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Barriers to Learning: The Educational Challenges Faced by Refugees in Malaysia

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Education is a basic human right, yet for refugee children in Malaysia, accessing quality education remains a formidable challenge due to a combination of legal, socio-economic, and cultural barriers. Despite approximately 190,370 refugees and asylum-seekers being registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia, access to formal education is largely restricted by legal limitations and systemic exclusion (UNHCR, 2024). Although NGOs and community-led initiatives strive to address these gaps, numerous obstacles continue to impede refugee children's educational opportunities. A comprehensive approach is necessary to fully address the complexities of the refugee experience in the country.

One of the most significant challenges facing refugees in Malaysia is their exclusion from the formal education system. Malaysian law does not recognise refugees as legal residents, preventing them from enrolling in public schools (Lee & Hoque, 2024). As a result, refugee children are often left with only informal educational institutions, usually operated by NGOs and community-based organisations. While these institutions play a vital role in providing basic education, they frequently grapple with limited funding, insufficient resources, and a shortage of trained teachers (Awoke & De La Cruz, 2023). Furthermore, the absence of accreditation from these informal schools creates a significant obstacle, as students who complete their education through these channels are often unable to pursue higher education or secure formal employment, limiting their long-term opportunities (Lee & Hoque, 2024). As the global refugee crisis intensifies, the number of displaced children in Malaysia in need of education continues to rise, further straining these already under-resourced initiatives.



The socio-economic conditions of refugee families in Malaysia also limit their access to education (Loganathan et al., 2023). Many refugees live in precarious financial situations, struggling to meet essential needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. For these families, education often becomes a lower priority when survival is the main concern. As a result, many refugee children are compelled to engage in informal work to support their families, leaving them with little time or energy to focus on schooling (International Labour Organization, 2017). The prevalence of child labour within refugee communities exacerbates the cycle of poverty and reduces the likelihood of children remaining in school. Even when refugee families prioritise education, financial barriers such as school fees, transport costs, and the need for learning materials frequently prove insurmountable. Without access to free or subsidised education, many refugee children are forced to drop out, unable to meet these demands. This pattern is consistent with global research, which identifies poverty as a major factor contributing to school dropouts among refugee populations (Alkharouf et al., 2024).

While Malaysia's legal framework does not officially recognise refugee status, ensuring access to education can still help fulfill SDG 10: 'Reduced Inequalities, by providing refugee children with opportunities to integrate and overcome socio-economic disparities'. Through collaboration with NGOs and the international community, Malaysia can address these challenges and promote sustainable educational solutions, contributing to global development goals while ensuring that no child is left behind.

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