



Bridging Gaps in Migration Knowledge-Production and Doing Migration

KEY HIGHLIGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS FROM THE MIGRATION EXPERT PANELS AND WORKSHOP

Held in Conjunction with the

First Malaysian International Studies Association Conference (MISAC 1)

14-15 February 2024

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)

2024



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Summary

The academic community in Malaysia has a critical role in knowledge production and shaping intellectual discourse. Their role, if adequately facilitated, helps in balancing the competing discourse, interests and motivations of different stakeholders and communities (in practice) in shaping positive narrative concerning international migration in Malaysia. Resulting from a two-day conference and migrant expert workshop held on 14 and 15 February 2024 at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), this brief publication serves as our concrete starting point to further our scholarly engagement and academic mobilizing.

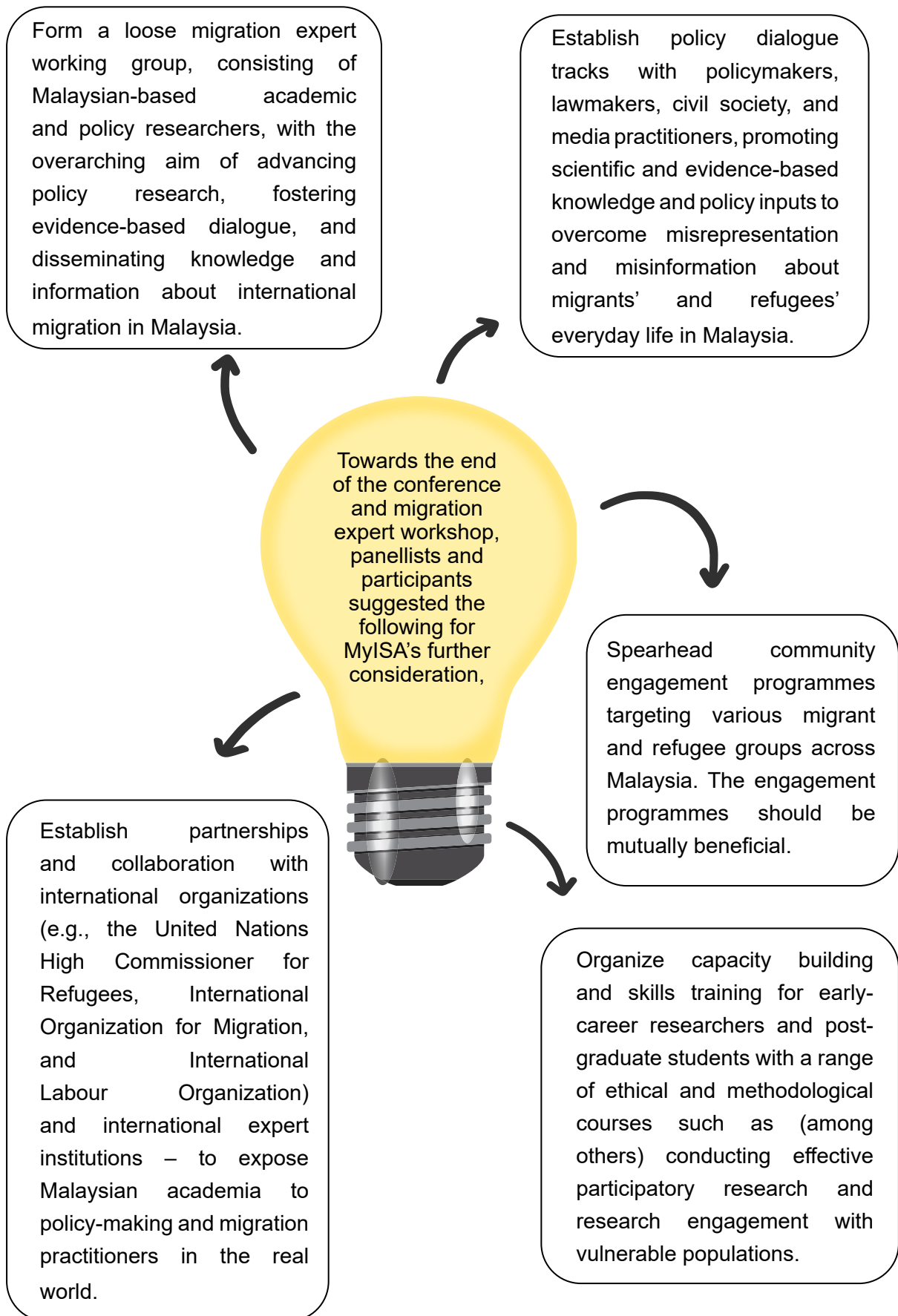
Here we synthesize the key takeaways as raised by panellists and participants throughout the conference and migrant expert workshop, as follows,

- In addition to being rigid and restrictive, Malaysia's policies towards migrants lack long term vision and fluctuates over time.
- Despite several changes in the federal government (from 2018 to recent years), the lack of political will continues to obstruct effective reform.
- While some aspects of policy reforms are underway, actions against perpetrators among the power elite and those of high rank are rarely taken.
- Implementation of comprehensive and effective reform requires cognizance of the political landscape, including the party system, power elites and the bargaining process in the policy-making sphere, including the incentives and interests which underpin specific policy decisions and actions.
- Some pockets of businesses or employers in Malaysia continue to commodify the migrant workforce as temporary labourers, low-paid, replaceable and less deserving of their labour rights.
- The state's capacity to respond to the existing labour market dynamics is alarming. Not only has civil society questioned the functional capabilities of the state, over-securitization measures have also taken centre stage.

- The state tends to frame migrants' and refugees' issues from the perspective of security, oftentimes resulting in “all-out war” against irregular migrants and refugees via immigration raids, arrests and detention.
- Current amendments in legislation and the creation of policy instruments have not always resulted in greater clarity and alignment across various policy domains.
- Finally, the Malaysian Government has already undertaken considerable efforts to strengthen the formal justice system where migrant and refugee workers are protected from exploitation and labour rights violations. However, these efforts disregard numerous common informal practices across different migratory journeys and pathways to employment in Malaysia.



What the Academic Can Do?



Foreword

I begin by introducing our association – MyISA, which stands for Malaysian International Studies Association. Registered with the Registrar of Societies (RoS) in 2023, MyISA aims to serve as an eminent institution committed to advancing the scholarly pursuit of International Relations (IR) in Malaysia. We do so by embarking on complex IR research, producing and disseminating knowledge, and fostering scholarly dialogues on regional and global affairs. As an association grounded in scholarly pursuits, most of our members are professors, lecturers and post-graduate students from more than half of the public higher institutions of education in Malaysia.

2024 marks a significant milestone in our collective efforts to engage with the IR community, particularly among scholars, early-career researchers, and postgraduate students. We convened our first conference, the *First Malaysian International Studies Association Conference (MISAC 1)*, on 14 February 2024 at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Selangor. The panels on contemporary migration studies and governance in Malaysia were held in conjunction with the MISAC 1 on 14 February, and followed by a migration expert workshop on 15 February, featuring international migration practitioners and experts sharing their first-hand experiences in regional and global outreach and advocacy programmes. The migration panels and workshop held back-to-back on 14 and 15 February 2024 were supported by Porticus, and other collaborating institutions, namely, the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Research Centre for History, Politics and International Affairs (SPHEA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and the International Institute of Public Policy & Management (INPUMA), Universiti Malaya UM). I would like to take this opportunity to thank Porticus and all collaborating institutions for their support in making this conference a success.

Professor Dr Zarina Othman

President of the Malaysian International Studies Association (MyISA)
2024

Remarks by Convenor of the Migration Expert Panels & Workshop

Let me begin by thanking MyISA, under the leadership of Professor Dr Zarina Othman, for making these migration panels and workshop a success. I would also like to take this opportunity to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to Porticus and Marat Yu for their dedication and support throughout the event, held in conjunction with the MISAC 1, on 14 and 15 February 2024.

MISAC 1 owes its success to the active involvement and perseverance of our panel experts, especially our senior professors, young researchers and those with lived experience, expressing their polarized voice and opinions which may not be comfortable to hear and accept by others. I believe that having a critical yet open discourse on the most important issues of our time is a process we need to go through together – it is a slow process, but efforts must be made to raise awareness and build solidarity across different pockets of our academic society and beyond. As such, I would like to thank the MyISA community members, young researchers and experts with lived experience for their trust, openness and support and for being part of this journey.

This brief publication serves as our concrete starting point to further our scholarly engagement and academic mobilizing. The academic community has a critical role in knowledge production and shaping intellectual discourse. Their role and efforts will assist in balancing the competing discourse, including interests and motivations of different stakeholders and communities (in practice), and addressing system-level gaps, and advancing social justice. While doing this, I hope we can maintain (or create) collegiality and respect along this journey and continue to learn from one another.

Convenor of Migration Expert Workshop (2024)

Dr Andika Ab. Wahab



Setting the Scene – *Making Sense of International Migration in Malaysia*

It is estimated that three to five million international migrants and refugees (see [Hwok-Aun & Yu Leng, 2018](#); [Wahab, 2023](#)), comprising more than 50 nationalities, live in Malaysia. They do so regardless of legal status, some migrate to Malaysia for work, others seek protection and remain in the country from one generation to another.

The profiles and factors underpinning these migrants' and refugees' voluntary and forced mobility to Malaysia are complex. They range from structural barriers (e.g., chronic poverty, gaps in legal jurisdiction, deep inequality, and violations of human rights in the origin countries) to non-structural issues and challenges (e.g., lack of opportunities to generate income and insecurity faced in refugee camps in such transit countries as Bangladesh) (see [Mahalingam, 2019](#); [Suyanto et al., 2020](#); [Anam et al., 2021](#)). Thus, some migrants voluntarily move to Malaysia in search of better jobs, while others are forced to migrate and seek temporary protection in Malaysia. It is worth stressing, however, that migrating across international borders through a regular or legal pathway is costly and bureaucratic ([Ormond & Nah, 2020](#)). Consequently, some migrants and refugees who are economically disadvantaged and politically vulnerable often resort to irregular migration pathways, which further amplify their vulnerability.

Malaysian policy governing international mobility has evolved, especially in the past four decades, (see [Kanapathy, 2008](#)) to accommodate growing business demand for the migrant workforce on the one hand and responding to international pressure and civil society's demands to provide concrete protection to refugees and asylum

seekers on the other. However, the governance system underpinning the recruitment and employment of migrant workers suffers from allegedly corrupt practices, lack of enforcement and an effective justice system to end exploitation and criminalities against vulnerable migrants ([Wahab, 2023](#)). Besides, Malaysian immigration laws and regulations governing international migration into the country is rigid and restrictive, creating multiple pathways for irregularity among migrant workers ([Jian-Xing Lim, 2018](#); [Low, 2021](#)). They are not recognized as refugees and classified as irregular migrants by the Government and, in practice, the Government maintains its unwritten policy of deliberately ignoring the irregular status of refugees, allowing them to live, move and interact with the host society ([Wake & Cheung, 2016](#)).

Demands for policy reforms are not new and continue to grow, as more exposures of allegedly corrupt practices, exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers and heightened xenophobia and hate speech targeting refugees in Malaysia, especially in the post-COVID-19 era, surface. After Malaysia saw its first change of federal government in about 60 years after the 2018 14th general election ([Wahab & Nazuha, 2023](#)), there have been notable developments¹ but no comprehensive reforms to address systemic causes underpinning labour exploitation and refugees' lack of protection.

This calls for a critical and intentional appraisal as to why Malaysia has responded as such, thus what can be done to improve Malaysia's responses to the complex migratory movements and multiple pathways to irregularity and vulnerability among migrant and refugee populations, and how Malaysian scholars can critically yet constructively contribute to unpacking these inquiries.

To bridge the gaps in migration knowledge-production and practice in Malaysia, this publication presents the key highlights and observations from the Migration Panels and Migration Expert Workshop held in conjunction with MISAC 1 at UKM, Bangi, from 14 to 15 February 2024.

¹ These developments include the creation of the Independent Committee on Foreign Worker Management (ICFMW), amendment of the Employees' Minimum Standards of Housing, Accommodations and Amenities Act (1990) in 2019; amendment of Employees' Social Security (SOCSO) Act (1969) in 2019; amendment of Employment Act (1955) in 2022; renewal of the third Malaysia's National Action Plan on Trafficking in Persons (2021-2025); and establishment of the first National Action Plan on Forced Labour (2021-2025).

Everyday Life of Migrants and Refugees in Malaysia

This section highlights the issues and challenges facing different groups of migrant populations in Malaysia, raised by panellists and participants, throughout the Migration Panels and Migration Expert Workshop held on 14 and 15 February 2024 at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).



Multiple pathways to irregularity

Panellists on different panels repeatedly raised the issue of the various ways in which a legal migrant worker can become “irregular”. For example, current migration policy prohibits migrant workers from changing employment without their employers’ permission. In the employer-tied permit system, when employers fail to or purposely do not renew the migrant workers’ annual working passes, they become “irregular”. Such a system keeps migrant workers vulnerable and at the mercy of employers. When migrants choose to abscond for such complex reasons as a form of protest against their employers or moving to another job of their choosing, their employment and immigration statuses also change to “irregular” migrants. The employer-tied permit system reinforces the existing

power imbalance between employers and workers. Migrant workers often have less or no agency to exercise, leaving them highly vulnerable to exploitation, especially when their status turns “irregular”.

The consequences of becoming “irregular” migrants include fines, imprisonment and caning, after which they are likely to be held in immigration detention centres before being deported to their countries of origin. Most migrant workers do whatever it takes to avoid these consequences.

Migrant and refugee workers as invisible labourers in informal economies

Despite notable progress in addressing labour exploitation and employment vulnerabilities in formal economic sectors (e.g., palm oil plantations and the manufacture of rubber gloves and electronics), very little attention is paid to addressing similar (or even worse) conditions migrant workers face in informal economic sectors. Though there is no reliable estimate of the number of migrant workers in informal economies, their presence and contributions are well-known, and in most cases even critical. In most cases, migrant workers in informal economies do not have contracts and agreed-upon wages, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation and deception by employers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, migrant and refugee workers transitioned from formal to informal economies, for such reasons as employers failing to renew their work passes, manipulation during recruitment and rehiring programmes, and absconding or changing their employment. Other migrant workers entered Malaysia using a short-term social pass but decided to work in such informal sectors as grocery shops, restaurants, night and weekend markets, automobile workshops, and construction sites. These groups of migrant workers

receive less support and intervention from the current initiatives to improve workers' well-being and facilitating their access to justice.

Detention and deportation

Generally, irregular migrants and refugees, regardless of employment status, are at constant risk of arrest, detention and deportation. There is a dearth of grey literature indicating horrible detention conditions and ill-treatment (for instance, see Human Rights Watch, 2024). Overcrowding is common, and the number of migrant workers detained in some detention facilities exceed maximum occupancy. The high number of detainees who die every year in Malaysian detention facilities reflects terrible detention management conditions. In 2021, about 165 detainees died in detention, and in 2022 there were about 150 deaths (see [The Vibes, 22 February 2022](#)). More than half of these deaths occurred in four detention facilities in Sabah (see [Solidar, 2022](#)). While the cause of death varies, the more common ones include pneumonia and septicaemia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant number of deaths occurred because of unhygienic conditions and inadequate healthcare support available in detention.

There is no legislation or procedure to deal with detainees with undetermined nationality status, which means it is unclear when they will be deported or released. This results in longer, sometimes indefinite periods of detention.

Many Rohingya asylum seekers and refugees, including women and children, are currently detained in various detention centres throughout Peninsular Malaysia. Recently, even Rohingyas with UNHCR cards have been detained, with minimal or no access for the UNHCR to visit and verify their status. The indefinite or prolonged periods of detention, in addition to poor sanitation and overcrowding, has physical and mental health consequences for the detainees.

Negative Sentiments against Migrants and Refugees

Migrants are increasingly viewed as less deserving of human and labour rights, which significantly undermines their capacity for agency and voicing their concerns. During such critical times as the COVID-19 pandemic and Malaysia's general elections, migrants and refugees are often used as scapegoats. For instance, migrants are frequently regarded as "ghost voters" (or "*pengundi hantu*" in Malay) during elections, which contributes to heightened hate speech and acts of racism and discrimination both in social media and in the migrants' everyday lives.

Where employment is concerned, migrants and refugees are considered as "disposable" and their presence in the labour market is short-term, temporary and informal in nature. They are the first to be retrenched at times of crisis, including

during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite Malaysia's continuous reliance on the migrant workforce (and refugee workers), they are viewed as taking jobs away from the local population and suppressing wages in the job market. Despite studies that prove otherwise (see [Wahab, 2017](#); [IDEAS, 2019](#)), this distorted narrative continues, further disrupting social cohesion and destroying prospects for better integration.

Finally, as a result of the continuous securitization approach by state actors at the federal and state levels, migrants and refugees are constantly seen as security threats and even threats to public safety and political stability, especially during elections.

Employment Conditions and Labour Exploitation

The employment conditions of many migrant and refugee workers in Malaysia vary across economic sectors, the locations of their workplaces (whether urban or rural), their immigration and employment status (whether they are regular, irregular and refugee workers), and the size of their employers (large enterprises, SMEs, family-run businesses or smallholder farmers). However, the following conditions are commonplace across all these dimensions,

For many refugee workers and irregular migrant workers, working without a valid contract is common. Wages, social security and benefits are not agreed prior to the initiation of work. In cases of labour disputes, workers often rely on informal ways of getting justice.

For migrant workers with legal documents, substitution of their contracts of employment upon arrival in Malaysia is common. Alarming, contracts substitutions often result in less labour rights and reduced work benefits. One common aspect of contract substitution is the prohibition to join an existing union.

Retention of migrant workers' passports by employers is still a common practice, especially among small and medium-sized employers. Passport retention by employers commonly serves to prevent workers from leaving and to threaten to surrender them to the authorities ([International Organization for Migration, 2023](#)).

Unpaid wages, delayed payment of wages and unpaid overtime work are widespread. In other cases, workers often face unlawful deduction of salary, including for the purpose of repayment of their annual work visa and levy. This is despite the existing Malaysian legislation requiring employers to pay work visas and levys of migrant workers.

Working excessive hours of work is commonplace, especially in the manufacturing sector of critical products such as rubber-made products and in the electronics sector, further jeopardizing their safety and long-term health implications.

Unsafe and overcrowded living conditions are the most known conditions of many migrant and refugee workers in Malaysia. In the construction sector, for instance, it is common for migrants and refugee workers to live in container-made accommodations with a lack of proper ventilation, access to clean water and sanitation, and safety features.

Some migrant workers face limited access to freedom of movement imposed by employers. Relatedly, migrant workers who intend to return home for a short holiday are asked to put up a monetary deposit and a guarantee from another worker with the view to ensuring migrant workers are not absconding. This amounts to forced labour practice.



Representation, Voice and Agency

Only one in every 10 migrant workers in Malaysia is unionised, which results in their lack of representation and capacity in the collective bargaining process ([International Labour Organization, 2022](#)). The reasons for this phenomenon are complex. While some migrants are intentionally prohibited by their employers from joining a union (with such consequences as termination of employment and deportation), others are not aware of their right to unionize or do not trust their union and their representatives. Employers generally have a negative view of unions, arguing that unions tend to create tensions in the workplace, rather than resolve disputes.

In recent years, a growing number of community-based groups which represent diverse groups of migrant populations have been established in Malaysia. These community groups are based on such grounds as nationality, ethnicity, ideology, and faith. While most of these community groups are able to establish contact and network with local and international NGOs and official foreign missions, they are not officially recognized by the Malaysian authorities, which limits their capacity to engage with the authorities on issues affecting the everyday life of migrants.

Generally, migrant workers and refugees do not speak up because they lack trust and fear retaliation. They are concerned that their active participation in open dialogue will jeopardize their employment status and physical safety in Malaysia. Additionally, language barriers and lack of leadership skills hinder community leaders from raising the migrant workers' issues effectively.



Synthesis of Policy Gaps

This section synthesises the policy issues and underpinning the many forms of vulnerability and precariousness migrant workers and refugees face, as raised during the Migration Panels and Migration Expert Workshop.

Policy Vision, Reform and Political Will

First, this report emphasizes that, in addition to being rigid and restrictive, Malaysia's policies towards migrants **lack long term vision and fluctuates over time** because of two key factors. The first relates to the absence of concrete national strategies (including a lack of tangible actions) to remedy the over-reliance on a migrant workforce in such key economic sectors as manufacturing, construction and plantation. This leads to the second factor, where migration policy is frequently subjected to pressure from the business community, which claim that migrant labourers on temporary contracts and paid low wages are necessary for Malaysian businesses to stay productive and competitive. The different reasons for migration further complicate the creation of a comprehensive policy that addresses the different protection needs of different groups of migrants.

Civil society groups have long advocated for a comprehensive migration policy that complies with internationally recognised standards and human rights principles. Despite several changes in the federal government (in 2018 after

the 14th General Election, in 2020 via the reconfiguration of a new political pact and most recently in 2022 via the 15th General Election), the **lack of political will** continues to obstruct this much-needed reform. This includes unchanged policy responses to the long-standing protection gaps involving refugees and asylum seekers. Relating to refugees, Malaysia's response remains guided by the National Security Council's (NSC) Directive Number 23, which refers to refugees as "irregular" migrants holding UNHCR cards, demonstrating Malaysia's continued reluctance to distinguish refugees' protection needs from those of irregular economic migrants.

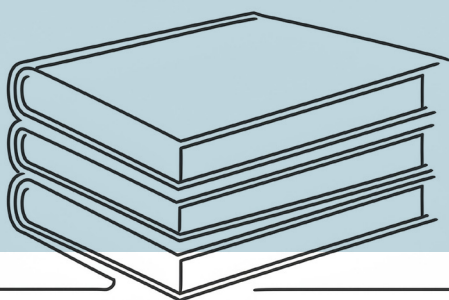


Policy Reforms and The Power Elites

It may also be argued that comprehensive and effective reform needs time. Political leaders and bureaucrats need time and space to consolidate power and persuade different pockets of power elites and stakeholders with a vested interest of the need for change. Concrete actions already taken by the government post-14th General Election include institutional and leadership changes in such key institutions as the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC). As reforms to combat corruption and enhance good governance continue, high-level corruption cases, money laundering, capital flight, potential misuse of public funds and mega scandals such as the 1MDB have not been fully investigated and resolved, as highlighted recently by Transparency International (2023). In the areas of labour exploitation and trafficking, in addition to corruption allegations and exposures, there was also the case of human trafficking death camps found in Wang Kelian, Malaysia in 2015 (see [Fortify Rights and SUHAKAM](#),

2019). This depicts that while some aspects of policy reforms are underway, **actions against perpetrators among the power elite and those of high rank are rarely taken** (see [Fortify Rights](#), 2023)

Implementation of comprehensive and effective reform requires **cognizance of the political landscape, including the party system, power elites and the bargaining process** in the policy-making sphere, including the incentives and interests which underpin specific policy decisions and actions. It is imperative to note that while there has been political fragmentation (especially after the 2018 14th General Election) and a reconfiguration of party politics, several dominant parties prevail with very little reform in leadership and political outlook. Besides, autocratic rule with power remains concentrated in the party leadership and government executive. The party system has been resilient as the elite political settlement has adapted to changing political and social demands. Eventually, a weak constitutional checks and balances remains, amplified by patronage politics and populist measures that continue to benefit those in power and treat unfavourably the most vulnerable migrants and refugees. Shrinking civic space further hampers effective oversight and accountability in policy-making and its implementation



Labour Market Dynamics and Rights Narratives

The panel sessions also highlighted the unremitting over-reliance on a migrant workforce, including refugee workers, in both the formal and informal labour markets, arguably to maintain productivity and competitiveness. There is an illogical disconnect, however, between heavy reliance on the migrant workforce and the way migrants are treated in the labour market. **Businesses or employers continue to commodify the migrant workforce as temporary labourers, low-paid, replaceable and less deserving of their labour rights.** The migrant workers are not seen as

assets worthy of retention and humane treatment. The result is a rather chaotic labour market, where workers abscond (i.e., run away) as a form of protest. The commodification also contributes to irregularity among migrant workers as it further positions them as highly vulnerable to labour exploitation. Existing government policy instruments do not adequately address these labour market dynamics. In fact, these dynamics can be seen as the underlying driving forces that incentivises businesses' behaviour and treatment of the migrant workforce. An example of such a policy is the employer-tied permit system that provides employers with the power and discretion to decide the fate of their migrant workforce. In this sense, the power imbalance between employers and workers prevails.

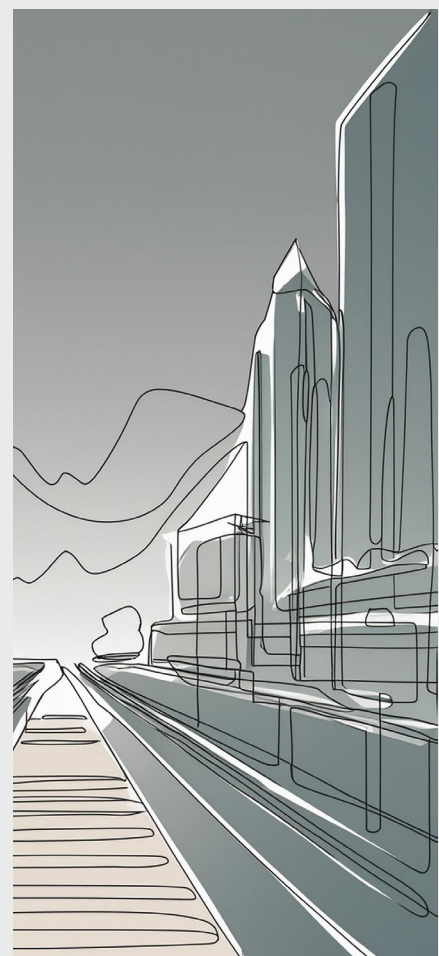


State Capacity for Change

The state's capacity to respond to these labour market dynamics is alarming. Not only has civil society questioned the functional capabilities of the state, **over-securitization measures have also taken centre stage**. These developments further diminish the rights-based narratives, permitting elite bargains that pull together political, economic and bureaucratic interests to deliberately ignore the risks of labour exploitation and injustice against vulnerable migrant and refugee workers.

Panellists on the migration panels highlighted that the state tends to **frame migrants' and refugees' issues from the perspective of security, oftentimes resulting in "all-out war"** against irregular migrants and refugees via immigration raids, arrests and detention. These measures often disregard the state (in)capacity to manage the reactions down the chain, such as immigration detention centres that exceed the maximum capacity of detainees, the likelihood of indefinite periods of detention due to delays in repatriating detainees to their countries of origin, and financial constraints to cover the cost of enforcing these security measures.

Introducing and implementing security measures is both the prerogative and duty of the state which has to safeguard national interests and border integrity. But this should not be done at the expense of human exploitation, risks of becoming victims of smuggling and trafficking, and employment precariousness. A balancing act is necessary. The **Government is yet to task the Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) to act as the overarching governmental agency** to manage migrants' participation in the labour market, despite its (MOHR) power and mandate under various federal legislations managing human resources and workers welfare. Instead, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), which is in charge of internal security and order, has the trust and confidence to play a leadership role in governing the presence of the migrant workforce in Malaysia. The Government has recently moved towards creating a synergy and collaborative approach, with a clear separation of mandates and functions, between the MOHR and MOHA. A result is the creation of a Joint Committee between the MOHR and MOHA (see [Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023](#)).



Increased Recognition of Global Norms and Policy Mismatches

There has been a growing recognition of international norms, manifested in several amendments of domestic legislation and policy measures aimed at addressing employment precariousness among migrant and refugee workers. For example, in March 2022, the Government ratified the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention (1930). Subsequently, in 2022, Malaysia amended the Employment Act (1955), expressly prohibiting forced labour. Earlier in 2021, Malaysia launched its first National Action Plan on Forced Labour (NAPFL) to increase public awareness, strengthen enforcement, remediation, and provide support services to victims of forced labour ([International Labour Organization](#), 2021).

However, **amendments in legislation and the creation of policy instruments have not always resulted in greater clarity and alignment across various policy domains**. For instance, though the prohibition of forced labour has already been included in the Employment Act (1955), it has been criticized for being too narrow (see [Lee and Pereira](#), 2023). Similarly, though amendments in various anti-trafficking and labour legislations have created a better environment for the enjoyment of labour rights and a victims-centred approach, other legislation (e.g., immigration-related regulations) maintain their restrictive, punitive and security-centric approaches.

Beyond the Formal Justice System

Finally, the Malaysian Government has already undertaken considerable efforts to strengthen the formal justice system where migrant and refugee workers are protected from exploitation and labour rights violations. However, these efforts **disregard numerous common informal practices across different migratory journeys and pathways to employment in Malaysia**. This includes the informal recruitment of migrant workers to work in Malaysia and other countries, the smuggling of migrant workers for employment in Malaysia, and the role of informal rules to help navigate procedural migratory and employment pathways in Malaysia. These practices offer multiple options and shape strategic choices among migrants pursuing employment abroad, benefiting various informal actors along the migration journey. Notably, and obviously, these practices undermine legislation and policy advancement already made by the Government. Migrants are often coerced, deceived and exploited in these schemes. Yet they are often excluded or face administrative barriers in accessing the existing formal justice system.

What the Academic Can Do: Issues and Opportunities for Change

Issues and Challenges

This part presents a number of issues and challenges worth highlighting as we seek opportunities to drive positive change. Throughout the migration panels and expert workshop, it was found that the academic community, generally,

- has very little interaction with and opportunities to learn from civil society and various groups of moving populations in Malaysia. This hinders a nuanced understanding (of issues and systemic barriers migrants and refugees face) and empathy towards migrants and refugees.
- has mixed perspectives and perceptions: positive and negative, about the everyday life and factors underpinning migration to Malaysia. The negative perceptions are partly caused by heavy reliance on secondary information, including press coverage and information available on social media without adequate fact-checking. Importantly, these negative perspectives and perceptions often shape the academic community's research agenda and outcome.
- has a good reputation and network with policymakers and lawmakers, yet is less visible and successful in shaping policy decisions concerning international migration. When members of the academic community are invited to policy roundtables, they are less critical of the government's position.
- has a good network and recognition by media practitioners. Some members of the academic community are regularly invited to contribute opinion editorials and articles in the mass media. However, such an opportunity to raise public awareness and educate the public about the positive side of migration is less leveraged.

- possesses adequate knowledge and capability to conduct both fundamental and applied research, but is less exposed to ethical principles and conduct when performing fieldwork involving vulnerable research informants. While getting ethical approval from relevant ethical committees is becoming a norm prior to conducting field research, academic researchers and post-graduate students are usually not required to attend ethics training.
- is vibrant and has increasing numbers of academic community members, conducting both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research. Yet, there is no adequate support system that enriches and drives the research agenda to shape a positive narrative about international migration in Malaysia. As of early 2024, there is no dedicated research institution or centre that works, promotes or champions migration research per se.

Opportunities to Drive Positive Change

Towards the end of both migration panels and workshop, the panellists and participants raised several suggestions worth highlighting in this report. They include,

- Form a loose migration expert working group, consisting of Malaysian-based academic and policy researchers, with the overarching aim of advancing policy research, fostering evidence-based dialogue, and disseminating knowledge and information about international migration in/into Malaysia.



What MyISA can do?

MyISA is to play a leadership role by acting as the secretariat or central committee of this expert group. Membership or members of the migration expert group can go beyond the formal members of MyISA, and should also consist of those from other disciplines (i.e., beyond International Relations)

- Establish policy dialogue tracks with policymakers, lawmakers, civil society, and media practitioners. The policy dialogue should also aim at promoting scientific and evidence-based knowledge and policy inputs to overcome misrepresentation and misinformation about migrants' and refugees' everyday life in Malaysia.



What MyISA can do?

MyISA to spearhead this initiative, by taking advantage of their existing members' expertise and networks across various universities and research institutions in Malaysia to host the policy dialogue tracks.

- Spearhead community engagement programmes targeting various migrant and refugee groups across Malaysia. The engagement programmes should be mutually beneficial. On the one hand, it should bridge gaps in awareness and knowledge about the everyday life of migrants and refugees among members of the academic community and post-graduate students; and on the other hand, to enable the academic community to contribute to the community in various aspects of their competency such as training, mentoring and advocacy programmes.



What MyISA can do?

MyISA and the migrant expert group (when established) to initiate community engagement programmes, in collaboration with faculties and universities linked with members of MyISA.

- Organize capacity building and skills training for early-career researchers and post-graduate students with a range of ethical and methodological courses such as (among others) conducting effective participatory research and research engagement with vulnerable populations. These courses should ensure an inclusive, safe and participatory approach, allowing migrant and refugee community groups, community leaders and lived-experienced experts to participate meaningfully and without being judged or having to face the consequences of their active involvement or disclosure.



What MyISA can do?

MyISA to organize a skills training and/or workshop series for members of the academic community and post-graduate students, ensuring that they are adequately trained to ensure an inclusive, safe and participatory engagement process with vulnerable communities. One important lesson drawn from the workshop is the need to ensure that lived-experience experts and speakers from vulnerable communities not only feel comfortable but safe (during and after the event) when raising their views and opinions.

- Establish partnerships and collaboration with international organizations (e.g., the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Organization for Migration, and International Labour Organization) and international expert institutions – to expose Malaysian academia to policy-making and migration practitioners in the real world.



What MyISA can do?

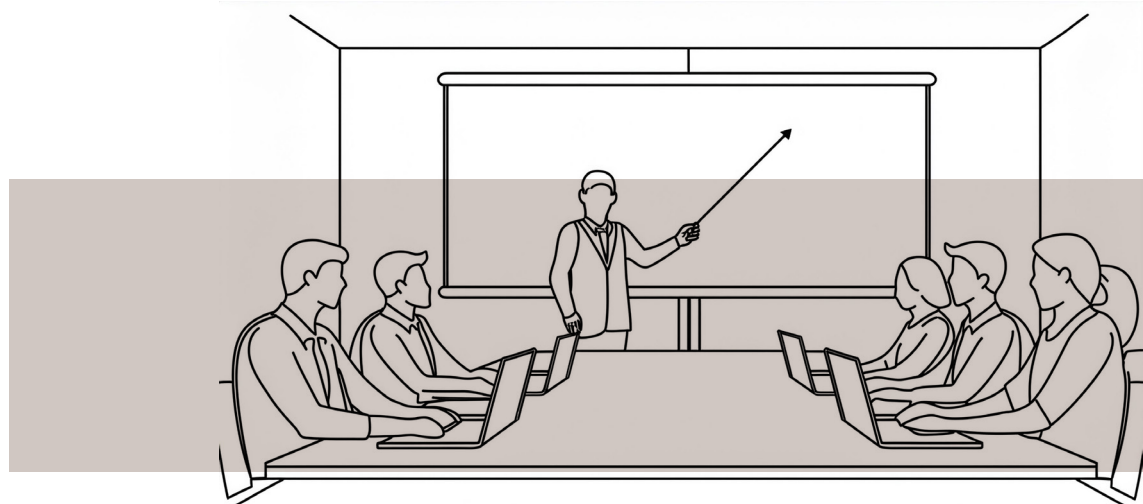
MyISA to organize regular engagement and dialogue with international organizations such as the UNHCR, IOM and ILO, targeting members of academia and post-graduate students.

Annexe 1: Migration Panels and Migration Expert Workshop – Programme Agenda

Programme Agenda of the First Malaysian International Studies Association Conference (MISAC 1), 14 February 2024

Time	Agenda
830-900	Registration
900-930	<p>Recitation</p> <p>Welcoming Remarks by the President of the Malaysian International Studies Association (MyISA), Prof. Dr Zarina Othman</p> <p>Remarks & Launching of MISAC 1</p>
930-940	Group Photo
940-1110 [Parallel Session] 1.5 hours	<p>Panel 3: Sponsored Migration Panel - Theorizing International Migration: Malaysia as a Case Study</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bakri Mat, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), “<i>Targeted Refugee Response Plan (TRRP): A Strategic Perspective from Malaysia</i>” Ramli Dollah, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), “<i>Speaking’ and ‘Doing’ security in Securitisation Theory: Analysing failed securitisation of migrants in Sabah</i>”. Mashitah Hamidi, Universiti Malaya (UM), “<i>Navigating Borders: Intersections of Migration and Social Justice</i>”. <p>Convener: Andika Wahab, IKMAS, UKM Rapporteur: Nik Hasif, IKMAS, UKM</p>
1110-1130	Tea Break
1130-1300 [Parallel Session] 1.5 hours	<p>Panel 6: Sponsored Migration Panel - Mixed Migration and Irregularity</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Wan Shawaluddin Wan Hassan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), “<i>When Survival Matters More Than Identity: The Case of Suluk Migrants in Sabah after Tanduo 2013</i>”. Dayangku Norasyikin Awang Tejuddin, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), “<i>Striking a Balance: Addressing Irregular Migration and Upholding Migrant Rights in Sarawak</i>”. Karma Tashi Choedron@Savinder Kaur Gill, University of Nottingham Malaysia, “<i>Unravelling the Complexities of Mixed Migration and Irregularity in Malaysia</i>”. <p>Convener: Aizat Khairi, Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) Rapporteur: Nik Hasif, IKMAS, UKM</p>
1300-1400	Lunch Break

<p>1400-1530 [Parallel Session] 1.5 hours</p>	<p>Panel 9: Sponsored Migration Panel - Transnational Movement Building: Challenges and Opportunities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Aslam Abdul Jalil, International Institute of Public Policy and Management (INPUMA), Universiti Malaya (UM), “<i>Countering xenophobia: building solidarity with Rohingya during the COVID-19 pandemic</i>”. 2. Hasan Al-Akraa, Asylum Access Malaysia, “<i>Refugee Integration: Experience and Challenges in Malaysia</i>”. 3. Nasrikah Paidin, Indonesian Community Leader, “<i>Transnational Movement Building: Challenges and Opportunities Experienced from Organizing Migrant Domestic Workers in Malaysia</i>”. 4. Marat Yu, Porticus (Asia), Transnational Movement Building <p>Convener: Andika Wahab, IKMAS, UKM Rapporteur: Nik Hasif, IKMAS, UKM</p>
<p>1530-1600</p>	<p>Keynote Address by Prof. Dr Johan Saravanamuttu, Nanyang Technological University (NTU)</p>
<p>1600-1610</p>	<p>Tea Break (Light Refreshment)</p>
<p>1610-1730</p>	<p>Plenary: Megatrends in the Indo-Pacific Region: Issues & Challenges for Malaysia and Southeast Asia”</p> <p>YBhg. Emeritus Prof. Dr D. S. Ranjit Singh, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), “<i>The Reemergence of Borneo as a Political Hotspot in Southeast Asia</i>”.</p> <p>Prof. Hajjah Ruhanas Harun, Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM), “<i>ASEAN Response to the Indo Pacific Construct</i>”.</p> <p>Prof. Dr K.S. Nathan, Asia-Europe Institute, Universiti Malaya (UM), “<i>Megatrends in the Indo-Pacific Region: The Role of Big Powers</i>”.</p> <p>Moderated by YBhg. Tan Sri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan</p>



Programme Agenda of the Migration Expert Workshop

15 February 2024

Time	Agenda
830-900	Registration
900-935	<p>Introductory Remarks by Convener, Dr Andika Wahab (10 mins)</p> <p>Welcoming Remarks by YBr. Prof. Dr Zarina Othman, President of the Malaysian International Studies Association (MyISA) (5 mins)</p> <p>Remarks by Prof Sufian Jusoh, Director, IKMAS (UKM) (5 mins) (tbc)</p> <p>Summary Presentation of Key Highlights, Reflection and Research Gaps from Migration Panels during MISAC 1 by Dr Nik Hasif, IKMAS (UKM) (15 mins) - Any questions and/or interventions can be made in the next session.</p>
935-1100	<p>By Amanda Ng Seang Wei, International Organization for Migration (IOM, Malaysia), <i>“Realizing Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration: What Hinders Progress?”</i> (20 mins)</p> <p>By Ms Hafsar Tameesuddin, Co-Secretary General of Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN), <i>“Building a Transnational Collaborative Movement: Why and How?”</i>, (20 mins)</p> <p>Q&A session / Reflection (45 mins)</p> <p>Moderator: Dr Andika Wahab, IKMAS, UKM</p>
1100-11100	Group Photo and Tea Break
1100-1230	<p>Open Dialogue: Formation of Malaysian Academic Network on Migration (Who, How and Where to Begin, and What’s Next?)</p> <p>Facilitator: Dr Andika Wahab, IKMAS, UKM</p>
1300-1400	Closing and Lunch

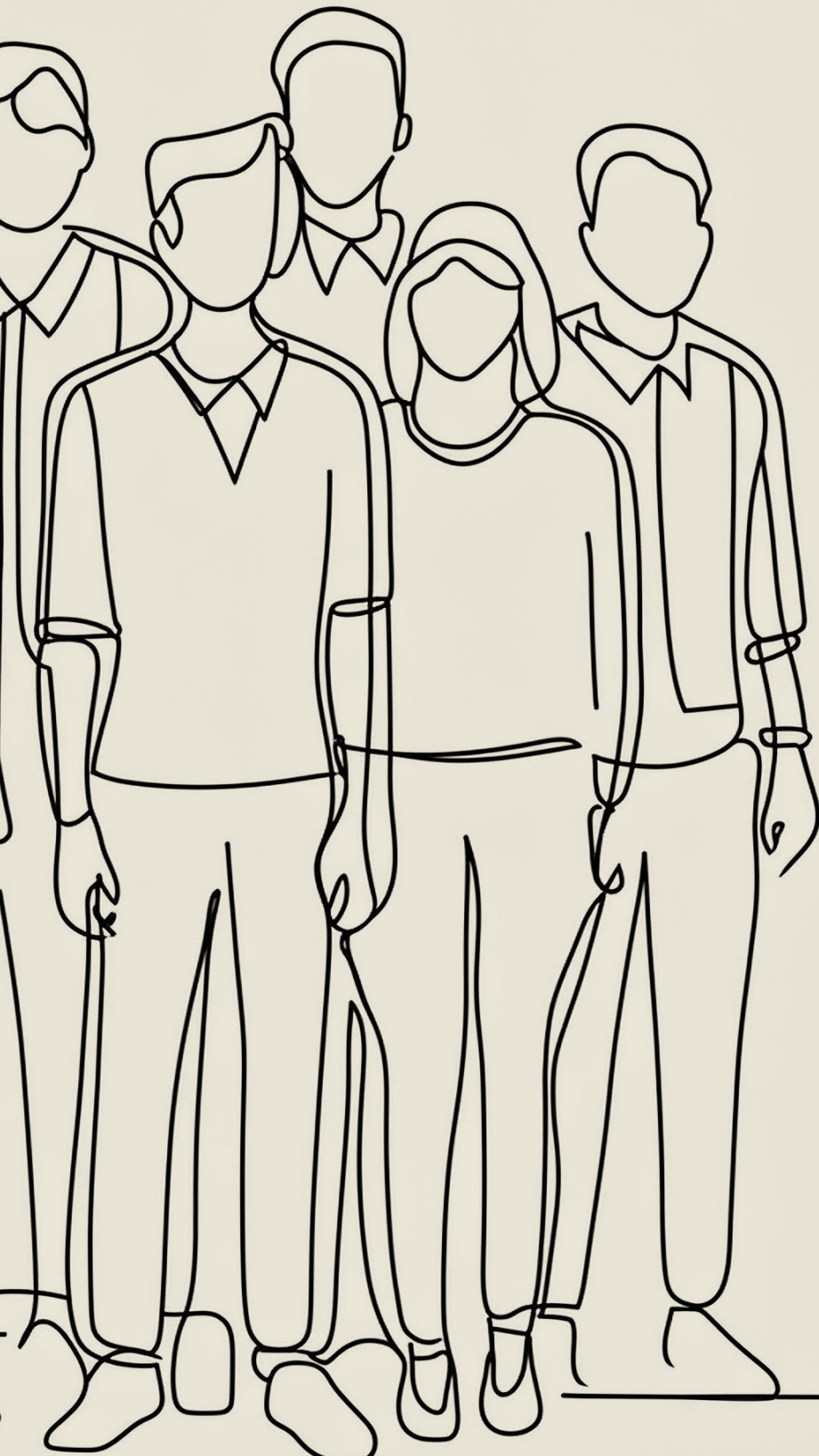




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