

MANAGING FOREIGN LABOUR IN MALAYSIA'S CONSTRUCTION SECTOR: PRACTICES AND CONSTRAINTS

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian construction sector is heavily dependent on foreign labour, making effective labour management a critical factor for project success. Despite their essential contributions to construction delivery and industry growth, foreign labourers often face challenges related to inadequate governance, weak enforcement, and suboptimal on-site management, exposing them to poor housing, low wages, unsafe conditions, and limited labour rights. These issues not only undermine worker well-being but also negatively impact productivity and project performance. This study investigates foreign labour management practices in Malaysia through a survey of 282 construction labourers using a 46-item questionnaire. The results indicate strong performance in workplace safety, supportive supervision, and accommodation management, while mid-level ratings were observed for job clarity, fair compensation, and training opportunities. High scores reflect better-performing sampled sites and do not mean issues are absent. Weaknesses were identified in worker participation in decision-making and awareness of policies and labour rights. The findings underscore the need to enhance communication, participatory management, and policy awareness to improve worker satisfaction, compliance, and overall project outcomes. Strengthening these labour management practices is essential not only for protecting foreign labourers' well-being but also for optimizing productivity and ensuring the effective execution of construction projects in Malaysia.

Keywords: Foreign Workforce Integration; Human Resource Coordination; Industry Productivity; Regulatory Compliance; Workforce Governance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's dependence on foreign labourers can be traced back to the colonial period, when imported labour was brought in to address shortages in agriculture and infrastructure; today, the construction sector continues this legacy, relying heavily on labourers from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal, similar to trends seen across Southeast Asia (Saari et al., 2025; Yusop et al., 2025). While this reliance helps keep labour costs low and projects affordable, it also creates socio-economic challenges, including wage pressure on local labourers, limited career progression, and weak skill transfer, ultimately reinforcing a segmented workforce with restricted opportunities for advancement (Saari et al., 2025; Yusop et al., 2025). Malaysia currently employs around 2.1 million documented foreign labourers, representing about 13% of the national workforce. However, the true scale of undocumented migrants remains uncertain. Previous estimates suggest that their numbers may be comparable to the documented workforce, potentially doubling the actual presence of foreign labourers in the country (Rizam et al., 2024; Mazlan et al., 2024).

The construction sector plays a vital role in driving national economic growth, but its activities depend heavily on the availability of a sufficient workforce. Due to the shortage of local labour, the industry increasingly relies on foreign labourers, who have become the preferred choice for many contractors. While this approach helps sustain project delivery, it also contributes to higher unemployment among local citizens and leads to an outflow of national income as foreign labourers remit their earnings to their home countries (Saari et al., 2024; Najib et al., 2019). Based on the research conducted by Jamalulil et al. (2022), reliance on foreign labourers stems largely from limited interest among local labourers in joining the industry. Zakaria & Zain (2021) argued that although foreign labourers have helped address labour shortages in Malaysia's construction sector, excessive reliance on them and the resulting negative consequences have evolved into a significant social concern.

Despite extensive research on foreign labour in construction, most studies have been conducted in other regional contexts, and limited empirical evidence exists focusing specifically on Malaysian construction sites. Furthermore, existing studies often rely on secondary data or limited case studies, with fewer employing direct primary data collection from active construction sites across both building and infrastructure projects. This indicates a geographical and methodological gap, which this study aims to address.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many local labourers are selective about the types of jobs they are willing to accept and often avoid physically demanding, high-risk, or unstable roles such as those in the construction industry. Consequently, employers tend to rely more on foreign labourers to fill these positions and ensure project continuity. Foreign labourers are attracted to Malaysia's construction sector due to consistent employer demand, comparatively better wages and working conditions, and limited employment prospects in their home countries (Zainal et al., 2023). Foreign workers often face multiple workplace challenges, including human rights concerns, work permit issues, language barriers, inadequate compensation and insurance, unequal treatment, and poor working conditions. However, fear of losing their jobs or being repatriated prevents many from voicing complaints or expressing dissatisfaction to management. (Wei & Yazdanifard, 2015; Uddin & Mohammed, 2020).

According to Bariono & Kamaruding (2025), foreign labourers in the construction industry face significant safety and productivity challenges. Inadequate training, low safety awareness, limited protective equipment, and fear of deportation increase their risk of workplace accidents. Additionally, inefficient recruitment processes and language barriers (Sanmargaraja et al., 2024; Ne' Matullah et al., 2021) delay hiring, disrupt project timelines, and lead to misunderstandings about safety and job requirements. These issues highlight the need for stronger safety enforcement, proper training, and improved administrative systems to enhance overall project performance.

Migrant labourers have long contributed to Malaysia's economy, but many still face inadequate and overcrowded housing conditions that can affect their health and safety. To address this issue, the Malaysian government introduced the Employees' Minimum Standards of Housing, Accommodations and Amenities Act 1990 (Act 446) to protect the housing rights and welfare of both migrant and local labourers (Nasir et al., 2023). The treatment of foreign labourers in the construction industry is often inadequate, as they face numerous challenges in their working environment. Poor working conditions and insufficient welfare support can negatively impact labourers' productivity and lead to delays in project timelines. Therefore, it is important to ensure that foreign construction labourers receive fair wages, safe working conditions, adequate welfare facilities, and proper support for their general well-being (Fateh et al., 2021).

According to Putul & Mia (2018), exploitation of foreign labourers frequently occurs at construction sites in Malaysia, which can significantly affect labourers' morale and motivation in their jobs. These exploitative practices include confiscation of labourers' passports, physical and psychological abuse, forced labour, sexual harassment, unfair salary deductions, discrimination, poor living conditions, and burdens related to the levy system. In some cases, labourers also face harassment from authorities. Such practices are often used to restrict labourers' freedom of movement, prevent them from changing jobs, and discourage them from reporting poor working conditions or exploitation.

Furthermore, exploitation in the context of labourers takes the form of wages that are not commensurate with the work they perform. This type of exploitation is usually carried out by employers within an organization, particularly in the construction sector. Exploitation of foreign labourers occurs due to weak administration, lax laws, and employers' lack of attention to managing migrant labourers from other countries to work in Malaysia. Employers often neglect proper management of foreign labourers, even when these labourers enter Malaysia through unauthorized channels (Marjuki, 2018). While concerns such as exploitation and human rights issues are discussed in the literature, this study operationalises these concerns through measurable workplace indicators such as working conditions, accommodation quality, and compensation practices.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative survey approach to examine strategies for enhancing worker protection, productivity, and general performance in Malaysia's construction sector. The research was guided by a pragmatic research philosophy and adopted both descriptive and explanatory approaches to better understand foreign labour practices at construction sites. The respondents comprised foreign construction labourers from

Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia, selected through a non-probability convenience sampling technique.

Data were collected using both structured face-to-face questionnaires administered and online questionnaires through Google Form at several active construction sites located in Malaysia. The selected construction projects consist of both building and infrastructure developments. The construction sites were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling approach based on several considerations, including: (i) active project status during the data collection period, (ii) accessibility and permission granted by site management, and (iii) representation of both building and infrastructure projects to capture diverse construction practices. This approach ensured that the selected sites were relevant to the study objectives and provided practical access to foreign workers for data collection. The questionnaire instrument was developed based on insights from relevant literature, particularly the work of Sanmargaraja et al. (2025) and Olanrewaju et al. (2024). It consisted of both Likert-scale and categorical questions, designed to capture labourers' perceptions and experiences related to labour management practices in Malaysian construction sites.

The questionnaire covered three main sections: (i) demographic and background characteristics of the respondents, (ii) labour management practices at construction sites, and (iii) potential interventions aimed at improving working conditions. However, this research focuses specifically on the findings related to foreign labour management practices in Malaysia at construction sites. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques and explanatory approach with IBM SPSS Statistics (version 31.0.0.0).

Specifically, the descriptive approach was employed to systematically characterize foreign labour practices at construction sites, including aspects such as working conditions, communication challenges, and employment arrangements. This was achieved using the structured survey instruments and descriptive statistical analysis (e.g., frequencies, means, and standard deviations).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 282 valid questionnaires were collected from 11 construction sites across Malaysia between September 2025 and February 2026. The names of the projects are kept anonymous to maintain confidentiality and protect the privacy of the sites involved.

4.1 RESPONDENT PROFILE

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed both online through Google Forms and in physical form. From this distribution, 282 completed responses were received, yielding a response rate of 94%. The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondent profile and employment status

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
<i>Site</i>	Site A	21	7.4

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
	Site B	6	2.1
	Site C	6	2.1
	Site D	12	4.3
	Site E	83	29.4
	Site F	59	20.9
	Site G	19	6.7
	Site H	20	7.1
	Site I	20	7.1
	Site J	26	9.2
	Site K	10	3.5
Years of Experience	Less than 1 year	13	4.6
	1-3 years	159	56.4
	4-6 years	59	20.9
	7-10 years	35	12.4
	Over 10 years	15	5.3
Nationality	Bangladesh	214	75.9
	Indonesia	6	2.1
	Nepal	7	2.5
Highest education	No formal education	109	38.7
	Primary	82	29.1
Current employment	Full-time	79	28.1
	Contract-based	135	47.9
	Daily wages	65	23
Monthly income range (RM)	1000-1499	6	2.1
	1500-1999	122	43.3
	2000-2999	94	33.4
	3000-3999	35	12.4
Types of construction	Residential buildings	125	44.3
	Commercial buildings	120	42.6
	Infrastructure	5	1.8
	Industrial facilities	22	7.8
Living in company accommodation	Yes	262	92.9
Language spoken at the site	Bengali	206	73
	Nepali	8	2.8
	Hindi	4	1.4
	Indonesian	1	0.4
	Urdu	25	8.9

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Trade/skill area	General labourer	73	25.9
	Masonry/brickwork	16	5.7
	Carpentry	18	6.4
	Electrical	5	1.8
	Plumbing	128	45.4
	Painting	5	1.8
	Heavy machinery operator	2	0.7
	Others: aircon, fire plumber, scaffolder, etc	32	11.3
Formal certification/training	Yes-local (Malaysia)	160	56.7
	Yes-From home country	69	24.5
	No	49	17.4
Recruitment method	Local employment agency	129	45.7
	Home country agency	81	28.7
	Directly by the employer	37	13.1
	Referred by other labourers	31	11
Frequency of overtime	Very often	92	32.7
	Quite often	139	49.3
	Often	31	31
	Occasionally	16	16
Reasons for overtime	To meet the project deadline	55	19.5
	To earn more income	209	74.1
	The project is on extension of time (EOT)	12	4.3
	Others: being forced, etc.	1	0.4

4.2 RESULTS OF FOREIGN LABOUR MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN MALAYSIA

The reliability analysis indicates that the 46-item questionnaire has outstanding internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.955 and 0.964 for standardized items (Table 2). These results confirm that the instrument consistently measures the intended constructs, and the slightly higher standardized value further demonstrates that the items maintain strong reliability even after standardization, underscoring the robustness of the measurement tool.

Table 2: Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.955	.964	46

The KMO suggests a very high degree of shared variance among the 46 constructs which means that the variables are not isolated measures but are likely influenced by common underlying factors or governance mechanisms in labour management (Table 3). In practical terms, this implies construct are suitable to collectively measure labour practices. The significant Bartlett's Test further confirms that relationships among variables are not random, indicating a well-structured correlation matrix. This strengthens the conceptual validity of the instrument and suggests that foreign labour management in the Malaysian construction industry is systemically interconnected rather than fragmented, supporting deeper interpretation, such as identifying key dimensions, policy gaps, or managerial clusters.

Table 3: KMO and Bartlett's test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.928
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	6618.607
	df	1035
	Sig.	.000

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for labour management practices, including the mean, standard deviation, and ranking of each statement. The findings indicate that respondents generally perceive labour management practices at construction sites positively, as reflected by the high mean scores ranging from 4.23 to 4.38 on a five-point scale. This suggests that most labourers agree that appropriate management practices are implemented at their workplace.

Table 4: Descriptive analysis of labour management practices in Malaysia

Labour Management Practices	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
My job responsibilities are clearly defined and well-managed.	4.38	0.647	1
The site environment is clean, safe, and well-organized.	4.36	0.676	2
My employer provides regular updates on contract renewal and permit status.	4.36	0.719	3
I have experienced fair treatment during recruitment and onboarding.	4.34	0.623	4
I always have access to personal protective equipment (PPE).	4.33	0.662	5
When labourers are mistreated, it affects the overall performance of the project.	4.32	1.99	6

Labour Management Practices	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
There is clarity about how wages and deductions are calculated.	4.32	0.569	7
I feel proud to work at my current site due to good management practices.	4.32	0.698	8
I receive clear instructions before starting a new task.	4.31	0.709	9
I always have access to proper safety gear and equipment.	4.31	0.683	10
I feel safe from harassment or abuse at my workplace.	4.3	0.723	11
I am fairly compensated for overtime work.	4.28	0.681	12
I am given sufficient rest breaks during the workday.	4.28	0.639	13
I think adequate signposts with graphical illustrations are provided on the site.	4.28	0.728	14
I am treated fairly regardless of my nationality.	4.27	0.701	15
The work environment is safe and well-managed.	4.26	0.674	16
The accommodation provided is clean, safe, and not overcrowded.	4.25	0.762	17
Poor labour practices can lead to legal fines, disputes, or project delays.	4.25	0.661	18
Management listens to and responds to worker complaints or grievances.	4.24	0.619	19
My supervisor is approachable and supportive.	4.23	0.688	20
My work performance is regularly reviewed and discussed.	4.23	0.649	21
The supervisors treat labourers with respect and professionalism.	4.23	0.701	22
I have access to drinking water and basic sanitation facilities on site.	4.23	0.766	23
I receive fair and transparent treatment from supervisors.	4.23	0.62	24
The way work is assigned and managed contributes positively to project productivity.	4.22	0.602	25
I receive safety training before starting high-risk tasks.	4.22	0.6	26
I am informed about my legal rights as a foreign worker in Malaysia.	4.22	0.635	27
I am informed in advance if there are changes in work schedules.	4.2	0.599	28
Labour management systems help improve work productivity on site.	4.19	0.672	29
I am informed of company policies and procedures.	4.19	0.663	30

Labour Management Practices	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
I understand the safety procedures and emergency protocols on-site.	4.19	0.602	31
I am aware of the company's policies related to worker rights and welfare.	4.19	0.747	32
Supervisors are trained to handle cultural and language differences.	4.18	0.71	33
Communication between foreign labourers and management is effective.	4.18	0.683	34
The company offers opportunities for skill development or training.	4.17	0.7	35
My feedback is taken seriously by management.	4.17	0.73	36
I feel that labour policies are applied equally to foreign and local labourers.	4.15	0.726	37
There are transparent and fair processes for conflict resolution.	4.15	0.644	38
There are clear procedures for reporting complaints or grievances.	4.15	0.699	39
The construction company provides stable and secure employment for foreign labourers.	4.14	0.788	40
The company has systems in place to prevent abuse or exploitation of foreign labourers.	4.13	0.745	41
My working hours are reasonable and comply with labour laws.	4.13	0.629	42
Labourers are involved in decisions or discussions that affect their jobs.	4.11	0.716	43
The working hours are fair and comply with employment regulations.	4.1	0.613	44
My wages are paid on time and according to what was promised.	4.06	0.843	45
My job responsibilities are clearly explained to me.	4.05	0.605	46

The highest-ranked variable recorded a mean score of 4.38 (SD = 0.647), indicating a strong level of agreement among respondents. This suggests that labourers generally experience clear task organization and structured job management, which contributes to better coordination and efficiency in construction activities. The second-ranked variable obtained a mean score of 4.36 (SD = 0.676), reflecting respondents' positive perception of workplace conditions. A well-maintained and organized site environment is important in construction projects as it supports worker safety, operational efficiency, and project performance. The present study found that improved safety measures are perceived as essential for enhancing worker welfare. This finding aligns with the work of Zulkeflee et al. (2023), who reported that inadequate enforcement of safety procedures remains a significant challenge in Malaysian construction sites. Similarly, the third-ranked variable also recorded a mean score of 4.36 (SD = 0.719), suggesting that respondents perceive effective communication regarding employment-related matters. The role of site

supervisors or team leaders who share the same native language (e.g., Bengali) and are able to communicate effectively in basic or functional Malay is critical in bridging communication gaps between foreign workers and local management. These supervisors often act as intermediaries, translating instructions and facilitating communication between management and workers. As a result, even though many workers may have limited proficiency in Malay, they generally possess a working understanding of commonly used terms and instructions, which supports day-to-day site communication. This finding corroborates previous research by Dainty et al. (2007), which identified language barriers as a major obstacle to safety compliance and operational efficiency in multicultural construction environments. The fourth-ranked variable achieved a mean score of 4.34 (SD = 0.623), indicating that respondents generally perceive fair and appropriate processes during the early stages of employment. Fair recruitment and onboarding practices are essential for building trust and maintaining ethical labour management. Meanwhile, the fifth-ranked variable reported a mean score of 4.33 (SD = 0.662), demonstrating that respondents widely acknowledge the availability of necessary safety resources at the workplace. Ensuring access to safety equipment is a critical aspect of labour management as it helps reduce workplace risks and promotes a safer working environment.

The remaining variables recorded mean scores ranging from 4.10 to 4.38, indicating a generally high level of agreement among respondents regarding the implementation of labour management practices at construction sites. These variables collectively reflect positive perceptions related to workplace safety, fair employment practices, communication between labourers and management, and the provision of welfare facilities. The results suggest that respondents acknowledge the presence labour management systems that support worker protection, productivity, and project performance.

Variables related to safety management, fair treatment, access to welfare facilities, and effective supervision demonstrate consistently high mean scores above 4.20, indicating that these practices are relatively well implemented across the surveyed construction projects. Furthermore, aspects associated with communication, worker rights awareness, grievance handling mechanisms, and training opportunities also received favourable responses, suggesting that labourers generally perceive management efforts to maintain transparent and supportive working conditions.

The findings indicate that providing adequate welfare support, including safe accommodation, fair remuneration, and effective occupational safety measures, is essential for enhancing the well-being of foreign construction workers. These findings are consistent with previous studies that emphasised the importance of welfare provisions in improving worker productivity, job satisfaction, and retention (Olanrewaju et al., 2024). Furthermore, the results support the observations of Zulkeflee et al. (2023), who reported that inadequate safety practices and poor living conditions remain persistent challenges among foreign workers in the Malaysian construction sector.

However, several variables with comparatively lower mean scores, although still above 4.00, indicate potential areas for improvement. These include aspects related to worker participation in decision-making, wage management consistency, and clarity of job explanations. While the overall perception remains positive, enhancing these areas could

further strengthen labour management effectiveness and improve worker satisfaction within the construction sector.

Although the overall mean scores suggest generally positive labour management practices, these findings should be interpreted with caution, as they likely reflect site-specific conditions and may not fully capture the broader challenges within the Malaysian construction industry. The results indicate relatively strong performance in areas such as safety, fair treatment, and structured work management; however, improvements in communication, worker engagement, and employment transparency remain necessary to support more sustainable labour practices and enhance project performance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings should be interpreted as reported perceptions of labour management practices within the surveyed sites, shaped by the study context and potential response constraints, rather than as a definitive representation of industry-wide conditions. Overall, respondents perceived labour management practices positively, with most variables recording mean scores above 4.00, indicating a high level of agreement on the presence of structured systems. Key aspects such as task organization, workplace safety, fair recruitment, access to protective equipment, and communication were viewed as important contributors to a well-managed work environment. These perceptions suggest that effective labour management practices may support worker welfare and project performance, although the results should be interpreted with caution.

First, the sample size of 282 respondents may limit the generalizability of the findings, and future research could involve a larger number of participants across more construction projects to obtain broader insights. Second, access to construction sites was challenging, as some project management teams were reluctant to allow survey activities, possibly due to concerns that issues regarding the treatment of foreign labourers might be exposed. Third, foreign labourers may have been hesitant to provide their true perceptions, as supervisors were often present during survey sessions, which could have led respondents to hide their dissatisfaction for fear of losing their jobs or facing wage penalties. While the findings indicate generally positive perceptions, the possibility of response bias due to workers' reluctance to express dissatisfaction should be considered, and thus the results may reflect a more conservative estimate of existing challenges.

The use of online survey tools such as Google Forms was limited because many labourers do not always carry mobile phones or have access to high-speed data. The presence of site supervisors during data collection may have influenced respondents to provide more favourable answers due to perceived workplace hierarchy. Although measures such as anonymity assurance were implemented, this may still have introduced some degree of response bias.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for construction firms to strengthen communication mechanisms, enhance worker engagement, and improve transparency in employment practices. From a policy standpoint, the results emphasize the importance of enforcing labour standards and strengthening monitoring systems to safeguard foreign worker welfare. Theoretically, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing empirical insights into labour management practices within the Malaysian construction context. Future research should adopt broader and more

representative sampling approaches, incorporate qualitative methods for deeper understanding, and utilize independent or anonymous data collection strategies.

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