

Malaysia's Refugee Crisis: A Poverty Issue, Not Just Migration

BY WIKI IMPACT TEAM | 10 May 2021

This article is a 'work in progress'. All statistics and facts mentioned are based on existing studies. When new research comes to light, this article will be updated.

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Over the past few years, there have been countless stories covering the migration of refugees from one country to another. More often than not, refugees are survivors. People who have survived after watching their families be torn apart by war and conflict, people who have survived losing their homes, their wealth, and everything they knew. Only to escape to a country where their basic human rights are ignored.

This is the story of millions of refugees. Each with a different narrative, but the struggles, suffering and challenges are the same. This paper discusses the livelihoods of refugees residing in Malaysia as well as the challenges they face with various indicators of the multidimensional poverty index - which includes housing, income levels, standard of living, health and education.

Who Are The Refugees & Asylum Seekers?

The United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as a person who has fled war, violence and conflict to reach safety in another nation^[1]



The 1951 Refugee Convention states that refugees are those who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion^[1].

At the end of the day, refugees are people. Mothers, fathers, children, elderly, who were forced to evacuate in a dire situation. Although they are often classified as migrants looking for economic gain, unlike migrants, they have lost the protection of their governments. And unlike migrants, they are unable to return home safely^[2].

An asylum seeker is a person who has expressed fear of returning to their country of origin either at a port of entry or after entering Malaysia^[3]. They need to fill in paperwork in order to be officially recognized as an asylum seeker by UNHCR, in order to be entitled to different protection by the body, especially protection from forced return to their country of origin, which is given to refugees but not necessarily to asylum-seekers^[3].



According to UNHCR, as of mid-2020, there are a total of 80 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. 26.3 million of whom are refugees^[4].



Source: [Cilisos](#)

Refugee Populations in Malaysia

The refugee population in Malaysia has been increasing over recent years. They come from all walks of life, coming to Malaysia to seek sanctuary from roughly fifty countries.



In 2019, there was a 6.43% increase in the refugee population of the previous year^[5]. Currently, there are 178,710 refugees and asylum seekers residing in Malaysia^[6]. Not accounting for the other 80,000 undocumented refugees awaiting registration by the UNCHR.

The majority of refugees in Malaysia are originally from Myanmar. These groups are mainly composed of the Rohingya (102,350 registered refugees) and Chin (22,430) ethnic groups [6].

The remaining 29,360 Myanmar refugees are from other ethnic groups fleeing conflict and persecution[6].

There are also refugees from Pakistan (6,610), Yemen (3,650), Syria (3,250), Somalia (3,230), Afghanistan (2,660), Sri Lanka (1,730), Iraq (1,210), Palestine (750), among others[6].

All these refugees can be found in almost every state throughout the nation, residing in both urban and rural regions. **The states of Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Pulau Pinang are home to the largest refugee populations in Malaysia**[6].

Why Is Malaysia A Refugee's First Choice?



Source: [CMC](#)

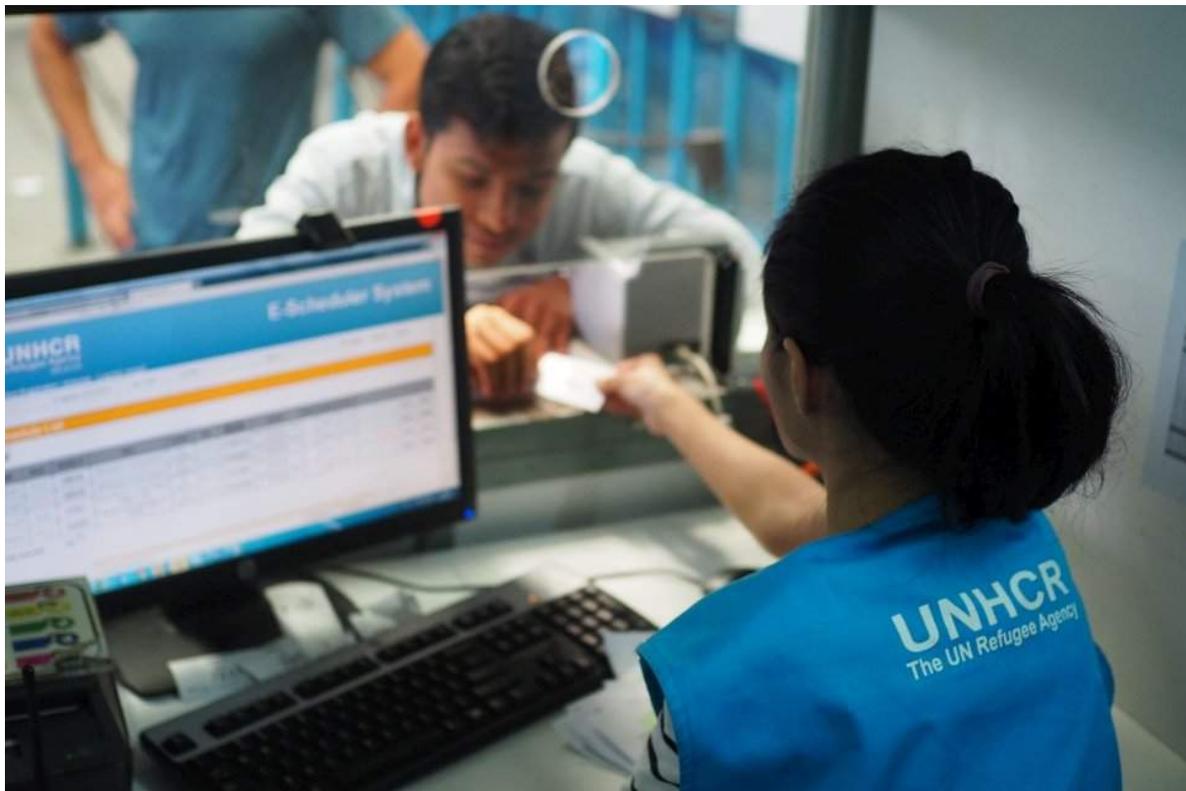
According to a case study on the Rohingya, the main contributor to the abundance of refugees in the country is due to their perception that Malaysia has a better social structure in comparison to their home country.

Being a Muslim-majority country, Malaysia provides a sense of inclusiveness and comfort to those who fled their homes due to religious discrimination. For this reason, the majority of the Rohingya refugees prefer to remain in Malaysia rather than move to a location where existing refugee protection laws are in place.



I would prefer to live in Malaysia instead of the United States because the U.S. is not an Islamic country. I have stayed in Malaysia for 16 years and know how to speak, read, and write well in the Malay language. I did not get everything that I wanted, but I stayed in Malaysia on Islamic grounds — Rohingya Leader in Malaysia^[7].

Rights of Refugees



Source: [UNHCR](#)

As refugees and asylum seekers are not Malaysian citizens. As such, they are not bound by the laws of the land. Unfortunately, this also means that they do not get to reap its benefits either. Refugees across the globe are protected by the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention)^[7]. This convention states the number of rights/entitlements refugees can claim from their host country, as well as their obligations^[7].

The longer a refugee stays in a host country, the more rights they become entitled to. Basic refugee rights include:

- Right not to be expelled (Article 32)
- Right not to be punished for illegal entry into the territory (Article 31)
- Right to work (Article 17-19)
- Right to housing (Article 21)
- Right to education (Article 22)
- Right to public relief and assistance (Article 23)
- Right to freedom of religion (Article 4)
- Right to access the courts (Article 16)
- Right to freedom of movement within the territory (Article 26)
- Right to be issued identity and travel documents (Article 27 and 28)

However, the host country is only obligated to provide these rights if they are ratified by the convention. Malaysia, just like other South-East Asian countries, is not tied to the convention, nor do they enforce the 1967 Protocol^[7]. Furthermore, the nation itself does not have any legal policy, or administrative framework regarding the protection of refugees, or any non-Malaysian for that matter^[7].

As a result of this, there is no proper guarantee of access to essential life continuity aspects, namely education, employment and healthcare among many more. This leads us to the relative poverty issues spurred within these refugee communities in Malaysia circling around the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI).

Not being able to afford a 'comfortable' lifestyle, goes far beyond how little they make each month. Being denied access to a stable job, having the inability to afford basic healthcare, not receiving

proper formal education, on top of falling victim to domestic violence, human trafficking and sexual abuse all are part and parcel of what is considered ‘norms’ among refugees^[7].

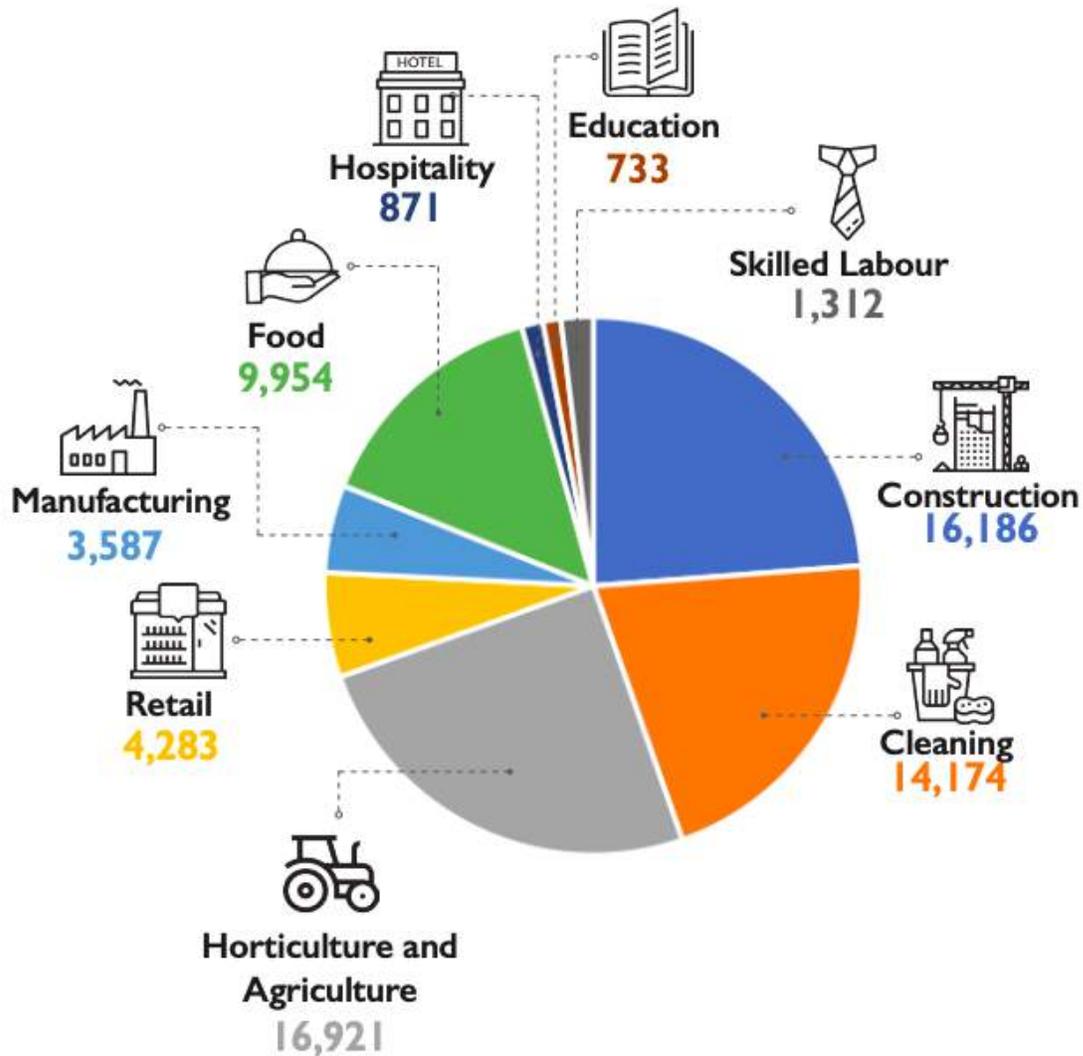
The Right to Work: Can Refugees Work Legally in Malaysia?



Source: [Malay Mail](#)

Given that Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees and asylum-seekers cannot work legally in the country, thus forcing them to take up unconventional job offers. In some cases, instead of the services sector, refugee employment only exists in low-visibility locations such as plantations. These are the sectors unpopular among Malaysians due to their dirty, dangerous, and difficult job scopes, which are now fulfilled through illegal means.

According to UNHCR 2019, the main registered sectors of informal employment for refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia were agriculture, construction, and cleaning with over 47,000 workers employed^[8]. Other popular sectors included food, manufacturing and retail, all of which are low-skilled jobs requiring little to no experience, nor educational qualification^[8].



Source: UNHCR (2019) / IDEAS Malaysia

There is, however, a small percentage of refugees and asylum workers who still manage to be employed in skilled labour roles^[8]. Some even settled in the education sector, whereby they would

provide proper education for other refugees. Whilst these are good wins, unemployment is still rampant within the refugee community.

Baseline data from a Socioeconomic Study in 2016 by UNHCR, found that roughly 50% of refugee household members are unemployed despite being of working age. With fewer people working, the average household income was only RM1,127 per month^[9]. The financial standing of these households is simply not enough forcing these families to find alternative means.

46% of households found themselves in debt by simply needing to pay for daily and emergency needs^[10]. All of these households owed close friends or family members money^[9]. Furthermore, unemployment is definitely harder for women. UNHCR found that only 23% of female refugees were employed compared to 72% of the male population^[9].



Source: [Al Jazeera](#)

Unemployment is caused by a range of factors. Key impediments to higher-income employment include the fact that employers (72%) are unwilling to risk hiring due to the lack of legal status of

refugees^[9]. 44% agree that language barriers are a factor and 35% credit unemployment to a lack of skills^[9].

These challenges arise due to the fact that these communities still remain illegal and unrecognized by the local legislation, and do not receive any welfare from the government, thus are not protected as a local citizen would be^[10]. To make matters worse, they have to face even more problems after getting the job. There are three main dimensions concerning the challenges of refugee employment post-hiring, including exposing them to risks of exploitation and social security, in illustration of refugee women being sexually harassed at work^[10]. These challenges can be categorized into three dimensions as follow:

#1: Employment Insecurity

Although many refugees manage to successfully land a job in Malaysia, this does not always translate to a steady and consistent source of income, nor standardized working hours.



It is common for refugee workers to receive late paychecks, as it is also common that these payments are not sufficient for the amount of work completed^[10].

Furthermore, these workers are not bound by any contract. As such, with ambiguous work schedules and unknown periods of employment, a worker could simply be discarded by a company without prior notice. With no legal documentation, there comes no responsibility, no promise of work hours, and no proper payment schedule. Workers are subjected to the whims of their employers. This ultimately leads to ‘free labour’^[10].

Simply put, even though refugees are able to work, they still face some challenges including being forced to work uncertain hours, for uncertain pay. When they do not get paid appropriately, they are on their own. They are not protected nor can they fight for their pay without proper documentation as proof^[10].

#2: Lack of Rights and Protection



Source: [Jasmine.Foong@Malaysiakini](#)

Similarly to the previous dimension, the lack of employee protection is important to take note of. It is not just the unpromised paychecks or the long neverending hours. Employee agreements include the protection against unfavourable working conditions^[10].

These can include, but are not limited to:

- Extreme heat when working outdoors
- Lack of safety standards at a workplace
- Physical and verbal abuse by employers
- In-accountability for workplace injuries
- Harassment by law enforcement
- Dirty and unhygienic living quarters provided onsite by employers^[10].

#3: Income Inadequacy

At the end of the day, refugees are not making enough to support themselves, let alone send enough money back to their loved ones. Several accounts have been made of these employees receiving inconsistent and inadequate income. It is simply not enough to make ends meet ^[10].



I've been in Malaysia for more than 17 years. Even if I work very hard, they (the employer) don't give me money. I use the money to send home to my family, there, in the village, I have a mother and siblings. I send money there. Here, I pay rent. That's why I'm still not married. I don't have enough money. I want to be rich, I want to get money. I want to work more, so I can earn more.

The Right to Housing: Can Refugees Afford Good Housing In Malaysia?



Source: [AlJazeera](#)

Contrary to popular belief, those who seek refuge in Malaysia do not have designated refugee camps or temporary shelters to house them while they await resettlement. There is no designated area for the people to head to as soon as they arrive to land and step out of their boats.

Nowadays refugees who come to Malaysia are living among us; dispersed across the cities and towns, in makeshift shelters by construction sites and low-cost apartments and housing units all over the country^[11]. Unfortunately, refugee 'homes' are nowhere near to the standard of the **Multidimensional Poverty Index Living Indicators**.

According to MPI, a good accommodation is one that:

- Has electricity
- Has Flooring (Not made of Dirt, sand, dung)
- Has good sanitation.
- Has access to clean water or drinking water that is less than 30 minutes away
- Has cooking fuel (not wood, charcoal, or dung)
- Owns at least one of these items: radio, tv, telephone, bicycle, motorcycle, refrigerator, car, tractor or vehicle^[13].

As a matter of fact, refugee houses lack in more than one indicator. With no one else to take care of them, the refugees have no choice but to stick together on this one. For instance, refugees living in KL tend to share living spaces (a low-cost apartment roughly 600-750sq feet in size) with other refugee families. The refugees can share living spaces, typically low-cost apartments, urban villages or housing estates side by side with Malaysians in groups of up to 20 people on average. This helps to accommodate for the high living expenses, safety issues as well as moral support that this vulnerable community needs^[12].



We cannot live separately; no one can live by themselves. When we live together, we share our money, we share our food, we help take care of each other. We are like a 'village' where communal cooking and cleaning are done and the members support and assist each other. Those who are able to earn an income help support those who cannot.



Source: [Maurico Lima | New York Times](#)

Of course, there are pros and cons to these living conditions. One Chin refugee who shares a living space with 50 other people in Kuala Lumpur was more inclined to communal living despite the cramped and less than ideal living conditions^[13]. On the other hand, there is no denying how cramped and uncomfortable these spaces are. There are many problems that come with living in a confined space concerning both psychological and physical health problems^[13].

“ It is not easy to live with so many people in one place. But I am alive, my family is alive. We are poor here but we are at peace. Our place is so small that I have to make my balcony into another room at night in order to fit everyone.



Source: [Tzu Chi Foundation](#)

Unfortunately, multiple families are not the only ones sharing the living space. These cramped areas are subject to vermin infestation. Cockroaches, fleas, rats are just a few of the other “tenants” inhabiting the same area or even within the same space. Low-cost housing is also prone to poor sanitation, inconsistent supply of electricity as well as a high risk of infectious diseases ^[13].

The Right to Education: Can Refugees Get an Education in Malaysia?

According to UNHCR, there are refugee children that enrol into school. Out of 23,823 children, who are at the age where they should be attending school, only:

- 1,234 children aged 3 - 5 years are enrolled in preschool (14%)^[14].
- 5,046 children aged 6 - 13 years are enrolled in primary school (44%)^[14].
- 874 children aged 14- 17 years are enrolled in secondary school (16%)^[14].



Source: [UNHCR](#)

Only 30% of refugee children who should be receiving an education are enrolled in community learning centers^[14]. Given that these two indicators of which are named as years of schooling and school attendance are added, these households automatically fall into the category of multidimensionally poor, which comes as no surprise that it is experienced by most of our concerned households in this very discussion.



Like all children, refugee children have the fundamental right to life, survival, and development to the maximum extent possible. However, similar to stateless communities, refugee children are often denied access to Malaysian education on the grounds of lack of documentation.



Source: [International Catholic Migration Commission](#)

The main issue in Malaysia is the lack of access to the formal education system, thus forcing the refugee children to obtain education via an informal parallel system of 128 community-based learning centres. Several other challenges that could be seen rooted from the major issue above can be simplified as follow:

- Denial of access to Malaysian formal public education.
- Lack of certification and access to public examinations.
- High turnover of teachers and minimal compensation.
- Security and safety issues faced by the students and teachers in and out of school ^[14].

As they are denied access to Malaysia's formal education, refugee children take up informal education. With the assistance of non-refugee organizations such as religious groups, classes are often run by refugee families themselves.

These classes are held in order to provide children with enough basic knowledge for them to get by. Make-shift classes are often overcrowded, and without a standardised syllabus, which means that they would only cater for a select few subjects. Many of the teachers are also refugees with inadequate training and there is a constant need for new teachers, as the salaries of the teachers are considerably low^[15].

These schools in question are very much lacking. Even if they cannot be compared to the national standard, they still clearly lack funding, adequate wages for refugee teachers, transportation for the children, funding for utilities and rent, funding for school meals, and necessary teaching equipment^[15].



Source: [UNHCR](#)

One example of the rudimentary conditions of these schools is evident in this case study, which highlighted a church school in Kuala Lumpur. The church, a humble two-story house, is composed primarily of refugees and low-wage migrant workers from Myanmar. Every square foot of the

rented house was being used. There was even one class meeting on the stairs connecting the two floors. The teachers were also refugees, sometimes with only a little more education than the children themselves ^[16].

The Right to Relief And Assistance: Can Refugees Access Basic Healthcare?



Source: [UNHCR](#)

Refugees are considered foreigners, with many not in possession of legal identification, in this country. As a result, they do not get to enjoy the same benefits of affordable Malaysian healthcare services provided by the government. The reality of this inequality happens at the front door of hospitals – Malaysians pay a registration fee of RM1 at any government hospital while refugees pay up to RM100.

Anyone without legal identification that states that they are Malaysian is considered as a 'non-citizen', and therefore, is required to pay 24 to 100 times more than a Malaysian citizen when accessing public healthcare facilities ^[17]. This is because of the Fees Act (Medical) 1951, which was amended for non-Malaysians in January 2016.

Nonetheless, the refugees who are able to afford healthcare bills have other challenges to deal with. For example, they harbor the fear of being arrested by law enforcement agents while trying to seek treatment. The Malaysian Immigration Act requires everyone to report the presence of undocumented foreigners to the police. This creates an ethical dilemma for medical frontliners who are simply trying to save lives.



Source: [Free Malaysia Today](https://www.freemalaysia.com.my)

Additionally, refugees are not legally recognized until they are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR). This brings forth another issue where, due to the large number of refugees entering the country, the registration process is awfully slow – taking up to years-long

When a survey was conducted on the matter, it was found that the main barrier to primary healthcare for refugees is just simply not being able to afford healthcare fees. 50% of refugees just did not have enough to pay for extensive medical bills. Similarly, the second reason was that healthcare centres refused to provide necessary healthcare services primarily due to payment issues.

Conclusion



Source:[Good News Network](#)

All in all, based on the selected indicators of multidimensional poverty index, refugee's rights are not upheld. Whilst Malaysia is under no means legally obligated to provide the necessary steps to ensure their livelihoods, we only have things to gain in catering to the community. The government should seek to maximise the potential economic contribution of refugees by

minimising the business cost of hiring them and supporting refugees' access to healthcare. It is important to remember they are still people regardless of their origins. They came to Malaysia to escape discrimination and hostility.

When it comes to people making a difference, there are those that simply do not discriminate. Hunger, living conditions, water, education are all human rights. There are countless initiatives throughout Malaysia that have pooled in their efforts to ensure that regardless of origin, these needs are catered to. Here is a list of changemakers helping refugees build a better life in Malaysia.

Employment

1. [PichaEats](#): We built a platform where refugee mothers cook their delicious authentic meals, while we market and deliver the food to the public. Through PichaEats, you make a change to their lives just by enjoying a good meal!
2. [Tenaganita](#): Tenaganita was founded in 1991, born out of the struggles of women workers in the plantations and industrial sectors to gain their rights as workers; for decent wages, decent living conditions and to stop discrimination and gender based-violence. The organization currently has three major focus areas of work: Migrant and Refugee Rights Protection; Anti-trafficking in Persons; and Business Accountability and Responsibility.
3. [Rohingya Project](#): The mission of the Project is to create the foundation for a viable future for the stateless Rohingya by connecting them digitally to opportunities to learn, equip and empower themselves. Through the creation of a Financial and Social Inclusion platform, those Rohingya who for years have been sidelined can be given access to a range of virtual services including online education, digital identity and reward tokens. The platform will tap into the potential of the Rohingya community and other marginalized people and offer options to counter their exclusion from the mainstream.



Education

1. [United Learning Centre](#): United Learning Centre (ULC) is a safe haven for Myanmar refugee children to live, love, learn and play, enabling them to rise above their circumstances and reach their potential.
2. [EIShaddai Centre Berhad \(EIShaddai\)](#): EIShaddai Centre Berhad (EIShaddai) was set up in 2008 as a Christian-based humanitarian NGO with a vision to reach out to the displaced and marginalized community of various nationalities through compassion services and social work. Our current work involves the refugee, asylum seeker and other immigrant communities in Malaysia. We are working with people from Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia and 15 other countries.
3. [Chin Student Organisation](#): Our charity formed in 2005, when university students from Myanmar found Chin children wandering the streets of Kuala Lumpur. When no one else would help, the students took it upon themselves to teach the kids.
4. [SHELTER - Home for Children](#): SHELTER's refugee work is headed by the Community Team at SHELTER – scope of work is to help register the children of refugees with UNHCR, to help give these children an identity. Extending the work, SHELTER also seeks to provide for the children's care as well to organize food aid, clothings, shelter and medical care.
5. [Zotung Refugee Catholic Learning Center "ZRCLC"](#): Set up in 2008, the Zotung Refugee Catholic Learning Center "ZRCLC" is a refugee community school run by the Zotung Refugee Catholic Community "ZRCC" based in Kuala Lumpur. The aim is to provide a safe learning environment for Myanmar refugee children as their parents work for basic livelihood.



Healthcare

1. [Mercy Malaysia](#): They organise refugee clinics offering basic healthcare services including mental health education and counselling.
2. [Global Doctors Malaysia](#) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) collaborated to set up the [Global Doctors Medical Care Centre](#) to provide complimentary consultations and diagnostic services (e.g. CT Scans, X-Rays, Mammograms) for all refugees registered with the UNHCR. The cost of medication however is not free.
3. [Klinik Amar Muhajir](#) set up by Dr Siti Noraida Habibullah provides almost free medical services to the refugee community. For a minimal amount of RM5 ringgit the refugee population will get access to medicines for communicable and non-communicable diseases, maternal and child health care, and medical aid to save lives, prevent complications, and to avert public health consequences.
4. [Doctors Without Borders \(Malaysia\)](#) better known as [MSF](#) has a primary healthcare clinic in Penang and they also provide mental health services to refugees, particularly Rohingya people, who are effectively excluded from work, healthcare and other social services.

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