



## ► Research Brief

December 2020

# Public attitudes towards migrant workers in Malaysia

## ► Summary

In 2018 there were 1.76 million documented migrant workers in Malaysia from 15 countries of origin (MOHA 2018). When including the 2019 World Bank estimate of 1.23-1.46 million irregular status workers, together migrants account for 20 per cent of the Malaysian workforce (ILO/UNCT 2019). With an ageing population and continued demand for labour in sectors such as construction, domestic work, agriculture, and manufacturing, Malaysia's demand for migrant workers is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Migrant workers contribute to Malaysia's development socially as well as economically. World Bank data from Malaysia, for instance, suggests that a 10 per cent net increase in manual or "low-skilled" migrant workers may increase Malaysia's GDP by up to 1.1 per cent (World Bank 2015). However, public attitudes towards migrant workers tend to be negative. This study shows that negative attitudes are expressed through discriminatory actions, such as limiting or denying entry; exclusion from access to services; public support for laws that enshrine social exclusion of migrant workers; and denying equal wages on par with nationals.

In order to understand the overall level of public support towards migrant workers, the Safe and Fair (ILO and UN Women) and TRIANGLE in ASEAN (ILO) programmes conducted a four-country study of public attitudes in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The full report can be found at: [https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS\\_732443/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_732443/lang--en/index.htm). This brief highlights the main findings in Malaysia.

The study explores public attitudes related to labour market shortages, migration and crime, social and cultural threats, equal treatment with nationals, and violence against women migrant workers. The research also inquires specifically about the domestic work sector.

### Key Policy Recommendations

#### Promote inclusion and community engagement with migrant workers through policy and practice

Ensure that women and men migrant workers are able to fully access rights and freedoms in line with international labour and human rights standards.

Design policies that facilitate platforms and community events where migrant workers and the public can meaningfully interact.

Promote social inclusion through city planning by avoiding separation of migrant workers' accommodation.

#### Raise awareness among general public

Design campaigns to raise awareness by providing accurate and positive information about migrant workers and their contribution to the national economy.

Complement and reinforce public campaigns with targeted interventions directed at "influencer" groups such as schools and news media.



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The survey targeted members of the Malaysian public aged 18–65 years, covering all major regions. A gender quota was applied to ensure representativeness with regards to men and women across each region.<sup>1</sup> In total, 1,009 Malaysians were surveyed.

This 2019 study follows a previous 2010 ILO study on public attitudes, applying the same methodology, and finds that positive attitudes toward migrant workers have declined since 2010. The study also confirms that people who know and engage with migrant workers on a personal level are more likely to be supportive of migrants and have a positive attitude towards them. Polarization in views has increased, and people with limited or no interaction with migrant workers are less supportive than before. Alarming, in Malaysia as in other migration destination countries, positive attitudes of Malaysian respondents who employ domestic workers in their homes also decreased, despite the frequent interaction that such employers have with migrant workers.

However, the study finds that positive public support exists for policy initiatives aimed at supporting women migrant workers, especially related to ending violence against women and improved working conditions for domestic workers. This tends to show that focused attention towards a particular group of migrant workers and specific issues concerning those workers can help generate more public support.

The findings suggest that programmes and policies must further encourage interaction and community engagement with migrants, and must discourage exclusion, isolation and discrimination.

### Leverage the positive public support for women migrant workers

Design policies to address violence against women migrant workers and ensure that pregnant women migrant workers have access to maternity leave.

Design and enforce regulations aimed at improving the working conditions of women migrant domestic workers, as well as ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

### Address declining attitudes of employers of women migrant domestic workers

Conduct a coordinated and evidence-based publicity campaign on the social and economic value of domestic work, and on the rights of domestic workers, involving governments, trade unions, employers and domestic workers' groups.



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<sup>1</sup> For the detailed methodology, refer to the full report: ILO and UN Women. *Public Attitudes towards Migrant Workers in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (Bangkok, 2019).

## ► Findings

### Public support for migrant workers

#### Labour market shortages: Need for migrant workers

Population demographics are changing in Malaysia. The population is ageing and there are fewer workers as a percentage of the population. There is, therefore, a need for more workers to maintain the labour force, and to provide care to the elderly. Despite labour market shortages, as well as the economic gains to be made from labour migration, the study shows that much of the Malaysian public is not convinced of the need for migrant workers in Malaysia (see figures 1 and 2):

- 56 per cent of the Malaysian public surveyed say the country does not need “low-skilled” migrant workers.
- 47 per cent believe that migrant workers are a drain on the economy.
- 47 per cent, believe that migrant workers have an overall negative effect on the economy.

#### Migration and crime: Unfounded fears

There is little evidence to back up the claim that migrant workers are more likely to commit crimes than the rest of the population. In fact, recent evidence of the causal impact of migration on crime finds that migrant workers in Malaysia reduce both property crime and violent crime. An increase of 100,000 migrant workers in Malaysia reduces crimes committed by 9.9 percent (World Bank 2018). However, a majority of Malaysians still have the impression that migrant workers do commit more crimes (see figures 1 and 2):

- 59 per cent of the Malaysian public surveyed say that migrants commit a high number of crimes.
- 83 per cent think crime rates have increased due to migration.

The 2010 study found that in Malaysia over 80 per cent of local respondents believed that migrants commit a “high number of crimes”. These levels have dropped to 59 per cent of Malaysians responding similarly in 2019. This is a positive trend regarding a very negative attitude towards migrants.

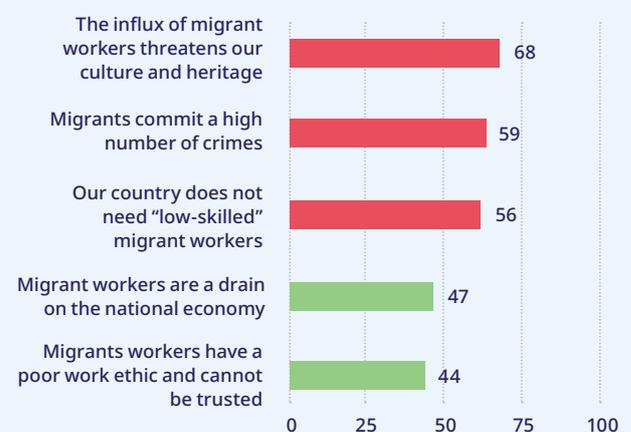
### Social inclusion versus social and cultural threats

This study finds that a majority of the Malaysian public tends to believe that migrant workers threaten the country’s culture and heritage; while a sizeable minority say that migrant workers have a poor work ethic and cannot be trusted (figure 1).

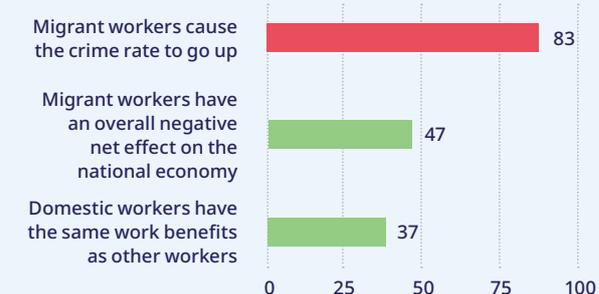
However, on a more positive note, when measuring public behaviours of inclusion, the survey finds that:

- 57 per cent of the Malaysian public had or would help a migrant worker integrate into their community or get ahead in their work.
- 70 per cent said they had spoken or would speak out against someone who was saying offensive things about migrant workers.

**Figure 1. Attitudes about migrant workers - Support for the following statements (%)**



**Figure 2. Misconceptions about migrant workers - Support for the following statements (%)**



## Equal treatment

Equality of treatment is enshrined in international human rights instruments and labour standards. This study showed that belief in equality of treatment is not the norm in terms of public attitudes towards migrant workers.

A majority of the Malaysian public surveyed are of the view that (figure 3):

- Migrant workers should not have any rights at work if in irregular status (86 per cent).
- If migrant workers are exploited, they have themselves to blame (59 per cent).
- Migrant workers should not receive the same salary and benefits as national workers (58 per cent).
- Migrant workers should not receive the same work conditions as national workers (73 per cent).
- Migrant workers should not be able to join a union (65 per cent).

These attitudes indicate that many citizens hold a view that migrant workers should be treated differently. Discrimination is therefore a problem that needs to be tackled through law enforcement as well as through efforts to influence social norms and attitudes.

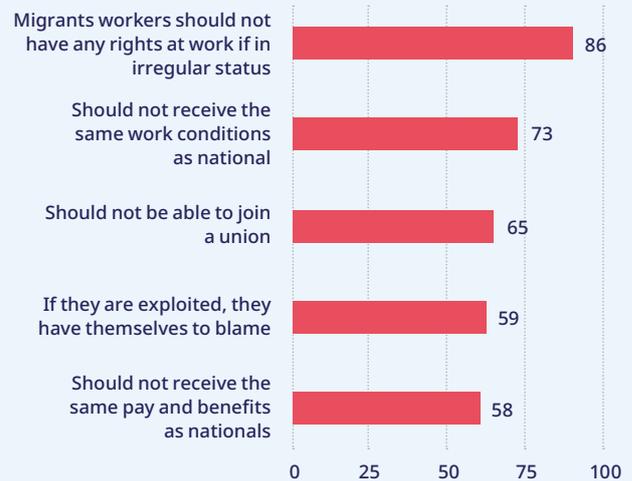
## Treatment of women migrant workers

When asked whether women migrant workers specifically should have equal wages with women nationals doing the same job, only one third of Malaysians supported this (figure 4).

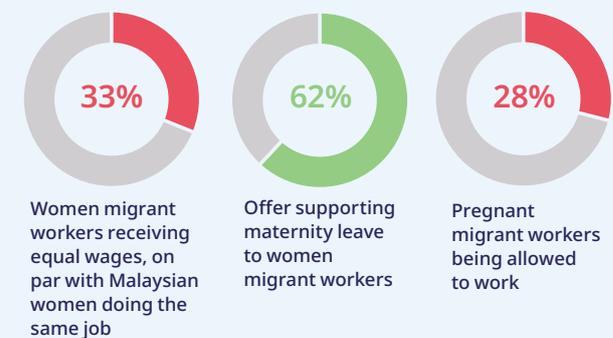
Malaysia has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and has a law on maternity leave with pay that is inclusive of women migrant workers. Further, dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy or of maternity leave is prohibited. Nonetheless, in practice, women migrant workers are deported if found to be pregnant, and Malaysian employers often restrict the movement of domestic workers, resulting in isolation and restricted ability to seek help when it is needed.

A majority of the Malaysian public do support offering maternity leave to women migrant workers. Yet, on the other hand, only 28 per cent of Malaysian survey respondents support women migrant workers being allowed to work while pregnant, a contradiction in sentiment (figure 4).

**Figure 3. Attitudes on equal treatment of migrant worker - Support for the following statements (%)**



**Figure 4. Attitude on treatment of women migrant workers - Support for the following statements**



## Violence against women migrant workers

As outlined in the United Nations' 2017 Report of the Secretary-General on Violence against Women Migrant Workers,

Migration can foster women's empowerment and, through new opportunities and personal expansion, improve their agency and autonomy, yet the feminized, informal sectors in which many migrant women work are characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, limited labour and social protections, and exposure to physical and sexual violence.

Prevention and services to assist women migrant victims of violence were the issues for which the surveyed Malaysian public gave their strongest support. A strong majority of the Malaysian public support women migrant workers having access to shelters if they experience violence (81 per cent), and also support stronger law enforcement to reduce violence against women migrant workers (82 per cent) (figure 5).

**Figure 5. Addressing violence against women - Support for the following statements**



Harnessing this strong public support for freedom from violence for migrant women and turning it into law and action is imperative, especially at a moment when governments, trade unions and employers, with the full support of CSOs, around the world have come together to adopt new international instruments to counter violence. The June 2019 International Labour Conference adopted the Violence and Harassment Convention

(No. 190) and Recommendation (No. 206), 2019, which recognize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

Whether migrating through regular or irregular channels, women migrant workers can face the risk of violence and abuse from intermediaries and employers, as well as from partners and others. They experience intersectional forms of discrimination based on multiple identities, including job sector, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, legal status, age, pregnancy status, marital status and language, among others. Women migrant survivors of violence face multiple challenges while seeking justice or accessing essential services. Because of little access to protection and support services, absence of protection orders, limited referral networks and coordination mechanisms, lack of language interpreters, as well as fear of deportation or of losing their jobs, many migrant women suffer in silence.

Therefore, services must be available regardless of migration status, and in sufficient quantity and quality, and these services need to respond in ways that integrate human rights and cultural sensitivity and respect the survivor's choices. Key components of response are high-quality, accessible survivor-centred (for instance, non-judgmental) services by health actors, police and justice, and social services. Effective coordination is also paramount, as services cannot keep survivors safe and support healing when they work in isolation.

One challenge facing migrant workers who experience violence is that they often do not report it. The survey found that some Malaysian respondents (47 per cent) were aware of this problem. Women migrant workers may struggle to access services due to perceptions around their respectability or due to victim blaming. Pervasive negative attitudes can also further isolate migrant women, restricting their movement and preventing them from seeking support due to fear of reprisals.

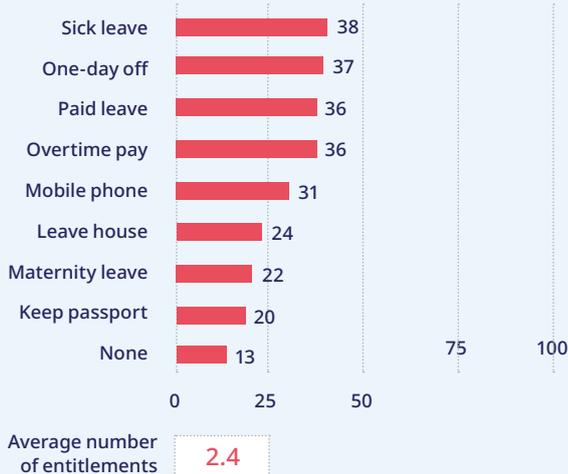
## Domestic workers: Same treatment, better protections

The public also strongly support improved labour conditions of domestic workers, though Malaysian respondents who employ domestic workers are less supportive. Overall figures show that 71 per cent of Malaysians support better labour conditions for domestic workers, and 51 per cent also support recognition of care work as a formal profession.

This public support does not appear to translate, however, into decent work conditions and provision of work entitlements. The survey asked Malaysian respondents if they employ a domestic worker in their

home, and if so, asked them about working conditions they provide to their employees. Malaysian employers were presented with a list of eight entitlements they might provide to domestic workers (such as paid leave, overtime pay, ability to hold their passports or a phone, or a day off per week), and based on their responses it appears that Malaysian employers provide an average of roughly two and a half entitlements to their domestic worker employees. The most commonly provided entitlements are sick leave and one day off per week, and the most commonly denied entitlements are workers being allowed to hold their own passports and maternity leave (figure 6).

**Figure 6. Work entitlements provided to migrant domestic workers by surveyed employers (%)**



Base: Malaysian employers of migrant domestic workers, n=190

## Factors that correlate with public support for migrant workers

### Interaction with migrant workers

The study explored whether demographic variables correlated with public support for migrant workers and found that they are not strongly associated. Instead, frequency and quality of interaction with migrant workers are a strong predictor of support for migrant workers generally.

The survey findings revealed a high degree of interaction with migrant workers in Malaysia, compared to the other three countries surveyed (figure 7). This is in line with the fact that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with a large proportion of migrant workers in its workforce.

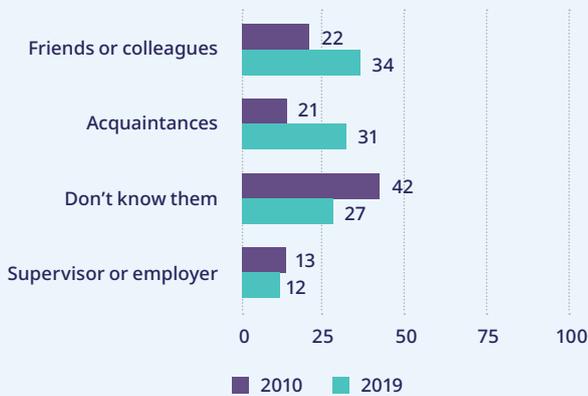
Interaction between Malaysians and migrant workers has increased since the 2010 ILO study on public attitudes (figure 7). Regular personal contact with migrant workers is much higher with 60 per cent of 2019 Malaysian respondents reporting such contact (versus 50 per cent in 2010). Only 5 per cent of Malaysian respondents stated that they never encounter migrant workers.

**Figure 7. Frequency of interaction with migrant workers, 2010 and 2019 (%)**



The Malaysian public's interaction with migrant workers increased by 15 percentage points in the years between studies, with more people saying they know migrant workers in 2019 (figure 8). Overall, most encounters took place in the general community, but Malaysian respondents also reported work-related relationships, which is consistent with generally having more interaction with migrant workers on average. Substantial minorities of Malaysian respondents report knowing migrant workers personally, and in most cases, they are friends, colleagues or acquaintances. The proportion of Malaysians reporting having migrant friends/colleagues is up by 12 percentage points, and the proportion of those with migrant acquaintances is up by 10 percentage points in 2019, compared to 2010 (figure 8).

**Figure 8. Type of relationship with migrant workers, 2010 and 2019 (%)<sup>2,3</sup>**

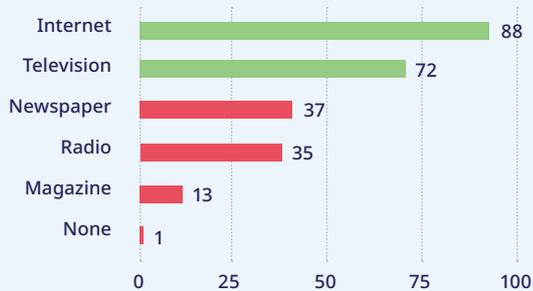


## Role of news and media

Based on evidence that the media shapes opinion about migration and drives behaviour, Malaysian survey respondents are asked about the number and type of media sources they consume.

Survey respondents report regular use of mass media, with the internet being the most popular medium at 88 per cent. Television is also common at 72 per cent; while newspaper readership is less common at 35 per cent (figure 9). Facebook is the most popular social media platform, with YouTube second, followed by Instagram and Google+. The number of social media platforms used by Malaysian respondents stands at three per person, on average.

**Figure 9. Regular use of mass media (%)**



Base: n=1,009

The study finds that the more news media sources people consume, the more supportive they are of

migrant workers, irrespective of the type of media source.

Mass media, specifically news reports and social media, remains the most prominent source of information about migrant workers. But social media has risen to a strong second place since the 2010 study, surpassing television programming. The average number of media sources regularly consumed by Malaysians was 3.8 per person.

## Changes in public support for migrant workers from 2010 to 2019

For the 2010 ILO study on public attitudes, an index of questions on knowledge, attitudes and practice (KAP) was compiled, with scores summed to explore correlative factors. The “KAP Index” questions used in 2010 were also used in the 2019 study. On a scale of 0 to a 100, the KAP Index reflects how supportive people are towards migrants. The higher the KAP Index<sup>4</sup>, the more supportive people are.

Comparing results for Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand from 2010 and 2019, figure 10 reflects a modest decline in the KAP Index in all three countries, meaning overall support for migrant workers declined to some degree between 2010 and 2019. Both Singapore and Thailand had a seven-point drop in the index, whereas Malaysia had a more marginal decrease of three points. Despite the drop, Singapore’s score remains the highest among the countries surveyed, an indication that support for migrant workers remains relatively stronger in Singapore than in Malaysia and Thailand.

**Figure 10. KAP Index**



Note: KAP Index is a composite score of 15 questions about knowledge, attitude, and practice.

<sup>2</sup> Only includes respondents who reported interactions with migrant workers (n=955).

<sup>3</sup> Due to rounding, percentages may not precisely reflect the absolute figures.

<sup>4</sup> KAP Index is an indicator in which knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour measures have been aggregated at the individual level and indexed, expressed as a range from zero to 100.

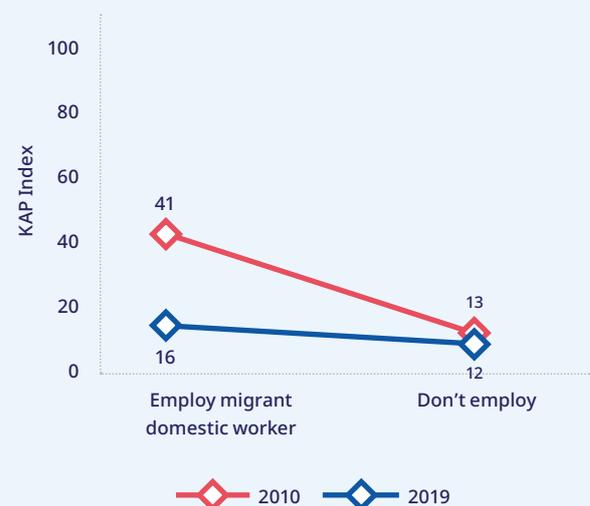
Looking at the KAP Index scores for 2010 and 2019 in Malaysia, the KAP Index is rather low (see figure 10). In both years, the KAP Index score shows that migrants do not receive a lot of public support. The results suggest that most people in Malaysia have limited knowledge about migrant workers; hold many negative attitudes towards them; and are unwilling to engage in practices or behaviours that would support migrants.

As noted above, interaction between the Malaysian public and migrant workers increased between 2010 and 2019 (see figures 7 and 8). Despite the correlation between a higher KAP Index and greater interaction with migrant workers, support for migrant workers declined over the period. This is due to a greater KAP Index decline<sup>5</sup> – by 27 points – among Malaysian respondents with no interaction with migrant workers (see figure 11). The KAP Index did not change much for Malaysian respondents who have regular interaction with migrant workers, which suggests an increased polarization in support between persons exposed to migrant workers and persons who are not. There was also a marginal decline among Malaysian respondents who had had occasional interactions with migrant workers. Together, these declines may explain why the support for migrant workers has diminished over time.

**Figure 11. KAP Index, by frequency of interaction with migrant workers in Singapore, 2010 and 2019**



**Figure 12. KAP Index, by Singaporean employers of migrant domestic worker(s) versus non-employers, 2010 and 2019**



A strong, positive relationship was found in 2010, whereby Malaysian respondents who had hired migrant domestic workers had a considerably higher KAP Index – meaning Malaysian employers were generally more supportive of migrant workers than the general public were. In 2019, the results remained largely unchanged in Singapore with the support of migrant workers declining by 6 points among employers of migrant domestic workers. However, employers of migrant domestic workers in Malaysia and Thailand appeared significantly less supportive of migrant workers generally, declining by 25 points and 22 points, respectively.

It is critical, therefore, to encourage more interaction between Malaysian communities and migrant workers. Decreasing the distance between nationals and migrant workers requires a multi-pronged approach including city planning, workplace inclusion, community platforms, and changes to laws and policy to ensure there are no exclusions or “special rules” that keep migrant workers from enjoying fair and equal treatment.

<sup>5</sup> To make the KAP Index more sensitive to incremental changes, the total index range is from 0 to 200. Based on past studies, 95 per cent of all results have fallen within the range of 60 to 160, and the scale was therefore adjusted (with tails cut off before 60 and beyond 160) to show a zero to 100 range for more common understanding. The theoretical index can therefore be negative or exceed 100. Please refer to full study.

## ► Recommendations

### 1. Promote inclusion, social interaction and community engagement with migrant workers in destination countries, including through changes to policy and practice.

- 1.1 Stimulate attitude changes on specific issues to tackle discrimination and barriers that prevent the fair treatment of migrant workers, especially women, and social inclusion.
  - Ensure that women and men migrant workers are able to fully access rights and freedoms in line with international labour and human rights standards.
  - Adopt policies, regulations and operating procedures that support social inclusion, including access to services, social security, schools, and health facilities, including those specialized in addressing violence and abuses.
  - City planning can promote social inclusion by avoiding separation of migrant workers' accommodation. Physical distance is a barrier that hinders migrant workers from integrating into the local community and encourages segregation and discrimination.
  - Ensure that labour migration mechanisms are accessible, affordable and not time consuming. Across all four countries, respondents said that migrant workers with regular status can adapt better than those without.
- 1.2 Design, support and deliver policies that facilitate platforms and community events where migrant workers and the public can meaningfully interact and demonstrate the positive impact of migrant workers on societies and economies.
- 1.3 Encourage inclusion in the workplace by working with employers and trade unions to promote the rights of migrant workers. Trade unions could promote solidarity and encourage inclusion by accepting and supporting migrant workers to join as members.
- 1.4 Avoid dehumanizing terms to refer to migrants and migrant workers in legal texts and other official documents.

### 2. Conduct awareness-raising activities with the general public.

- 2.1 Design campaigns to raise awareness by providing accurate and positive information about migrant workers and their contribution to national economy. The study identified that the majority of the respondents had limited knowledge about the important contributions migrant workers make to Malaysia. Information

campaigns can help to inform the public ideally by working on shifting social norms and shared values. It is important to focus on specific sectors and problems so that the public can relate to the messages in a more personalized way.

- Promote campaigns that address the root of negative attitudes towards migrant workers. Strive to develop a personal connection between the public and migrant workers by focusing on specific migrant work sectors and on interactions among nationals and migrant workers within those sectors.
  - Promote evidence of the beneficial impacts of migrant workers to strengthen positive attitudes while at the same time debunking common myths about them, such as the characterization of migrant workers as criminals, as taking jobs from nationals, or as having a negative impact on the economy. Promote messages about the empowerment that can result when women in particular have positive migration experiences.
  - Tackle stigma and raise the status of roles and work sectors in which migrant workers work. Undervaluing the work of migrants has negative consequences and can lead to discrimination and social exclusion. Promoting the importance of decent work, equal opportunities, social protection, gender equality and inclusion are essential.
  - Take care to ensure that messaging does not promote migrant workers – especially women migrant workers – as “victims” or inherently vulnerable. This can feed into narratives that migrant workers are weaker and powerless, and through emphasizing difference, undermine migrant workers' claims to the same rights at work as nationals.
- 2.2 Complement and reinforce public campaigns with targeted interventions directed to influencer groups.
    - Encourage governments, in partnership with international organizations and other relevant actors, to encourage schools to promote positive behaviour towards migrant workers and members of their families. The study highlighted a general lack of knowledge about migrant workers' rights. But public education on prejudice and diversity can shape attitudes towards migrant workers as well as change discriminatory social norms and stereotypical behaviors.

- Implement interventions to encourage more balanced and inclusive reporting, as well as non-discriminatory terminology used by the news media when reporting stories about migrant workers. News media are influential and impact the public's attitudes as well as policy-makers' agendas. Terms such as "undocumented" and "irregular" can be used rather than "illegal"; and "migrant" rather than "alien". At all opportunities, humanize the individual representation of migrant workers and avoid descriptions that overemphasize the number of migrant workers or depict the migrant population as degrading the dominant culture.

2.3 Continue to track shifts and trends in public support for migrant workers in countries of destination. Doing so will allow ongoing campaigns and other interventions to adjust to any changes in public attitudes. More frequent tracking of attitudes can also enable studies to identify causation of changes in public support for migrant workers.

### **3. Harness opportunities available given the high degree of public support for women migrant workers, including opportunities to address violence against women.**

3.1 Leverage the positive public support for ending violence against women migrant workers. Respondents showed high levels of support for access to shelters for women who experience violence and for stronger enforcement against violence. It is recommended to work with governments, trade unions, and NGOs to ensure the availability of shelters and comprehensive services designed to meet the needs of women migrant worker survivors of violence.

- Ratify the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190).
- Governments, employers, trade unions and NGOs should run campaigns to end violence and harassment, including against migrant women and other marginalized groups, in the world of work. Awareness raising and campaigning should form an important part of combined strategies linked to prevention of violence and harassment in the world of work.
- Governments, employers, trade unions and CSOs should make sure information on available VAW services, including shelters, are available and widely disseminated.
- Governments, trade unions and CSOs, including labour migration organizations should make sure to have tools and capacities to refer survivors of violence and abuse to available VAW services through established referral pathways.

3.2 Leverage the public support for women migrant workers to receive maternity leave. Policy change and/or enforcement is needed in migrant countries of destination to ensure women migrant workers have de jure and de facto access to maternity leave within broader social security schemes, and that they are not discriminated against on the grounds of pregnancy, either at work or during recruitment.

3.3 Support governments and employers to actively promote gender-sensitive policies and practices that tackle gender stereotypes and occupational segregation. Strong gender segregation of occupation in the region is the result of stereotypical perceptions of what women can or cannot do as well as the consequence of gender-differentiated barriers in access to specific job opportunities.

### **4. Address declining attitudes of employers of domestic workers.**

4.1 Governments, trade unions and other stakeholders, including domestic workers groups, should conduct a coordinated and evidence-based publicity campaign on the social and economic value of domestic work; and on the rights of domestic workers. Domestic work is often undervalued, and often not fully considered as work, either by employers or through lack of full inclusion in national labour laws.

4.2 All stakeholders, including and especially the media, should use respectful terms to describe domestic workers. They should avoid terms such as "servant", "maid" and "helper", and instead use "domestic worker", which squarely shows that domestic workers are workers, and not servile or part of the family.

4.3 Leverage the positive public support for domestic workers to design and enforce regulations aimed at improving the working conditions of women migrant workers, as well as ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). Respondents showed high levels of support for recognition of care workers, improvement of the working conditions of domestic workers, and equal labour rights for domestic workers on par with nationals. Malaysia has not yet ratified Convention No. 189.

4.4 Conduct further research to understand the knowledge, attitudes and practices (work entitlements provided) of employers of migrant domestic workers. Such a study is critical in light of the fact that employers today appear to show less support for migrant workers than before.

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