



Malaysian women who went abroad for studies and never returned

KUALA LUMPUR: Three decades ago, when Lily (not her real name) boarded a UK-bound flight to further her studies, she never thought she was saying goodbye to Malaysia as her home forever.

At first, she had plans on returning home once she graduated. But there was always a goal she wanted to achieve, a professional qualification she wanted to get.

However, having gained recognition as an expert in her field, any hopes she had of returning were dashed.

Now, she calls the UK her home, where she works in the medical sector, and Malaysia the country she visits almost every year to see her mother and siblings.

“It wasn’t my intention to stay in the UK forever and never to return home. It was more of achieving my goals for my medical practice and then come back,” she said via Zoom.

Lily is one of the 1.86 million Malaysian women living overseas, according to the latest figures from the United Nations.

While the figure may not seem overly high, it is equivalent to 12% of Malaysia’s total female population of 15.6 million.

This makes Malaysia the country with the second highest regional rate of women migrating with 57%, second only to Thailand, and is above the global average of 48%.

Experts say the fact that more women than men are leaving the country to seek their fortune elsewhere is not necessarily bad, given the increasingly globalised world.

Describing the 57% figure as “huge”, International Labour Organization (ILO) consultant Suriani Kempe said it raises questions on what makes more women than men leave and whether this is a worrying trend for the nation.

“Women emigrating doesn’t mean they’re not coming back, right? But if there are discriminatory policies in place in the country that prevent them from coming back, the government should be concerned,” she said.

Suriani spoke to reporters after conducting a workshop organised by the Asia Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development on Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Reporting on Women Migrant Workers.

The song remains the same

A few decades ago, the main reasons for women leaving the country were either to further their studies or to accompany their husbands. Now, the reasons have expanded.

Although there is no breakdown on why they left, experts agree women are leaving for other reasons as well, such as to advance their career and for better pay. These issues used to be associated with men.

They also agree that many of the women are likely educated and professional, choosing to migrate to more developed and wealthier nations.

Those days, news reports used to feature only Malaysian-born men doing well internationally. Now, many Malaysian women are being featured, such as Florence Tan, chair of the Small Spacecraft Coordination Group at Nasa, and Dr Serena Nik-Zainal, a consultant geneticist and cancer researcher in the UK.

“Some people say that most women are migrating to follow their husbands. At the same time, I strongly believe there are women who decided to migrate because their skills are more appreciated somewhere else,” said Farid Basir, vice-president of the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF).

Interspersed among the reasons is the issue of gender discrimination, which is a major contributor to women’s migration numbers.

Lily said one of the reasons she decided to stay on in the UK was she did not feel she would be able to succeed much if she had returned to Malaysia after graduation.

“It was actually like the structure was clearly there (in the UK) and it also felt like a more meritocratic system,” she said.

“In Malaysia, you never felt that no matter how good you were, you would get anything on merit because too many things were not meritocratically awarded.

“I’ve often felt women were sidelined.”

Experts point to the low female labour participation rate as a sign of existing gender discrimination.

According to the **statistics department**, only 55.3% of women are taking part in the labour force, one of the lowest in Southeast Asia, despite women comprising 61% of university graduates in this country.

Unit for Research on Women and Gender (Kanita) member Noraida Endut of Universiti Sains Malaysia said the trend is a matter for concern, especially if it means the women left home because they did not have enough opportunities here.

“The women know that if they come back to the equivalent position in Malaysia, opportunities for career advancement may not be as promising,” she said. “Or there is not enough protection, for example, a family-friendly work environment in Malaysia compared to the other country.

“The promotion path is not as clear for women as it is for men. So the frustration may come in from there.”

Farid, who is also the chief people officer at MBSB Bank, said there is a disconnect between the labour participation rate and the high number of female degree-holders.

“It demonstrates that it is a talent that we have not optimised,” he said, adding that it is crucial for Malaysia to fully utilise its untapped talents to achieve greater economic success as it heads towards an ageing nation.

To do so, he said, employers need to create a structure for women to reach top leadership positions by providing them a developmental platform for mentoring and coaching through targets.

In Malaysia, men make up most of the decision-makers in government, public service and private sector although women constitute 48.6% of the population.

As of Sept 29, 2021, only 14.9%, or 33 out of the 22 seats in the Dewan Rakyat, were held by women MPs, while women holding decision-making positions in the public sector accounted for 38.2%.

Women representation in the top 100 public limited companies' board of directors stood at 25.8%.

Family discrimination

For some women, discrimination may not be the reason they left. But it is certainly why they decided to stay away.

Experts agree the biggest hurdle Malaysian women are likely to face when they return home is the citizenship issue.

For Malaysian women, coming home to Malaysia is more complicated and expensive if their spouses were foreigners and if their children were born overseas than for Malaysian men.

Under the law – now being looked at by the Court of Appeal – Malaysian mothers cannot pass their citizenship to their overseas-born child, a right only Malaysian men have currently. Only children born in Malaysia to Malaysian mothers get automatic citizenship.

Suraini is one of the litigants in the landmark Family Frontiers case, currently on appeal. It saw the High Court rule that Malaysian mothers have the right to pass on Malaysian citizenship to any children born overseas. The Court of Appeal will render its judgment on June 22.

“The fact that if women are married to foreigners and they give birth abroad, that her child is not entitled to Malaysian citizenship, would probably be a driving factor that keeps them out of the country and stops them from coming back.

“This is because of the discrimination they experience in their own country,” she said.

According to Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad (TalentCorp), the national agency under the human resources ministry tasked with wooing Malaysian professionals back, women are only 23% of the 5,774 Malaysians who have taken advantage of the Returning Experts Programme from 2011 to 2020.

Incentives offered to Malaysians returning home include tax breaks and permanent residence (PR) status for spouses and children, pending approval by the immigration department.

Noraida pointed out that PR status was not much of a draw, considering children of Malaysian men would be Malaysians and their foreign spouses are eligible to apply for citizenship after a few years.

“The option is not the same for male spouses compared to female spouses,” she said. “They have to go through different processes to be able to have some kind of nationality or permanent residence in Malaysia. So yes, there is discrimination in that sense.”

She said women also faced problems acquiring PR for their children.

On top of that, costs in Malaysia are higher for non-citizens, including healthcare and education. This means Malaysian mothers would have to pay more for their non-citizen children if they decide to return and settle in the country.

Setiawangsa MP Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad said consequently, many women decide to keep living overseas. Depending on the country, their children may be entitled to benefits.

“Even if you’re a non-citizen, you get so many benefits (in some countries),” he said.

One of the benefits available overseas is childcare, especially for special needs children. Although Malaysia has good facilities and childcare, he said, they are usually limited and not easily accessible unless one is rich.

Nik Nazmi, who has written on the brain drain and has family members who are part of the estimated 3.15 million Malaysian diaspora, also said it was important for the government to be more flexible with regards to the citizenship issue so as not to exacerbate the brain drain.

“Obviously, those with a single citizenship may be forced to make a choice. And when we are a smaller country in terms of development, in terms of academic research and all those things, we tend to lose out,” he said.

The ideas the experts suggested included a special status or visa for people with ancestral links to Malaysia, or allowing dual citizenship for Malaysians.

Lily, too, cited citizenship as the biggest obstacle for her to return to Malaysia for good, saying there is no chance of her returning unless something changes.

“I’ve now got a family and I’ve got children here. This makes it very complicated (to return) because they don’t have dual nationality or anything of that sort.

“(If the government allows dual citizenship for my children), it would not close my options completely. I would actually explore returning more meaningfully,” she said.

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