



FAMILY FRONTIERS

Persatuan Kebajikan Sokongan Keluarga Selangor & KL (PPM-011-10-24072020)

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ASEAN Urged to Recognise Marriage Migration to Strengthen Families and Foster Regional Inclusion

in conjunction with ASEANPeoples@ASEAN2025

Family Frontiers organised a roundtable discussion on marriage migration in ASEAN in conjunction with [ASEANPeoples@ASEAN2025](#), marking the start of a new migration discourse in the region. The consultation, titled “Marriage Migration in ASEAN: Building Stronger Families and Inclusive Policy Pathways”, brought together 25 in-person participants from across the region—including representatives from the ASEAN, civil society organisations (CSOs), SUHAKAM, academia, policy experts, and individuals with lived experience—to discuss policy recommendations and explore shared regional frameworks.

Marriage migration refers to the movement of individuals across national borders typically involving a union between a citizen and a non-citizen, and often leading to long-term residence and family life in the destination country."

"Marriage migration has emerged as a major - yet often overlooked - form of cross-border movement, particularly for women. While labour migration has long been a dominant form of migration, shaping policy and discourse, marriage migration is equally shaped by gendered, economic and social inequalities," said Rachel Tan, programme director of the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD).

In Malaysia, there are nearly 180,000 non-citizen spouses of Malaysians, with 132,000 of them women, with the largest groups coming from Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines¹. Due to their non-citizen statuses, these spouses face barriers such as limited access to employment, insecure residence rights, and restricted access to essential services. These challenges can also be exacerbated by risks of family separation and gender-based violence.

Moderated by Family Frontiers President Adlyn Adam Teoh, the roundtable discussion featured panellists Prof. Dato' Noor Aziah Binti Mohd Awal from SUHAKAM, Karsiwen from KABAR BUMI, Indonesia, Patricia Low from Family Frontiers and Rey Asis from Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM) who shared the work they do on marriage migration in their own respective countries.

"Marriage migrants are not Cinderellas, they are not princesses that wait for help from their spouses and the government," said Rey Asis, explaining that non-citizen spouses want to and have the potential to contribute to their families and larger society.

that national laws across ASEAN change significantly in regards to cross-border marriages, access to legal status, and the protection of family life

Women marriage migrants in particular, are at heightened risk of abuse and exploitation, due to enforced dependency on their spouses and lack of sufficient protections.

“Being a public university lecturer for more than a decade and gifting tiga anak Malaysia to this nation, all I’m asking for is security and a long-term prospect to remain in the country without worrying about my next contract or the time when my youngest child will turn 18,” said an impacted non-citizen wife who was abused by her Malaysian ex-husband for years. She remains in the country on a work permit sponsored by her employer — her only path to legal residence. Without this, she would be granted only a one-year custody visa with no right to work, leaving her and her young children without a stable livelihood or long-term security.

Marriages that are facilitated by brokers or matchmakers can also be a guise for human trafficking, and in some situations, sexual slavery. Linda* (pseudonym to protect her identity), an Indonesian marriage migrant, is one of them. Trafficked into another country, she endured long periods of abuse until she managed to escape and get repatriated back to Indonesia.

“After my father returned to Indonesia having stayed with me for a while after marriage, I began to be treated harshly. I was often beaten with a wooden stick. I didn’t understand what was happening at the time because my husband would sometimes get angry suddenly and beat me, and I didn’t understand his language,”

“There are no policies in placement countries, to protect marriage migrants,” said Karsiwen when asked about the problems faced by Indonesian marriage migrants. *“We encourage governments to make a law for comprehensive repatriation and reintegration for victims,”*

Nazreen Nizam, the Executive Director of Women's Aid Organisation, shared her lived experience with being married to a non-citizen. *“In Malaysia, marriage migrants who have children with their Malaysian spouse often receive longer visa extensions, while couples without children are given shorter ones. This policy assumes that only couples with children are in genuine, long-term relationships. But that’s simply not true. Some couples choose to be child-free. Others may not have children due to medical or personal reasons. Our love and commitment shouldn’t be measured by whether we produce a human offspring,”*

In Malaysia, marriages between Orang Asli women and non-Malaysian men are not recognised. *“They don’t get support from society and government when these women marry non-citizens. Because of this, their children don’t really have access to education and acceptance by communities,”* said a woman representative from the Orang Asli community.

“The prevailing immigration framework treats migrants through a security or labour control lens, with limited recognition of their human rights or family life,” said Prof Aziah, explaining that there is very little distinction between irregular migration and marriage migration. *“One of the critical actions is to advocate for the reform of discriminatory marriage laws,”*

Marriage migration remains inadequately addressed within existing legal and policy frameworks, with no collaborative regional approach to the treatment and protection of

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non-citizen spouses. As said by Bina Ramanand, Executive Director of Family Frontiers, *“It is high time ,”*

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Context – The Issues Faced by Non-Citizen Spouses of Malaysians Living in Malaysia

Introduction

It is currently estimated that Malaysia is home to nearly 180,000 marriage migrants¹. About 132,000 (73.3%) of them are women. Although marriage migrants are an integral part of the social and economic fabric of the country, raising Malaysian children and families, they face immense challenges in accessing basic services and are afforded very little protection in key areas of life. The contributions of marriage migrants play a crucial role in the country's growth and development, however, they remain largely undervalued and unrecognised in national policies, and receive insufficient support from the government.

As part of a multi-country rapid research on women marriage migrants in Malaysia, Family Frontiers conducted an online survey with 89 respondents and focus group discussions with 62 participants across the country from August to November 2024.

Key Issues Faced by Non-Citizen Spouses in Malaysia

1) Limited access to Permanent Residence (PR) & citizenship

The process of obtaining PR remains long-drawn, with low rates of approvals and no reasons given for rejections. Accessibility to PR is important as it provides security and significantly removes barriers to employment opportunities.

Out of 89 survey respondents:
Only 28 (31%) were able to submit a PR application (4 approved, 6 rejected, 18 in process)
Average waiting time for outcome of application: 4-10 years

82 (92%) believe that having PR will improve their well-being, security, and stability and that of their family

2) Restrictions to employment

The Long Term Social Visit Pass (spouse visa) prohibits employment until a work endorsement is obtained with an offer letter from a prospective employer. However, this statement is a significant barrier to securing a job offer, as employers are hesitant to hire upon seeing this statement. Marriage migrants are also excluded from working in certain fields such as banking, including acquiring professional licenses to be an engineer, practice as a lawyer or drive commercial vehicles, until they obtain PR.

¹ Statistics only include those holding valid visas and do not take into account those who are undocumented.

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From 2020 to 2024, only 15,090, or 11.5%, of non-citizen wives were in legal employment, leaving a majority without financial independence and reliant on their spouses. Limited rights to formal employment also pushes many non-citizen wives into informal work, often with low pay and no job security.

3) Lack of legal status & security for marriage migrants following separation, divorce, or death of Malaysian spouse

The legal status of a non-citizen wife remains subject to their Malaysian husband. After marriage dissolution, non-citizen wives often struggle to remain in the country, especially if there are no children from the marriage. Despite having joint custody of the children, some have been unable to secure visas to remain in the country. Additionally, widows are issued passes valid for only six months at a time, requiring a Malaysian sponsor and prohibiting employment. Furthermore, divorced non-citizen husbands are unable to obtain a visa to remain in the country and co-parent their Malaysian children, placing a huge burden on the Malaysian ex-wife as the sole carer.

87% identified visa and immigration issues as a key challenge faced upon migrating to Malaysia
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Impacts on marriage migrants and families

- **Vulnerability to, and perpetuation of, gender-based violence:** Women marriage migrants are forced to remain in abusive marriages due to economic dependency and immigration stipulations that require the Malaysian spouse to be physically present at each visa renewal.
- **Risk of family separation:** Lack of viable passes can result in women marriage migrants being separated from their Malaysian children or compel ageing wives to leave Malaysia, their long-time home.
- **Deterioration of the well-being of binational families:** The socioeconomic hardships and lack of legal status faced by non-citizen spouses have a direct impact on their children, affecting their education, health, and general well-being and are not in their best interest.
- **Economic dependency and insecurity:** These restrictive policies curtail opportunities for gainful employment for non-citizen wives, fostering dependency on their husbands, and eroding their agency and economic autonomy. This can trap non-citizen wives who are in abusive marriages, and disproportionately impact low-income and single-income families. Furthermore, these policies disproportionately disadvantage Malaysian wives with non-citizen husbands, placing them in a position where they often carry a heavier burden of income generation.

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One key finding from our research was the connection between childhood statelessness and marriage migration. If a woman marriage migrant is undocumented, they are unable to register their marriages in Malaysia. Children born from these unions are at high risk of statelessness, as the Malaysian law does not allow Malaysian men to confer citizenship by operation of law to children born outside a legally recognised marriage. This has resulted in families with stateless children, which may perpetuate statelessness across generations.