting their Malaysian husbands, while 60% migrated to Malaysia after the marriage.

This shows that marriage was not always the initial motivation to migrate. For most respondents, the decision to marry and stay in Malaysia occurred only after spending time in the country. This aligns with qualitative insights, which show that migration pathways are often shaped by employment opportunities, professional assignments, or familial connections, rather than a pre-planned intention to marry and settle in Malaysia. The migration pathways are as below:

A. Employment as Foreign Labour

While most of the non-citizen wives chose to migrate to Malaysia primarily to live near their Malaysian husband's family, migration for employment opportunities also plays a key role in the overall migration patterns. Economic purposes were cited by 25% of respondents as the primary reason for residing in Malaysia, while 47% chose to live near their Malaysian husband's family.

For non-citizen wives within this pathway, there are two distinct groups. The first group comprises highly skilled labour employed in well-paid roles within sectors such as multinational corporations, the corporate sector, and foreign companies operating in Malaysia. Women in this group hold high educational qualifications, including postgraduate degrees, and work in sectors requiring mobility and frequent international travel. Many had established careers in their home countries with frequent trips to Malaysia or were already based in Malaysia before meeting their husbands, marrying, and deciding to stay. 25% of the survey respondents (22 out of 89) met their husbands through professional settings or the workplace. Two examples below illustrate the migration pathway under the category of employment among professional and highly skilled women:

Hanna from Indonesia:

I came to Malaysia (...) and worked for one of the biggest oil and gas companies in Malaysia. I am a geologist and have a Master's degree. From 2008, I worked as a direct-hire, but then I met my husband in 2014, and we got married.

Rita from Indonesia:

I have a degree in business administration. Last time I was working in Jakarta [at an embassy] (...) I'm the one handling public relations for a department and (often travelled to Singapore) to help with some event organisations. That was when I met my husband. He was there for work too.

The second group consists of a significant number of women recruited to Malaysia for roles in manual labour, such as factory work, hospitality, or domestic service. These women viewed working abroad as a valuable opportunity to improve their family's economic situation, given the scarcity of stable and satisfactory job opportunities in their countries of origin. Many travelled to Malaysia through job agencies, which provided guaranteed employment in designated factories. One respondent from the Philippines shared that she was willing to leave her college studies behind when she received an offer to migrate to Sabah, Malaysia to work as an irregular labourer:

Francesca, from the Philippines:

I came to Malaysia when I was 20 years old and I started to work as a factory machine operator that time when I met my husband here in Sabah, Malaysia. Then, when I met him, we got a mutual understanding [dated] for 6 months before we got married. (...) Actually, before that, I was studying in Philippines. I was already in my second year of college, when I met the agency who was recruiting. The agency said that I had to come to Sabah to become a tadika teacher [kindergarten teacher or nursery worker] or factory worker. So I chose [to be] the factory worker.

In another interview, Ruhana from Indonesia shared a similar experience:

At that time, I was working as a maid in Malaysia. I worked in a journalist's house in Sarawak, and it was there that I met my husband. I have been living in Malaysia for 25 years.

B. Pursuit of Higher Education

Another identified pathway to migration is through higher education. Over the past decades, the Malaysian government has expanded higher education institutions in the country, creating opportunities for more international students to enter Malaysia on long-term student visas. Additionally, efforts to market Malaysia as Southeast Asia's education hub have further supported this growth (Mohd Ismail & Doria Abdullah, 2000, p. 107). Data published by Education Malaysia (2024) shows a steady rise in the number of international students, with an almost 30 percent increase in applications from international students to study in Malaysia from 2022 to 2023. This upward trend has remained consistent year after year.

Equipped with higher education, some of these students attempt to enter the professional workforce in Malaysia, while others will return to their home countries. Quantitative findings show that 18% of respondents met their husbands through educational institutions.

Yuni, from Indonesia:

I am from (...) a small city near Medan, south of Medan. It's about a 40-minute flight from KL, actually, so it's quite close. For my education, I studied architecture in Subang. I worked in architecture firms in Malaysia for a few years before I moved to broadcasting. (...) But my little brother was here studying at a Subang university too for a few years.

Another participant reminisced about how her parents were impressed with Malaysia's education system and its affordability, and decided to send her to study in a university in the Klang Valley area. She enjoyed her time as a student here and integrated with the community fairly easily. She met her husband while still a student and they dated for a few years before deciding to get married:

I'm the only child from my family, and actually I studied here in Malaysia during my college time, so I took this multimedia course. This particular program is the one that I couldn't find in Indonesia.

This migration pathway is increasingly popular among younger women seeking to attain the highest level of education, including degrees from overseas institutions. Education Malaysia Global Services, a government-related arm focused on international student recruitment, is also working to intensify its efforts to attract more Indonesian students, aiming to enrol 10,000 by the end of 2024 ("Plans to up number of Indonesian students", 2024).

C. Matchmaking Services

Leng & Yeoh (2021) identified cases of international marriages among a specific demographic of Malaysian men and non-citizen women. In their research, they performed an ethnographic study on a group of ethnic Chinese Malaysian men who, driven by financial necessity, worked abroad in their youth. Upon returning to Malaysia, they were often considered too old to find wives among local women, creating a demand for transnational matchmaking agencies. Meanwhile, young women from Vietnam, seeking improved living conditions, agreed to be matched with these Malaysian men, thereby fulfilling the market demands in the process.

While the quantitative survey revealed that only one respondent reported meeting their husband through a matchmaking agent or broker, qualitative findings from FGDs painted a more nuanced picture. In particular, during an FGD conducted with Vietnamese wives in Johor, facilitated through interpreters, a notable prevalence of arranged marriages facilitated by matchmaking services emerged. The differing results may be attributed to the diverse demographics reached through each method. The online survey, disseminated via social media platforms, likely attracted a demographic of non-citizen wives who are more educated, digitally proficient, and integrated into urban networks. Conversely, the FGDs provided a direct platform for voices from communities that may face language barriers or lack access to online resources—such as Vietnamese wives whose migration experiences often involve economic necessity and the involvement of matchmaking agents.

During the FGDs, non-citizen wives appeared reserved about sharing the details of how their marriages began, possibly as a way to distance themselves from stereotypes associated with "mail-order brides". A participant in the Johor focus group discussion said that as a Vietnamese woman, she feels uncomfortable when people think that Vietnamese women only marry Malaysian men for their money. One Vietnamese wife, Trinh, shared that she married her Malaysian husband with the help of "friends"—as she preferred to call the matchmaking agents—who had come in search of brides. She described her husband as "sincere", noting that he had met her family prior to the marriage. Recounting her life before marriage, she shared that she had never worked her entire life because her father refused to let her work, and so her family arranged her marriage to a man from Malaysia, believing that she would be well off due to Malaysia's stronger economy compared to Vietnam's. In the case of Trinh, her husband is relatively good to her and is responsible towards the family. However, a sense of uncertainty still lingers:

I fear being separated from my child and forced to return to Vietnam if anything bad were to happen to my husband, where I have no support left since I rarely go back as my husband is merely working in farming. My Malaysian-born child wouldn't thrive there, given the limited opportunities. I have built my life here—learning Mandarin to connect with my husband's family and raising our children together.

D. Cultural and Security Considerations

Our study highlights cultural and security considerations as significant factors influencing the migration of non-citizen wives to Malaysia. For several participants in the FGDs who originated from Thailand, their minority status and Muslim religious identity in their home

countries played a significant role. Inter-ethnic conflicts in Southern Thailand—particularly in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—have seen the Malay Muslim communities, who are minorities in Thailand, engaged in conflicts and insurgency movements against the state and authorities (Melvin, 2007). According to Kosmo! (“Pilih lelaki Malaysia untuk ubah”, 2022), some Southern Thai women opt to marry Malaysian Malay men to escape hardship in Thailand and to seek more stable and secure lives in Malaysia. Similarly, a respondent in our study, a prominent community leader in Perlis, explained that women from southern Thailand—particularly from regions like Songkhla, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—often prefer marrying Malaysian Malay men as it offers a path to a safer life. This is partly due to the fact that Malay-Muslims form the majority population in Malaysia, providing a sense of cultural and religious alignment:

When we were growing up, we [Southern Thailand women] were told by our parents that if we wanted a better life, marry a Malaysian man. It is better [that way] to ensure our security and safety, because we are the minority in Thailand, but here in Malaysia, we are part of the majority Muslim if we marry Malay men. You can find a lot of us in Perlis and Kedah. But this is not to say that we got married simply to be here, no, it is easier to fall in love with someone who is stable and share [sic] your cultural and religious belief [sic].

In a similar vein, the Filipino Muslim women we interviewed in Sabah cited similar reasons of cultural and religious affinity, i.e. being a Muslim made them prefer to marry Sabahan or Malaysian Muslim men. The longstanding conflict in Mindanao between the Philippine government against the Muslim Mindanao community since the late 1960s led to many women from that region leaving their country of origin and entering Sabah, a state in Malaysia that is geographically nearest to the Philippines, as refugees (Lumayag, 2014). In 1970, the Sabah Government, led by Chief Minister Tun Mustapha permitted refugees from Mindanao to settle legally in the state on humanitarian grounds. This decision was also arguably linked to Tun Mustapha’s “personal and political motives (...) related to his religious belief, his origin and his role as the head of the Muslim based political party” (Azizah Kassim, 2009, p. 58).

The Malaysian Government later introduced several special identification documents for the refugees which allowed them to legally reside and work in Sabah, namely the IMM13, Sijil Banci and Kad Burung-Burung. As of 2020, there were around 136,000 holders of these special documents in Sabah (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020). The high representation of Filipino respondents in the survey (25%) reflects the historical and ongoing prevalence of Filipino migration to Malaysia.

The FGD participants in Sabah, although undocumented, are identified by the Malaysian Government as citizens of the Philippines in their special identification papers, although they do not possess any documents from the Philippines stating so.¹⁵ But they expressed no affinity to the Philippines, for they have lived in Sabah since childhood, and have never left Malaysia:

¹⁵ Some may argue that they have valid claim to Philippine citizenship, but many are deterred from exercising it due to reasons such as the lack of access to consular services, high costs, and lack of documentary proof.

Di Filipin tidak ada apa-apa sudah (...) Kehidupan sudah di sini, sudah orang sini.

Translation: *There is nothing left in the Philippines (...) Our life is here, we are like the locals.*

Saya rasa sedih sebab bila anak-anak sudah besar nanti, kalau ada operasi, dorang mungkin kena tangkap. Saya pun mau balik kampung, tapi susah sebab sudah lama tidak balik, saya pun nda berapa kenal sana lagi. Semua anak saya pun cakap Melayu saja.

Translation: *I feel sad because when the children grow up, if there's a raid, they might get caught. I also want to go back to my hometown, but it's difficult since I don't know the place well anymore. All my children only speak Malay.*

One participant noted that while wives who arrived in Sabah at an older age may feel some connection to the Philippines, their children, born and raised in Sabah, regard it as their home—the only place they know and are familiar with—despite their lack of citizenship recognition.

In one particular case, a participant migrated to Malaysia to escape restrictive social norms and conservative practices in her home country. Malaysia's reputation as a progressive Muslim-majority country may offer a sense of freedom that may not be accessible in "more conservative" Muslim-majority States. Jameela, from a country in North Africa, mentioned that she specifically travelled to Malaysia as a tourist to escape the conservative culture of her home country, and then fell in love with the place. She visited a mosque in Kuala Lumpur to pray and engaged in a conversation with the *imam*, expressing her amazement at how Islam is practised in Malaysia. In that conversation she also shared that she was considering moving to Malaysia permanently, and did not want to stay here "only as a tourist". Upon hearing this, the *imam*, a Malaysian man, proposed marriage to her:

I came to Malaysia in 2010, jalan-jalan [travelling around] as a tourist. So I went to a masjid for prayer and went to the imam to chat with him. When I went inside the office, I was asked for [in] marriage, because my [now] husband said he knows who I am [and what I need]. We met on the first day, after three days, we were already married. Only three days. No more time for [getting to know] each other and thinking further about whether we want to have children or not. (...) I was made his second wife.

This swift transition from tourist to second wife reveals a sense of security and religious connection that can lead to situations where women feel pressured or rushed into life-altering decisions such as marriage. When cultural and religious norms intersect with personal vulnerability, they can create conditions for potential exploitation, particularly through the misuse of shared religious identity and trust.

2. The Legal Landscape

This section explores the various documentation statuses available to non-citizens married to Malaysian citizens who choose to reside in Malaysia long-term. The information compiled in this report was retrieved from sources such as the Malaysian Immigration website and documentation of the procedures experienced by non-citizen spouses. Cognisant that these policies are subject to frequent changes, we endeavoured to ensure that the information current at the time of the research.¹⁶ Some of the challenges in ascertaining procedures in documentation include lack of up-to-date information on online government portals, and varying requirements and paperwork, as these processes are not streamlined across the country and can vary from state to state. This is elaborated further in the section on barriers (p. 40). These documents, along with their specific eligibility criteria, can shed light on how the legal status of these spouses shape the already complex dynamics of their lives in Malaysia, and offer insight into how the State perceives and categorises non-citizen spouses.

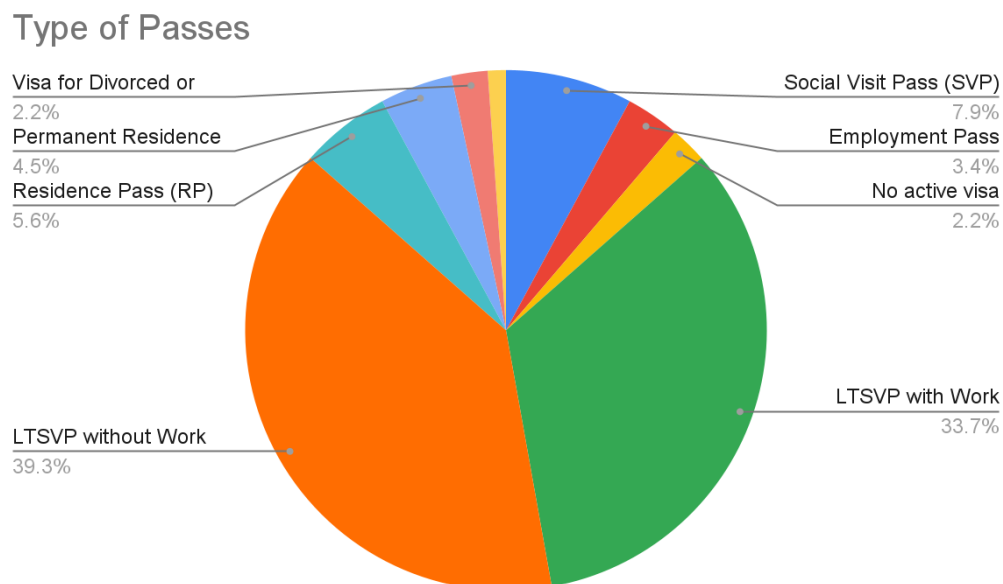


Figure 8: Types of Passes held by Non-Citizen Wives

A. Long Term Social Visit Pass

The Long-Term Social Visit Pass (LTSVP), commonly known as the "spouse visa", is the main pass issued to non-citizen spouses and can also be granted to other categories, such as non-citizen children of Malaysians. This pass allows foreign visitors to stay temporarily in Malaysia for a period of not less than six months. Non-citizen spouses are not automatically allowed to engage in paid employment while holding a LTSVP, but can apply for a "work endorsement" (see section H below) without needing to convert to an Employment Pass.

¹⁶ This section is for informational purposes only and should not be considered legal advice. Policy changes may occur without notice, and individuals are encouraged to consult official sources for the latest updates.

The LTSVP is typically used by non-citizen spouses of Malaysian citizens due to its availability as the only longer term option. The visa can vary in duration, commonly starting with six months and extending to longer periods over time, especially for couples with children. However, the duration often depends on the discretion of the immigration officer and the branch handling the case.

Non-citizen husbands must undergo a six-month cooling-off period before applying, whereas non-citizen wives can apply immediately after marriage registration. The typical processing time for an LTSVP is two to three months, but it can be longer. During the processing period, applicants can apply for a special pass to stay legally in Malaysia. However, approval is not guaranteed, and some may need to leave the country for a visa run.

Malaysian spouses **must be present** during both the application and renewal processes. A Malaysian sponsor with a minimum monthly salary of RM 2,000 is also required. In most cases, the Malaysian spouse will act as the sponsor. If the Malaysian spouse does not meet the salary threshold, the applicant will need to find another family member or relative to act as their sponsor. A security bond must be paid during the application process, which is typically RM1,500 for most countries. An Affidavit of Oath, including a photograph and stamped by the Commissioner of Oaths, is also required, along with other documents such as photos, marriage registration, relevant forms, and any other necessary paperwork. LTSVP is renewable three months before it expires. Extensions can be done via the ePLSI portal online, but all original documents need to be brought along for verification.

The LTSVP includes a prohibition on employment, stating, "Any form of employment is strictly prohibited". Spouses who overstay or violate visa conditions may be blacklisted, potentially barring reentry for a certain period. The duration before they can re-enter depends on the severity of the violation and the discretion of immigration authorities.

B. Entry Permit or Permanent Residence (PR)

As stated in the immigration portal, the Permit Masuk (or Permanent Residence) is the "highest form of recognition" granted by the Government of Malaysia to foreign nationals. This permit allows non-citizens to stay in the country indefinitely, provided that the individual adheres to the laws and regulations set forth by the government. The Permit Masuk can be revoked if the holder violates any of the conditions, such as:

- (1) Maintaining good conduct and compliance with the country's laws at all times.*
- (2) Not being involved in any political organisations or activities.*
- (3) Not participating in or supporting any groups that criticise or attempt to overthrow the government through violence.*
- (4) Not engaging in activities that negatively impact national security, public order, public health, or morality.*

Non-citizen spouses who have been married and registered their marriage in Malaysia, and who hold a Social Visit Pass (LTSVP), may apply for this permit after residing in the country for six years. The application process requires sponsorship by the Malaysian spouse and must be submitted at the nearest Immigration Office or branch to the applicant or sponsor's residence.

The Permit Masuk offers several benefits to its holders. It allows them to reside in Malaysia indefinitely, provided their passport remains valid. Additionally, they are permitted to work, study, and engage in business activities without the need to switch to other types of visas. However, they are not eligible to vote in elections. After meeting certain conditions, they may apply for Malaysian citizenship (see section D).

For applicants from Peninsular Malaysia, the Permit Masuk is issued at the Immigration Headquarters in Putrajaya, whereas for Sabah and Sarawak, it is issued at the relevant state Immigration Offices. Both the applicant and their sponsor must be present at the Immigration counter when submitting the documents for the Permit Masuk. The processing fee for the Permit Masuk is RM120.00. The approval or rejection of an application is at the discretion of the Director-General of Immigration, in accordance with the relevant laws and regulations. If the application is rejected, the applicant may appeal to the Minister of Home Affairs through the Secretary-General at the designated address.

A prior survey conducted by Family Frontiers on PR applications by non-citizen spouses¹⁷ revealed significant delays; most applicants (69%) have been in the PR process for over four years, with some waiting between six to eight years (20%) or over ten years (8%). However, only 8% of applications have been approved, with a high rejection rate (34%). Many rejections occur even after applicants have waited several years, suggesting that extended waiting periods do not necessarily increase the chances of approval. The majority of applications in that survey (58%) are still "In Process", with many exceeding two years of waiting time.

C. Residence Pass (RP)

The Residence Pass (RP) is another type of pass that may be issued with a validity ranging from 3 to 10 years, subject to the discretion of the immigration officer. Holders of the RP are eligible to work, study, and run a business without the need for a separate work permit, unlike the Long-Term Social Visit Pass (LTSVP). However, RP renewal is not guaranteed; non-citizen spouses who are unable to renew their Residence Pass (RP) are required to reapply for the LTSVP.

Furthermore, there is no clear pathway for foreign spouses to apply for PR after holding an RP, which leaves them in a state of uncertainty regarding their long-term legal status in Malaysia. Despite the advantages of the RP, it still requires a sponsor, which continues to limit the autonomy of non-citizen spouses, particularly women, even after they have lived in Malaysia for many years. The processing fee for a five-year RP is RM500.00, but the renewal process remains unclear and is subject to the discretion of the authorities.

¹⁷ See Annex G.

D. Citizenship for non-citizen wives under Article 15(1)

Non-citizen wives of Malaysian men are entitled to citizenship by registration via Article 15(1) of the Federal Constitution.

(1) Subject to Article 18, any married woman whose husband is a citizen is entitled, upon making application to the Federal Government, to be registered as a citizen if the marriage was subsisting and the husband a citizen at the beginning of October 1962, or if she satisfies the Federal Government-

*(a) that she has resided in the Federation throughout the **two years** preceding the date of the application and intends to do so **permanently**; and*

(b) that she is of good character. (my emphasis)

In calculating any residence in the Federation for the purposes of Part III of the Second Schedule, Section 20(2c) states that “(c) a period during which a person is allowed to remain temporarily in the Federation under the authority of any pass issued or exemption order made under the provisions of any written law of the Federation relating to immigration, shall not, except in the case of any period referred to in paragraph (c), with the consent of the Minister, be treated as residence in the Federation.” In her analysis, Nah (2011) notes that the Long Term Social Visit Pass issued to non-citizen spouses (as well as other types of passes, including the Student Pass, Dependent Pass, etc.) only allows entry and temporary residence, as outlined in Immigration Regulations 1963. Consequently, time spent on these passes does not count toward the residency requirement for citizenship.¹⁸

However, in reality, obtaining Permanent Residence is highly elusive.¹⁹ Consequently, although Article 15(1) provides a pathway to citizenship, many still do not qualify. To paint a picture—as of 2023, there are 131,735 non-citizen women on the LTSVP, but there are only 5,212 applications under Article 15(1) currently in process from 2018 to 31 January 2023 (Parliament Written Answer, 13 February to 4 April 2023, Question No.657). The rate of approval is also low, with long waiting times before a decision is made. The path to citizenship can take 12 to 15 years or more from the time of marriage.²⁰ As of 17 October 2024, the Parliament lower house passed a bill which contains an amendment to Article 15(1), which inserts a language proficiency requirement and possible revocation of citizenship if the marriage is dissolved within two years of receiving Malaysian citizenship.²¹

There is no provision for citizenship by registration for non-citizen husbands of Malaysian women—the only path available is citizenship by naturalisation under Article 19, which requires the applicant to have resided in the federation “periods which amount in the aggregate to not less than ten years in the twelve years immediately preceding the date of

¹⁸ In this dissertation, Nah references a 2009 newspaper article from The Star in which former Home Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein states that foreign female spouses must hold Permanent Resident status for two years to qualify for citizenship.

¹⁹ See Annex G and I.

²⁰ A timeline depicting the journey of a non-citizen wife towards citizenship is in Annex I.

²¹ A situation that can render the wife stateless as Malaysia prohibits dual citizenship as she would have had to renounce her previous nationality.

the application for the certificate, and which include the twelve months immediately preceding that date” (Article 9(3)).

E. Employment Pass

To circumvent the difficulties and short periods of validity of the LTSVP, some spouses may opt to remain in the country with an Employment Pass (EP), which is also known as the “expatriate pass”. The EP can only be applied for by the company hiring the expatriate, and consists of several categories, based on salary ranges:

Employment Pass Type	Salary		Contract		Dependents	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Category I Expatriate	RM5,000	RM10,000	min 2 years	Up to 5 years	Allowed	Allowed
Category II Expatriate	RM5,000	RM 5,000 to RM 9,999	Less than 2 years	Up to 2 years	Allowed	Allowed
Category III *Knowledge/skilled	RM2,500 to RM4,999	RM 3,000 to RM 4,999	<=12 months (maximum 2x renewal)	<=12 months (maximum 2x renewal)	Not Allowed	Not Allowed

* Please note that final decisions on approval for all Employment Pass applications Category I, II and III will continue to be at the discretion of the Immigration Department of Malaysia.

Figure 9: Malaysian Employment Pass Classification Source: Malaysian Immigration Department. (2017). Announcement: EP Category Reclassification.

At a glance, the EP for Categories I and II can offer more freedom and flexibility. If the non-citizen spouse on an EP Category I or II has a non-Malaysian child, the child may remain in the country under a Dependent Pass, which also permits them to attend school without the hassle of obtaining a yearly Student Pass. Part-time study is also permitted with an EP—something which is not possible on a LTSVP.

The downsides to relying on an EP for legal status is, 1) an EP is tied to a specific employer and once you are no longer in their employment the EP is withdrawn, and 2) time spent on an EP does not count toward eligibility for Permanent Residence.

F. Student Pass

Several respondents initially came to Malaysia to pursue higher education and subsequently met and decided to marry Malaysian citizens. Foreign nationals studying at higher education institutions in Malaysia are required to hold a Student Pass for the duration of their studies. The Student Pass application must be submitted by the respective higher education institution (IPT/IPTS/IPS).

It is important to note that Student Pass holders are prohibited from marrying during the validity of their pass. If they intend to marry a Malaysian citizen, they must return to their

home country to complete a mandatory cooling period before re-entering Malaysia to proceed with the marriage.

Non-citizen spouses holding a Long-Term Social Visit Pass (LTSVP) are not permitted to pursue higher education without obtaining a Student Pass. This requirement poses challenges, as LTSVP holders wishing to study must cancel their LTSVP and apply for a Student Pass, resulting in the loss of accumulated years that could contribute to their eligibility for PR in the future.

Additionally, some divorced, separated, or widowed non-citizen spouses have considered or used a Student Pass to remain in the country after their LTSVP expires. These individuals, particularly those without children, face difficulties as they cannot opt for a widow or divorcee visa, which is only available to those with children. Pursuing higher education and obtaining a Student Pass becomes a last resort for these non-citizen spouses to continue residing in Malaysia.

G. Other types of Long Term Social Visit Passes

The LTSVP can also be applied by non-citizens in other categories. Among the LTSVPs relevant to non-citizen wives are those issued to foreign women who are victims of abuse, widows of deceased Malaysian husbands, and divorcees.

i. Widow of a citizen (*Balu kepada warganegara*)

To apply for an LTSVP as a widow, the applicant must submit the spouse's death certificate along with other relevant documents. This visa is typically only available if the widow has a child. Despite the passing of their Malaysian spouse, the widow is still required to have a Malaysian sponsor with a minimum income of RM2,000 per month. A security bond payment is also mandatory. It is important to note that the widow's visa does not grant the right to work. As a result, many non-citizen widows of Malaysian husbands face significant challenges in finding employment and continuing to reside in Malaysia to support their Malaysian children.

ii. Abused wife of a citizen (*Isteri 'teraniaya' kepada warganegara*)

Non-citizen wives of Malaysians who find themselves in abusive situations are eligible to apply for the LTSVP. Applicants must submit police reports and medical records to provide evidence of the abuse. Similar to the widow's visa, this type of visa requires a Malaysian sponsor with a minimum income of RM2,000 per month and does not grant permission to work. Abused non-citizen wives who have escaped their relationships face additional challenges, including the inability to work and support themselves, especially when they have children to care for.

iii. Divorced wife of a citizen (*Janda kepada warganegara*)

Non-citizen spouses of Malaysians who are divorced can apply for an LTSVP. The applicant must have children and possess joint or full custody of the children. This visa does not grant the right to work, which creates a significant challenge for divorced non-citizen wives who are granted custody. The inability to work to support their children often forces many divorced wives to leave Malaysia, resulting in them being separated from their Malaysian

children and unable to co-parent. This situation is compounded by the tendency of courts to grant custody to the Malaysian parent.

H. Work Endorsement or Permission to Work on the LTSVP

Once granted an LTSVP, non-citizen spouses may apply for a “work endorsement” after six months. During the first six months, it is common for the non-citizen spouse to be unemployed, relying solely on the Malaysian spouse’s income. This situation is further complicated by the statement of prohibition in the spouse visa, which states that “any form of employment is strictly prohibited”. This causes confusion among employers, as non-citizen spouses are, in fact, eligible to work. Unlike migrant workers, non-citizen spouses can manage their own application for a work endorsement. Unfortunately, the prohibition statement often leads to the exclusion of non-citizen spouses, despite their eligibility. The impacts are further explored in “Restricted Rights to Employment”, p. 44.

I. Undocumented or stateless

Non-citizens must possess the required valid documents and legal status in Malaysia to marry Malaysians. For unions between nationals and the undocumented or stateless, these marriages are not legally recognised. Many of these unions occur in border regions where irregular migration is common, especially in the states of Sabah and Sarawak. In many of these areas, communities have existed long before national borders were established. In Sabah, there are generations of undocumented and stateless “refugees”²² from the Philippines and many have married local Sabahans. Unions between Malaysians and refugees are also not recognised; Malaysia does not have a formal framework for refugees²³, and the Immigration Act 1959/63 regards refugees as illegal or undocumented migrants.

However, such relationships do form, and in many instances, these unions have undergone religious or customary rites. Although they lack an official marriage certificate or *sijil nikah*, the women we encountered during this research consider themselves married and live together as such. The tragic consequence of this is that if the non-citizen wife is undocumented or stateless, the children will be rendered stateless, or at high risk of statelessness. Malaysia’s citizenship laws base eligibility of receiving Malaysian citizenship based on the legal marital status of the parents—if the parents are unmarried, the citizenship of the child follows the mother. Malaysian men cannot confer citizenship on their children born outside a legal marriage, even if they acknowledge them.

The undocumented non-citizen wives we met in Sabah shared about the challenges they faced with healthcare and maternal care. Public hospitals charge higher rates for foreigners, which are exorbitant, and many of the women were unable to settle the bills. Some of them also reported mistreatment by hospital staff due to their undocumented status. As a result, they avoided hospitals for childbirth and chose home births instead; however, this route makes obtaining a birth certificate very difficult. Soraya, who was born in Sabah to undocumented Filipino parents, shared:

²² Their “refugee” status, as determined by the IMM13 document, has been contested and conflated with the ensuing rapid influx of economic migrants (Azizah Kassim, 2009).

²³ Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Yang kedua itu pun sama juga lah, RM1000 lebih (...) Masa itu murah lagi kan? Ya. 2012 kan. Tapi sekarang kan, mahal sudah. Lepas itu, anak ketiga pula, melahirkan di rumah lah. Sebab takut. Sebab ada orang cakap, bayaran di hospital mahal. Jadi saya cuba beranikan diri lah. Bersalin di rumah.

Translation: The second (child) was also the same, around RM1000 (...) That time it was still cheaper? Yes. It was 2012. But now, it is more costly. After that, my third child, I gave birth at home. Because I was scared. People were saying that the hospital fees will be expensive. So I tried to be brave. Give birth at home.

Women who gave birth in hospitals, or had the umbilical cord cut at government or private clinics after home births, were able to obtain birth certificates issued for non-citizens. However, those who delivered solely at home faced significant challenges in obtaining a birth certificate. Consequently, their children are unable to enrol into public schools due to documentation issues and have to rely on alternative schools for education. These children are also unable to access affordable public healthcare.

3. Barriers and Issues as Seen in Lived Experiences

This section explores the lived experiences and challenges faced by non-citizen wives as they navigate their lives in Malaysia. The issues they encountered highlight their vulnerability and the systemic discrimination they have faced in areas such as legal status, access to employment, and social integration. Often, these women face structural barriers that exacerbate their marginalisation, such as the bureaucratic complexities of visa applications, limited work opportunities due to visa restrictions, and the stereotyping endured in administrative and social spaces.

A. Challenges in Navigating Immigration Processes

The online survey revealed that 77 respondents—an overwhelming 87%—identified visa and immigration issues as a key challenge faced upon relocation. This overwhelming consensus highlights the systemic barriers and complexities surrounding Malaysia's immigration processes. Through further analysis of both quantitative and qualitative responses, several critical issues emerged;

Discrepancy in information: One recurring issue among the respondents was the discrepancy in information provided by immigration officers, leading to significant difficulties in navigating immigration processes. This challenge is particularly evident in the application process for Permanent Residence (PR), a critical avenue for non-citizen spouses seeking stability, autonomy, and better employment prospects. The PR application process lacks clarity and adequacy across different documentation types, regardless of the number of years these women have lived in Malaysia. Emma, who is from the United Kingdom, has been unable to apply for PR despite being married for 11 years:

As it is, I can only get one year LTSVP at a time and it just feels impossible with the requirements. It keeps changing and not [sic] clear on the process including whether

cases are ongoing, abandoned or expired. So many stories of people waiting 20 years with no updates.

Immigration offices, particularly those outside of the Klang Valley, often fail to provide clear information regarding the application and renewal processes. As a result, many applicants are left in limbo, uncertain about the status of their applications. Only those with the necessary resources can afford to travel to the main headquarters in Putrajaya to follow up on their application status, leaving those with limited means at a disadvantage. Some non-citizen wives shared that they have been turned away at the counter, or given inaccurate information:

Lisa, from the Republic of Korea:

I wanted to get the forms to apply for PR but immigration officer was not willing to give me the checklist to apply for PR (...) The immigration officer was not willing to help at all, not willing to give out some tips, basically I got shooed away (...).

Anggun, from Indonesia:

I inquired two times during my renewal for my long term spouse visa but I was told to get a working permit before I can apply for PR.

Some respondents reported being told by immigration officers that their files or applications had either expired or were lost in the system, forcing them to restart the entire application process. This added further frustration and uncertainty to an already complex and stressful situation. Vera, from Uzbekistan, who has lived in Malaysia for just over 10 years recounts her experience:

I applied for PR about two years ago. I had my interview at the immigration office and at the police station. I was told that everything was in order, but recently we discovered that my case had somehow been archived, and they lost my police report. We were quite surprised. Now immigration has sent an inquiry to follow up on my case, but we're not sure where it will go either Putrajaya or another higher authority.

We've also checked with the local police station, and they said they've done their part, so it's out of their hands.

The quantitative findings show that 31% of respondents (28 out of 89) had applied for PR, while the majority (69%) had not. Among those who did not apply, reasons included uncertainty about eligibility, negative experiences with the immigration, confusion over the process, and fear of rejection. For the 28 respondents who applied for Permanent Residence (PR), Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of their application outcomes and waiting times.

Waiting Time	Approved	Rejected	In Process	Total	%
Less than 2 years	0	0	3	3	11
2-4 years	0	1	2	3	11
4-6 years	0	1	4	5	18
6-8 years	0	1	4	5	18
8-10 years	3	1 ²⁴	1	5	18
More than 10 years	1	0	0	1	4
No response	0	2	4	6	21
Total	4	6	18	28	100

Table 1: Breakdown of Waiting Times and Application Status for Respondents Who Applied for Permanent Residence (PR)

The table illustrates the outcomes and waiting times for the 28 respondents who had applied for Permanent Residence (PR). Notably, only 14% of these applications (4 out of 28) were approved, while 21% (6 out of 28) were rejected. A significant majority—64% (18 out of 28)—were still “in process”.

The waiting time before receiving a decision is significantly protracted—11% of applicants (3 out of 28) have been waiting for less than two years, whereas an equal proportion have waited for over 10 years, with their applications still unresolved. Additionally, 54% (15 out of 28) of the applications have been in process for four to 10 years. The absence of clear timelines or consistent outcomes is further evident from the range of responses. For instance, even after extensive waiting periods, the likelihood of rejection remains, as seen in the cases of applicants waiting up to four to 10 years.

In addition, **87% of respondents believed PR would improve their employment opportunities, and 92% stated that it would enhance their family’s stability and well-being.**

Dependency on the Malaysian spouse: The legal status of a non-citizen wife remains subject to their Malaysian husbands. The presence of the spouse is mandatory for the renewal of the LTSVP. As revealed in the survey, 88 out of 89 respondents (99%) indicated that their dependency on their Malaysian spouse was tied to the sponsorship and renewal of their pass, highlighting the critical role of the husband in maintaining legal status.

This dependency limits her autonomy and creates or perpetuates vulnerability, especially in cases of marital conflict, separation, or abuse. Non-citizen wives may be forced to remain in abusive marriages for fear of being sent out of the country, or separation from their Malaysian children. One FGD participant’s husband refused to renew her LTSVP causing her to overstay, and threatened her with divorce and separation from their children:

²⁴ This respondent was offered Residence Pass (RP)

He didn't want to do my visa (...) that's my problem now (...) so if you [the husband] don't want to do my visa, then how? I had already overstayed that time.

She subsequently managed to secure a 3-year pass under the category of “abused wife of a citizen” with the help of a local NGO:

These three years, the immigration said, it's for you to think whether you want to divorce your husband or go back to your country (...) I got two kids, [they were] still small at the time (...) I cannot leave my children and go back, how can [sic]? At that time my husband said, you go back to your country (...) [because of this] I was really sick, like I [was] going to become crazy.

For non-citizen wives with a pending PR application, it will be withdrawn upon the dissolution of the marriage or death of a spouse. Rebekah, whose husband passed away recently and unexpectedly, shared:

I've been told because it's connected to my long-term social pass, now that my husband's not around, they're going to cancel my PR application as well. So yeah, I think those are some of the frustrations.

So I've been in Malaysia 17 years. We don't have kids, so that's another thing with immigration (...) pretty much earlier this month, they were like, no, you will not get the widow visa because you don't have kids.

This can potentially push non-citizen wives, already in vulnerable situations following the passing of their spouse, into even greater precarity. Many of them have lived and made Malaysia their home for decades. At the FGD, Rebekah said that she had been in Malaysia for so long that she no longer had anything to return to in her home country.

In the online survey, 52 respondents (59%) reported receiving significant support from their Malaysian spouse or family in navigating their challenges, the remainder of the respondents experienced varying levels of support, with 22% (20 respondents) reporting only partial support, and 19% (17 respondents) indicating that they received little to no support. A significant portion either lack consistent help or are navigating their challenges alone.

Arrest and detention: Two respondents shared their experiences in immigration detention. One respondent was detained in the immigration lock-up without proper warning during the processing of her pass. She had been on another pass, and was in the process of transitioning to a LTSVP. Anxious about the looming expiration of the current pass, and concerned that her LTSVP had not yet been processed, she visited the immigration office. There, she was directed to a room, where she assumed it was for a “further interview”. However, without any prior explanation of her rights or any clear communication, she was unexpectedly detained in an immigration lock-up. Her Malaysian husband, alarmed by her sudden disappearance, began making frantic phone calls to multiple authorities. She was eventually released the following day, without any apology or explanation from the authorities. She recounted her experience with difficulty, as the trauma still deeply affects her.

We tried our best to register and update on time. But by that time, my visa had almost ended already. So we tried to go back and forth a few times until it's the due date, like, oh my God, your visa is expired. But the thing is, we've been there [at the Immigration Office] many times trying to renew my visa and change it [from student pass to spouse visa]. But the thing is, they [the Immigration] did not accept [process and provide information] about the application at all.

I even had to stay in prison for one night. That was my scariest moment. (...) the guy behind the counter (...) He just said, you have to follow me first, just for a moment. (...) I'm so scared to go to the Immigration Office (...) until today. They just detained me with some of the other immigrant prisoners. Just like that. The way Immigration treated me, like a prisoner [with no rights].

Another respondent, who had endured abuse from her Malaysian husband, was granted a pass for “abused wife of a citizen”. However, the details of her pass was not explained to her by the immigration officers, so she was unaware that she needed to renew it, resulting in her overstaying. Her then-husband reported her to the authorities, and she was arrested and detained in the lock-up for two weeks.

Lack of access to immigration and consular services: This issue was particularly stark in Sabah and Sarawak, where one would have to travel long distances to get to an immigration office. The land area is vast and largely underdeveloped, making travel arduous and expensive. Not all immigration offices have a Visa, Pass and Permit Department—offices with this service are usually in the major towns and cities. Non-citizen spouses who live in rural or interior areas will have to undertake a potentially long and costly trip to renew their passes. Many may not be able to afford it, and as a result, many allow their passes to lapse. In our interview with a Sarawakian activist, they shared the obstacles of renewing the LTSVP for a non-citizen residing in Lawas, Sarawak, which requires a 3.5-hour drive to Miri. This journey involves crossing through the country of Brunei, so if the pass or passport has expired, this route is no longer feasible. Instead, they would have to attempt a trip to Kota Kinabalu in the neighbouring state of Sabah, which can take up to 4.5 hours by road. Non-citizen spouses in Sabah and Sarawak have also reported difficulties in accessing essential consular services, such as passport renewals, adding yet another layer of barriers they must navigate.

B. Restricted Rights to Employment

One of the most significant challenges faced by non-citizen spouses in Malaysia is securing employment. After visa and immigration issues, which were identified by 77 respondents in the survey as the primary challenge, employment emerged as the second biggest challenge faced by non-citizen spouses upon relocating to Malaysia, as cited by 44 respondents. To be eligible to work, they must hold a LTSVP and apply for a “work endorsement”, or special permission to work from the Malaysian Immigration. To apply for this “work endorsement”, the applicant must first secure a job offer letter from the prospective employer.

However, here lies a chicken or the egg dilemma. The LTSVP contains a statement of prohibition printed on it—“Any form of employment is strictly prohibited”. Employers are

largely reluctant to offer jobs to non-citizens because their LTSVP explicitly states they are not allowed to work. This restriction can only be lifted once a "work endorsement" is issued. Many employers, typically those that are not multinational corporations, are also unaware what a "work endorsement" is and what the process entails.

The impact of this prohibition is evident in the quantitative data, as 63% of respondents (56 out of 89) reported that the statement on their LTSVP significantly affects their ability to secure employment. Even among those who did not report a severe impact, 24% (21 respondents) expressed feeling somewhat affected, revealing that the LTSVP's messaging perpetuates uncertainty and discourages active job-seeking.

When asked if they find it difficult to secure a job in Malaysia in general, the majority of respondents (52%) explicitly confirmed difficulty in securing employment in Malaysia, while a minority (16%) did not face such challenges. Although 42% either did not provide a direct response or were unsure, their detailed explanations reveal systemic obstacles preventing non-citizen spouses from entering the workforce. Key issues include restrictive visa and work endorsement policies, employer preference for local candidates, bureaucratic inefficiencies, language barriers, limited job opportunities, and disparities in workplace conditions and salaries. The lack of clarity and information on the "work endorsement" on the part of the employer further adds to their hesitation of hiring non-citizen spouses.

The survey data is shown in Figure 10. Of the 89 respondents, only 32% are employed full-time, while 30% are unemployed and actively seeking work. Meanwhile, 21% are not employed and not looking for work, and 11% are self-employed or freelancing.

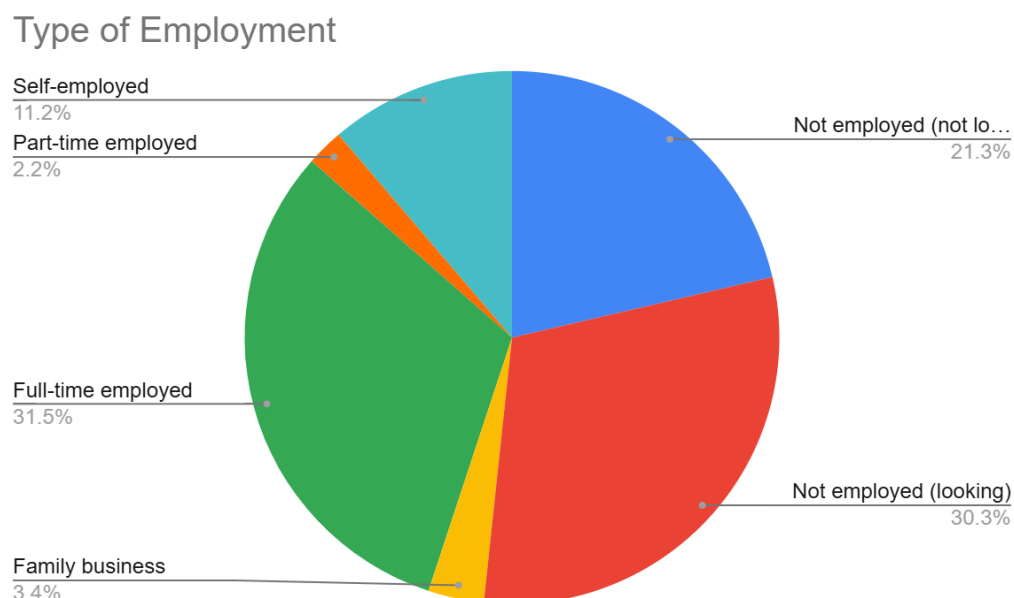


Figure 10: Type of Employment of Respondents

Around 3% of respondents are employed within their spouse's or family business—a common workaround—where in many cases, Malaysian spouses establish small businesses and hire their non-citizen spouses. Similarly, 2% of respondents are employed part-time, as this is easier to access than full-time work. While these approaches offer temporary relief, they are far from sustainable solutions.

It is also important to highlight that among the 48% (43 out of 89) of respondents currently employed, 30% (13 individuals) earn RM2,500 or below.²⁵ At the same time, a smaller proportion—12% (five individuals)—reported earning salaries exceeding RM10,000, likely reflecting specialised skills or high-demand professional expertise that could help address Malaysia's brain drain. Moreover, the diversity of roles reported by respondents suggests that many non-citizen spouses take up jobs based on availability rather than suitability or opportunities for career advancement. This employment pattern demonstrates that, while some manage to navigate the restrictions, they often face compromises in terms of job type, income, and alignment with their qualifications.

Non-citizen spouses are required to secure a letter of consent from their Malaysian spouse in order to work. This dynamic creates a power imbalance, which may reinforce dependency and grant the Malaysian spouse undue control over their partner's ability to earn a livelihood. In situations of marital discord or abuse, such restrictions can heighten the non-citizen spouse's vulnerability to coercion, manipulation, and economic hardship.

Non-citizens are also prohibited from working in certain sectors, such as banking and e-hailing, until PR is secured. This additional restriction further limits non-citizen spouses—especially women—in their ability to integrate socially and attain economic independence, adding to the difficulties they already face and further deepening their dependency on their Malaysian spouses. From the qualitative data, financial dependency on their Malaysian husbands was identified as the second most common form of reliance, with 49 respondents (55%) citing it, following sponsorship and visa renewal.

One newly-married wife from the Philippines, found finding a job incredibly difficult due to her legal status:

I've been staying here for 5 months, and I've been looking for a job for 5 months, and it's really hard to get a job here, despite all the working experience that I have (...) I was never called for an interview, because when they see my resume, and see that I am holding a spouse visa, they don't want to accept any spouse visa holders. They prefer to process a working visa. I was actually expecting that it would be easy to find a job here because I already have all the working experience. But it's not. It's so hard.

The restrictions did not exempt highly-qualified and professional geologist Hanna, who had years of work experience in a multinational oil and gas company. She shared her frustration about the limits of working under the LTSVP:

²⁵ In October 2024, it was announced that the minimum monthly wage in Malaysia will be set at RM1,700 on 1 February 2025 (Jun, 2024)

From 2008, I worked as a direct hire, but then I met my husband in 2014, and we got married. At the time, I was still on a work visa for one year, but then my contract ended, and I started the process for a spouse visa. I applied for the spouse visa, and it has been very tough for me to get a job because oil and gas companies always check my visa, and it clearly states that I cannot work. For about two to three years, I was unemployed. I couldn't work formally because no company would hire me while I was on a spouse visa. Even though I have a Master's degree and over 15 years of experience in the oil and gas industry, I couldn't contribute financially to support my husband.

One non-citizen wife from the Philippines found herself given incorrect information by immigration officers when she inquired about applying for the “work endorsement”. They told her to give up the LTSVP and apply for a “work visa”, or an Employment Pass, which is an entirely different visa:

I even asked Immigration that [about work endorsement] when I got my spouse visa. I asked them about if I wanted to work, and how the application process. And then the immigration officer said to me: You can work, but you have to leave [give up] your spouse visa, and change it to work work visa.

At Malaysia's 6th CEDAW reporting cycle review in Geneva in May 2024, the government stated that **from 2020 to 2024, 15,090 non-citizen wives held “work endorsements”**. This figure indicates that **only 11.4%** are legally employed.²⁶ This low percentage is particularly concerning, underscoring how disproportionately their rights have been curtailed.

Non-citizen spouses possess valuable skills and the potential to contribute significantly to the country's economy, but this rich resource remains largely untapped due to restricted access to employment opportunities and the limitations imposed on them. Enabling their participation in the workforce could also help Malaysia address its “brain drain” problem, providing an existing talent pool from which the country can draw from (Bunyan, 2024).

Employment issues in Sarawak: The states of Sabah and Sarawak have autonomy over certain areas of administration, including immigration regulations. Their rules differ from those in Peninsular Malaysia. During the FGD in Kuching, Sarawak, the participants stated that they are not allowed to work on the LTSVP. When we looked into the matter, we identified that Sarawak immigration offers two types of passes for non-citizen spouses—the LTSVP, which does not allow any form of work, and the “Spouse Programme”, which is a special employment pass for non-citizen spouses. It is unclear if the years spent on the “Spouse Programme” count towards the eligibility for Permanent Residence. This lack of clarity may push some spouses to opt for the LTSVP and give up the ability to work altogether. As of the mid-2024, there have been reports of the state adopting the “work endorsement” format used in the Peninsular, with a possible one-year waiting period before spouses can apply for it. However, a participant reported that when inquired with the immigration about this change, she was told it was not possible.

²⁶ Percentage was derived from the total number of non-citizen wives reported at the same review (see Annex C)

C. Issues with Access to Basic Services

Access to basic public and private services is essential to living a decent life, and the results of this research showed a mixed response among the respondents of the survey.

Public Services: The survey data reveals that accessing public services such as government hospitals, public transportation, and libraries is relatively accessible for some non-citizen spouses, but there are those who face considerable difficulties. Figure 11 illustrates the distribution of responses regarding the ease of accessing public services:

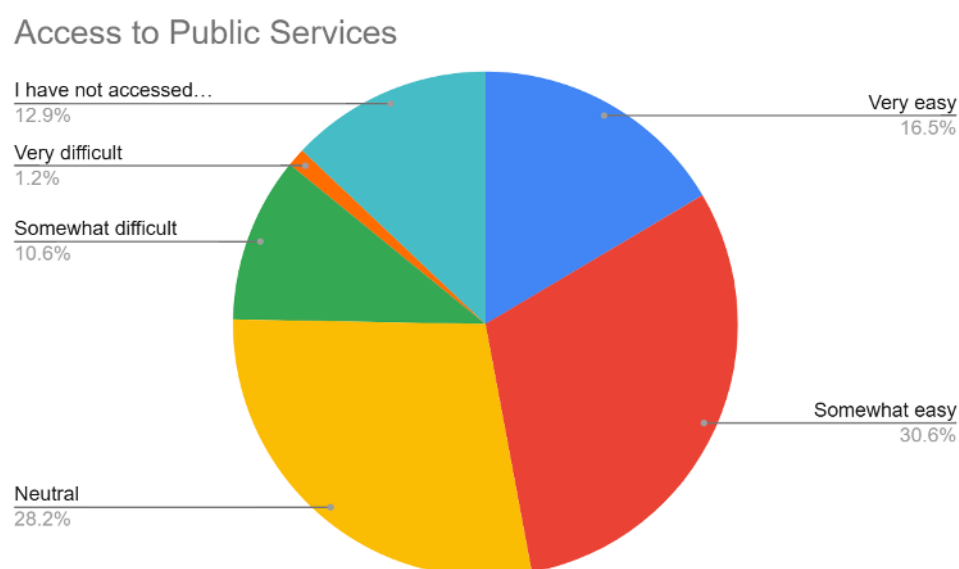


Figure 11: Access to Public Services

About 12% of respondents found it very and somewhat difficult to access public services, with 47% reporting some level of ease, and a total of 41% were either neutral or have never accessed public services. Some of the issues listed by respondents include prejudice or bias at the service counter, services requiring the presence of the Malaysian spouse, and language barriers.

Government offices often operate in Bahasa Malaysia, making it difficult for those with limited language proficiency to engage effectively.²⁷ Economic and social policies further marginalise binational families; even those classified as low-income (B40)²⁸ often face restrictions on accessing essential government aid, including education subsidies for their children. Blanket exclusions on public transportation subsidies and schemes apply to all non-citizens, including those who are spouses and children of Malaysians.

Deborah, from the Philippines:

²⁷ The topic of language is discussed further in subsection F: Social vs Political Acceptance (p. 55)

²⁸ B40, or Below 40%, is an income classification, representing the bottom 40% of income earners in the country. These are low-income households that qualify for government assistance.

Most government offices use formal Bahasa Melayu which is quite hard for a beginner to understand.

Kartini, a widow from Indonesia:

Even my family might be categorised as B40 as I'm the only breadwinner, but can't get help from the government, it affects my daughter's education as we can't get full PTPTN²⁹ amount, only get RM5,000-10,000 per year regardless of college/university/courses.

Non-citizen spouses of Malaysians are entitled to the same rates as citizens in public hospitals. However, our focus group discussions revealed gaps in awareness and implementation of this benefit. Several non-citizen spouses were unaware of their eligibility, while others faced difficulties when attempting to access services. Hospitals may ask for an original marriage certificate or other related documents, or for the presence of the Malaysian spouse. Katelin, who is from the Philippines, was unaware that non-citizen spouses are entitled to equal access to public healthcare:

When it's a public hospital they give priority to citizens, it's easy in private although it can be pricey, especially [if] they have different rates for foreigners and locals.

Mai, from Vietnam:

When I went to the public hospital for a medical examination, they always required me to present the original marriage certificate and my husband's original IC [Identity Card or Kad Pengenalan]. When I went alone, I couldn't provide my husband's original IC. Even though I explained that it wasn't feasible for me to carry my husband's original IC, the hospital still did not accept this and required it to charge me local fees; otherwise, they would apply foreigner rates. Despite presenting my marriage certificate, the hospital did not comply.

Private Services: When it comes to accessing private services such as banking, insurance, retail, and telecommunications, non-citizen spouses report varied experiences. Figure 12 illustrates the distribution of responses regarding the ease of accessing public services:

²⁹ Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional, or the National Higher Education Fund Corporation, provides study loans to Malaysian students pursuing tertiary education in Malaysia.

Access to Private Services

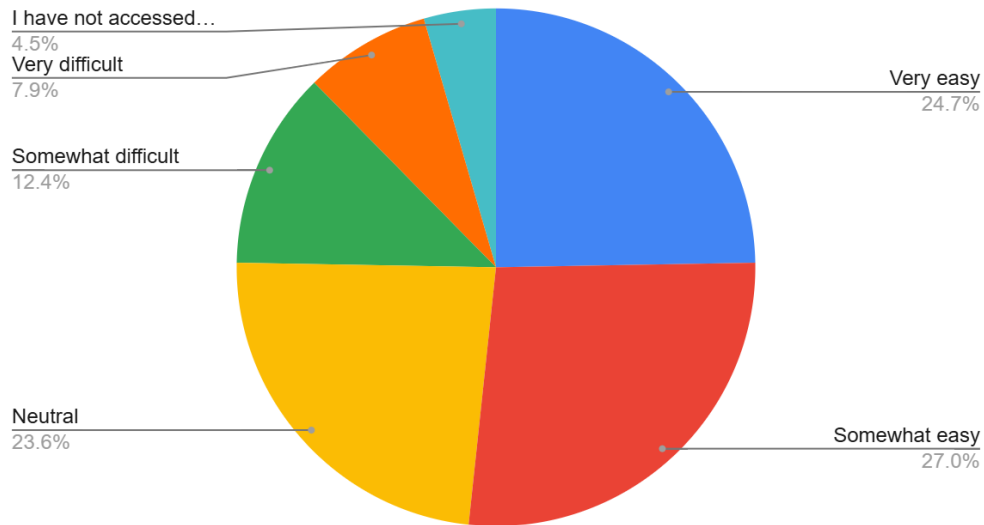


Figure 12: Access to Private Services

The majority of respondents (25%) found accessing private services very easy, with an additional 27% finding it somewhat easy. However, 12% faced some difficulty, and 8% found it very difficult to access private services. Some of the challenges faced by non-citizen spouses include inconsistent policies and additional requirements, such as higher fees or limited acceptance of visa types.

Jana, from the Czech Republic:

Health insurance was difficult, car insurance was difficult. All because not every company accepts LTSVP as a valid visa. For the same reason I still have to pay foreign prices at many places in Malaysia, including driving schools or some tourist attractions.

Lack of access to banking emerged as a significant challenge non-citizen spouses had in common. Contrary to the ease that citizens have, non-citizen spouses have to contend with approaches that vary according to each bank when handling applications from non-citizen spouses, which can often be unclear, and influenced by visa category, nationality, and employment status.

Dewi, from Indonesia:

So right now, I'm using Touch 'n Go e-wallet and also my husband's card. I'm also using a joint bank account. Before this, before Covid, I tried to open my own individual bank account. I asked at Maybank, BSN, and many more. At Maybank, they asked for my husband's payslip and then the manager even called my husband's office, but they said I couldn't open an account. Recently, last month, I went to RHB Bank in Alor Setar. Before that, I had gone to KL and asked at many

banks there as well. But RHB Bank said the same thing, that foreigners cannot open an individual bank account, especially since I'm not working here.

Judith, from the Philippines:

It's also very challenging to open a personal bank account. (...) here [in Malaysia], I found out that you need to be employed in order to open one. At that time, I really needed to open an account to settle down and fix my finances, but since I couldn't, we opened a joint account with my husband, which I'm using now (...).

The gendered impacts, as seen with the previous two issues, is also present here. The inability to open individual accounts without formal employment, and being forced into joint accounts diminish the financial independence and security of non-citizen wives, who are already made to be dependent on their husbands in other aspects of their lives. This lack of financial security keeps them in a state of uncertainty and vulnerability, trapping them in precarious situations and increasing their exposure to gender-based violence. Without banking services, non-citizen wives do not have the ability to establish or manage personal or emergency funds. Banks also require proof of formal employment or work endorsements to open bank accounts for non-citizens. This policy unfairly disadvantages individuals who are unable to secure employment (due to the hurdles elaborated in the previous section) or stay home to care for their children or family members.

Ultimately, regardless of whether the service is public or private, our findings reveal that non-citizen wives face consistent challenges that result in dependency and restricted autonomy. Across various sectors, these spouses are often required to rely on their Malaysian husbands for essential tasks, highlighting a pervasive limitation on their independence and control over their own affairs. Vera shares:

My son (then 12 years old) was involved in a car accident, and his father had to be present at the government hospital with his child's IC to sign the admission forms before the nurse could call the doctor to assess his condition. I cannot deposit money into my children's savings account or update their savings book (a joint account with their father); the father must be present with his IC. I have a joint savings account with my husband, but I am not allowed to put money into a fixed deposit through my apps. I cannot also deposit money into a fixed deposit at the bank counter unless my husband is present (...).

Social protection and other matters: Non-citizen spouses also face inadequate access to social protection and property ownership. Government schemes such as financial aid and assistance for low-income families are only given to Malaysian citizens. At the time of writing, the national pension scheme, the Employee Provident Fund (EPF), is not yet mandatory for non-citizens. There have been discussions to amend this (Choy, 2025), but the percentage of contributions by both employee and employer is to be capped at 2%. For context, Malaysian citizens contribute 11%, with employer contributions ranging from 12-13%. In 2023, the government established i-Sayang, which allows husbands to contribute a percentage of their income to their wives' EPF accounts, as a boost for homemakers and

stay-at-home mothers. Unfortunately this scheme excludes non-citizen wives, as the requirement states the recipient must be a Malaysian citizen.

Non-citizen spouses, even those who hold a PR, are subjected to foreign investment directives and limitations on residential property purchase or ownership, such as RM 1 million in most states, RM 2 million in Selangor, and RM 1.8 million in Penang (island) (PropertyGuru Editorial Team, 2020). This rule applies even when buying property jointly with their Malaysian spouses. The price bracket imposed, however, is outside the means of many. Therese, who is from Germany, shared that she and her husband financed a house equally with 50:50 contribution, but due to this law, the house does not belong to her and it is not in her name. This has a direct impact on middle or low-income Malaysian families, especially if the Malaysian spouse's income is insufficient to purchase property solely under their name. FGD participants also voiced that not having joint ownership of property with their spouses leaves them in uncertainty should anything untoward happen.

D. Abusive Relationships

This section explores the adverse impacts non-citizen wives face when the spouse is abusive and exploitative, and how the discriminatory nature of the laws and policies that govern non-citizen spouses do not only exacerbate their vulnerability, but can be weaponised against them. The immigration pass system is designed in a way that the spouses are disproportionately dependent on the Malaysian spouse. The chart below illustrates the distribution of responses regarding harm and violence experienced in their marriages to Malaysian spouses through the online survey. While the majority of respondents reported never facing harm, a significant portion detailed various forms of abuse, highlighting the challenges faced by vulnerable spouses in these relationships.

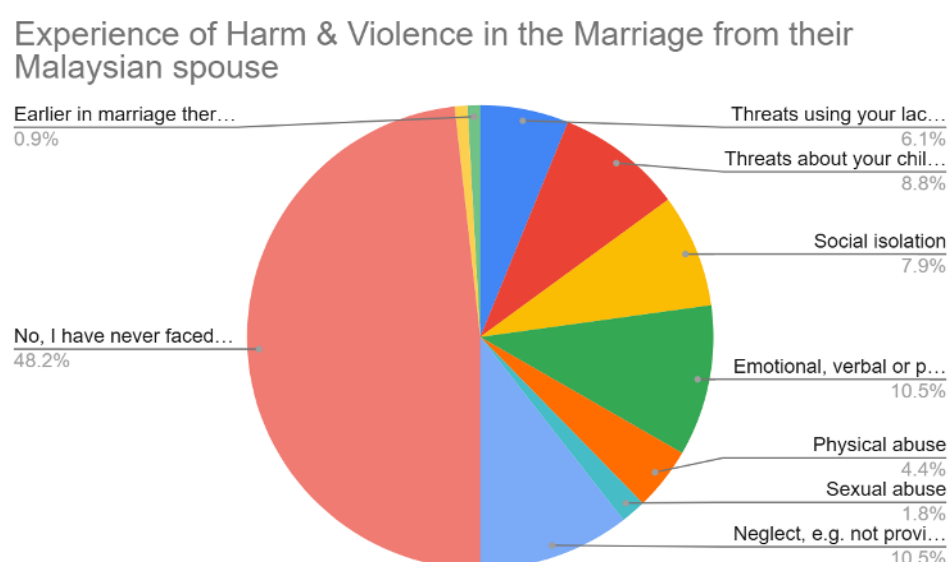


Figure 13: Experienced of harm and violence experienced by non citizen wives from their Malaysian spouse

When a Malaysian husband is abusive, his non-citizen wife may find herself trapped in a cycle she cannot break out of due to her lack of independent legal status; she may be unable to flee or seek safety. Many are also afraid to report the abuse to the authorities, fearing retaliation and the absence of adequate legal protections due to their status as foreigners. The stigma and shame surrounding their circumstances further isolate them, cutting them off from essential support systems of family, friends, and the community. As a result, women in these situations face severe strain to their mental and physical health.

Francesca, from the Philippines:

I came to Malaysia when I was 20 years old and I started to work as a factory machine operator and (...) I met my husband there in Sabah. But [I was] not happy, because he is very womaniser [sic]. The relationship as husband and wife isn't good because he only sends allowances. He's always with someone else in another country (...). Even when he stays in Malaysia, he's with another woman. (...) we loved each other, but it only worked for about a year. When I was pregnant with our first daughter, I noticed that he would often hang out with other women. It continued like this, with no change, and I couldn't do anything. I stayed because I had no family in Malaysia, and I didn't know what else to do. I also couldn't tell my family in the Philippines because I was ashamed. They respect my husband so much because, on the surface, he seems like a sweet and nice person.

Mai, from Vietnam:

When my husband physically abused me by hitting my head and face, I did not receive any help from the neighbours, even though they saw it happening but did not want to intervene. I reported the domestic abuse to the police and obtained a medical report from a doctor, but I was not adequately protected by the state authorities. Instead, when I asked the police what I should do if my husband continued to assault me, they only said, "Then you should move out and not live together."

Jameela, who is in a polygamous relationship, has to parent her child alone as her husband is absent and refuses to provide financially:

We have been married for 14 years and during Corona times, I got pregnant (...) After I had the baby, my husband got married to another woman. Before having my baby, I sold honey and herbs. But since having a baby, I have not been receiving any nafkah [financial support] from my husband and would always be left alone.

Some women have experiences where the spouse used their lack of permanent legal status against them, and threatened to deport them or separate them from their children. There are severely inadequate protections for non-citizen wives. In the case of Sarah, her husband and his family used her state of isolation from family and friends to subject her to years of abuse, exploitation, and distress:

My issue is the extreme abuse by a Malaysian family. Using me as a slave, withholding all my rights as a wife, a human being and now as a mother (...) using

me to contribute money whilst mentally and physically abusing me over nearly two decades and finally abducting [my] child (...) denying me a spouse visa so I would be forcibly separated from my child and making me homeless after the child turned three.

This law discriminates against the foreign mother if the relationship with the Malaysian dad breaks down. It's very cruel.

E. Impact of Marital Status Change on Visa Status

For non-citizen spouses in Malaysia, changes in marital status such as divorce or the death of the Malaysian spouse can have serious consequences on their visa status, often leaving them in uncertain situations with little guidance or support from immigration authorities. The requirements for the special categories of the LTSVP, such as finding a Malaysian sponsor with a specific minimum income, having joint or full custody, or having Malaysian children can be hard to fulfil. The success rate for these passes are also rather low, with many non-citizen spouses reporting much difficulty in obtaining them. The criteria for approvals are also not publicly disclosed, and are discretionary in nature. These special category passes also do not allow any form of employment, pushing them into further precarity by not being able to support themselves and their children financially.

Daria, a widow from Iran who has lived in Malaysia for 14 years:

After my husband's death, I went to immigration to inquire about my visa situation. They informed me that I could be given a one-year visa. When I mentioned that I was currently working, they advised me to ask my organisation to help convert my spouse visa to an employment visa. Upon returning to my workplace, they agreed to assist with the conversion, but the process has been delayed because my spouse visa is still valid for a couple more months.

However, regarding my PR application, I have not received any clear information. An immigration officer told me that since the application was sponsored by my husband, who has passed away, it would likely be terminated. I was not informed of this officially, I never received any emails or requests for a death certificate, leaving me uncertain about the status of my PR application.

Maria, from the Philippines:

I am widowed, with two children. I am on a widow visa and I am working silently [illegally] at a small restaurant here, but it is very frustrating (...) for widows here, the law is very unfair. Hoping for having [sic] a fair law for us, hoping that they see us as one of those contributing to this country by giving birth to Malaysians.

The discretionary approach to issuing these special categories of the LTSVP means there is no guarantee of legal status to remain in the country, potentially causing separation from their Malaysian children. The lack of a long term visa can also play into custody rights in

cases of divorce, putting non-citizen wives at the risk of a disadvantage. Major life events such as death, divorce, and separation can lead to immense strain on those affected, including the children. Having to navigate unclear waters on visas or passes on top of an already distressing situation puts non-citizen spouses under undue stress.

The data gathered from our survey reflects the challenges non-citizen spouses face when experiencing changes in marital status. Out of 89 respondents, four have been divorced and three have been widowed. Among these individuals, three have successfully secured long-term legal status to remain in Malaysia, three have not, and one is still in the process of applying. Of the three divorced or widowed respondents who were able to secure long-term legal status, it is important to note that they remain unable to work due to the restrictions of their visas.

F. Social vs Political Acceptance

Non-citizen spouses, through ties of marriage and childbearing, are a part of the Malaysian social fabric. Integration into Malaysian society and culture is expected of them, but the policies surrounding legal status, immigration, employment, and citizenship stand in opposition to these expectations.

Traits such as physical appearances and the ability to speak the local languages can assist in *social acceptance* of non-citizen wives. For example, those who have similar physical attributes such as skin colour and facial features (which can vary widely due to Malaysia's diverse society), and proficiency in languages widely used locally—such as women from the Nusantara region, East Asia, and South Asia—may be perceived as locals rather than migrants. For one Chinese-Indonesian woman, her physical appearance allowed her to be perceived as a local, and she found relative ease of social integration:

Personally [in terms of social life in Malaysia], not really any difficulty, it's just like when you need to register something (...) related to my children, everything has to wait (...) because my name cannot be put on a document. So, maybe that's the only thing. Other than that for the daily item, [I have no issue with interacting], maybe because when people look at me, they always think that I'm a local Chinese Malaysia [sic].

Fluency in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) or the English-based creole 'Manglish' allows further blending into the community; grasp of the national language is often demanded of non-citizens who want to participate in society or partake in the economy (such as migrant workers), but even nationals are not spared.³⁰ According to the Pew Research Center (Evans et al., 2023), the top three attributes that are important to "truly sharing national identity" for Malaysians are respecting the country's institutions and laws (90 percent), being polite and welcoming (88 percent), and being able to speak the national language (83 percent).

³⁰ In April 2024 an Immigration personnel in Penang refused to renew a Malaysian woman's passport because she could not speak Malay (Zulkiffli, 2024).

In Malaysia, the national language is widely regarded, upheld, and prescribed as “the great equaliser”. However, in its implementation toward this ideal, it can inadvertently exclude many. There are no programmes or language courses offered to non-citizen spouses by the government; if they want to go for lessons they will have to bear the cost, which can be high for those without means. Among the non-citizen wives surveyed, only 21% reported having advanced fluency in Bahasa Malaysia, with another 29% at an intermediate level. A larger group—42%—were at beginner or no proficiency levels, struggling with basic communication or unable to speak the language entirely. One participant recounts:

I struggle with the Malay language; despite living in Malaysia for 10 years, I haven't made any Malay friends. When I attempt to speak Malay, people often respond in English, and my mother-in-law thinks they might be intimidated by my English. (...) I'm unsure how to overcome this language barrier.

Language is also a requirement to apply for Permanent Residence, and upon gazettment of the ongoing Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2024, it will also apply to citizenship for non-citizen wives under Article 15(1) (“All you need to know”, 2024). Natasha, who is from the United Kingdom and in her 60s, shares her situation:

I handle everything because my husband doesn't like bureaucracy. I ask questions in both Malay and English, though I'm not very good with Malay. I live in (...) a tourist destination, so people often respond in English even if I speak in Bahasa. My husband is a terrible teacher, so I'm trying to learn Malay through a Zoom class, but it's not enough for me to feel confident in discussing everything in Malay, which worries me about my PR application. It's essential for me to get PR because I rely on my husband as my sponsor. If something were to happen to him, I would have no status here and would have to leave my life here, including our house and land. There's no one else who could be a sponsor for me, so I need to get PR to stay here. It's a big worry and I don't want to carry this stress around.

However, the standards of this language requirement or test have not been publicly disclosed, leaving non-citizen spouses in the dark, not knowing what to expect or how to prepare. Some participants have expressed their struggles in learning a new language; the barriers that exist in language acquisition—such as literacy levels, limited social networks, and socioeconomic factors—need to be considered and taken in account when making a decision on PR and citizenship applications. Malaysia's diverse landscape also means multiple languages are used in daily life beyond the national language, and English is widely spoken, particularly in major cities and towns, and among the younger generation (Hakim, 2023).

Social acceptance is but one facet of integration and inclusion. It is not possible to truly belong and to find one's place in society if *legal* and *political acceptance* are tightly shut doors. From a legal standpoint, non-citizen spouses are governed by immigration laws that render their status as temporary. Provisions for citizenship and pathways to Permanent Residence are exclusionary, serving more as barriers than facilitators. Without these forms of legal recognition, there can be no *political acceptance* or inclusion; even though

non-citizen spouses being an integral part of Malaysian society, and contributing significantly to the country, both in paid and unpaid labour, and raising Malaysian families. In the eyes of the State non-citizen spouses are perpetual migrants (until PR or citizenship is attained) despite having lived in Malaysia for decades and considering it their home. Many participants described a sense of belonging, but yet they cannot fully belong. Rebekah, who is a widow, encapsulates this:

There's lots of good, right, with being in Malaysia. (...) so for me, it's home, but I think it's the frustration of not being acknowledged, not being recognised, not feeling welcome, right, in the place that you are trying to build a home.

But I do know quite a few [binational] couples who have moved from Malaysia because of it [the challenges non-citizen spouses face]. Because they have that sense of, "How can I settle?" (...) You don't feel settled, you don't feel safe, that you know, whatever happens, you feel like you can't really build a life if it can be taken away from you.

Non-citizen spouses find themselves in a liminal space in which they navigate their identity, sense of belonging, and legal status, neither fully included nor entirely excluded. Without full access to fundamental rights and basic services, and with all the barriers that non-citizen spouses face, they remain at the margins.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Borrowing the words of migration scholar Amy Gurowitz—Malaysia needs these “women migrants”, but does not want them (Gurowitz, 2019).³¹ The historical context of marriage migration indicates that these women do not merely seek temporary residence (Piper & Lee, 2016); instead, they often intend to establish permanent lives in Malaysia. This research further consolidates and builds upon the work done by Family Frontiers over the years, highlighting that the deep systemic challenges and structural inequalities faced by non-citizen spouses have changed little.

Non-citizen spouses continue to be pushed to the periphery, and from these margins, they navigate a cascade of issues that include, but are not limited to: Complex, inconsistent, and opaque immigration policies and processes and inadequate legal frameworks; restricted access to employment and basic services, leading to economic marginalisation; imposed reliance, stripping of their autonomy, and increased exposure to—along with the perpetuation of—precarity and gender-based violence; their identity within Malaysian society and the struggle to fully belong.

This research examines marriage migration through a gendered lens but stands to benefit further from a fully intersectional approach, which we have endeavoured to incorporate in part. Women make up the overwhelming majority of non-citizen spouses in Malaysia, and disproportionately bear the brunt of these challenges and inequalities. It is crucial that their voices and experiences not only be heard, but also used to shape policies that are gender-responsive.

The implications of the findings of this research extend beyond the individual; it brings to the fore the broader systemic gaps that need to be addressed. The current policies not only affect the well-being and rights of non-citizen spouses, but also of their Malaysian spouse and children. It is absurd to think that non-citizen spouses exist in silos; their lives are deeply intertwined with that of their families, and their families are the building blocks of society. The challenges they face ripple outward, or trickle down, to their family unit, the community, and the wider social fabric of the nation.

There needs to be a shift from what Nah (2011) describes as the Malaysian state authorities’ view of non-citizens, that is, “(temporary) ‘outsiders’—separate entities external to the body politic who must be controlled and regulated”. This is demonstrated in immigration policies across the board, which are often exclusionary and discriminatory toward all categories of non-citizens. Such policies undermine fundamental human rights and dignity, and they fall short of aligning with international legal standards. We argue that non-citizen spouses, as integral members of Malaysian society and contributors to its social and economic landscape, should not be subjected to policies that treat them as perpetual outsiders. Instead, there must be reforms that recognise and respond to their roles and positions in society as wives, husbands, mothers and fathers, as well as the valuable contributions and assets they bring to the nation’s table.

³¹ Her original words, referring to the political exclusion and discrimination against migrants, are : Like many other countries with labour shortages, Malaysia needs these workers, but does not want them.

The voices of non-citizen wives have shaped this research, and they have been powerful and illuminating. But it is also evident that some of these voices have been hampered, or subdued, by factors such as lack of access due to geographical constraints, differing levels of understanding of rights and processes, and, most critically, a reluctance to speak out due to fear of repercussions. Numerous participants have echoed this, citing fears³² that their visas will be revoked or not renewed, or that they will be in trouble with immigration if they publicly air their grievances about the hardship they face as non-citizen spouses. In Malaysia, freedom of expression and assembly, while provided for in the Federal Constitution, is constrained, and even more so for non-citizens.³³ Culturally, dissent or disagreement over the country's institution and laws can often be seen as an act of opposition (Evans et al., 2023). This further marginalises non-citizen spouses and keeps them silent, making it difficult for their issues to gain visibility and to call out for much-needed reforms.

Nonetheless, their voices and lived experiences must be centered and raised; they are a testament of the far-reaching ramifications of the policies non-citizen spouses are subject to in real, everyday lives. For some of the participants, speaking up is reclaiming their agency. There is also power in the creation of connection and community through the focus group discussions; we witnessed women sharing their experiences with the hope of aiding others, and the palpable relief when they realise they are not alone in their struggles, and that there are others who have walked, or are walking, the same path as them.

Finally, the narratives and findings from this research compel an urgent reevaluation and reform of current immigration and social policies for non-citizen spouses; it needs to be inclusive, non-discriminatory, gender-responsive, and just. This is not just for the sake of the non-citizen spouses, but for their families, and ultimately, the country.

³² Unfounded or otherwise.

³³ The Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 prohibits non-citizens from participating in an assembly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND MECHANISMS

1. Recognise and integrate marriage migration in the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) framework

Marriage migration is a valid form of migration that can arise through both voluntary and involuntary circumstances, with marriage migration flows driven by factors such as globalisation, increasing mobility, and demographic changes. Women marriage migrants often face commodification and exploitation (Annamalai, 2024), particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, where patriarchal structures persist, and state power tends to exclude and marginalise migrants. The challenges and risks associated with marriage migration closely parallel those found in labour migration, including exploitation, vulnerability to smuggling or trafficking, inadequate legal and social protections, social isolation, documentation difficulties, and exposure to abuse. Both forms of migration often subject individuals to power imbalances and discriminatory immigration frameworks, thereby intensifying their precarious status within host societies. Both groups also frequently navigate societal prejudices and hindrances to integration.

Marriage migration has more commonly been framed as a private issue, often relegated to the domestic sphere and overlooked in public discourse. But research on marriage migration across the board acknowledges that it is not merely a private matter, but one that has been thrust into the public arena. State power and policies can, and have, an overbearing jurisdiction over the lives of marriage migrants, regulating and dictating many aspects of their lives. The repercussions of this can shape and influence the social sphere of a nation. We also argue that the assumption that non-citizen spouses are ‘different’ from migrant workers due to their connection to the host country by ties of marriage and childbearing is tenuous—despite these contributions and kinship, marriage migrants in countries like Malaysia and Singapore are categorised and treated as ‘temporary’ residents. This effectively leaves them out from both domestic and international frameworks that cover nationals and migrant workers, denying them access to the protections and opportunities these frameworks ensure.

Migration is nuanced, and as per the description of the GCM, it should “cover all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner” (International Organization for Migration, 2019). **Marriage migration should be recognised and included in the GCM framework as a distinct form of migration** that warrants targeted protections and policy considerations. **Development of indicators** that specifically address the issues faced by marriage migrants will enable marriage migration to be **accounted for in the GCM**. Member states can be made aware of the issue of marriage migration, and utilise the GCM as a guideline to assess and create better and fairer policies for marriage migrants as part of a more holistic approach to migration governance as a whole, and be held accountable within the GCM processes.

B. AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

We urge governments, particularly neighbouring countries and within the region, to improve consular services for their citizens, addressing geographical and financial barriers. Services such as passport renewals and certification of documents should be accessible by non-citizen spouses residing in remote areas or far away from the embassy, as the lack of access to these can cause documentation of non-citizen spouses to lapse, increasing the risk of overstaying, deportation, and being blacklisted. Greater multi-country coordination to ease marriage registration would be pertinent—for example, the provision of single status certificates by consulates. Ensuring the access to these services can help marriage and birth registrations, reducing the risk of statelessness and situations of irregularity.

C. FOR THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT, POLICIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Family Frontiers participated in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2023 and the 88th CEDAW session in 2024 and raised the issues faced by binational families in Malaysia. In the CEDAW 2018 Concluding Observations, it was stated that:

“The Committee is concerned that foreign women who are married to men who are nationals of Malaysia are dependent on their husbands to maintain their legal status in the country, which places them in a vulnerable position, in particular in cases of domestic violence. It also notes with concern that foreign wives with long-term social visit passes are prohibited from engaging in any form of employment, which creates further dependence on their husbands.”

The recommendations given were:

“The Committee recommends that the State party revise its laws and policies to simplify the process of granting legal status to foreign women who are married to men who are nationals of Malaysia, including by removing the requirement that the husband be present when the wife applies for the renewal of her long-term social visit pass, and to simplify the process of obtaining permanent residency. It also recommends that the State party amend its laws and policies to enable foreign wives to work.”

As a country that has ratified CEDAW, we urge the Malaysian government to take concrete steps toward implementing these recommendations and uphold its obligations under CEDAW, ensuring the protection and well-being of Malaysian binational families.

Below are the recommendations that Family Frontiers has put forth at the 4th UPR review and the 6th CEDAW review, and we continue to call on the government to:

Employment and Access to Basic Rights

1. Remove the statement of prohibition on employment on the visa (LTSVP) and allow non-citizen spouses of Malaysians equal rights to work without restrictions and in all sectors, including those requiring professional licences.

2. Remove the requirement for consent from the Malaysian spouse to work.

3. Include non-citizen spouses under labour laws and social protection such as ensuring mandatory EPF with an equitable percentage of contributions, SOCSO benefits, and other entitlements.

4. Recognise the status of long-term resident spouses in Malaysia and rectify disparities in expedited approvals for high-net-worth professionals, ensuring fairness for all.

Permanent Residence and Pathway to Citizenship

1. Establish a streamlined Permanent Residence (PR) application process of six months, including a stipulated time frame and reasons for rejection. Accord PR after five years on Long-term Social Visit Pass (LTSVP), irrespective of nationality, qualifications, income, or children, and utilising existing documentation.

2. Process citizenship applications for non-citizen wives under Article 15(1) within a year, with clear criteria for approval and reasons given for rejections. Grant citizenship irrespective of nationality, qualifications, income, or children.

Legal Protection Among Separated, Divorced, and Widowed Non-Citizen Spouses

1. Grant separated, divorced, and widowed non-citizen spouses the right to reside and work in Malaysia, regardless of nationality, gender, income, custody status, or number of children.

The government must provide sufficient remedy for separated, divorced, or widowed foreign spouses through law and policy to enable their continued residency and right to work. This is in the best interest of their Malaysian children, and will protect binational families from sudden upheaval, particularly in distressing situations such as marital separation and death of the spouse.

D. FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR/EMPLOYERS IN MALAYSIA

1. Ensure employees who are non-citizen spouses have equal access to work benefits on the same basis as Malaysians, covering the mandatory provisions and extending to include non-mandatory protections, such as contributions to the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) that are on an equal basis to citizens, the Voluntary Separation Scheme (VSS), and severance packages.

2. Encourage the employment of non-citizen spouses of Malaysians by raising awareness among HR and hiring departments about immigration regulations and work endorsement procedures. Provide targeted training for these departments to ensure they are equipped to navigate the legal requirements and facilitate smoother hiring processes for non-citizen spouses.

3. Allow non-citizen spouses equal access to financial services by allowing them to open individual bank accounts, and remove the additional and cumbersome requirements and paperwork.

REFERENCES

- All you need to know about the constitutional amendment to Malaysia's citizenship laws. (2024, October 17). *Malay Mail*. <https://shorturl.at/FiT3Z>
- Andaya, B. W., & Andaya, L. Y. (2017). *A history of Malaysia*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Annamalai, V. (2024, January 30). *China's Demand for Brides Draws Women from Across Southeast Asia—Sometimes by Force*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://shorturl.at/yTrR6>
- Aziz, M.I.A., & Abdullah, D. (2014). Malaysia: Becoming an Education Hub to Serve National Development. In J. Knight (Ed.), *International Education Hubs* (121-137). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7025-6_7
- Bunyan, J. (2024, July 29). What you should know about Malaysia's brain drain and who's benefiting from it. *Malay Mail*. <https://shorturl.at/j30FW>
- Chiu, T. Y., & Yeoh, B. S. (2021). Marriage migration, family and citizenship in Asia. *Citizenship Studies*, 25(7), 879-897. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2021.1968680>
- Choy, N. Y. (2025, February 3). HR Ministry: Bill to amend EPF law for foreign worker contributions to be tabled in current February-March sitting. *The Edge Malaysia*. <https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/743073>
- Education Malaysia. (2024, October 28). *Malaysia: A rising destination for international students*. Education Malaysia. <https://tinyurl.com/2s6tppdf>
- Enh, A. M., Wahab, A., Azlan, A. A., Talib, K. A., Sakti, A. M. T., & Sultan, F. M. M. (2024). Life experiences and cultural adaptation among migrant workers in Malaysia. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-023-00360-1>
- Evans, J., Starr, K. J., Corichi, M., & Miner, W. (2023, September). *Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia*. Pew Research Center. <https://shorturl.at/nwiWm>
- Gurowitz, A. (2000). Migrant Rights and Activism in Malaysia: Opportunities and Constraints. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 59, 863 - 888. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2659215>.
- Hakim, L. (2023, November 29). Malaysia ranks 3rd in Asia for high English proficiency. *New Straits Times*. <https://shorturl.at/xqhTJ>
- Hashim, R., Tahir, U., Jalaluddin, N., & Mohamad, Z. (2012). Circulating Women as Objects of Trade in Malay Historical Texts. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 40, 34-50. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853112X632575>.
- Hirschman, C. (2016). Gender, the status of women, and family structure in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies*, 53(1), 33-50.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2020). *Public attitudes towards migrant workers in Malaysia*. International Labour Organization. <https://shorturl.at/JcD3o>

- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2023). *Malaysia*. International Organization for Migration (IOM). <https://www.iom.int/countries/malaysia>
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2024). *World Migration Report 2024: Chapter 3 - Asia*. International Organization for Migration (IOM). <https://shorturl.at/cfDt3>
- Jun, S. W. (2024, October 24). Fair earnings: Where does Malaysia's minimum wage of RM1,700 stand in comparison to other countries? Malay Mail ; Malay Mail. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/10/25/fair-earnings-where-does-malaysi-as-minimum-wage-of-rm1700-stand-in-comparison-to-other-countries/154608>
- Kassim, A., & Zin, R. H. M. (2011, December). *Policy on irregular migrants in Malaysia: an analysis of its implementation and effectiveness*. PIDS Discussion Paper Series. Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS). <https://shorturl.at/azxqA>
- Kassim, A. (2009). Filipino Refugees in Sabah: State Responses, Public Stereotypes and the Dilemma Over Their Future. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 47, 52-88. https://doi.org/10.20495/tak.47.1_52
- Kaur, A. (2010). Labour migration trends and policy challenges in Southeast Asia. *Policy and Society*, 29, 385 - 397. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2010.09.001>
- Leng, C. H. (2015). International marriages in Malaysia: issues arising from state policies and processes. In *Changing Marriage Patterns in Southeast Asia* (185-201). Routledge.
- Loh, W. S., Simler, K., Tan Wei, K., & Yi, S. (2019, March 28). *Estimating the Number of Foreign Workers (A report from the Labor Market Data for Monetary Policy task)*. The World Bank. <https://shorturl.at/JiyxH>
- Lumayag, L. (2014). *Sabah: IMM13 holders' children gone missing?*. Aliran. <https://tinyurl.com/yzbyvj8w>
- Maguire, P. (1987). *Doing participatory research: A feminist approach*.
- Malaysian Communications & Multimedia Commission. (2021). *Handphone User Survey 2021*. Ministry of Communications, Malaysia. <https://tinyurl.com/bdzjyhu>
- Malaysian Communications & Multimedia Commission. (2023). *Communications and Multimedia Facts & Figures*. Ministry of Communications, Malaysia. <https://tinyurl.com/5n6u9awc>
- Malaysian Immigration Department. (2017). *Announcement: EP Category Reclassification*. Home Ministry, Malaysia. <https://tinyurl.com/2padwy7y>
- Melvin, N. J. (2007, September). *Conflict in Southern Thailand: Islamism, violence and the state in the Patani insurgency*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. <https://tinyurl.com/4j554fwy>
- Ministry of Home Affairs, Malaysia. (2020). *KDN cadang hanya guna IMM13 untuk seragamkan dokumen warga asing di Sabah*. <https://tinyurl.com/uks4pddb>

- Mohammed, M. (2016). *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*. International Organization for Migration (IOM). <https://shorturl.at/IoNZA>
- Nah, A. M. (2011). *State Power and the Regulation of Non-citizens: Immigration Laws, Policies and Practices in Peninsular Malaysia*. National University of Singapore. <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/34664>
- Nguyen, H., & Vallentine, J. (2020, November 22). *Urban Mixed Migration - Kuala Lumpur Case Study*. Mixed Migration Centre (MMC). <https://tinyurl.com/28kxm3z4>
- Parliament of Malaysia. (13 February to 4 April 2023). Parliament Written Answer. First Meeting, 2nd Session (Question No. 657). <https://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/jindex/pdf/JBL05042023.pdf>
- Parliament of Malaysia. (2022, August 4). Parliament Written Answer. Second Meeting, Fifth Session (Question No. 101). <https://tinyurl.com/y8xsnmxx>
- Parliament of Malaysia. (2024, March 13). Hansard. First Meeting, Third Session (Question No. 27, 55). <https://tinyurl.com/mr253kuh>
- Pilih lelaki Malaysia untuk ubah kehidupan lampau. (2022, March 18). *Kosmo*. <https://tinyurl.com/3z4z8rmf>
- Pillai, P. (2017). Bumiquest: Malacca's Portuguese Eurasians and the search for identity. *Yearning to belong: Malaysia's Indian Muslims, Chitties, Portuguese Eurasians, Peranakan Chinese and Baweanese*, 78-118. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Piper, N., & Lee, S. (2016). Marriage migration, migrant precarity, and social reproduction in Asia: an overview. *Critical Asian Studies*, 48, 473 - 493. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2016.1226598>.
- Plans to up number of Indonesian students in Malaysian varsities by 20%. (2024, May 15). *The Star*. <https://tinyurl.com/4fczypzk>
- PropertyGuru Editorial Team. (2020). Foreigners Buying Property In Malaysia: Your Complete Guide! PropertyGuru Malaysia. <https://www.propertyguru.com.my/property-guides/complete-guide-to-foreigners-buying-property-in-malaysia-30975>
- Rucas, S. L., & Alami, S. (2022). Female–female competition occurs irrespective of patrilocal. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 51(7), 3287-3292. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02221-3>
- Trimmer, T. (2014). *World History Connected | Vol. 11 No. 3 | Tiffany Trimmer: "Bring in Outsiders Who will do the Work": Migration and British Malaya's Imperial Labor Hierarchy, 1900–1930*. https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/11.3/forum_trimmer.html
- Yaapar, M. S. (2019). Malay navigation and maritime trade: A journey through anthropology and history. *IJUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies*, 2(1), 73-81. <https://doi.org/10.31436/ijrcs.v2i1.61>

- Yeoh, B., Chee, H., Anant, R., & Lam, T. (2021). Transnational marriage migration and the negotiation of precarious pathways beyond partial citizenship in Singapore. *Citizenship Studies*, 25, 898 - 917. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2021.1968681>.
- Yoong, M., & Lee, S. (2023). 'China doll snatched away my husband': The intersectional othering of Chinese migrant women in a Malaysian newspaper. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2023.100713>
- Zulkiffli, Z. (2024, April 24). Penang Immigration Dept probing claim woman denied passport renewal over inability to speak Malay. *New Straits Times*. <https://shorturl.at/AfeA3>

ANNEXES

Annex A - Interview Guides and Focus Group Discussion questions

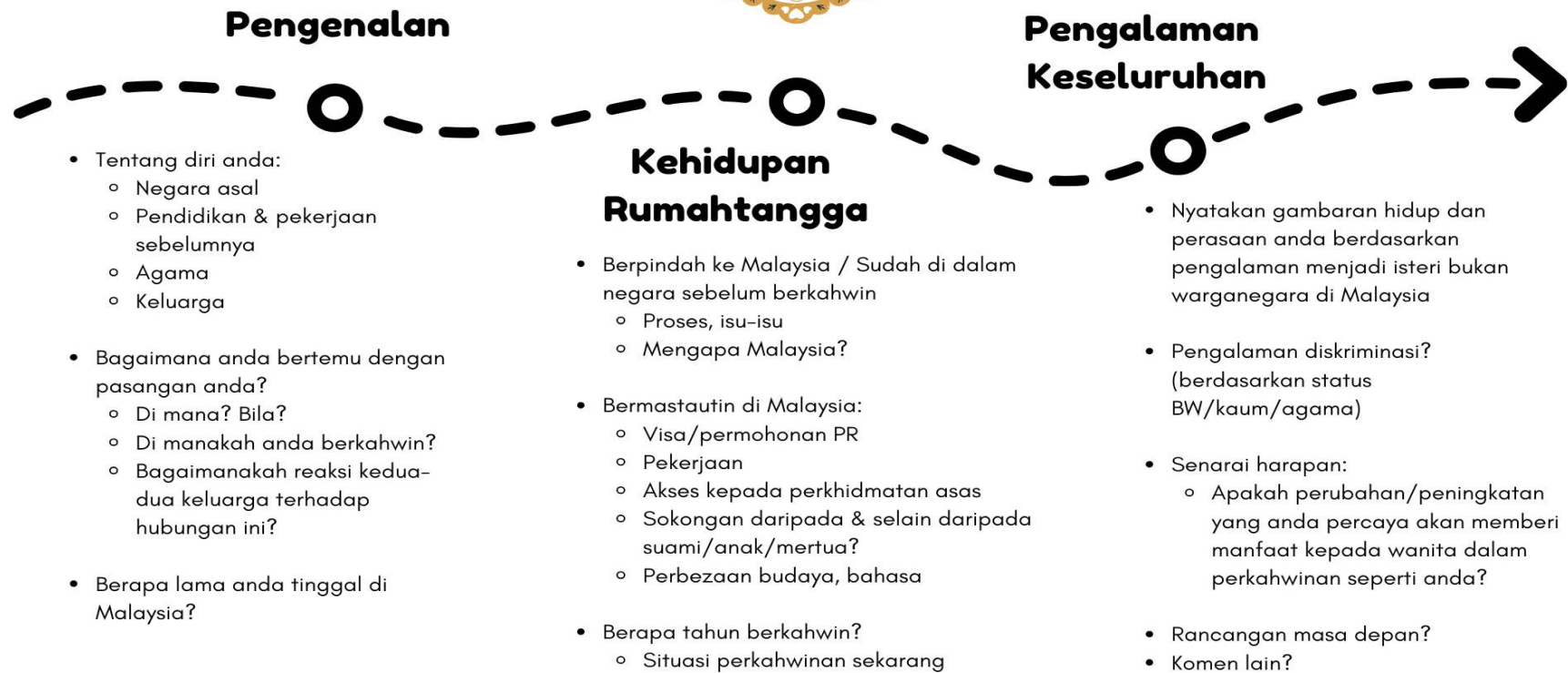
	Compulsory Questions
Part 1: Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants to introduce themselves : Name, age, country of origin & Your favourite dish in your country • All participants will be given a piece of paper with a flow chart depicting a woman's typical life path before asking the question: Suggested prompt: This is a typical woman's life path and today we would like to understand your life path. Throughout women's life, we are all migrating from one place to another to follow our parents, or for study, work and even marriage purposes. So for the first part of our discussion, we want to hear about your life particularly before and after you got married. Briefly share about your background in your country of origin up until you first met and decided to marry your husband.
Part 2:	Married Life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having discussed your journey up to meeting your Malaysian husband, could you explain the decision-making process for relocating to or living in Malaysia? • Share your experiences and challenges with visas, employment, access to banking, etc.
Part 3:	Overall Experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel about your life in Malaysia as a non-Malaysian in a binational marriage? Are you generally content and accepted, or do you face social, employment, or other issues in Malaysia? • Have you faced any discrimination due to your non-citizen status, or based on your ethnicity/nationality?
Part : Closing	What's on your wishlist for improvements for women in a marriage like yours? What changes do you believe would benefit women in such situations?

Annex B - Timeline Mapping Chart

Aktiviti Peta Garis Masa



Nama:
Umur:
Pekerjaan:



Timeline Mapping Activity



Name:

Age:

Occupation:

Introduction

- Tell us about yourself:
 - Country
 - Education & work experience
 - Religion
 - Family
- How did you meet your spouse?
 - Where? When?
 - Where did you get married?
 - How did your families react to the relationship?
- How long have you been living in Malaysia?

Married Life

- Moving to Malaysia/Already in the country before marriage
 - The process, issues
 - Why Malaysia?
- Residing in Malaysia:
 - Visas/PR application
 - Employment
 - Access to key services
 - Support systems aside from family
 - Cultural differences, language
- How many years of marriage
 - Current situation

Overall Experiences

- How would you describe your experience and feelings as a foreign spouse in Malaysia?
- Experiences of discrimination? (foreigner status/ethnicity/religion)
- Wishlist:
 - What changes or improvements do you think would benefit women in a marriage like yours?
- Future plans?
- Any other comments?

Hoạt động Lập Bản đồ Dòng thời gian



Tên:
Tuổi:
Nghề nghiệp:

Giới thiệu

- Hãy kể về bản thân bạn:
 - Quốc gia
 - Trình độ học vấn và kinh nghiệm làm việc:
 - Tôn giáo
 - Thành phần gia đình
- Bạn đã gặp người bạn đời của mình như thế nào?
 - Ở đâu? Khi nào?
 - Bạn đã kết hôn ở đâu?
 - Gia đình của bạn phản ứng thế nào với mối quan hệ này?
- Bạn đã sống ở Malaysia bao lâu rồi?

Trải nghiệm

Cuộc sống hôn nhân

- Định cư Malaysia/Đã ở Malaysia trước khi kết hôn
 - Quy trình, có vấn đề gì
 - Tại sao chọn Malaysia?
- Sinh sống tại Malaysia:
 - Xin visa/thường trú
 - Việc làm
 - Được sử dụng các dịch vụ cơ bản nào
 - Nhận được hỗ trợ nào khác ngoài gia đình
 - Khác biệt văn hóa, ngôn ngữ
- Đã kết hôn bao nhiêu năm
 - Tình hình hiện tại
- Bạn cảm thấy như thế nào và trải nghiệm ra sao khi là vợ/chồng ngoại quốc ở Malaysia?
- Có trải nghiệm bị phân biệt đối xử không? (vị thế người nước ngoài/dân tộc/tôn giáo)
- Mong muốn:
 - Bạn nghĩ những thay đổi hoặc cải tiến nào sẽ có lợi cho phụ nữ trong một cuộc hôn nhân như của bạn?
- Kế hoạch tương lai?
- Có ý kiến khác không?

Annex C - Statistics Obtained Through Malaysia's CEDAW 6th Reporting Cycle

STATISTICS OF ACTIVE PASS FOR FOREIGN WIVES TO MALAYSIAN FROM 2019 UNTIL 31 MARCH 2023

Nationality	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Indonesia	50,280	14,009	55,922	60,893	61,470
Thailand	15,233	7,621	16,770	18,743	19,094
Vietnam	15,278	6,879	16,531	18,415	18,657
Philippines	8,541	4,955	8,840	9,793	9,998
India	2,557	2,543	3,559	3,808	3,797
China	7,618	1,735	5,446	6,112	6,389
Pakistan	413	347	345	421	426
Singapore	1,791	1,784	2,314	2,701	2,770
Myanmar	1,483	1,682	1,943	1,123	2,105
Cambodia	1,419	1,475	1,721	1,906	1,951
Others	3,391	4,363	4,510	4,994	5,078
Total	108,004	47,393	117,901	129,909	131,735

Source: Immigration Department of Malaysia

ANNEX J

STATISTICS OF MYPR HOLDER (WOMEN) 2018 – 2022

Year	Total
2018	101,090
2019	104,720
2020	102,971
2021	100,805
2022	100,783

Source: National Registration of Malaysia (JPN)

Annex D - Statistics on Marriage Data for Citizens and Non-Citizens from Department of Statistics Malaysia for the period 2021–2022

1	Perkahwinan Mengikut Jantina		
	Jantina	Tahun	
		2021	2022
	Lelaki Warganegara	185,810	184,962
	Lelaki Bukan Warganegara	2,369	4,558
	Jumlah	188,179	189,520
	Perempuan Warganegara	185,778	183,160
	Perempuan Bukan Warganegara	2,401	6,360
	Jumlah	188,179	189,520

2	Peratus Perkahwinan Mengikut Jantina				
	Jantina	Tahun		Peratus Perkahwinan (%)	
		2021	2022	2021	2022
	Lelaki Warganegara	185,810	184,962	98.7	97.6
	Lelaki Bukan Warganegara	2,369	4,558	1.3	2.4
	Jumlah	188,179	189,520	100.0	100.0
	Perempuan Warganegara	185,778	183,160	98.7	96.6
	Perempuan Bukan Warganegara	2,401	6,360	1.3	3.4
	Jumlah	188,179	189,520	100.0	100.0

3	Perkahwinan Mengikut Jantina Bagi				
a	Orang Islam				
	Jantina	Tahun		Peratus Perkahwinan (%)	
		2021	2022	2021	2022
	Lelaki Warganegara	147,908	139,728	98.8	97.8
	Lelaki Bukan Warganegara	1,797	3,140	1.2	2.2
	Jumlah	149,705	142,868	100.0	100.0
	Perempuan Warganegara	148,544	139,926	99.2	97.6
	Perempuan Bukan Warganegara	1,161	3,418	0.8	2.4
	Jumlah	149,705	143,344	100.0	100.0




b	Orang Bukan Islam				
	Jantina	Tahun		Peratus Perkahwinan (%)	
		2021	2022	2021	2022
	Lelaki_Warganegara	37,902	45,234	98.5	97.0
	Lelaki_Bukan Warganegara	572	1,418	1.5	3.0
	Jumlah	38,474	46,652	100.0	100.0
	Perempuan Warganegara	37,234	43,234	96.8	93.6
	Perempuan Bukan Warganegara	1,240	2,942	3.2	6.4
	Jumlah	38,474	46,176	100.0	100.0

Annex E - Sample of a Call for Participation in Focus Group Discussions

Call for Participation For Focus Group Discussions - Online Session

Dear Community Members,

Foreign Spouse Support Group (FSSG) has scheduled online meet ups with foreign wives of Malaysian citizens. We invite you to join us to share your insights concerning Malaysian binational families in Malaysia. This meeting invite includes those who are widowed or divorced/separated. We'll also hold a separate discussion to explore the challenges faced by foreign husbands and Malaysian wives. Stay tuned!




-  Date & Time: 29 August 2024 (8pm)
-  Venue: Zoom (Meeting Link will be given to confirmed participation)
-  Registration Link: bit.ly/FFforeignwivesonline



Call for Participation For Focus Group Discussions - Klang Valley Session

Dear Community Members,

Foreign Spouse Support Group (FSSG) has scheduled online meet ups with foreign wives of Malaysian citizens. We invite you to join us to share your insights concerning Malaysian binational families in Malaysia. This meeting invite includes those who are widowed or divorced/separated. We'll also hold a separate discussion to explore the challenges faced by foreign husbands and Malaysian wives. Stay tuned!


-  Date & Time: 29 August 2024 (8pm)
-  Venue: Zoom (Meeting Link will be given to confirmed participation)
-  Registration Link: bit.ly/FFforeignwivesonline




Call for Participation For Focus Group Discussions - Sarawak Session

Dear Community Members,

Foreign Spouse Support Group (FSSG) has scheduled a meet up with foreign wives of Malaysian citizens. We invite you to join us to share your insights concerning Malaysian binational families in Malaysia. This meeting invite includes those who are widowed or divorced/separated.

 Date: 25th August 2024 (Sunday)

 Time: 3PM

 Venue: Kuching (exact address will be given once we confirmed your participation)


 Registration Link: <https://bit.ly/FFsarawakforeignwives>





Call for Participation For Focus Group Discussions - Sabah Session

Dear Community Members,

Foreign Spouse Support Group (FSSG) has scheduled a meet up with foreign wives of Malaysian citizens. We invite you to join us to share your insights concerning Malaysian binational families in Malaysia. This meeting invite includes those who are widowed or divorced/separated.

 Date: 24th August 2024 (Saturday)

 Time: 10AM

 Venue: Kota Kinabalu (exact address will be given once we confirmed your participation)

 Registration Link: <https://bit.ly/FFsabahforeignwives>



Annex F - Sample of an Online Call for Participation for Online Survey

Survey on Non-Citizen Wives in Malaysian Binational Families

Association of Family Support & Welfare Selangor & KL (Family Frontiers) in partnership with Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is conducting a survey to understand the experiences and challenges faced by non-citizen wives married to Malaysian spouses.

✍️ If you are a non-citizen woman currently or previously married to a Malaysian spouse, please fill out the survey linked below. It will only take around 10 minutes!

📄 Survey links:

<https://bit.ly/ForeignWivesAPWLD> (Eng & BM)

<https://bit.ly/VietForeignWivesAPWLD> (Tiếng Việt)

<https://bit.ly/MForeignWivesAPWLD> (Mandarin 普通话)

🔒 All responses will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

✉️ If you have any questions at any time about the survey, you may contact us by email at community@familyfrontiers.org

Calling all Non-citizen Wives Married to Malaysian Spouses - We would like to gather your insights!

FSSG with Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is conducting a survey to understand the experiences and challenges faced by non-citizen wives married to Malaysian spouses.

Scan the QR below to fill up the survey:

<https://bit.ly/ForeignWivesAPWLD>

Survey available in Eng, Viet, BM and Mandarin

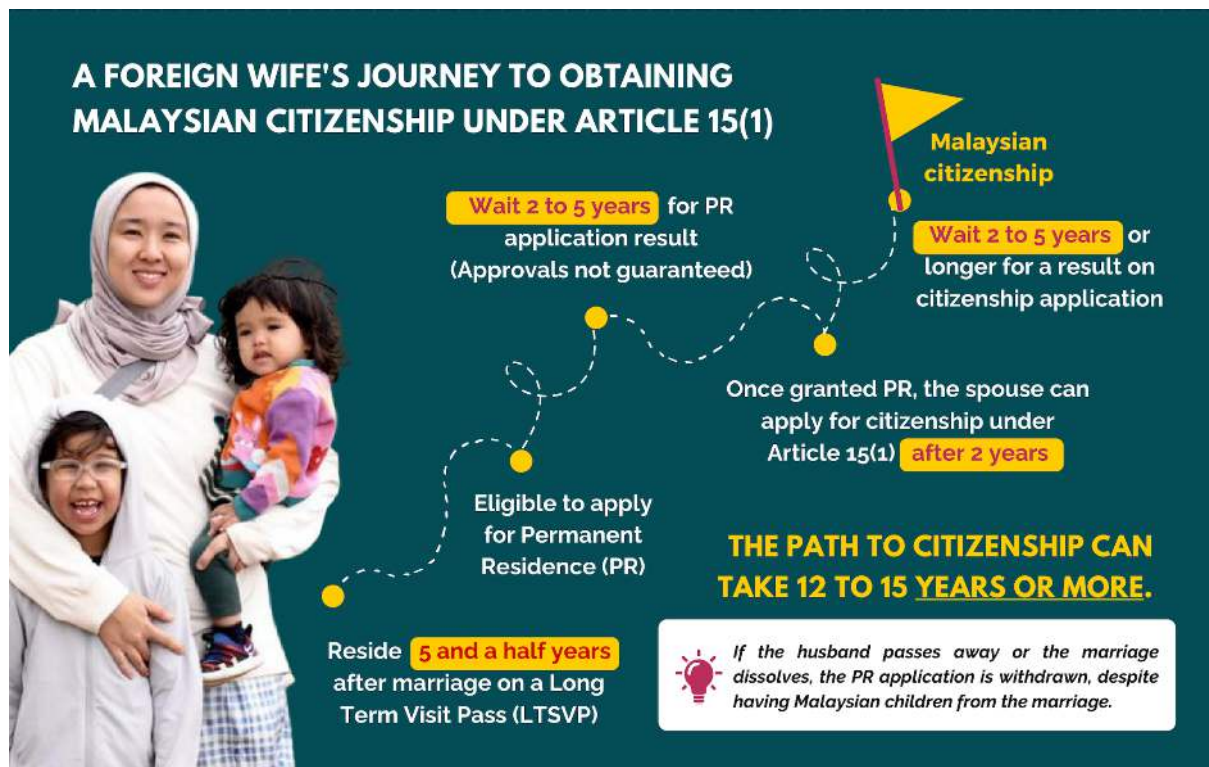
Annex G - List of past surveys by Family Frontier that were used to complement this research

- 1. 2020**
Employment Challenges of Foreign Spouses
- 2. 2021**
Employment Status of Spouses in Binational Marriages
- 3. 2022**
Survey on Gender Based Violence Experience Among Binational Families
Research Analysis
- 4. 2024**
Survey on Permanent Residence Applications of Foreign Spouses & Children of
Malaysians [2022-2024}
Findings

Annex H - Online Research Survey

 **[Linked to Research Report] Survey on Non-Citizen Wives in Malaysian Binational Fa...**

Annex I - Timeline of Citizenship under Article 15(1)



Annex J - About Family Frontiers and the Research Team

Organisational Profile

The Association of Family Support & Welfare Selangor & KL (Family Frontiers) is a registered entity dedicated to advancing, promoting, and strengthening the family unit to ensure that no family is left behind. Serving as the umbrella body for the Foreign Spouses Support Group (FSSG), it advocates for the welfare of Malaysian binational families and leads the Malaysian Campaign for Equal Citizenship.

FSSG was founded in 2009 by two non-citizen spouses of Malaysians who faced significant challenges raising their Malaysian children in the country. They established FSSG to provide support to other non-citizen spouses experiencing similar difficulties, with the goal of protecting their rights and influencing policy through advocacy, services, and community-building efforts.

Family Frontiers has been a pioneer in championing the rights of marriage migrants and binational families, playing a key role in Malaysia's constitutional amendment on equal citizenship for overseas-born children of Malaysian mothers and non-citizen fathers. It is also a member of the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), further strengthening its advocacy efforts on regional and international platforms.

The Research Team

Research co-authors: Patricia Pek Wan Low and Nur Adilla

Patricia Low is the Research and Policy Coordinator at Family Frontiers, and an activist impacted by Malaysia's gender-discriminatory citizenship laws. She leads the research activities and engagements with treaty bodies and related mechanisms, and works to translate data into impactful policy advocacy. Central to her approach include the centering of lived experiences and feminist participatory methods. She holds a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in English from University of Malaya.

Nur Adilla is currently an Adjunct Professor at Lakeland University Japan. She is also a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies at Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. She holds a Master of Gender Studies from University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

Research Assistants: Nur Aishah binti Ahmad, Aaliyah Nadjmin binti Danial, Sarah Czarina Mashanis, Nathas Vari Karoonamoothi, and Alicia Dixon