

Majority of Malaysian diaspora are women: when will they return?

KUALA LUMPUR (June 7): Three decades ago, when Lily (name has been changed) boarded the 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. But having gained recognition as an expert in her field, any hopes she had of returning, were dashed.

Now, she calls the United Kingdom (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 UK forever and never to return home. It was more of achieving my goals for my medical practice and then return. But life happens," she told Bernama via Zoom.

Lily is one of the 1.86 million Malaysian women living overseas, according to the latest figures by the United Nations. While the figure may not seem overly high, it is roughly equivalent to 12 per cent of Malaysia's total female population of 15.6 million.

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

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 per cent figure as "huge," International Labour Organisation (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 out 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 was speaking to Bernama after conducting a workshop organised by the Asia Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development on Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Reporting on Women Migrant Workers recently.

The song remains the same

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

Although there is no specific research done on the breakdown on why they left, experts agree women are now leaving Malaysia 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.

Where news reports used to feature only Malaysian-born men doing well internationally, there are now many Malaysian-born women 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 the husband. 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).

In other words, times have changed. And yet, much remains the same.

Interspersed among the reasons listed, is the issue of gender discrimination, where escaping it may be, is a major contributor to women’s migration numbers.

Lily said one of the reasons she decided to stay on in the UK was because she did not feel she would be able to succeed much if she had gone back 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. Whereas in Malaysia, you never felt, no matter how good you were, you would get anything on merit because too many things were not meritocratically awarded,” she said.

“I’ve often felt women are sidelined,” she added.

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

According to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia**, only 55.3 per cent of women are participating in the labour force, one of the lowest in Southeast Asia, despite women comprising 61 per cent of university graduates in this country.

Unit for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA) member, Professor Noraida Endut at Universiti Sains Malaysia told Bernama the trend is concerning, 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. Or there is not enough protection, for example, a family-friendly work environment in Malaysia compared to the other country,” she said, adding there needs to be more research.

She said women and men in the public sector may start off on an equal footing but as the years go by and they start to have families, women’s careers tend to stall, compared to men.

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

MEF’s 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 per cent of the population.

As of Sept 29, 2021, only 14.9 per cent or 33 out of the 22 seats at the Dewan Rakyat were held by women Members of Parliament (MPs), while women holding decision-making positions in the public sector accounted for 38.2 per cent. Women representation in the top 100 public limited companies' (PLC) board of directors (BOD) stood at 25.8 per cent.

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 spouse is foreign and if their children were born overseas than for a Malaysian man. Under Malaysian law, Malaysian mothers cannot pass their citizenship to their overseas-born child, a right only Malaysian men have, for now. Only children born in Malaysia to Malaysian mothers get automatic citizenship.

"The fact that if the women are married to a foreigner and they give birth abroad – that 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 experienced in their own country," said Suriani.

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

According to Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad (TalentCorp), a national agency under the Ministry of Human Resources tasked with luring Malaysian professionals back, women are only 23 per cent of the 5,774 Malaysians who have taken advantage of the Returning Experts Programme from 2011 to 2020. Some of the incentives offered to Malaysians returning home include tax breaks and permanent residency (PR) status for spouses and children, pending approval by the Immigration Department.

Noraida pointed out 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. They have to go through different processes to be able to have some kind of nationality or permanent residency in Malaysia. So yes, there is discrimination in that sense," she said, adding women also faced problems acquiring PRs 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.

MP for Setiawangsa Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad told Bernama 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 brain drain and has family members who are part of the estimated 3.15 million Malaysian diaspora, also said it is 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.

Some of 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, which makes it very complicated (to return) because they don’t have dual nationality or anything of that sort,” she said.

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

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