

SKILLS ACQUISITION AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY OF YEMENI
IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA

MOHAMMED FADHL ALI ALGAAL

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DEDICATION

*In the name of ALLAH the Most Beneficial and the most Merciful
Specially dedicated to my beloved mother and father.*

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ABSTRACT

Migrant workers are characterized by no/low skills, no/low level of education, low income and less mobility based on the human capital theory. However, the concepts of their skills and mobility are not necessarily right when applying the sociological perspective. From this perspective, learning of skills is a social process that is embedded in social relations, social networks and ethnic niches thus function as important mechanisms of non-formal learning and skills development which build up to create upscale economic mobility. This study employs sociological perspective to understand the processes of skill acquisition, skill transfer and economic mobility of Yemeni migrant (restaurant) workers in the Malaysian immigrant labor market. Having this main purpose, this research studied a sample of ten Yemeni migrant (restaurant) workers in the State of Johor. Semi structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to gain insights about the work histories in their country of origin, work experiences in Malaysia, role of social networks and ethnic niches for non-formal learning and skills development and job jumping and mobility. Interviews were translated, transcribed and summarized in details and then coded into themes for analysis. This study found that many Yemeni immigrant workers arrived to Malaysia with some skills directly or indirectly relevant to their jobs in Malaysia which they acquired in their home/ third country. The study further found that Yemeni immigrant (restaurant) workers have acquired linguistic and occupational skills through social networks and ethnic niches that help them develop their career and/or move to jobs with high advancement opportunities that can ultimately improve their working conditions and build economic mobility pathways through job jumping and on-the-job learning.

ABSTRAK

Pekerja asing dikategorikan sebagai pekerja tidak mempunyai kemahiran/kurang berkemahiran, tidak berpendidikan berpendidikan rendah, pendapatan rendah dan kurang kebolehan berdasarkan teori modal insan. Namun, konsep kemahiran dan kebolehan tidak digunakan dalam perspektif sosiologikal. Berdasarkan teori ini, kemahiran bersosial adalah proses perhubungan yang mana ianya berkait dalam konsep hubungan sosial, rangkaian hubungan dan etnik serta fungsi sebagai alat yang penting dalam komunikasi yang tidak formal dan kemahiran berkembang membentuk kebolehan dalam aspek ekonomi. Kajian ini mengambil kira perspektif sosiologi untuk memahami proses kemahiran pengambilalihan, kemahiran pertukaran dan kebolehan ekonomi pekerja asing berbangsa Yaman (restoran) dalam pasaran pekerja asing di Malaysia. Kajian ini mengambil sepuluh orang pekerja asing berbangsa Yaman (Restoran) sebagai sampel kajian. Temubual berbentuk separa struktur dengan soalan “open-ended” digunakan untuk mendapatkan maklumat latar belakang responden, pengalaman bekerja di Malaysia, peranan dalam rangkaian hubungan dan etnik untuk pembelajaran tidak formal dan kemahiran, penukaran pekerjaan, dan kebolehan. Hasil temubual diterjemah, disalin dan dirumus secara terperinci dan dikodkan untuk dianalisis. Hasil kajian menunjukkan kebanyakan pekerja asing daripada Yaman mempunyai kemahiran secara langsung dan tidak langsung berhubungkait dengan pekerjaan mereka di Malaysia yang mana ia diperolehi dari tanah air mereka. Kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa pekerja asing berbangsa Yaman mempunyai kemahiran berkomunikasi dan berkemahiran dalam rangkaian sosial dan etnik yang membantu mereka untuk membina kerjaya dan atau mencari pekerjaan yang lebih baik yang mana ianya mampu membuktikan kemampuan mereka dan mampu mencipta kebolehan ekonomi melalui penukaran pekerjaan dan pembelajaran dari masa ke semasa.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UN	-	United Nations
IOM	-	International Organization for Migration
USA	-	United States of America
UK	-	United Kingdom
ILO	-	International Labour Organization
ITUC	-	International Trade Union Confederation
OECD	-	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Of The Study

By mid-year 2013, the total number of migrants in the world has risen to 230 million. The United Nations (UN) has been counting and tracking the number of migrants since 1990 when there were 150 million international migrants in the world. In the year 2000, around 175 million people resided outside their country of birth meaning that one out of every 35 people in the world was an international migrant (IOM, 2005). Just over half of these migrants were economically active, with the majority residing in industrialized nations, mainly in the USA, Canada, the UK, Italy, France and Germany (ILO, 2004). These migration flows comprised mainly of people moving from countries in the Global South, together with an increasing movement from Central and Eastern European countries— particularly from the new European Union Member States— to Northern Europe (Portes and French, 2005).

Thus, while migrant workers have been characteristic of the functioning of the global economy for many centuries, they are a growing presence, especially in the economies of the industrialized nations.

The original causes of migration in general are diverse and highly complex ranging from individual, household to macro-structural factors. Researchers have in several or different ways emphasized the agency of migrants in the face of economic conditions, local and global labour markets conditions , or a mixture of both (Castles *et al.*, 2005; Skeldon, 1997). Many frameworks have attempted to highlight the responsibility of both personal factors of migration and local factors jointly with meso- as well as macro-level conditions for the movement of migrations. Among the frameworks, focus was on household strategies approach that explains the role of families in deciding and supporting the decision of the migration. The framework also covers the gender role and the role of social networks approach which points out how migration is facilitated by family, kin and community networks (Hagan, 1998; Massey *et al.*,1993). Transnationalism and transmigration have been the focus in migration literature. Transnationalism and transmigration involves the issues about how migrant groups develop the interconnections and networks between home and destination areas, and how social, economic and cultural fields usually become transnational naturally (Lima, 2010; Portes, 2003; Schiller *et al.*, 1992; Vertovec, 2004).

In practice, people move for a host of specific reasons such as political conflict, repression, famine, poverty, the search for economic and/or educational betterment, and family obligations. Perhaps not surprisingly then, much research has focused on the labour market experiences of migrants after they have decided to leave.

Whatever are the reasons for migrant workers leaving their home country and starting new lives in different places, they come to the host country with some basic skills in different forms. People making the necessary preparations to travel to a new

country and passing through all the travelling processes have in a sense proved that they had already applied some skills. Upon arriving and settling in a new host country, they contribute to the development of the host country in a variety of ways. Migrant workers contribution can be seen in the economy and to society in general. However, the major problem most migrant workers face is that their skills and qualifications are not generally recognized by employers. They thus become trapped in no/low-skills, low pay jobs with poor working conditions (Lucio *et al.*, 2007).

Faruqi (2007) observes that migration flow common to both North and South. In the South, Malaysia has been the leading country to host large number of foreign workers. In relative terms, foreigners represented 9.5 percentage of the total labor force in 2010, compared to 3.5 percent in 1990. This percent has risen to 13.6% which includes only registered or regular foreign workers (World Bank, 2013). If the additional 1 to 2 million unregistered (undocumented or irregular) foreign workers are included, the percentage of migrant workers will be much higher. This fact clearly indicates the contribution of the Malaysian economy towards creating employment opportunities for other nationalities and, by the same token, migrant workers' participation in the economic development process of Malaysian society. This reciprocity of interests is reflected in the literature. Mauro *et al.* (2013), for instance, recognizes that the presence of migrant workers has reallocation effect which helps create jobs for Malaysian workers. At the same time, they gain long term benefits from skills acquisition and their exposure to a variety of Malaysian socio-cultural practices (Abdulazeez *et al.*, 2011).

According to the World Bank report (2013) which is completed by Human Development, Social Protection and Labor Unit, East Asia and Pacific Region in collaboration with ILMIA—Ministry of Human Resources of Malaysia,

“There are two formally registered foreign types of workers in Malaysia—expatriates and foreign workers—governed under two very distinct sets of rules and privileges. *Expatriates* are defined as skilled, managerial, professional, and technical workers, and can stay in the country for long- or short-term periods; they have their own sets of rules and privileges. *Foreign*

workers are defined as semi-skilled or unskilled migrant workers and are called migrant workers by employers and the legal system. They are brought to the country as ‘guest workers’ or ‘contract workers’ and are managed by different rules and regulations than expatriates, in so far as types of passes, tenure, levies, and rules are concerned. The official distinction between the expatriates and semi-skilled or unskilled migrant workers is based on a monthly salary cut-off point that is currently set by the authorities” (World Bank, 2013: 90).

While expatriates who are defined as skilled have many privileges, foreign workers are discriminated against and are barred from marrying local women, opening bank accounts, changing jobs easily or travelling. They are constantly stopped, questioned and arrested by the authorities. Amnesty international documented in its report (The Exploitation of Migrant Workers in Malaysia) that there are widespread abuses committed against migrant workers who are lured to Malaysia by the promise of jobs but are instead used in forced labour or exploited in other ways. "Migrant workers are critical to Malaysia's economy, but they systematically receive less legal protection than other workers," said Michael Bochenek, the report author and director of policy at Amnesty International. "They are easy prey for unscrupulous recruitment agents, employers and corrupt police" (Amnesty International, 2010).

Many migrant workers are forced to work in hazardous situations, often against their will, they work for longer hours, some more than 12 hours a day and many are subject to verbal, physical and sexual abuse. Most pay recruitment agents substantial sums of money to secure jobs, work permits and training. Once they arrive, they often find that much of what their agents told them about their new jobs is untrue for example, the pay, type of work, even the existence of those jobs or their legal status in the country (Amnesty International, 2010).

Now, the foreign workers, called migrant workers, are not only managed and regulated differently from their counterpart expatriates, they also learn necessary knowledge and skills differently. Sociologists categorically point out that migrant workers learn substantial amount of skills through social networks and ethnic niches which work as centers of non-formal learning and skill development (Hagan, 1998; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). The study of Hagan et al. (2011) on Latino migrant workers in the construction industry of USA shows that they create mobility pathways through skill transference, on-the-job re-skilling, and job jumping. The migrant workers who are branded as *unskilled* or *semiskilled* are thus seen as skilled as well as mobile from sociological perspective. The study deploys a sociological perspective to investigate into the skill formation, skill transference and economic mobility of migrant workers in the Malaysian service industry.

1.1.1 Yemenis Immigrants in Malaysia

The Yemen unemployment rate has reached 40 percent, and as high as 60 percent among the people under 25 years old (al-monitor, 2014). The poverty rate in Yemen has risen dramatically from 42 percent in 2009 to 54.5 percent of the total population in 2012. Adding to the existing problems, Yemen has one of the fastest population growths globally and considered one of the least food secured countries in the world. The food insecurity has reached around 45 percent of the 25 million populations (World Bank, 2015).

The Yemeni government was unable to generate more jobs to tackle these serious economic problems. Thus, the Yemeni government encouraged people to migrate to the neighbouring rich Persian Gulf countries and to the rest of the world, resulting in billions of dollars arriving to the country in the form of cash transfer from the Yemeni workers. Remittances of Yemeni workers abroad played very significant role in stabilizing the national economy, and represented one of the main contributions to the national income. Also contributed significantly to the formation

of national savings as well as its contribution to cover essential part of the country's requirements of hard currency and strengthen the position of the balance of payments.

Cash transfers of Yemeni expatriates have reached US \$ 3.3 billion in 2014, or 9.1 percent of GDP (Alhayat, 2015). This figure represents the amount of cash that arrived to the country by the formal banking system, which exclude transfers that arrive in goods and machineries and equipments. Expatriates have contributed to improving the living standard of the citizen at home by improving their quality of foods, clothing, education, and contributed to the establishment of private, public and cooperative development projects (Maonah, 2013).

For that, many of the Yemeni workers are compelled to leave their country and immigrate to other countries to look for work and support their families back home. Yemen is among the top ten countries exporting labours in the Middle East and North Africa and at the same time recipients of remittances of foreign currencies. The number of Yemeni workers abroad who have dependents in Yemen estimated to be around 1,593,137. Of those, there are 5.7 percent with higher education, 1.9 percent are medical staff and doctors, and the remaining percentage are university education, high school and unskilled labors (Maonah, 2013).

When it comes to migration, Malaysia was one of the oldest countries that Yemeni workers tried to explore. Trading between Southeast Asia and South of Arabia (Yemen) had started back in the seventh century. Accounts by European and Arab travellers to Southeast Asia report the existence of small settlements of Arab merchants in the big trading cities from the thirteenth century onwards. Almost entirely men, they travelled to Southeast Asia in thousands lured by the tale of fortunes to be gained. The majority of these Hadramis originated from WadiHadramaut between Shibam and Tarim. On arriving in Southeast Asia they usually settled in places where they found their relatives or other migrants from the

same town (Mobini-Kesheh, 1999). The early contacts were through trading of spices, timber, textiles and many other items.

The history of Hadramis has been associated with migration for centuries. There were many external and internal forces behind these migrations. The expanding power of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean and the Ottomans ruling of Yemen were some of the external forces. Other internal forces such as poverty, droughts and political instability in Yemen as well as business and trading opportunities and Islamic Dawa (missionaries) initiated Hadramis migration movement (Jacobsen, 2009). The Hadramis migration to Malaysia has been a story of success. Apart from doing business, Hadramis were preaching Islam and spreading Islamic teaching in the country. Since Islamic law prohibits the marriage between Muslim and non-believers, many of them married women who converted to Islam and settled in Malaysia. After adapting to their new homelands, Hadramis become leader scholars, academics and also had some political influence (Othman (2006)). In Malaysia or Southeast Asia, Malays perceive Arabs as the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This perceived genealogical link of Arabs makes Malays believe that Arabs are of elevated status due to the noble ancestry, have supernatural powers and an inherited missionary role (Othman, 2006).

There are around a half million Yemeni Hadrami residing in Malaysia (26thSep, 2012).¹ Even though they are considered Malaysians, they maintain their ancestral identities through religious and cultural occasions and celebrations. A number of Yemeni restaurants and businesses can easily be noticed in Malaysia, serving Yemeni and middle-eastern cuisines. Arabs visiting Malaysia feel at home because of their common religion and due to the Hadramis foundation presence. Many Yemenis and Arabs have new investments, and trade and consider Malaysia as their second home (26thSep, 2012).

¹“26thSep” is the name of a newspaper published from Yemen. This newspaper has been named after the great revolution in Yemen that took place on 26th September 1962.

In Malaysia, many immigrants from Yemen end up working in restaurants serving primarily Arab and Middle Eastern food. NNN-Bernamea (2013), in reference to Yemeni Ambassador in Malaysia, reported that there are more than seventy (70) Yemeni restaurants in Malaysia, apart from other Arab and Middle Eastern restaurants employing Yemeni workers. This is a high proportion considering the relatively small number of immigrants from Yemen. Furthermore, the available information indicates that a clear majority of Yemeni businesses are active in the service sector, mainly restaurants. Yemenis tend to go for restaurants' because both Malaysians and the Middle Eastern visitors to Malaysia like Yemeni food. Although the Yemenis are mostly in restaurant business, some Yemenis have ventured in imports and exports businesses and in tourism and travel agencies. Except a few large Yemeni firms, in Malaysia, Yemeni businesses are small-scale which can accommodate only a few regular employees.

It goes without saying that the presence of Yemeni businesses is good for both Yemeni migrant workers and Malaysia. The benefits for Malaysia can be understood in the role that Yemenis businesses play in attracting tourists from the Middle East region. Migrant workers' benefits are obvious; they get an opportunity to earn income to survive. However, insofar as the small Yemeni restaurants are concerned, the question arises as to the long-term benefits of the Yemeni migrant workers. Do they just get some income to make their survival possible or, beyond the money income, do they gain something which becomes their human capital to provide them benefits in future? This current study essentially addresses this question by employing the sociological perspective in examining Yemeni restaurant workers' work life history.

1.2 Problem Statement

Malaysia is a leading developing country in Asia. Its economy has an impressive economic development record, with its manufacturing, services and tourism industries all successfully expanding since the 1960s to complement the country's competitive natural resource industries (Crawford, 2012). People from various nations have taken part in its economic development process. Of the 29.7 million population in Malaysia, 2.4 million are non-Malaysian citizens, and of its 13.2 million labour force, 1.8 million (13.6%) are registered or regular foreign workers and 1 to 2 million are unregistered (undocumented or irregular) foreign workers (World Bank, 2013).

Yemeni link with Malaysia and its impact on Yemeni as a nation have been extensive, long lasting and very remarkable. Yemeni historical presence in Malaysia has helped Yemen in many ways. For instance, Malaysia is one of the few countries in the world that allows Yemenis to enter the country without a visa. The descendants of Yemeni Hadramis still visit Yemen regularly. Besides the recent economic difficulties which forced many Yemenis to leave the country and to start searching for better opportunities elsewhere, this very strong historical link between Yemen and Malaysia has encouraged many workers from Yemen to immigrate to Malaysia and start doing businesses or working in restaurants and other sectors. In fact, Yemeni restaurants in Malaysia have created a kind of very strong brand image which gives them huge advantages to success (26th Sep, 2012).

Migrant workers are characterized by no/low skills, no/low level of education, low income and less mobility. While these features generally hold true from the economic and political-legal perspectives of human capital theory, the notions of their skills and mobility are not necessarily true when seen from sociological perspective. From this perspective, learning of skills is a social process that is embedded in social relations, and social networks and ghetto or ethnic niches thus function as important centers of non-formal learning and skills development

which eventually becomes instrumental for their upscale economic mobility. A study on Latino immigrant construction workers in North Carolina, USA shows that the workers are low on traditional human capital attributes, but high on work experience and they acquire and transfer skills and create pathways for their economic progress (Hagan et al. 2011).

While Hagan's conclusion may be true for the migrant workers in construction industry in US, is it true for Yemeni migrant workers in Malaysia? Malaysian economy, based on the general observations of foreign labouring classes, seems to contribute in skills formation and transfer. However, we do not know how they acquire and transfer skills. This study, employing sociological perspective, plans to offer an answer to this question and thus aspire to contribute to the body of knowledge on how migrant workers skills formation and mobility in a developing country context. Due to the sharply contrasted definition of the human capital theory and the social learning theory, this study explains why the foreign workers' skills acquired back at home and/or new skills formed during their stay in Malaysia should be recognised and not be omitted as in the human capital theory definition. Such skills are very fundamental in their journey to reach higher economic mobility. By and large, studies in human capital theory of the immigrant labor market incorporation in the unregulated informal jobs either assume that immigrant workers are unskilled by virtue of the transfer of low levels of traditional human capital and thus trapped in low-wage jobs (Chiswick & Miller, 1995; Borjas, 1995), or they paint a bleak picture of economic marginalization, exploitation, and discrimination because of the conditions of an unregulated industry and the undocumented status of its heavily immigrant workforce.

Human capital theory assumes education increases productivity in the workplace, resulting in higher individual wages and assumes that higher levels of educational attainment and quality will yield greater productivity and wages across the board. Such treatment of education is problematic because the process of human capital formation varies for individuals and groups and results in ignoring the other means of skill acquisition and skill transfer.

According to the social learning theory, people learn differently, and a “quality” education in one context may prove ineffective in another. The rationale for this study is also felt from often stained image of Malaysia as host country of foreign labourers. “The degrading treatments unleashed on migrant workers by officials, recruiting agents and employers often stain identity of host among comity of nations” (Abdulazeez et al., 2011:332). According to Malaysian insider (2014) a survey conducted by the international Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) rating countries on a scale from “1” the best to “5” the worst, Malaysia was identified as one of the worst countries in the world to work in as it does not guarantee workers’ access to their rights and therefore expose them to unfair practices and autocracy. This study posits that Malaysian immigrant labour market environment and sociocultural milieu are generally supportive of migrant workers’ long-term development despite the alleged stained image. The present research undertakes for investigation the issue of how the migrant workers exploit opportunities in the Malaysian immigrant labour market to sharpen their existing skills, learn newer skills and thus enhance their chance of achieving some degree of economic mobility.

1.3 Research Questions

In line with the main aim of this study, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- i. What are the work experiences of Yemeni immigrant (restaurant) workers in their home and/or third countries that can prepare them for the Malaysian immigrant market?
- ii. Do Yemeni immigrant (restaurant) workers change in terms of their work skills, work behaviours and work settings in their Malaysian work experience?

iii. How do social networks, ethnic niches and on-the-job training of the Yemeni migrant (restaurant) workers contribute to their changes in work skills, work behaviours and work settings?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of the research is to understand the processes of skill acquisition, skill transfer and economic mobility of the Yemeni immigrant (restaurant) workers in Malaysia from a sociological perspective. To achieve the main purpose, the study addresses the following specific objectives:

- i. To explain the major occupational learning of Yemen migrant workers in their home/third countries before coming to Malaysia.
- ii. To explore changes experienced by Yemen migrant workers in their Malaysia work experience in terms of work skills, work behaviour and work setting.
- iii. To discuss the sources and mechanisms that Yemeni migrant workers have followed to acquire and transfer skills and create pathways for economic mobility.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study adds to the limited academic research in this field. Currently, there are not many published researches, papers, or articles on the migrant workers in Malaysia, particularly from the sociological perspective. Consequently, the findings of this study add to the limited literature on the subject matter and improve the understanding of the migrant workers conditions in the region for future studies.

This study argues that we need to rethink human capital measures, particularly as the Malaysian system formally classifies foreign workers into two distinct groups—expatriates and foreign workers- governed with different rules and privileges. Giving migrant workers similar privileges and rights would make their presence in Malaysia more meaningful and make them more productive and reduce their involvement in illegal activities.

Findings of this study have shown that immigrant workers' on-the-job learning has long run implications for immigrant labour market career. The linguistic skills and work experience, technical and social skills that immigrant workers acquire on the job can function as the foundation for creating pathways to economic mobility and occupational advancement.

Finding of this study is expected to be helpful in countering the “stained” identity of Malaysia as one of the worst countries in the world to work for and enhance the Malaysian image as a host country of a large number of migrant workers.

Furthermore, finding of this study can be helpful in providing some insight of the Yemeni migrant workers experiences in Malaysia which can be used to increase the cooperation between Yemen and Malaysia in regard to establishing work agreements between the two countries.

1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This research studies Yemeni migrant workers in Malaysia as the main purpose, and more specifically, the focus is on the Yemeni migrant workers in restaurants.

Respondents in this study are limited to full time Yemeni migrant workers in restaurants with at least three years of working experience in Malaysia. Johor Bahru was chosen as the place of this study.

This study covered some of the most related theories in regard to the research, for instance, the human capital theory, the social learning theory and the models of positive and negative assimilation. Also general concepts were considered as well. This research also gathers information and data from different sources which maybe in need to support in the matter.

1.7 Summary

This chapter introduced the background of the world migration and some overview of the Malaysian labour market and foreign workers and focus on the Yemen migration history with Malaysia and the role they played in Malaysia. There are few researches about the contributions to the Yemenis into the Malaysian development in the early history and almost no research about the Yemeni workers in the recent times. The purpose of the research is to understand from a sociological perspective the processes of skill acquisition, skill transfer and economic mobility of

migrant workers in the Malaysian immigrant labour market. In order to achieve the study purpose, Johor Bahru was chosen to be the area of this study. Brief details about migration history and the Yemenis history were provided. This chapter also presents the problem of the study, the objectives of the study and research questions, the scope of the study, the significance and limitations.

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