

## UNTANGLING THE NEEDS OF REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA: THE WAY FORWARD

<sup>\*1</sup>Atika Shafinaz Nazri, <sup>2</sup>Kartini Aboo Talib@Khalid, <sup>3</sup>Nidzam Sulaiman & <sup>4</sup>Mary Ellen  
Gidah

<sup>1,2,4</sup> Institute of Ethnic Studies, Level 4, Kolej Keris Mas, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,  
43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor  
Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

\*Corresponding author: atikashafinaz@gmail.com

Received: 21.05.2021

Accepted: 08.11.2021

### ABSTRACT

**Background and Purpose:** NGOs have become the most vital actors in meeting refugees' needs in Malaysia; alas, most of these concerns cover basic needs such as food, health care, and education. In this regard, this study investigates other forms of NGOs assistance that ought to be provided to Malaysia's refugee communities to enhance living standards.

**Methodology:** This study employs a qualitative approach consisting of semi-structured interviews with Somalian, Rohingya, Pakistani and Syrian refugees. Data were collected during observation trips in Penang, Kedah, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Johor to comprehensively understand these diasporic communities, notably regarding the challenges refugees face in Malaysia.

**Findings:** The data indicated that refugee communities are significantly in need of proper and accessible channels through which they might share their grievances, temporary shelters, mental health care, and language classes. The team concluded that these forms of assistance ought to be made available to all refugee communities in Malaysia. Without such forms of assistance from NGOs, refugees' lived realities are made invariably more difficult; this is in addition to their vulnerability to forces that threaten their security.

**Contributions:** This paper provides insights into the needs of refugees in Malaysia based on interviews and observations conducted with them. Based on the findings, this research provides recommendations to NGOs to ameliorate life necessities for refugee communities.

**Keywords:** Humanitarian assistance, Malaysia, NGOs, refugees, UNHCR.

**Cite as:** Nazri, A. S., Talib@Khalid, K. A., Sulaiman, N., & Gidah, M. E. (2022). Untangling the needs of refugees in Malaysia: The way forward. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 7(1), 196-220. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol7iss1pp196-220>

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The factors that drive refugees from their home country to other destinations seeking asylum and a better life range from wartime conflicts to natural disasters (Khairi, 2016). The upshot of this is that refugee issues have become increasingly complex and have become recognized as a growing global concern in political and international discourse alongside other issues. At the most basic level, the refugee problem is an individual issue extrapolated to demonstrate the shaping of a political, governmental, and international entity by revealing its humanistic, moral, security, and progress underpinnings (Hakovirta, 1993). Citing an example from the study conducted by Loescher (2002), the interviewed individuals described their concerns regarding their status in the country where they sought asylum could not provide adequate protection. These cases involve a few countries, namely Turkey, Syria, and Kenya, where human rights records indicate that refugees endured arbitrary persecution, arrest, and deportation by the authorities.

These experiences are not as widespread in Malaysia due to NGOs who have collectively come together to alleviate their plight significantly. Malaysian NGOs had actively engaged with refugee communities since 1992, when the country opened its doors to Bosnian refugees who found homes in Kajang, Selangor, and Sarawak. During that time, the NGO body, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), led the way by establishing the Bosnian foster child program in Malaysia (Enh, 2017).

Until early 2020, the number of NGOs in Malaysia rose significantly and became a civil society phenomenon. The exponential increase may be attributed to the growing presence of international refugees in Malaysia, as was reported by UNHCR Malaysia in October 2020. According to the report, the number of refugees and asylum seekers stands at 178 990 and is expected to increase with time (UNHCR Malaysia, 2020). Given such figures, coupled with

the uncertainty of those fleeing their home country, NGOs lead the way to monitor and ensure the refugees' basic needs are adequately met through humanitarian assistance. Hammerstad (2015) defines humanitarian assistance as the aid given to the emergency victims of human-made crises and disasters caused by natural hazards such as floods, famines, or wars. Humanitarian assistance commonly employs emergency assistance to highlight short-term goals, the impact of which is rapid lifesaving and the reduction of suffering. In a different light, long-term missions are aimed at assisting development. The term 'complex emergency' conceptualizes specific issues to curb humanitarian catastrophe amid war or large-scale political violence. The response to humanitarian assistance happens concurrently alongside political and military actions to halt terrorism activities.

The primary vision of humanitarian intervention is to save a life, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity by assisting those in need. There are several humanitarian sectors such as education and agriculture; however, the four main aspects that measure a person's survival are food, shelter, health, water, and sanitation. This operation also depends on how much contribution is made (Rose, Phil O'keefe, Jayawickrama, & O'brien, 2013). Nevertheless, in Malaysia, Nazri, Khalid, and Sulaiman (2019) criticized Malaysian NGOs who primarily focused on food, health care, and education when providing humanitarian assistance to refugees. In this regard, our team would like to counter-argue to untangle NGOs' forms of assistance to Malaysia's refugees to preserve their living standards. We have confidence that the findings will help identify refugees' needs in Malaysia based on interviews and observations conducted with this vulnerable group. Based on the findings, this research provides recommendations to NGOs to ameliorate life necessities for refugee communities.

## **2.0 REFUGEE-RELATED ISSUES AND HUMANITARIAN NGOs IN MALAYSIA**

Refugees living in countries that have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol generally find themselves better placed to secure occupation and access education and health care. As for others not as fortunately placed, life could be much more challenging and destabilized. The discussion of Malaysian refugee-related issues in the context of security is seen in the work of Ali and Sehu Mohamad (2014), Abdullah (2014), Hamzah, Daud, Idris, and Shamshinor (2016), Ahmad, Rahim, and Mohamed (2016), Wahab (2018), Nazri et al. (2019), and Sahak, Nordin, and Ishak (2020).

We begin by referring to the study of Ali and Sehu Mohamad (2014), in which he reviewed the challenges faced by ethnic Rohingya Muslim refugees who face unemployment due to the non-issuance of birth certificates to babies born in Malaysia because their parents

are incapable of providing valid identification documents. Rohingya teenagers who should be receiving some form of formal education are sidelined because of their refugee status. Besides that, Ali maintains that many refugees are experiencing severe health problems but are incapable of obtaining appropriate health care due to financial constraints. Because refugees live far below the poverty line, they are forced to find shelter under bridges, build shelters on construction sites, or beg on the streets. Above all else, Ali believes that the Rohingya refugee community's biggest menace is the ever-looming threat of being arrested by the authorities and deported from Malaysia.

In concurring with Ali and Sehu Mohamad (2014), Hamzah et al. (2016) determined that members of the Rohingya community were often victims of exploitation and deception in illegal human trafficking rings. This trail of human slavery and suffering most often led to mass murders, such as in the cases of Wang Kelian and Padang Besar in the Malaysian state of Perlis. This particular issue was at the forefront of the study conducted by Wahab (2018), who discovered that ethnic Rohingya refugees were smuggled across borders only to be forced into marriage or labor exploitation.

We also found that Syrian refugees in Malaysia experience similar predicaments. Findings from the research conducted by Nazri et al. (2019) indicate that Syrian refugees are frequently oppressed, detained, and forced to offer bribes to the authorities to avoid jail time or fines. In spite, refugees who are UNHCR cardholders face arrest by the immigration authorities and the police. In addition, Nazri et al. (2019)'s research disclosed that many Syrian refugees, notably women and children, have been traumatized by the experience of war in their home countries. Regrettably, most refugees in Malaysia have no channels to express their grievances and receive mental health therapy for the trauma.

Refugees in Malaysia are confronted with numerous issues which, fortunately, have not gone unnoticed, particularly by the NGOs. In general, humanitarian NGOs are among the first actors to reach the scene of human rights and humanitarian law violations. Irrera (2011) identified the following characteristics of humanitarian NGOs (p. 91):

- a) Organizations are playing a role, even if they are part of a political mission.
- b) They are committed to the idea that conflict management should be respected.
- c) NGOs, in solidarity, focus on the root conflict consequence as the main problem to disentangle.
- d) Trust-based NGOs. Charity and compassion as values are guidelines for action.

In general, the types of NGOs' assistantships are widely varied and lean either towards immediate assistance or long-term development (Byman, Lesser, Pirnie, Benard, & Waxman, 2000). Beamon and Balcik (2008) explained the participation of human rights NGOs in two types of activities:

**a) Assistance Activities**

Assistance for large-scale emergency victims. These activities are short-term and focus on providing services to human health and survival.

**b) Development Activities**

Long-term assistance that focuses on self-sufficiency and sustainability includes permanent construction, transportation, food, and health care.

In the case of the Rohingya refugees, as described in the study conducted by Abdullah (2014), there is a well-known organization known as the Rohingya Information Center in Taman Bukit Teratai, Johor. The center has established networks with many charity organizations in Malaysia. Other Rohingya organizations in Malaysia include the Rohingya Solidarity Democratic Movement, the Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organization, and the Community Rohingya Islam Pro-Democracy Organization. Abdullah (2014) argues, even though the organizations' headquarters are not located in Malaysia, they continue to extend assistance to almost 15 000 Rohingya in the country regardless of the state and district of origin. The Rohingya refugees have availed themselves of the organization's networks' assistance to ensure their ethnic identity remains intact.

Ahmad et al. (2016) observed Malaysia's experience in managing the refugee influx. What sets their study apart from others in the discussion on refugee issues is how Malaysia copes with stateless persons' arrival in tandem with NGOs engagement to alleviate the situation. In dissecting Malaysia's handling of refugee cases, they scrutinized the four refugee groups who have been, and are currently, depending on Malaysia for assistance and relief: Vietnamese, Bosnians, Rohingya, and Syrians. The Malaysian Social Research Institute's establishment has helped refugees from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria, specifically in education, through funding from the UNHCR. Also, the results of their study indicate that there is a nine-point NGOs cooperative effort comprising Humanitarian Care Malaysia (MyCare), Syria Care Malaysia, Malaysian Humanitarian Aid and Relief (MAHAR), ABIM, and IMAM Response and Relief Team (IMARET). They engaged in assisting Syrian migrants in Malaysia via the foundation known as Dana Kemanusiaan Imigran Syria.

Therefore, Sahak et al. (2020) exposition on refugee plights and anguish in Malaysia as a transit country is somewhat inaccurate. Precisely, a common understanding between the UNHCR and the NGOs is a necessary strategy to protect refugees. Our research team also uncovered that issues confronting refugees in Malaysia are experienced by refugees abroad, such as in Turkey, Jordan, and Bangladesh. In Turkey, about 15% of the total number fleeing Syria live in refugee camps, while some are in cities. Some other Syrian refugees live in rural areas, making it logistically difficult for humanitarian organizations to send aid to them. Refugees are forced to live in overcrowding accommodations with limited food supplies and other necessities (Al-Natour, Al-Ostaz, & Morris, 2018). Numerous women refugees, notably those who moved alone or even those who had children, also experienced the violence of various forms during their travels to Europe, including smuggling. These particular groups are vulnerable to sexual assault such as rape (Freedman, 2016). Meanwhile, in Irbid, Jordan, women refugees have come forward to share feelings of insecurity when waiting with their daughters for the school bus at public bus stops (Krause et al., 2015). In Bangladeshi refugee camps, some men were forced to find jobs in river ports; others were sentenced to prison foraging in the jungle, and women were forced to go to a town near Teknaf to beg (Larkin, 2007).

The above discussion shows that previous studies have focused more on the forms of barriers confronted by refugees without paying adequate attention to the solutions that need to be implemented to improve the refugees' quality of life. Such discussions on refugee issues have helped this study fill in the gaps regarding the actual needs of refugee communities to thrive and live more prosperously. Previous studies have shown that many Malaysian humanitarian NGOs are involved in helping refugees; unfortunately, the discussions failed to take an in-depth look at the types of NGO assistance available. Drawing from the above, we conclude that security issues are at the forefront of concerns plaguing all refugees, including the Rohingya and Syrians. We assert that if nothing is done to deescalate the situation, refugee life will remain perilous. NGOs engagement in providing humanitarian assistance to the refugee groups in Malaysia is, at best, still constrained to focusing on basic needs - food, health, and education - instead of long-term development that could prove more advantageous to the refugee communities.

### **3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN**

This research utilized a qualitative method yielding primary and secondary data. Based on the investigation, this study helps to understand better refugees' conditions seeking shelter in

Malaysia based on their narrative. This study is limited to the understanding of the refugees' experience in Peninsular Malaysia without involving communities in Sabah and Sarawak because it is based on statistics from UNHCR Malaysia (2020):

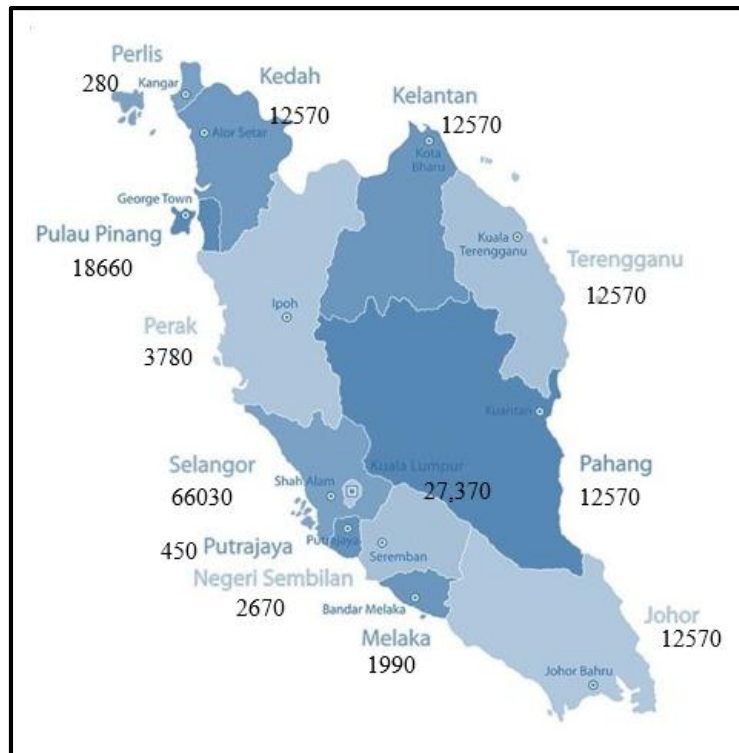


Figure 1: Refugees statistics in Peninsular Malaysia

Source: UHNCR Malaysia (2020)

### 3.1 In-Depth Interviews

Primary data was acquired through unstructured interviews, during which the researchers asked a series of questions to which the informants were given free rein in providing their answers. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain the unique views of informants who were willing to share their experiences as recipients of humanitarian aid; the data from the interviews strengthened the phenomenon studied. The purpose of in-depth interviews is to share informants' experiences instead of predicting or controlling their narratives. Researchers found that most refugees were fearful during formal interviews. Therefore, this study only managed to interview four refugees, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: List of informants

Informant	Refugee	Date
Informant 1	Somalia	14 July 2019
Informant 2	Rohingya	14 July 2019
Informant 3	Syria	1 October 2019
Informant 4	Pakistan	30 November 2019

In line with Creswell (2013), we found that it was sufficient to interview up to four or five informants before reaching saturation point at which the data procured no longer unearthed new information on refugee problems.

The selection of Somali and Pakistani refugees as informants was based on the initial observational analysis that had previously been conducted. The justification for the selection from the Somalian and Pakistani refugees is because they generally receive less attention as beneficiaries of NGOs assistance, according to UNHCR statistics. The Pakistani refugee community-ranked second-highest with 6640 individuals, while Somalian numbers were estimated to be around 3230. Most refugees from Somalia were single mothers compared to refugees of other ethnicities and nationalities, the majority of which had family members in Malaysia. The Rohingya community registered the highest number of displaced individuals (102,020) in Malaysia. As a side note, because of the Syrian Migrant Temporary Relocation Program, Syrian refugees can apply for a status change from refugee to a migrant.

All refugee informants are Muslims because they are more comfortable and open to participating in interviews than non-Muslims who fear sharing information formally. Such a response is further compounded by the fact that the majority of refugees in Malaysia are Muslims. However, the researchers also sought to obtain information from non-Muslim refugees through personal conversations during participatory observation, regardless of ethnicity and nationality. For instance, researchers conducted observations at the Alternative Community Learning Centre of Chin refugees, Cheras, Selangor, all non-Muslims. The researchers used Malay, English, and Arabic during the interview sessions.

The refugees interviewed were from those who had lived in Malaysia for an extended period, had a UNHCR identity card, and were capable of articulation and open to sharing experiences. The in-depth interview sessions conducted with the informants depended on the

number of questions; usually, interviews with NGOs workers, government agencies, and experts lasted an hour and a half while interviews with refugees were concluded within 30 to 45 minutes.

### **3.2 Participant Observation**

The researchers also employed participant observations to collect the data to understand the diasporic and day-to-day tribulations confronting the refugees in Penang, Kedah, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Johor (Table 2). Additionally, anecdotal data accumulated through personal conversations with the interviewees served to enrich the hoard of data collected in this study, notably among the non-Muslim refugees because they hesitated to share information via formal interviews. Researchers were volunteers at non-profit organizations for several years, conducting the participant observation covertly. This approach allows researchers to observe without suspicion and get to know every member of each organization acceptably. Furthermore, participant observation permits researchers to familiarize themselves with the processes in these organizations and get to know their refugees as clients in serving their needs. The frequent and similar responses and interactions become indicators to build a case on how these organizations respond to providing refugees services.

Table 2: Observation details

Date	Location
28 June 2019	Seksyen 9, Shah Alam
29 June 2019	Domain, Cyberjaya
29 June 2019	Mutiara Ville, Cyberjaya
4 September 2019	Alternative Education Centre of Rohingya, Lahat, Ipoh, Perak
14 July 2019	Publika, Damansara, Selangor
5 September 2019	Kampung Sungai Gelugor, Tembusu, Sungai Petani, Kedah
6 September 2019	Bukit Pinang, Kedah
8 September 2019	Alma Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang
8 September 2019	Machang Bubok, Pulau Pinang
8 September 2019	Bagan Ajam, Pulau Pinang
5 September 2019	Kampung Pengkalan Lebai Man, Sungai Petani, Kedah
7 September 2019	Taman Perindustrian Ringan Kristal, Alor Setar, Kedah
7 September 2019	Bailtu rahmah, Rohingya Learning Center, Taman Sejahtera, Sungai Petani, Kedah
2 November 2019	Restoran Istanbul, Domain, Cyberjaya, Selangor
10 November 2019	Sri Ria Apartment, Sepakat Indah 1, Kajang, Selangor
30 November 2019	Taman Cempaka 1C, Bukit Sentosa, Bukit Beruntung, Selangor
22 December 2019	Machang Bubok, Pulau Pinang
22 December 2019	Alma, Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang

22 December 2019	Bagan Ajam, Pulau Pinang
23 December 2019	Kampung Sungai Belati, Sungai Baharu, Perlis
23 December 2019	Bukit Pinang, Kedah
23 December 2019	Taman Perindustrian Ringan Kristal, Alor Star, Kedah
24 December 2019	Baitul Rahmah, Sungai Petani, Kedah
24 December 2019	Kampung Lebai Man, Sungai Petani, Kedah
24 December 2019	Temusu, Sungai Petani, Kedah
29 December 2019	Kampung Sungai Sekamat, Kajang, Selangor
3 January 2020	Taman Sri Murni Selayang, Selangor
11 February 2020	PPA Chin, Cheras, Selangor
11 February 2020	Somalia community Center, Gombak
11 February 2020	MSRI Ampang, Kuala Lumpur
15 February 2020	Seksyen 16, Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor
13 July 2020	Afghanistan Community Center, Ampang, Kuala Lumpur

---

### **3.3 Secondary Data and Analysis Data**

Meanwhile, secondary data was derived from the literature review comprising the latest journal articles. The study applied a thematic data analysis in which the findings were streamed according to the themes which naturally suggested themselves during analysis. The point of thematic analysis is to determine themes, identify significant or exciting patterns in the data, which are then employed in the research to comment on a given issue. This technique allows a summary of the data and an interpretation of the themes to understand better the underpinning currents of a particular phenomenon (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). An example of the findings derived from participatory observation data and excerpts of personal conversations in the interview transcriptions is "Observation in Kampung Sungai Sekamat, Kajang, Selangor on 16

January 2020 at 5.34 pm". The identification method used for reporting interview data is (Informant 1, 2020), placed in the same text section. The informant's real name is anonymous; their code is designed as Informant 1, Informant 2, and so on to protect the informant's identity.

## **4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 The Needs of Refugees in Malaysia**

NGOs play the role of actors in civil society to meet the refugees' needs, as opined by Khalid (2010, p. 11), who affirmed that an NGOs could be "any entity besides the government that wields enormous influence and capabilities in assisting society to achieve a harmonious existence". Governments and NGOs establish a symbiotic relationship when NGOs "increasingly [express] their desire to engage civil society," [and governments] acknowledge the presence of this actor as advantageous as well as "instrumental in dealing with contemporary societal issues" (Branden, Trommel, & Verschuere, 2015, p. 677). Be that as it may, concerning the problem statement, discussion of the literature, and consolidation with findings from the interviews and observations made during fieldwork, the research findings suggest several shortcomings in meeting refugees' needs that require attention. The discussion in this context is focused on refugees' needs besides the three main categories of food, health care, and education that NGOs are already providing. In essence, the question posed through this study is, "what are the other forms of assistance which NGOs might provide to refugees?"

#### *i. Complaint channels*

Although refugees have UNHCR identification documents and can thus move freely, they are still vulnerable in Malaysia regarding authority bodies such as the police or the immigration officers. Refugees believe that their UNHCR cards do not guarantee a safe existence in Malaysia. In the event of unexpected emergencies, they are ignorant about whom to turn to for assistance. They are therefore forced to bear the brunt of the problems themselves without assistance from anyone. For instance, most of them are resigned to the fact that when an employer acts unfairly by withholding their wages, they are powerless to protest or fight back or obtain any form of assistance (Observation at Taman Cempaka 1C, Bukit Sentosa, Bukit Beruntung, Selangor on 30 November 2019 at 4.00 pm). In a more isolated case, Nazri et al. (2019) documented the case of a 12-year-old Syrian boy who had come into contact with a Pakistani pedophile who worked as a religious teacher at the boy's school. The situation came to a head when the man went to the boy's home to look for him, and the boy's family were

frightened to go to the police because they only had UNHCR identification. Consequently, the family was forced to move from Kajang to an undisclosed location to protect their son.

A complaints bureau is essential when the authorities arrest refugees, making them vulnerable to blackmail or extortion. Refugees have narrated several instances to the researchers in which they were victimized:

*“...but some of my community, community leader I meet many times for the arrested people like the Somalian people, Yamani people arrested by the police. Sometimes they have a UC letter. You see, you have a card, so the police cannot arrest you, but if you have the appointment or the paper for the UNHCR picture, so they catch the police then after 14 days, so you are released for the UHNCR”* (Informant 1, 2019).

*“...we have much trouble in Malaysia. If we can return, we will return to our own country. If people do not have documents, that person, if they are caught, they have to pay, they cannot afford to pay the police, and I do not want to be arrested. We want to freedom; now we refugees have this, there is fear, there is fear -Where to go there is this catch”* (Informant 2, 2019).

The Syrian man's experience further explains statements from Informants 1 and 2; it became apparent that the police had arrested him as he was on his way back from Petaling Jaya to Cyberjaya and had then extorted RM100 from him instead of a summons or jail time (Observation in Mutiara Ville, Cyberjaya one 29 June 2019 at 8.38 pm). The researchers also gathered similar data patterns of extortion. Initially, the Rohingya interviewees were reluctant to talk about their run-ins with the public and the authorities, but the researchers convinced them to understand that their cooperation would allow the researchers to highlight the refugees' problems. Given strong reassurances, the refugees started to share stories of being harassed by the local Malay community, the police, and officers from the Road Transport Department. The authorities would frequently patrol the adjacent areas and arrest refugees who fled to the peripheries of nearby villages ostensibly to curb the presence of individuals without official documentation when in reality. The officers were only after illicit bribes (Observation in Bukit Pinang, Kedah on 6 September 2019 and 23 September 2019 at 4.34 pm). Such experiences have been corroborated in the study conducted by Ali and Sehu Mohamad (2014). Nazri et al. (2019) reiterated that such incidences form a collective threat to the refugee community

because these frequent arrests have led to some community members being deported from Malaysia.

Besides being harassed, as outlined above, the range of complaints includes sexual molestation, robbery, fraud, and persecution by the locals. In these issues, the NGOs' role is to mediate and facilitate such reports of victimizing as envisaged by MacTavish (2016), who received reports of sexual abuse from female refugees in the refugee camp in Zaatari, Jordan. Based on figure 2, MacTavish confirms that refugees in Zaatari Camp submitted more reports of sexual harassment that occurred to NGOs than to other agencies. Refugees felt more secure reporting any inconvenience they experienced to NGOs than other agencies because of the NGOs' high level of trust, empathy, and pleasantness.

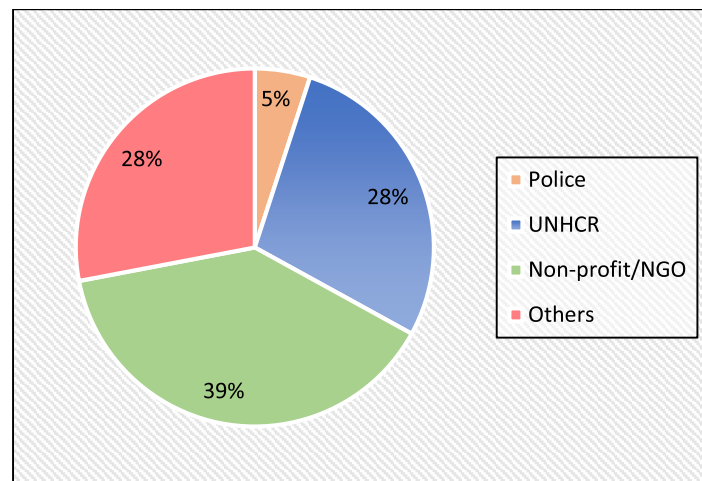


Figure 2: Platform for sexual harassment complaints by the Syrian refugee women in Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan

Source: MacTavish (2016)

## ii. *Temporary shelter*

Shelter remains one of the priorities for refugees because the shelter is integral to sustaining life and ensuring personal safety, dignity, and protection from physical assault (Kumssa, Williams, Jones, & Des Marais, 2014). In Malaysia, temporary accommodations are a basic necessity for newly arrived refugees who have yet to acquire legal documentation and have no acquaintance or family to contact for assistance; these refugees face the risk of falling through the community's cracks and consequently finding themselves homeless in Malaysia. Available temporary housing is an immense help to those without adequate funds to rent rooms or homes, as well as those who have been arbitrarily evicted by landlords and thus have no place to go, for instance, in the research conducted by Nazri et al. (2019), an account of a 68-year-old man

who had only a large bag with him as he roamed the streets of Masjid India, Kuala Lumpur and slept wherever he could. Based on the information he provided, the research determined that he had not received any assistance at all. In the study by Ali and Sehu Mohamad (2014), it was discovered that some Rohingya refugees were forced to set up camps under bridges or live on construction sites and beg for a living due to extreme poverty.

Other cases in which shelter is of extreme priority include threats to personal safety posed by abusive spouses, sexual predators, and threats from the public. One example is a Rohingya woman identified in this study as Informant 2, aged 34, who had come to Malaysia with an agent's help. She had gotten married for the second time, but the marriage ended because of irreconcilable differences and spousal abuse. Even though they were divorced, her ex-husband would still come around until she decided to move away. Informant 2 stated:

*“Tenaganita had provided me with shelter and assistance in Malaysia. It was an NGO that provided shelter for all those from other countries. I was there in the shelter for ten months. That NGO helped me. No other NGOs did”* (Informant 2, 2019).

Informant 2's experiences detailed how an NGO, Tenaganita, had given her temporary shelter. However, as a Muslim, she faced difficulties because the Hindu housekeeper could not perform her obligatory daily prayers. Such discrimination worsened her circumstances, so she decided to leave, having no other alternatives left.

The recommendation for NGO-run temporary homes is supported by the study by El-Khani, Ulph, Peters, and Calam (2018). Local NGOs in Turkey acquired a building once a wedding hall and turned it into a temporary shelter for Syrian refugees newly arrived in Reyhanli, South Turkey, a place close to the refugee camp in Bakhsheen. Based on his research, no individual was allowed to stay in the shelter for more than four weeks. Later, they were transferred as soon as possible by the NGOs to the refugees' camp.

### **iii. Legal aid**

Although refugees hold UNHCR cards, they are still at risk of being arrested by the local authorities, especially those working without legal permits. This issue has statistical substance as per Figure 3, which shows refugee numbers in detention despite some of them having UNHCR cards:

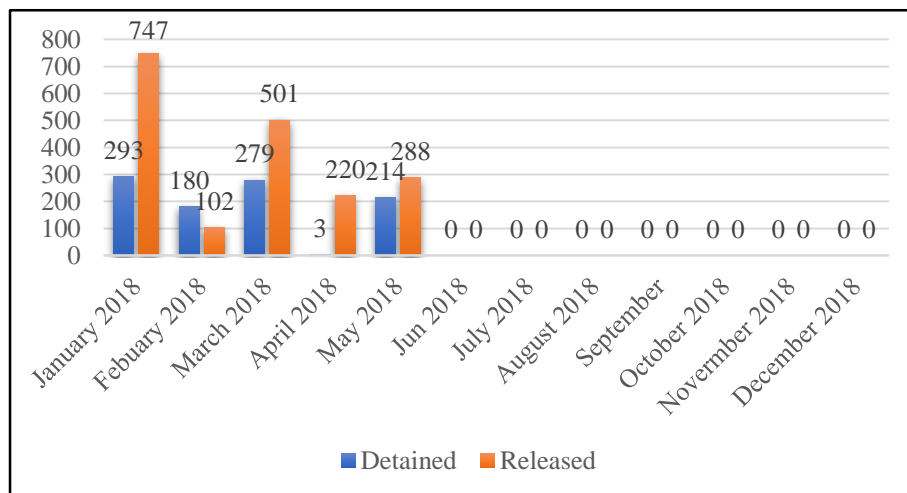


Figure 3: Number of asylum seekers and refugees were detained and released

Source: UNHCR (2018)

In Malaysia, during this study, it has been ascertained that many of those arrested were placed in detention camps. While in detention, the individuals have no alternative but to ask friends or family to contact the UNHCR on their behalf. As in the case of Informant 3, an 18-year-old Syrian man who had been arrested at the age of 17. He divulged the following:

*“The authorities conducted an operation, and I was arrested. I could not get away because they were everywhere. I was quickly detained. There were 200 of us in eight lorries. I do not know where they took us; it seemed like a football stadium, like an office. There were people there in the office with computers and laptops. They took down my name as stated on my UN card. Those without documentation were held separately. They would probably be thrown in jail. Those with a UN card were left stewing for a day or two before being released because we had been detained during work hours. We were then taken to Bukit Aman. Police [headquarters]. Myself and eight other Syrian refugees”* (Informant 3, 2019).

Based on the informant’s anecdotes, he had also been detained by immigration officers during a raid on Arab restaurants in Lingkaran Cyber Point, Cyberjaya, and had been in a detention camp for almost seven months. Being a teenager at his arrest, he had no idea where or whom to turn for assistance.

The need for NGO engagement in legal matters is supported by Kersch and Mishtal (2016), who studied the Alliance for Regional and Civil Initiatives (ARCI) in mediating

detention issues of refugees in Europe. Their research showed that the ARCI would provide a lawyer for refugees on trial and make efforts to contact court authorities to bring forward court dates.

NGOs also play a role in detention cases and assist through legal means refugees who desire to return to their home country as many refugees are unaware of the procedures required during immigration processing. This issue may be seen in the study conducted by Mollie and Gerver (2016), in which NGOs were found to play a significant part in assisting refugees in Israel to return to their home country as these refugees had found that life in Israel was even less bearable than in their country of origin. In March and April 2012, 1200 individuals from the south of Sudan in Israel have repatriated thanks primarily to NGOs endeavors.

#### *iv. Psychological healthcare*

The local community might be under the impression that refugees are provided with adequate assistance because they have access to food, water, and shelter (Sim, 2016) and can move about in relative safety compared to their home country. The reality is that most refugees suffer from some degree of trauma that affects their mental and emotional health due to losing their country, culture, language, profession, family, friends, and the perceived destruction of their future. Even before arriving in the host country, refugees have already been through appalling circumstances such as violent conflict, detention and jail time for political or religious reasons, torture or physical and mental trauma, sexual abuse, and even witnessing the brutal deaths of people around them (Akinyemi, Owoaje, & Cadmus, 2016; Lindencrona, Ekblad, & Hauff, 2007; Lindert, Ehrenstein, Priebe, Mielck, & Brähler, 2009; Mollica, Wyshak, & Lavelle, 1987).

Such horrific experiences have been documented by Nazri et al. (2019), who described in detail the case of a teenager, aged 19, who had committed suicide by jumping from the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of an apartment building in Kajang. The young man had been under severe psychological stress from his time in war-torn Syria. A similar study revealed that women were traumatized from the war in Syria and continued to suffer the aftereffects even after coming to Malaysia. To illustrate, the sound of fireworks or thunder would immediately take them back to the sound of bombs exploding in Syria.

In addition to trauma acquired in their home country, the mental stress they carry is intensified by the harsh realities of life in the host country. For example, in the study conducted by Fleay and Hartley (2016), it was discovered that asylum seekers awaiting refugee status in Australia were not allowed to work and therefore had to depend on minimal financial support.

Compounded with an extended length of time in which they had nothing much to do, this served only to worsen their state of mind and emotional makeup with the addition of sadness and fear.

The right to gainful employment is fundamental to refugees and asylum seekers concerning their dignity and self-esteem. Work allows them to participate and contribute to the host community and improve their language and other skills. Economic emancipation lessens their dependence on social assistance and discourages the formation of an economically disadvantaged class of people who are mainly dependent on handouts (Edwards, 2005).

The first case in question involves victims of human trafficking. During a fieldwork trip to a Rohingya school in Lahat, Ipoh, Perak, in a private conversation with the school's headmaster, it was revealed that one of the male students had been a victim of human trafficking in Myanmar before he was rescued and brought to the school. When a research team member attempted to engage him in conversation, he appeared frightened and seemed unable to answer the question posed. The researcher noted that the child was traumatized and had great reluctance to talk to people he did not know (Observation in Rohingya School, Lahat, Ipoh, Perak on 4 September 2019 at 2.00 pm). Trauma may also be experienced due to having been arrested and imprisoned in Malaysian jails as narrated by Informant 3:

*"After that, we were taken to Semenyih. Probably Semenyih. I was there for six months and two weeks before the UN allowed me to be released, but life was so difficult that I prayed to die during those six months. The food was horrible, and I was sick most of the time, everything itched because the place was so dirty, and we were crammed into a room with 150 people" (Informant 3, 2019).*

Informant 3 told the researchers that prison was unbearable due to the unhygienic conditions and the prison authorities' cruelty that caused him even more stress and trauma. He added:

*"They were cruel there. They did not care. They struck us. Many times, I had to be sent to Kajang Hospital. Whether it was itchiness or open swollen wounds, but it took so long for them to take me to the hospital. Sometimes it would be two, even three weeks before they would take me to the hospital. They did not care. When I got angry, they hit me again. When I was hurt, I told the immigration officers many times that I was a human being just like them, but they did not like it and beat me again. I do not know how I survived six months there" (Informant 3, 2019).*

As disclosed by Informant 3, he had notified the UNHCR representative who had come to take his statement and arranged for his release after receiving a report of abuse by the correctional officers. It took ten days after the UNHCR had initiated an investigation of his allegations before being released. Despite being free now, Informant 3 still struggles with the trauma he experienced in prison.

In another case, the research team found evidence that the unsympathetic views and poor treatment of local people towards refugees contribute to their emotional turbulence. The existing discrimination caused tremendous stress for Pakistani children because they had been kept indoors. After all, the authorities shut down their school. This part was attributed to discrimination from the local community, who had a distinctly unfavorable impression of Pakistani refugee children playing in the streets (Informant 4, 2019).

Based on the situations above, this research asserts that NGOs in Malaysia must push for refugee communities to access appropriate psychological treatment to address their emotional and mental burdens. In the international arena, such as in Europe, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Cox's Bazar, there are many NGOs that offer psychological and mental health therapy (Renner, 2009; Soares & Tzafalias, 2015; Almoshmosh, Mobayed, & Aljendi, 2016; Yassin, Taha, Ghantous, Mia, & Forgione, 2018; Gilbert, 2009; Elshazly, Alam, & Ventevogel, 2019).

#### *v. Language classes*

Based on Mestheneos and Iqannidi's (2002) study, one of the critical issues is employment and language mastery for most refugees. This finding is in line with the study by Li and Sah (2019), who noted that a refugee's potentiality to master the local language is of great importance in securing employment and improving their pay scale. Nevertheless, refugees' risk being sidelined by the local communities without assistance, encouragement, and direction from external parties (Kleinmann, 1984). The lack of ability to master the host country's language could be seriously detrimental to the refugees' ability to carve out a place for themselves alongside the local community. For instance, as Tran (1990) demonstrated in their study, adult Vietnamese refugees in America found it difficult to acclimatize to the local community due to their inability to master English. Language skill impacted their ability to buy food, apply for assistance, and call the police or fire department when needed. Language mastery is crucial. After all, it connects with other basic survival needs such as complaints channels, legal assistance, and psychological treatment because these all depend on the refugees' ability to communicate their needs to the host society. In critical cases, such as when refugees find

themselves implicated in criminal acts or are the victims of crimes, they do not seek help from the police because they are impeded by the language barrier and are thus rendered incapable of claiming justice for themselves.

In Malaysia, based on observation studies around the Klang Valley, Kedah and Perlis, language is the main hurdle that refugees face when looking for jobs. Thus, their alternatives are limited to small-scale entrepreneurship, such as home businesses involving food preparation and sale. Understandably, these business activities' proceeds are not commensurate with household expenses; the situation is significantly more for families with many school-going children.

The findings of this study indicate that language classes for refugee communities should be a priority for NGOs in Malaysia. The research team suggests that language mastery should include mastery of both English and the local language. The English language is not only an integral factor in the interaction between the refugee and host communities; it is crucial given that these refugees might one day find themselves being moved along to yet another host country as in the case of refugees in Thailand who are being prepared for life in the United States by taking language classes offered by Thai NGOs (Harkins, 2012).

Based on the need's analysis of refugee communities in Malaysia, we identified several areas in which assistance could benefit them: complaint channels, temporary shelters, legal aid, psychological healthcare, and language classes. Complaint channels need to be made accessible to refugees who do not have food and available finances and in the event of threats to their safety. The temporary shelters are needed to provide a safe transition zone for refugees. Legal aid could offer assistance to refugees in an arrest by law enforcement and secure their release from detention. Psychological healthcare contributes towards stabilizing the processing of trauma suffered by individuals in their home country or even in Malaysia, and language classes benefit refugees in overcoming communication barriers when job hunting.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

In line with the study by Ong, Chai, Tan, and Tan (2018), although under UNHCR protection, refugees' lives are destabilized within risk fraught circumstances. The number of refugees in Malaysia is continually rising, and therefore not all individuals may be registered with the UNHCR. Fortunately, the growing number of NGOs in Malaysia is projected to absorb some of the pressure on the UNHCR to provide for the mass number of refugees seeking help. In concurrence with the findings of the study by Galtung (1986), we reiterate this position via our

research, “What the NGOs can do for the United Nations is far more important than the question of what the United Nations can do for the NGOs” (p. 5).

At present, most Malaysian NGOs are more concerned with providing refugee communities with food, health care, and education. However, it is apparent from previous studies that refugees are also contending with multiple threats to their safety, such as oppression and injustice perpetrated upon them by the local people, unlawful and arbitrary detention by authorities, and trauma from wartime or jailtime experiences. Refugee life in Malaysia is not as idealistic as it might appear to be. Indeed, refugees find that life could be that much more challenging here in Malaysia than in their home country.

The findings of this study consistently point towards several aspects of much-needed aid that NGOs could and should provide to refugee communities in this country: (1) complaint channels; (2) temporary shelter; (3) legal aid; (4) psychological healthcare; and (5) language classes. These five areas are interrelated; for instance, language mastery is required for refugees to channel their complaints and seek legal aid and mental healthcare. The ability to fully utilize the complaints channels is needed when refugees face oppression and detention from the police or any other authorized body. Therefore, NGOs must reconsider and reprioritize the types of aid they distribute according to the refugee communities' needs. If these needs are not met, community members would be hard-pressed to protect themselves and negotiate life in Malaysia. The most significant contribution of this study is to highlight the five areas of aid that should be extended to all refugee communities in the country.

We assert that it is time for Malaysian NGOs to undergo an organizational transformation to expand their endeavor to provide more holistically for refugee communities on top of the three significant available assistance categories. In the United States, Europe, Turkey, and Australia, numerous NGOs are already thinking innovatively about the forms of aid they dispense to refugees; this is particularly significant given that refugee communities' survival depends much on NGOs support. Networking between these organizations is vital in ensuring that humanitarian aid is distributed more systematically and less haphazardly.

## REFERENCES

- Abdullah, A. (2014). Diaspora Rohingya di Malaysia: Pengekalan identiti dan survival masyarakat minoriti. *Sarjana*, 29(1), 107-122.
- Ahmad, A. A., Rahim, A. Z., & Mohamed, B. H. M. A. (2016). The refugee crisis in Southeast Asia: The Malaysian experience. *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences*, 3(6), 80-90.

- Akinyemi, O. O., Owoaje, E. T., & Cadmus, E. O. (2016). In their own words: Mental health and quality of life of West African refugees in Nigeria. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 17(1), 273-287.
- Ali, N., & Sehu Mohamad, Z. (2014). *Cabaran-cabaran pelarian Rohingya Muslim: Kajian kes di Pulau Pinang*. Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Almoshmash, N., Mobayed, M., & Aljendi, M. (2016). Mental health and psychosocial needs of Syrian refugees and the role of Syrian non-governmental organizations. *BJPSYCH International*, 13(4), 81-83.
- Al-Natour, A., Al-Ostaz, S. M., & Morris, E. J. (2018). Marital violence during war conflict: The lived experience of Syrian refugee women. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 00(0), 1-7.
- Beamon, M. B., & Balcik, B. (2008). Performance measurement in humanitarian relief chains. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 21(1), 4-25.
- Brandsen, T., Trommel, W., & Verschuere, B. (2015). The state and the reconstruction of civil society. *International Review of Administrative Article Sciences*, 83(4), 676-693.
- Byman, D., Lesser, I., Pirnie, B., Benard, C., & Waxman, M. (2000). *Strengthening the partnership: Improving military coordination with relief agencies*. RAND.
- Creswell, W. J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Sage Publication.
- Edwards, A. (2005). Human rights, refugees, and the right “to enjoy” asylum. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 17(2), 293-330.
- El-Khani, A., Ulph, F., Peters, S., & Calam, R. (2018). Syria: Refugee parents’ experiences and need for parenting support in camps and humanitarian settings. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 13(1), 19-29.
- Elshazly, M., Alam A. M., & Ventevogel, P. (2019). Field-level coordination of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services for Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar. *Intervention*, 17(1), 212-216.
- Enh, M. A. (2017). Sumbangan dan peranan Malaysia dalam konflik Bosnia-Rerbia 1992-1995. *Sejarah*, 17(17), 177-193.
- Fleay, C., & Hartley, L. (2016). 'I feel like a beggar': Asylum seekers living in the Australian community without the right to work. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 17(4), 1031-1048.
- Freedman, J. (2016). Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: A hidden aspect of the refugee “crisis”. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 24(47), 18-26.

- Galtung, H. (1986). A new era for non-governmental organization in the UN? *Transnational Association*, 3(1), 183-186.
- Gilbert, J. (2009). Power and ethics in psychosocial counselling: Reflections on the experience of an international NGO providing services for Iraqi refugees in Jordan. *Intervention*, 7(1), 50-60.
- Hakovirta, H. (1993). The global refugee problem: A model and its application. *International Political Science Review*, 14(1), 35-57.
- Hammerstad, A. (2015). The international humanitarian regime and its discontents: India's challenge. *The Round Table*, 104(4), 457-471.
- Hamzah, S. I., Daud, S., Idris, A. N., & Shamshinor, A. S. M. (2016). Migrasi rentas sempadan etnik Rohingya dan implikasi terhadap Malaysia. *Sains Insani*, 1(1), 36-43.
- Harkins, B. (2012). Beyond "temporary shelter": A case study of Karen Refugee resettlement in St. Paul, Minnesota. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 10(2), 184-203.
- Irrera, D. (2011). Civil society and humanitarian action - NGOs' roles in peace support operations: Review of central European affairs review of central European affairs. *Perspectives*, 19(1), 85-106.
- Kersch, A., & Mishtal, J. (2016). Asylum in crisis: Migrant policy, entrapment, and the role of nongovernmental organizations in Siracusa, Italy. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 35(4), 97-121.
- Khairi, A. (2016). Pelarian Cina Indonesia dan pelarian Moro di Sabah: Penelitian dari aspek pensejarahan. *Jurnal Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan*, 8(1), 68-75.
- Khalid, T. A. K. (2010). Masyarakat sivil di Malaysia: Isu dan strategi. *Journal of Asian and International Bioethics*, 1(1), 219-244.
- Kleinmann, H. H. (1984). Understanding refugee second language learning. *Japan Association for Language Teaching*, 6(2), 209-219.
- Krause, S., Williams, H., Onyango, A. M., Sami, S., Doedens, W., Giga, N., Stone, E., & Tomczyk, B. (2015). Reproductive health services for Syrian refugees in Zaatri Camp and Irbid City, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan: An evaluation of the minimum initial services package. *Conflict and Health*, 9(1), 1-10.
- Kumssa, A., Williams, J. H., Jones, J. F., & Des Marais, E. A. (2014). Conflict and migration: The case of Somali refugees in Northeastern Kenya. *Global Social Welfare*, 1(1), 145-156.
- Larkin, E. (2007). Burma's forgotten refugees. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 63(6), 32-39.

- Li, G., & Sah, K. (2019). Immigrant and refugee language policies, programs, and practices in an era of change: Promises, contradictions, and possibilities. In S. J. Gold & S. J. Nawyn (Eds.), *Routledge international handbook of migration studies* (pp. 25-338). Routledge.
- Lindencrona, F., Ekblad, S., & Hauff, E. (2007). Mental health of recently resettled refugees from the Middle East in Sweden: The impact of pre-resettlement trauma, resettlement stress and capacity to handle stress. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 43(2), 121- 131.
- Lindert, J., Ehrenstein, O. S. V., Priebe, S., Mielck, A., & Brähler, E. (2009). Depression and anxiety in labor migrants and refugees - A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Social Science & Medicine*, 69(2), 246-257.
- Loescher, G. (2002). Blaming the victim: Refugees and global security. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 58(6), 46-53.
- MacTavish, E. (2016). *Barriers of reporting sexual violence in Syrian refugee camps*. (Unpublished master dissertation). Royal Roads University, Canada.
- Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 8(3), 3351-33514.
- Mestheneos, E., & Iqannidi, E. (2002). Obstacles to refugee integration in the European Union Member States. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 15(3), 304-320.
- Mollica, R. F., Wyshak, G., & Lavelle, J. (1987). The psychosocial impact of war trauma and torture on Southeast Asian refugees. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 144(1), 1567-1572.
- Mollie, G., & Gerver, M. (2016). Refugee repatriation and the problem of consent. *British Journal of Political Science*, 48(1), 855-875.
- Nazri, S. A., Khalid, T. A. K., & Sulaiman, N. (2019). Syrian Muslim refugees in Malaysia: The narratives and survivability. *Islam Realitas*, 5(2), 130-144.
- Ong, C., Chai, J. M., Tan, C. S., & Tan, S. M. (2018). Communicative readiness and motivation among UNHCR refugee teachers of English in Malaysia. *Journal of Social Science*, 4(1), 1-9.
- Renner, W. (2009). The effectiveness of psychotherapy with refugees and asylum seekers: Preliminary results from an Austrian study. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 11(1), 41-5.
- Rose, J., Phil O'keefe, P., Jayawickrama, J., & O'brien, G. (2013). The challenge of humanitarian aid: An overview. *Environmental Hazards*, 12(1), 74-92.

- Sahak, S., Nordin, R., & Ishak, K. M. (2020). The plight of refugees in Malaysia: Malaysia as a transit country in protecting refugees' rights. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 5(1), 378-394.
- Sim, R. (2016). Into the mind of the refugee: Unpacking modern refugee mental health. *Harvard International Review*, 37(4), 46-48.
- Soares, A. A., & Tzafalias, M. (2015). Europe gears up to attend to refugees' health. World Health Organization. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 93(12), 822-823.
- Tran, V. T. (1990). Language acculturation among older Vietnamese refugee adults. *The Gerontological Society of America*, 30(1), 94-99.
- UNHCR Malaysia. (2020). UNHCR glance. <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance-in-malaysia.html>.
- UNHCR. (2018). Protection in Malaysia. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-my/protection-in-malaysia-591401344.html>.
- Wahab, A. A. (2018). The colours of exploitation: Smuggling of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Malaysia. *Akademika*, 88(1), 5-16.
- Yassin, N., Taha, A. A., Ghantous, Z., Mia, M. A., & Forgione, F. (2018). Evaluating a mental health program for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 20(2), 388-398.