

The Difficulty of Education for the Children of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Sabah Malaysia

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Abstract

Existing research has identified issues related to the education of Indonesian migrant workers' children but has not adequately explored the educational challenges faced by the children of undocumented Indonesian migrant workers. We argue that the education of children from undocumented Indonesian migrant worker families represents a critical and overlooked area of concern. These children often experience distinct barriers to accessing quality education, including legal, economic, and social obstacles. Understanding these challenges is essential for informed policymaking and the development of support mechanisms. To investigate this underexplored domain, we conducted a mixed-methods study, combining surveys and in-depth interviews with affected families and relevant stakeholders. This approach allowed us to gather comprehensive data on the educational experiences of these children and the factors influencing their access to schooling. Our findings reveal a multitude of challenges faced by the children of undocumented Indonesian migrant workers, including limited access to formal education, discrimination, financial constraints, and psychological stress. Based on our findings, we propose a series of targeted policy recommendations and interventions aimed at improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for this vulnerable group. These suggestions encompass legal reforms, financial support mechanisms, awareness campaigns, and community engagement initiatives. This research contributes to the academic discourse on children's education of undocumented migrant worker families. By highlighting the specific challenges faced by the children of undocumented migrant workers, we provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and NGOs working to enhance educational equity and social inclusion in migrant-sending countries.

Keywords: *Children; Education; Indonesian migrant workers; Sabah.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is categorized as a large country given its population of 275 million. The available job opportunity is not sufficient to meet the number of the productive group. The limited job opportunities pushed some parts of the society to find an alternative by working abroad and becoming Indonesian migrant workers. With their relatively low skill, they commonly chose jobs like domestic workers, factory workers, plantation workers, and other unskilled workers (Muslihudin, 2020, 2021). According to data from

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Badan Nasional Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (BNP2TKI), a national agency for the placement and protection of Indonesian migrant workers in 2017, Malaysia remained the main destination country of Indonesian migrant workers with a total of 88,991 workers. This number does not include approximately 2 million undocumented workers. The second destination of Indonesian migrant workers is Hong Kong amounting to 68,103 workers and Taiwan, 62,823 workers (BNP2TKI).

Malaysia became the main destination country given its geographical proximity to Indonesia. This is the main consideration for the migrant workers. Besides, there are chances for the migrant workers to move irregularly through the land borders which traditionally has been used to move across the two countries. Figure 1 illustrates the geographical condition of Sabah and parts of Indonesia. Figure 1 illustrates the geographical condition of Sabah and parts of Indonesia.

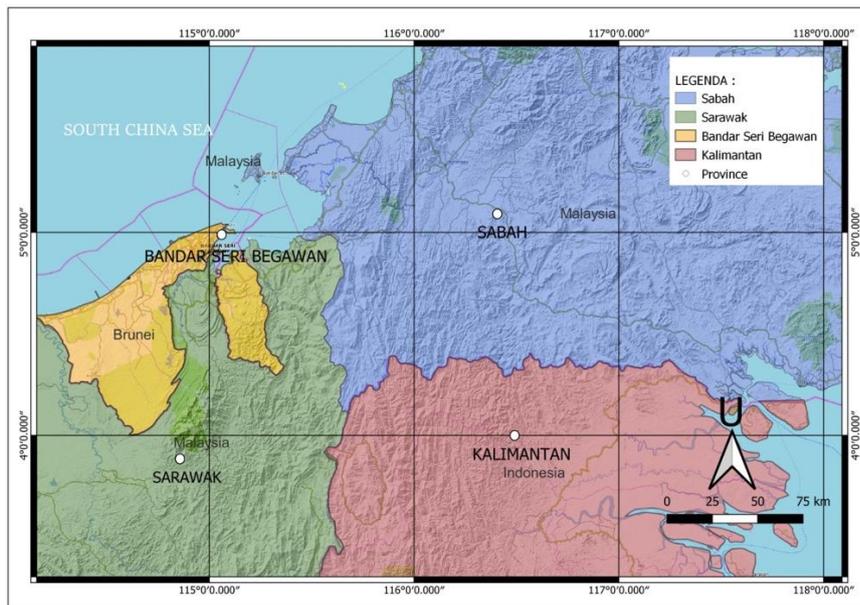


Figure 1. Location of Sabah State

The long land border between Eastern Kalimantan, Indonesia, and Sabah, Malaysia has been an issue. Fathiyah (2019) informs that from 2,016 km of the border in Kalimantan, there are nine dispute point of outstanding boundary problem that has been discussed since 1974. Besides, the nature of the long border that is not clearly marked has made it a common traffic for the populations living nearby or from other areas, including the migrant workers.

Such border conditions make the mobility of the population from Indonesia to Sabah Malaysia quite high. Moreover, between the conditions in the two neighboring countries, there are significant differences in terms of the economy, especially employment opportunities. Thus, promising for residents migrating to Sabah. Malamassam (2016) emphasizes that migration actors tend to move to areas with similar cultural backgrounds to their areas of origin, and for most of people, migration is considered as an attempt to gain upward social mobility. Likewise, Mantra (1988) concluded that the main reason for migrating out of the village is an economic one. Another similar opinion is Soemantri (2013) which states that the purpose of citizen mobility is mostly to work.

Sabah has many palm and cocoa plantations, timber and mining industries, and eco-tourism. The high demand for labor and many opportunities to become workers in Sabah are the reasons why people from Indonesia move to Malaysia. In 2020, the number of Indonesian migrant workers registered with the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia (KJRI) Kota Kinabalu is 163,128 people (KJRI Kota Kinabalu, 2020). It is estimated that the number of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah is more than that

because there are many undocumented Indonesian migrant workers working in Sabah who are not registered yet. There are 4 categories of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Sabah: 1). migrant workers work in Sabah with complete documents (passports, work permits, work contracts) and through official channels (immigration checks). 2). migrant workers who come to Sabah with travel documents (passports) and through official channels (immigration checks), but then look for work (without a work contract and work permit) and overstayed. 3). migrant workers without any documents, enter Sabah without permission. 4). Indonesian citizens born and raised in Sabah without any documents at all (birth certificate, passport).

The presence of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, Sabah in particular, encounters a rather serious problem, especially related to the education of the children. Malaysian government called them inland foreigner. Children were born from spouses of undocumented migrant workers. A huge part of the migrant workers have lived and worked for 2-3 generations in Sabah. Their parents also do not have a marriage certificate, as well as children who are born, do not have a birth certificate. Some of the younger ones would be kept in child care and when they are older, they go to school at an education non-governmental organization (NGO) named Humana or Community Learning Center (Ratri, 2018).

Glind (2010) said that non-formal education was given in plantation in Sabah and Sarawak State, eastern Malaysia as an effort to improve the education access for the children with irregular status. They are invisible children that are not legally recognized. Majority of them were unregistered because they were children of Indonesian migrant workers whose visas do not include dependents. It is estimated that there were around 50,000 to 200,000 invisible children who could not access education in Eastern Malaysia. It was reported frequently that children went to work on the plantation as they could not access education.

Some studies have highlighted several problems surrounding the education of Indonesian migrant workers' children. Suciati (2016) found that these children often lack proper Islamic education due to the absence of their parents who work abroad. Djone (2019) emphasized the impact of child work on student learning outcomes, with child workers being at a disadvantage in terms of educational achievement. Gao (2018) discussed the inadequate and unequal education opportunities for migrant workers' children, leading to the establishment of separate schools for them. Lai et al. (2014) also acknowledged the increasing concern for the education of migrant workers' children, emphasizing the need for tailored solutions based on specific circumstances. However, these studies have not addressed the challenges of education encountered by the children of Indonesian undocumented migrant workers. Given the background above, the aim of this article is to describe the conditions and problems of education faced by the children of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah State, Malaysia.

2. METHOD

The method used in this research is descriptive with a mixing method between quantitative and qualitative (Brannen, 2005). The target of this research is PMI children in Sabah Malaysia who are continuing their studies at various universities in Indonesia. Their number is 148 students. Considering that the population is relatively homogeneous, the sample is determined randomly. The number of samples studied was a third of 148, so there were 49.3 students, so it was rounded up to 50 students.

Data was collected by means of questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and documentation. The 50 students were given a questionnaire which served as respondents.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

Gender		Age Group		Locus of Campus	
Male	Female	18-20	20	Java	Outside Java
19	31	21-23	25	27	23
		24-26	5		

Source: Data collection by authors, 2022

Based on gender, the study included 50 respondents from Sabah, comprising 19 males and 31 females. Regarding age, the maximum age range was 21–23 years, with 20 respondents falling within the 18–20 year category and 5 respondents in the 24-26 year range. Furthermore, 27 participants were enrolled in universities within Java, which included institutions like Jenderal Soedirman University, Bogor Agricultural Institute, and Padjadjaran University, among others. The remaining 23 respondents hail from universities located outside Java, including Mataram University, Hasanudin University, Syah Kuala Aceh University, and the others.

Students who were used as informants through interviews and focused discussions were carried out on 7 students who were at Jenderal Sudirman University in Purwokerto. Documentation is used both from primary and secondary data from respondents and informants.

Data analysis was also used with mixed methods. Quantitative analysis was carried out on the results of the questionnaire, especially in the form of frequency distribution, diagrams, and documentation. The qualitative analysis carried out is an interactive analysis (Miles et al, 2014), especially on the results of in-depth interviews and focused group discussions from the informants. The steps include data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In fact, there are many problems related to the existence of Indonesian migrant workers abroad, especially those in Malaysia. Why is that, because Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia start with incomplete document requirements as IMW. They stay for so long in Malaysia with an illegal status or do not have documents. Because it took so long to have family and descendants there. The problems that existed in him were then passed on to their children and even their grandchildren. Irfani (2021) illustrates that the existence of Indonesian migrant workers is a complex matter. they are linked to political, social, legal, and humanitarian aspects. Migrant workers did not appear overnight. Its roots can be traced back to the colonial period, to be precise in 1890, when the Dutch East Indies government sent residents of the archipelago as contract laborers to Suriname. Finaka (2019) adds that since PMI started from the post-independence era until the 1960s, the placement of Indonesian migrant workers abroad has not involved the government, but has been carried out on an individual, kinship and traditional basis with the main destination countries being Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. BPPMI (2023) also concludes that most Indonesian citizens who work in Malaysia just come to Malaysian territory without carrying any documents, because there has been a traditional cross-border between the two countries.

3.1. Description of Indonesian Migrant Worker in Sabah

Malaysia hosted the largest number of Indonesian migrant workers compared to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, etc. This is caused by the geographical proximity between the two countries. Indonesia even shared a land border with Sabah and Serawak State. It makes easy mobility between the two countries, both regularly and irregularly. The

presence of shortcuts demonstrates that irregular paths do exist. Because of this, most of the Indonesian migrant workers are undocumented.

The path connecting Kalimantan populations to Sabah State had been established by a historical social relation over time. Berita Kaltim (2015) elaborates on the society of northern Kalimantan whose land is at the border of the Serawak and Sabah State, Malaysia. It was found that since a long time ago, the ancestors had moved without borders. Brotherhood between the Dayak ethnics and the ethnic groups in Sabah and Serawak were created. The people of Dayak ethnic incorporated with the neighboring communities, got married, and maintained a brotherhood. It is common to see Indonesian citizens living at the border attend a wedding party in Sabah or Serawak, sometimes to the extent that the village is emptied.

Salsaby Ad'n (2015) explained that Nunukan Regency which is located in Northern Kalimantan has been the favorable entry of irregular Indonesian migrant workers. Sebatik Island is located in that area, directly bordered by Tawau, a big city of Sabah State, Malaysia, to develop palm oil plantations. Shortcuts are known to irregular migrant workers from Indonesia, these paths are also known as 'Batu'. The paths are actually challenging, different from the authorized path through the Port, whereas the migrants only needed to follow a 500-meter path along Dunlop Street.

The economic inequality between the two countries had been a pull and push factor of worker migration from Indonesia to Malaysia. Tradingeconomic (2018) shows that the per capita income of Malaysia was \$15,521, while Indonesia was \$4,130. That means Indonesian's per capita income makes up a quarter of Malaysia's. Adding to the inequality were the working opportunities available in Malaysia and the limited opportunities in Indonesia. Working as a laborer in a palm oil plantation pays more in Malaysia compared to Indonesia. According to Zulfikar (2016), this contributes significantly to the migrants' home region and even nationally.

Most Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah work in palm oil plantations with income of as many as 2000 Ringgit or equivalent to 7 million IDR per month. That number had been a strong attraction for the workers who did not possess certain certifications or skills. The pull factor had even caused some of the migrants to move in an irregular manner. On the other side, Malaysia also needs laborers in the area of work, it can be said that without these irregular migrants, the palm oil plantation may have been left unexplored. This pattern of economic exchange is not actually new. Figure 2 shows that according to respondents of this research, most of the Indonesian migrant workers have lived in Sabah for more than 20 years.

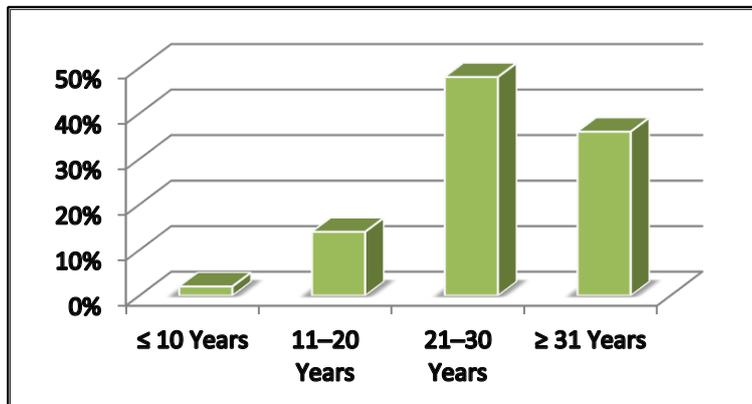


Figure 2. Duration of Indonesian migrant workers' stay in Sabah, Malaysia

Source: Data collection by authors, 2022

It is shown that there are 84 percent of respondents have lived in Sabah for more than 20 years. Most of the Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah have their children there, hence, second or third-generation in Sabah. There are also those who have their grandchildren, even great grandchildren there, whereas the whole family lives in Sabah. Ironically, despite their life spent in Sabah, they remain non-citizens of Malaysia. The World Bank (2017) shows that most of the profiles of undocumented male migrant workers exist in Malaysia. Susiana (2012) explained that the problems faced by TKI who work in Malaysia have different characteristics from other destination countries. Nearly 70% of migrant workers in Malaysia come from Indonesia, 40% of whom are undocumented. They work in six sectors, namely: plantation, construction, agriculture, services, industry or manufacturing, and the domestic sector. Each sector has specific problems that require special handling related to their protection.

There are in place regulations and identification for regular migrants to be Malaysian citizens with ID Cards. There are three different colors of the cards, they are red cards for newcomers, green cards for temporary residents, and blue cards for those who obtained citizenship status. The migrant workers who access these cards are usually settled in the urban side and do not work in plantations. The majority of migrant workers in Sabah do not have knowledge of ID cards as they work in plantations and live in rural even remote areas.

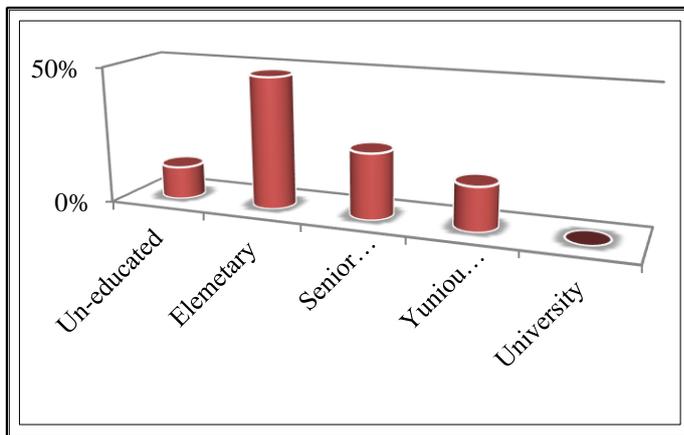


Figure 3. Education level of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia

Source: Data collection by authors, 2022

The level of education of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah Malaysia is generally low. Figure 3 indicates, as many as 60 percent of respondents are under the very low category as they did not finish elementary school level education. There are 24 percent who graduated from middle school only 16 percent graduated from high school and none of them graduated from higher education institutions. Compared to the average Indonesian's level of education expectation is 12.91 years meaning that 7-year-old children have the opportunity to finish their education until high school level even one-year non-degree Diploma (Kadarwati, 2019). It can be implied that Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah Malaysia are Indonesian citizens under the category with the lowest education level, and relatively left behind. They are different from Indonesian migrant workers in other countries like Hong Kong, South Korea, and Japan who are relatively educated and skilled. This is in line with findings by Muslihudin (2019, 2021) in his research about Indonesian migrant workers originally from Banyumas Regency, Indonesia, who mostly only studied in elementary schools and middle schools.

3.2. Children of Indonesian Migrant Workers as Higher Education Students

The children of Indonesian migrant workers who are studying in higher education institutions (HEI) in Indonesia are average 20-22 years old. The scholarship program for

these migrant children started in 2018, so there are only two levels of students being researched in this study. They are awarded with Afirmasi Pendidikan Tinggi (Adik) or Higher Education Affirmation scholarship for Indonesian migrant workers. The following part discusses the findings of these students.

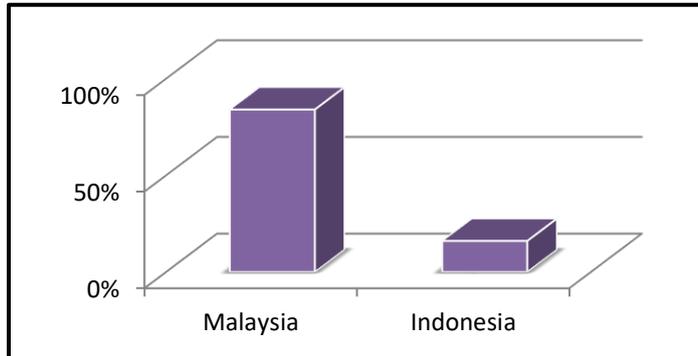


Figure 4. Birth country of children of the students

Source: Data collection by authors, 2022

Most of these students amounting to 84 percent of were born in Malaysia and the rest 14 percent were born in Indonesia (Figure 4). It means that the majority of their parents have been in Malaysia for more than 20 years. Information from focus group discussion explained that half of the parents left for Malaysia as teenagers or were unmarried and got married after they were employed. Some of them found their partners outside their region of origin, some others back at home. One of the informants' parents was from Sulawesi Indonesia and Mindanao, the Philippines. It was found that migrant workers were not only Indonesians but also from India, Pakistan, and others.

Indonesian migrant workers' number of children reflects their life view. When the students asked how many siblings they have, apparently, they have relatively many siblings, as shown in Figure 5.

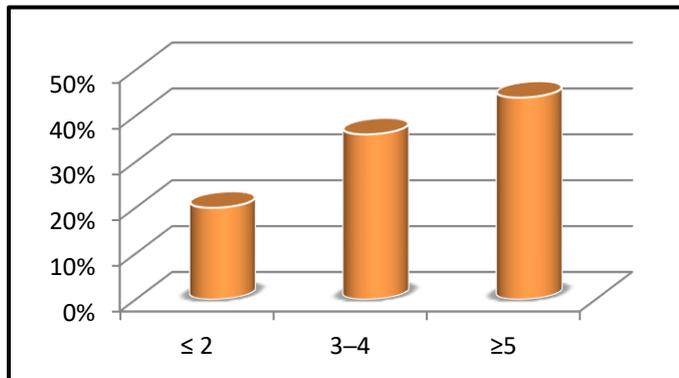


Figure 5. Number of siblings of the students

Source: Data collection by authors, 2022

Most of the Indonesian migrant workers have more than 2 children, there are even 44 percent who have more than 4 children. This reflects the old philosophy of Indonesian society “many children, abundant blessings” which is still intact among Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah. As they live agricultural life in palm oil plantations, they give meaning to children as laborers needed in the production process. This is an old Indonesian philosophy from the past. Matrapendidikan (2014) illustrates that this kind of philosophy is no longer relevant to modern life. Raising children these days is not an easy matter, more over with modern education concept which underlines a family-based education. Parents became the main educators and teachers for the children in the family.

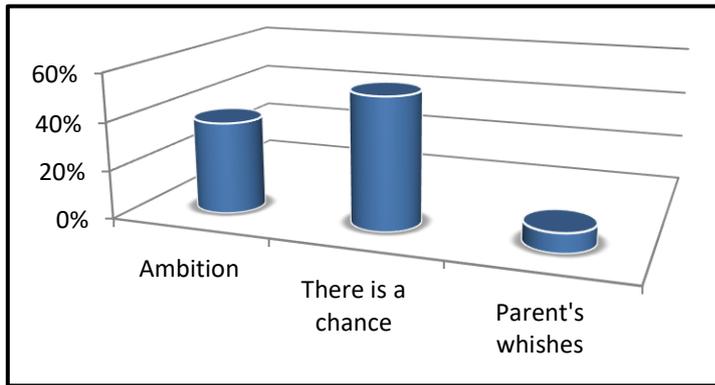


Figure 6. Push factors to be a student

Source: Data collection by authors, 2022

For many of the Indonesian migrant workers, children's education is not their priority. This information can be seen in Figure 6. They managed to get scholarships mainly not because of their parents' wish, which only makes up to 8 percent. Most of them, 54 percent, admitted that they chose to be students because they saw the opportunity given by the Indonesian government. The rest 38 percent admitted it is their dream to continue to higher education, some even did not get their family's support. Although all these students were sponsored, their daily needs were still not fully met. The Adik scholarship for the children of Indonesian migrant workers consists of tuition fees and living costs. The government covers the tuition fees regardless of the nominal, while living cost is as money as Rp 6 million per semester (or 1 million per month). That number did not cover their need because they had to pay for their own accommodation. Therefore, they still have their parents wired some money every month. That could be the reason why the parents do not support the idea of pursuing education in universities because they still have to cover some of the costs.

3.3. Fulfillment of Education Rights

Indonesia as a member of the United Nations is bound to human rights responsibility, especially the rights of their citizens to education. Article 60 of Act No. 39 Year 1999 about human rights states that every child has the right to education and teaching in the context of their personal development in accordance with their interests, talents, and level of intelligence.

The 1945 Constitution Article 28 paragraph 2 of the 1945 Constitution reads: "Every child has the right to survival, growth and development and the right to protection from violence and discrimination". Article 28 clearly states that every child gets their human rights as a young generation who has the opportunity to live, grow into adulthood, and develop their physical and mental abilities. To support the acquisition of all children's rights, education is the most important right for a child to develop all the potential abilities. Furthermore, Article 31 paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution states that every citizen has the right to education. This article mandates that all citizens, including children who have limitations or who are in disadvantaged conditions, are entitled to education, especially elementary school education.

The children of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah are formally Indonesian citizens, therefore Indonesian government is obliged to meet their education. In reality, this has not been fulfilled. Ogahara (2018) stated that Child Rights in Malaysia signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, implying their commitment to child rights, nevertheless, problems like child detention and child marriage remain as the government has not made significant changes in these issues. This was also acknowledged by Indonesia through the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud). Kemendikbud

(2015) stated that the fulfillment of 9 years of mandatory education for children of Indonesian migrant workers, in Malaysia, remains homework for the government.



Figure 7. Building construction inscription SIKK

At that time, in 2014 Indonesian government had just built one Indonesian School at Kota Kinabalu (SIKK) whose capacity was limited and it was the only Indonesian school in the Capital of Sabah State. Later, a Community Learning Center (CLC) was built in the remote areas near the Indonesian migrant workers' community, created for students at the elementary and middle school level. Figure 7 above is a form of the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Education and Culture showing its concern for the education of the children of migrant workers in Malaysia.

SIKK and CLC were formal education institutions established by the Indonesian government in their effort to meet the education rights of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah. Nevertheless, the facility and infrastructure were limited, including the number of teachers.

Before the formal education institutions were built by the Indonesian government, there was a Non-Government Organization (NGO) who were assisting the children. It was Humana, an NGO based in Malaysia which concern is education issues. Muyamin (2019) explains that Humana Child Aid Society is an NGO that was established in 1991. Humana provides education who do not have access to school. Until currently, Humana has provided education for 12,000 children in the Sabah plantation and other remote areas. In the beginning, Humana was supported by Corporate Foundation, but now Humana's main support comes from the plantation companies in Malaysia (Humana, 2015). Humana aims to promote, provide, and operate learning centers in Sabah, especially for the children in the plantations and undocumented children from other countries. Humana works with the plantations in Sabah to provide education for children with permission from the Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

Ratri (2018) reported that of 53,687 children of Indonesian migrant workers at the age of 1-18 years old, only 24,856 of them got education services in Sabah. They got access to education in three education institutions; 1) SIKK; 2) CLC for elementary school level (CLC SD); and 3) Humana Learning Centers. Ratri further explains that they are children of Indonesian migrant workers in palm oil plantations, with details as follows:

Table 2. Amount of Indonesian Students at Sabah

Amount	Place of Study
927	SIKK (Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu)
8122	In 69 CLCs for Elementary School level (CLC SD)

3224	in 140 CLCs for High School level
12.583	in 134 Humana Learning Centers.

Source: Ratri (2018)

From the above data, it is shown that the contribution of Humana Learning Centers for children's education has been bigger than the Indonesian government. whereas Humana is an independent NGO trying to provide education to thousands of migrant children who live in remote areas. It is an extraordinary activity to help children who are marginalized by their parents' condition. The number of children of Indonesian migrant workers is about 50 percent who receive educational facilities. meaning that there are still 50 percent or more than 25 thousand children who are not touched by basic education. it is a very worrying condition.

The Indonesian government has just started paying attention to the education of the children of Indonesian migrant workers. The Indonesian government makes a policy so that the children of Indonesian migrant workers who complete their basic education in Sabah can continue their studies at senior high schools and even universities in Indonesia. The Indonesian government through the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 72 of 2019 concerning special service Education, provides opportunities for the sons and daughters of migrant workers in Sabah Malaysia to be able to pursue quality secondary education in Indonesia. Likewise, for the college level, the Indonesian government has given in the form of Affirmation scholarships to study at Universities in Indonesia. however, the number of scholarship recipients is very small or insignificant compared to the number of PMI children in Sabah.

Salengke (2018) explains that since 2018, the Ministry of Research Technology and Higher Education through the Directorate of Student Services provided allocation for Adik scholarship. In other formal meetings, the Educational and Cultural Attaché of the Indonesian Embassy for Kuala Lumpur stated that since the year, the Adik scholarship will be allocated for 100 Indonesian migrant workers' children in Malaysia.

4. CONCLUSION

Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah Malaysia are different from Indonesian migrant workers in other parts of Malaysia and other countries. Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah Malaysia are categorized as undocumented, working in palm oil plantations in live in remote areas. The majority of them have lived there for more than 20 years. Therefore, they have children who were born in Sabah. The parents who are undocumented will also have children who are undocumented. That status makes them called invisible children.

The number of Indonesian migrant workers aged 1-18 years old is more than 53 thousand children and less than 50 percent of them are accommodated in basic educational institutions. That fact demonstrates that the education rights of half of the Indonesian migrant workers' children in Sabah have not been met in full. There are three educational institutions that have provided education to children of Indonesian migrant workers, they are Humana, SIKK, and CLC. Since 2016, the Indonesian government has started paying attention to providing a scholarship for children of Indonesian migrant workers to study in various Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia.

Addressing the empirical reality about PMI in Sabah is that the two countries (Indonesia and Malaysia) should make some kind of agreement. The first agreement is regarding the provision of facilities for the education of PMI's children. the second agreement is that the residence status document needs to find a more flexible format. because the presence of PMI in Sabah also provides benefits for both Malaysia and Indonesia.

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