

Silent struggles for well-being: unraveling the hidden plight of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates the multidimensional challenges experienced by Bangladeshi migrant workers (BMWs) in Malaysia's construction sector and explores their implications on social well-being using Keyes' (1998) five-domain framework: social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, and social coherence.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed a qualitative case study approach using semi-structured interviews with 40 Bangladeshi construction workers, two key informant interviews (KIIs), and two field observations. Data were analyzed thematically, and findings were interpreted using Keyes' (1998) social well-being framework.

Findings – The study reveals that BMWs face interlocking forms of structural, economic, and psychosocial exploitation. Challenges include excessive migration fees, wage disparities, unsafe working conditions, restricted access to healthcare, legal harassment, and profound social exclusion. These hardships severely undermine all five domains of social well-being—limiting their sense of belonging, value, contribution, hope, and coherence. The study also highlights how limited access to collective representation and the fear of deportation constrain migrant agency and psychosocial resilience.

Research limitations/implications – The findings are based on one nationality and sector, potentially limiting generalizability. However, the study offers a transferable framework for examining the well-being of other migrant groups across sectors using a rights-based, psychosocial lens.

Practical implications – The findings highlight the urgent need for policies that ensure wage fairness, healthcare access, legal protection, and social inclusion. Specific attention should be given to psychosocial support and mechanisms for collective representation.

Social implications – Improving the well-being of migrant workers is vital not only for social justice but also for fostering cohesive, inclusive societies. Interventions grounded in well-being frameworks can help realign labor governance with international human rights standards.

Originality/value – This study contributes original insights by applying Keyes' (1998) framework to analyze the lived experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers, offering a novel psychosocial perspective on migrant well-being. It bridges the gap between policy discourse and grounded realities, offering actionable guidance for policymakers, labor advocates, and international stakeholders.

Keywords International migrant workers, Challenges, Human rights violation, Wellbeing, Bangladesh, Malaysia

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Labour migration has become a cornerstone of global economic integration, linking countries with labor surpluses, like Bangladesh, to those experiencing labor shortages, such as Malaysia.

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Malaysia is a significant destination for Bangladeshi workers due to its demand for low-skilled labor in construction, manufacturing, and agriculture (Reza, Subramaniam, & Islam, 2019; Oishi, 2005). As of 2022, Malaysia hosted 433,336 documented Bangladeshi workers, accounting for a significant proportion of its foreign labor force (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017).

Migration is driven by a combination of push factors—such as unemployment, poverty, and lack of social mobility—and pull factors, including wage differentials, job opportunities, and perceptions of a better quality of life (Hare, 2013; Reza & Subramaniam, 2019). While these factors offer a structural explanation of labor migration, they often overlook how migrants subjectively experience life in host countries.

One important yet under-analyzed aspect is “social well-being,” a multidimensional concept that goes beyond material conditions to include social relationships, dignity, personal development, institutional trust, and community belonging (Keyes, 1998; White, 2010). While previous studies have addressed the economic and legal struggles of Bangladeshi migrants, there is limited empirical work that explores how these workers perceive their quality of life beyond financial remittances. In particular, studies rarely apply a social well-being framework to low-skilled migrant workers in the Global South context, where structural vulnerabilities and social exclusion are more acute.

Some researchers argue that there is already a substantial body of literature on migrant wellbeing. However, most of these studies either focus on health outcomes or are situated in Western contexts (e.g., Europe, Gulf, or North America), which differ significantly from Malaysia’s socio-political landscape (Loganathan, Rui, Ng, & Pocock, 2019; Nielsen, Smyth, & Liu, 2011). Thus, the originality of this paper lies in applying the social well-being lens to a Southeast Asian context and grounding it in the lived realities of Bangladeshi construction workers—a group whose voices remain largely unheard in academic and policy discourse.

This study draws on Keyes’ (1998) multidimensional model of social well-being—comprising social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social coherence, and social actualization—as the analytical framework. By focusing on this model, we aim to understand how Bangladeshi migrants interpret their social roles, relationships, and sense of belonging in Malaysia. We examine how their migration experiences affect not only their income but also their emotional, social, and psychological well-being.

In doing so, the study moves beyond a purely economic evaluation of migration and instead embraces a more holistic, people-centered approach. It also seeks to contribute to the limited body of knowledge on migrant wellbeing in Southeast Asia, especially by highlighting the interplay between systemic challenges (e.g. recruitment debt, poor housing, wage exploitation) and the subjective sense of self and community. Ultimately, this research seeks to inform rights-based and culturally responsive policy interventions that prioritize the dignity, agency, and integration of migrant workers in host societies.

2. Literature review

The concept of well-being has gained significant attention in recent decades as an alternative to narrow economic indicators of development. Scholars increasingly argue that traditional measures such as income or GDP fail to reflect the full range of human experiences, especially in contexts marked by inequality, migration, and precarity. In migration studies, this critique has opened space for examining subjective well-being—how migrants feel about their lives, work, and social environments—as a vital complement to objective indicators like wages or remittances. Well-being, in this broader sense, refers not only to material prosperity but also to emotional health, social integration, dignity, safety, and the capacity to pursue meaningful lives (Gough & McGregor, 2007; White, 2010; Cieslik, 2015).

Within this multidimensional framework, social well-being is particularly important for understanding the lives of migrant workers. It encompasses how individuals relate to society and perceive their place within it—shaped by factors like trust in institutions, sense of

belonging, perceived social contribution, and acceptance by others (Keyes, 1998; Prilleltensky, 2008). While economic well-being addresses income and employment security, social well-being expands the lens to assess whether migrants are respected, valued, and able to form meaningful social connections. This distinction is critical when analyzing the situation of low-skilled migrant workers from Bangladesh in Malaysia, who, despite contributing to the national economy, often live in social marginality and invisibility.

Keyes' (1998) framework identifies five components of social well-being: social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, and social coherence. Social integration refers to the sense of belonging and connectedness to society. For many migrants, integration is hindered by language barriers, ethnic discrimination, or physical segregation in labor camps. Social acceptance measures how much individuals feel accepted by others, a critical factor for migrants facing stigma, xenophobia, or public hostility. Social contribution involves the perception that one's labor or presence adds value to society. In Malaysia, Bangladeshi workers are often seen as essential but disposable, which affects their self-esteem and sense of purpose. Social actualization captures the belief that society is evolving positively and offers opportunities for growth, while social coherence relates to understanding the social world and finding it predictable and meaningful. For migrants navigating a new legal, linguistic, and cultural environment, both are frequently disrupted.

Empirical studies have applied elements of this framework to migrant populations, though rarely in a systematic manner. For example, Gough and McGregor (2007) emphasize the importance of relational well-being, including respect and social recognition, in development. White (2010) critiques dominant remittance-centered models of migration, urging a shift toward well-being and human flourishing. In the context of Malaysia, however, research on Bangladeshi migrants has largely focused on recruitment systems, legal status, or labor rights (Reza et al., 2019; Loganathan et al., 2019). Few studies have explicitly engaged with social well-being as a comprehensive framework, leaving a gap that this study aims to fill.

Bangladeshi migrant workers, who constitute one of the largest foreign labor groups in Malaysia, often occupy the lowest rungs of the labor market. Concentrated in construction, agriculture, and manufacturing, they frequently face hazardous working conditions, substandard housing, and limited access to healthcare (Hugo, 2009; Nadim et al., 2016; Simkhada, Van Teijlingen, Gurung, & Wasti, 2018). Studies have highlighted how these structural vulnerabilities are compounded by irregular immigration status, debt bondage due to exorbitant recruitment fees, and lack of access to legal recourse in cases of abuse (Sunam, 2023a, b; Nasir, Haque, & Awang, 2023). These challenges significantly undermine both economic and social dimensions of well-being.

A growing body of literature explores how migrant well-being is shaped by the intersection of workplace practices, social exclusion, and policy frameworks. Reza et al. (2019) document wage theft, poor occupational safety, and denial of medical treatment for Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia, all of which erode workers' dignity and contribute to stress and despair. Nadim et al. (2016) report high rates of depression, anxiety, and musculoskeletal pain among migrant laborers, often linked to overwork, isolation, and substandard living conditions. Alswaidi, Memish, Al Hakeem, and Atlam (2013) note that migrant workers live in congested housing with poor sanitation, which exacerbates health risks and adds to psychosocial stress.

The social invisibility of migrant workers is further reinforced by barriers to community participation. Guo (2013) observes that cultural disconnection, religious differences, and linguistic exclusion prevent migrants from forming social ties with locals. This isolation is intensified by restrictive immigration policies that limit movement, deter unionization, and criminalize undocumented workers (Reitz, 2023; Testaverde, Moroz, & Dutta, 2020). Diop, Le, Johnston, and Ewers (2017) and Phungsoonthorn and Charoensukmongkol (2020) find some evidence that local communities recognize the contributions of migrant labor, these acknowledgments are often tokenistic and do not translate into improved rights or status for migrants.

Despite these well-documented challenges, few studies systematically link such experiences to social well-being using a conceptual framework. Much of the existing

literature remains descriptive, lacking a normative or analytical lens that addresses how migrants ought to be treated and what conditions are necessary for a dignified life. This study seeks to address that gap by applying Keyes' social well-being model not only as a heuristic but also as a framework for justice. It argues that migrants' right to social integration, acceptance, and value must be central to any policy on labor migration.

In addition to social factors, economic well-being remains a critical concern for Bangladeshi migrants. Most arrive in Malaysia after paying high recruitment fees—often several times the legal limit—leading to debt that may take years to repay (Reza et al., 2023b; Sunam, 2023a, 2023b). Wage disparities based on nationality are common, with Bangladeshi workers earning less than others in comparable jobs (Loganathan et al., 2019). Financial exploitation is compounded by restrictions on job mobility, limited bargaining power, and exclusion from national labor laws and social protection schemes. These factors entrench migrants in cycles of economic precarity that affect their ability to send remittances, support families, or plan for the future.

Some studies have explored the coping strategies employed by migrants to maintain well-being despite adverse conditions. These include informal support networks, religious or cultural associations, and remittance practices that create a sense of purpose and connection to home (Adhikary, Keen, & van Teijlingen, 2019; Peters, Harding, Forde, Heckendorf, & Seal, 2022). However, these strategies are often insufficient and fragile, particularly in crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed and deepened structural inequalities in migrant-receiving countries (Reza, Subramaniam, & Islam, 2024).

This study is situated at the intersection of these theoretical and empirical debates. It contributes to the literature by foregrounding the lived experiences of Bangladeshi construction workers in Malaysia and interpreting those experiences through a multidimensional model of well-being. By doing so, it challenges dominant discourses that frame migrants primarily as economic actors and calls for a rights-based approach to migration that values their humanity, dignity, and social inclusion. The emphasis on social well-being allows for a more nuanced understanding of how migrants perceive their place in society, the barriers they face, and the resilience they display—ultimately informing policy recommendations aimed at fostering a more inclusive and just environment for all migrant workers.

3. Research methods

This study was conducted in the Klang Valley region, encompassing Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia. The Klang Valley was chosen due to its significance as a residence and workplace for approximately 50% of international labor migrants in Malaysia (Kassim, 1993; Noh, Wahab, Bakar Ah, & Islam, 2016; Reza, Subramaniam, & Islam, 2022). Specific locations within the Klang Valley were selected for this research, including Kotaraya Bangla Market, Brickfields, Subang Jaya Section 15, the Merdeka PNB-118 construction project at Jalan Hang Jebat near Hang Tuah Station, a Kongsı construction settlement at Sri Rampai, and the Bangladesh High Commission area in Ampang, Kuala Lumpur. These locations were strategically chosen for their proximity to both workplaces and residential areas of Bangladeshi migrant workers, commonly referred to as *Kongsı*.

Access to construction sites was obtained through a combination of informal networks and trust-based community engagement. The researcher, being a native Bangla speaker with previous field experience among Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia, leveraged personal rapport and introductions made through social organizers, religious leaders, and local Bangladeshi shop owners. This familiarity with the community proved crucial, as access to active construction sites—typically restricted to authorized personnel—requires social negotiation rather than formal permission. In most cases, informal verbal consent from site supervisors or foremen was obtained before conducting interviews or observations near the work premises.

This study adopted a qualitative approach that integrated in-depth case interviews, key informant interviews (KIIs), and observation. Data collection continued until saturation was reached—that is, when no new or relevant information emerged from additional interviews (Kumar, 2018).

Observations were conducted overtly rather than covertly, as participants were aware that the researcher was conducting academic research. Observation data were systematically documented in field notebooks and later supplemented by reflective memos written at the end of each day. Observations focused on visible aspects of daily life, including housing quality, sanitation, food habits, communication practices, and workplace safety. These data helped contextualize interview findings by providing environmental and behavioral insights that interviews alone might not reveal.

Data collection tools were designed around the two key conceptual lenses of the study—social well-being (based on Keyes' 1998 framework) and migrant challenges. The in-depth interview guide included open-ended questions related to five social well-being dimensions: social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, and social coherence. Example questions included: "Do you feel accepted and respected in your workplace?"; "How connected do you feel to other workers and local communities?"; and "What gives you a sense of purpose in your work and life here?" Additional questions explored barriers such as recruitment fees, healthcare access, housing conditions, and workplace safety.

Two separate checklists were used—one for Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and another for structured observation. The KII checklist covered broader systemic themes such as labor recruitment mechanisms, enforcement of labor laws, healthcare entitlements, and the inclusion of migrants in national protection schemes. The observation checklist included categories such as housing density, availability of sanitation facilities, evidence of employer-provided safety gear, and indicators of psychological stress, such as isolation or exhaustion.

The six KII respondents included individuals strategically chosen from relevant institutional and professional backgrounds: one Labor counselor from the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; one policymaker from the policy division of the Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia; one Malaysian labor rights activist; one employer; one healthcare professional serving migrants in Selangor; and one academic researcher specializing in migration policy. These respondents provided critical insights into the structural, policy, and institutional factors affecting migrants' well-being.

All in-depth case interviews were conducted in *Bangla*, the participants' native language, ensuring comfort and authenticity in responses. KIIs were conducted in English or a mix of Bangla and English, depending on the respondent's preference. The researcher's proficiency in both languages ensured accurate communication and interpretation. During transcription, all Bangla interviews were translated into English by the researcher, maintaining cultural nuances and idiomatic meanings. Particular attention was given to ensuring conceptual equivalence rather than literal translation, followed by a back-checking process for reliability.

Table 1 provides an overview of the in-depth case participants. All names are pseudonyms, and the recruiting companies have been anonymized to maintain confidentiality and adhere to ethical standards.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, where patterns and meanings were derived from the data rather than imposed beforehand (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Rather than using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo, we manually coded and analyzed the data through repeated close readings of transcripts, notes, and observation logs. Codes were generated by identifying recurring themes, phrases, and narratives that aligned with the dimensions of social well-being—such as belonging, dignity, contribution, and perceived fairness. Observation notes were analyzed in parallel with interview transcripts to *triangulate* the data. For example, descriptions of overcrowded dormitories were compared with interview content that expressed emotional distress, social isolation, or poor hygiene.

The earlier methodological phrase—"transcribing the raw data, incorporating electronic textual data from scanned papers, employing an inductive method, summarizing the data,

Table 1. An overview of the profile of the in-depth case interview participants

No	Pseudonym	Age	Education	District	Recruiting company	Years in Malaysia
1	Mr. Fakir	40	Dhakil	Barisal	RCM Cemerlang M. Sdn Bhd	11
2	Mr. Mainur	30	No schooling	Sirajganj	Binajatim Sdn Bhd	08
3	Mr. Kuddus	46	SSC	Pirojpur	Puncak Padu Enterprise	07
4	Mr. Abul	41	Primary	Barisal	Seal Construction	09
5	Mr. Mukul	43	Class eight	Bogura	KS Meganiaga	11
6	Mr. Pannu	38	No schooling	Jhenaidah	Low Heng Construction	10
7	Mr. Gius	50	Class five	Dhaka	Heng Huat Construction	27
8	Mr. Halder	33	HSC	Madaripur	Unilink Sdn Bhd	09
9	Mr. Jahangir	30	Class eight	Barisal	Binajatim Sdn Bhd	09
10	Mr. Anwar	50	SSC	Narsingdi	First Class Harvest Sdn Bhd	11

categorizing the data, unitizing the data, and structuring the data through narrative techniques”—has now been clarified and rewritten in practical terms, as follows:

- (1) **Transcription:** All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim in the original language (Bangla or English) immediately after each session.
- (2) **Translation and verification:** All Bangla transcripts were translated into English by the research team and rechecked for conceptual clarity and cultural nuances to preserve intended meaning.
- (3) **Initial coding:** Codes and categories were manually developed by marking key segments in printed transcripts and field notes. Sample codes included “*exploitation*,” “*mental stress*,” “*lack of voice*,” and “*hope for family upliftment*.”
- (4) **Theme development:** Similar codes were grouped into broader thematic categories reflecting Keyes’ social well-being domains (e.g., *social acceptance*, *actualization*, *integration*) and cross-cutting challenges like *healthcare access* or *wage exploitation*.
- (5) **Triangulation:** Data from in-depth interviews, KIIs, and structured observation were cross-analyzed to confirm or contrast key findings. For example, narratives about food scarcity were checked against field notes documenting shared kitchens or low food quality.
- (6) **Narrative structuring:** Final themes were organized and written into narrative summaries that captured the connections between individual experiences, workplace settings, and policy structures.

The resulting thematic framework was structured across three interrelated levels:

- (1) **Micro Level:** Individual well-being aspects such as mental health, identity, loneliness, and informal support systems.
- (2) **Meso Level:** Conditions at the workplace, including wages, safety, recruitment practices, and employer relations.
- (3) **Macro Level:** Broader structural and legal dimensions such as migration policy, health entitlements, and workers’ rights enforcement.

The study strictly adhered to the ethical guidelines of the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). Written approval was obtained before the commencement of fieldwork. All participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the research, and *verbal consent was secured*. They were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any

time. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and company names were anonymized in reporting to protect their identities. All raw and processed data are stored securely in password-protected folders, and access is limited to the core research team.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on Keyes' (1998) five domains of social well-being. The domains—*social integration*, *social acceptance*, *social contribution*, *social actualization*, and *social coherence*—provide a robust framework for analyzing narratives and observational insights from the field.

4.1 Social integration: disconnection and isolation in host society

Social integration refers to the extent to which individuals feel they belong to a community and experience commonality with others. In this study, most Bangladeshi migrant workers (BMWs) reported a sense of alienation in Malaysian society, marked by limited interaction with locals and exclusion from mainstream social spaces.

Even though I have lived here for over three years, I don't feel like I belong," shared Mr. Yakub Fakir (40). We live in workers' camps far from towns. Malaysians don't talk to us; they think we are dirty or criminals.

Observations revealed spatial segregation, with many workers confined to congested living quarters on the outskirts of cities. These areas lacked basic social amenities, limiting informal interaction with locals and deepening social disintegration. Workers were rarely seen in public spaces, and their movement was often restricted by employers or self-imposed fears of arrest.

We never go outside unless necessary, noted Mr. Abdul Kuddus (46). Even going to the market can be risky due to police checks.

This exclusion prevented the development of a shared sense of identity, reinforcing workers' perception of being perpetual outsiders.

4.2 Social acceptance: experiences of stigma and legal harassment

Social acceptance involves being treated respectfully and feeling valued within society. For BMWs, acceptance was severely undermined by negative stereotyping and systemic discrimination. Workers consistently spoke of being labeled as illegal, criminal, or inferior, regardless of their documentation status.

Mr. Gius Uddin (50) recounted: Even though I have valid papers, the police arrested me twice. They don't believe we are legal. We are treated as if we are always lying.

Discriminatory policing practices and exclusion from labor unions further marginalized workers. Observational data confirmed the routine presence of police patrols in worker-dense zones and accounts of intimidation and extortion.

The stigma was not only external. Many workers internalized societal rejection, leading to low self-worth and silence in the face of injustice.

We don't speak out even when cheated by employers. Who will listen to us? asked Mr. Mainur Islam (30).

4.3 Social contribution: feeling undervalued despite labor input

Social contribution refers to individuals' perception of being a useful part of society and making a meaningful impact. Paradoxically, while BMWs were integral to the construction, plantation, and manufacturing sectors, they felt profoundly undervalued.

Mr. Abul Hossen (41) stated: I work like a machine every day, building houses and roads. But we are seen as disposable.

Despite long working hours, low pay, and high productivity, there was a pervasive sentiment that their labor went unrecognized. The lack of acknowledgment from both employers and the host society created feelings of invisibility.

We do the hardest jobs that locals avoid, explained *Mr. Jahangir Hossen (31)*. Yet, we are paid less and shouted at like children.

Some expressed hope that their remittances made them contributors to their families and the Bangladeshi economy, but this did not translate to recognition in the host country. In group settings, workers rarely spoke of pride in their work, instead focusing on exploitation and exhaustion.

4.4 Social actualization: blocked opportunities for growth and fulfillment

Social actualization refers to the belief that society is evolving positively and that one can realize their full potential. This domain revealed perhaps the starkest gaps. BMWs overwhelmingly reported stagnation, disillusionment, and a lack of personal or professional development.

I had dreams when I came here, said *Mr. Mukul Bali (38)*. Now, I only dream of going back. My life has not improved. I'm stuck.

Even skilled workers reported being confined to repetitive, low-skilled tasks. Opportunities for promotion, learning, or skill development were virtually nonexistent.

In Bangladesh, I had a diploma. Here, I clean tiles and sleep in a room with 12 men, *Mr. Abdul Kuddus* lamented.

Observation confirmed the monotony of their daily routines—early morning commutes, long hours of manual labor, return to crowded dormitories, and limited leisure or educational activities. The lack of upward mobility, compounded by visa restrictions and employer control, led to a sense of wasted years.

4.5 Social coherence: uncertainty and distrust in systems

Social coherence involves the perception that society is structured, predictable, and meaningful. For BMWs, the Malaysian system—immigration policies, employment contracts, healthcare, and legal protections—appeared fragmented, inconsistent, and hostile.

We don't understand how the visa system works. Agents cheat us, and employers threaten to cancel our papers. We live in fear, shared *Mr. Abul Hossen (41)*.

Even legally recruited workers felt deceived by intermediaries who promised better pay, benefits, and living conditions than were delivered. Healthcare access was seen as arbitrary and unaffordable, leading many to rely on home remedies or delay treatment.

We pay insurance, but if we go to the hospital, we pay like foreigners. So what is the point? asked *Mr. Gius Uddin (50)*.

This lack of predictability generated a constant state of anxiety, undermining trust in formal systems. Workers were unsure about their rights, had limited access to support networks, and were frequently subject to abrupt contract terminations or deportations without explanation.

Observation of multiple sites reinforced this precariousness—workers had no access to formal complaint mechanisms, and grievance redressal systems were either unknown or inaccessible.

Here are a few lines from the *summary table* based on [Keyes' \(1998\) five domains of social well-being \(Table 2\)](#): The findings of this study, structured around [Keyes' \(1998\) five domains](#),

Table 2. Summary table: social well-being challenges based on Keyes' framework

Domain	Key issues identified
Social Integration	Spatial segregation, isolation from host communities, and limited civic engagement
Social Acceptance	Discrimination, police harassment, social stigma, and fear of deportation
Social Contribution	Underappreciation of labor, wage disparities, and exclusion from worker recognition
Social Actualization	Stalled personal growth, blocked mobility, monotonous and precarious employment
Social Coherence	Distrust in governance systems, opaque legal processes, and uncertainty in employment rights

reveal the complex and often contradictory experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. Despite their essential contributions to the economy, workers frequently reported feelings of isolation and disconnection, reflecting a breakdown in social integration. Many shared experiences of discrimination and systemic neglect, indicating low levels of social acceptance in both the workplace and public life. While they take pride in their labor and remittances, a prevailing sense of being undervalued points to weakened social contribution. Opportunities for personal development and self-fulfillment remain limited, with few avenues for skill advancement or stable long-term prospects, thereby constraining social actualization. Finally, the absence of clear rights, protection, and transparent institutional mechanisms erodes their confidence in the systems meant to safeguard them, undermining social coherence. Together, these dynamics illustrate how structural and interpersonal forces intersect to diminish the social well-being of this vulnerable population.

5. Discussion

This study offers an in-depth exploration of the lived realities of Bangladeshi migrant workers (BMWs) in Malaysia through [Keyes' \(1998\)](#) conceptual framework of *five domains of social well-being*. By examining their experiences across the domains of *social integration*, *social acceptance*, *social contribution*, *social actualization*, and *social coherence*, the findings reveal how economic, legal, social, and psychological dimensions intersect to shape migrants' well-being. While the study's qualitative design and focused geographical scope may limit generalizability, its contextual richness provides valuable insights into the structural inequalities that underlie the migrant experience in Malaysia.

The first dimension, *social integration*, captures how Bangladeshi migrant workers struggle to connect meaningfully with the host society. Workers reported persistent *social isolation* due to language barriers, restrictive labor policies, and exclusion from local communities. Their daily interactions were often limited to fellow migrants within cramped housing areas (kongsi) and workplaces, reflecting a lack of inclusion in broader Malaysian society. This aligns with Keyes' notion that integration involves a sense of belonging and engagement with one's social world—a condition largely absent for these workers. Prior research by [Ford \(2019\)](#) and [Reza et al. \(2019\)](#) similarly emphasizes that structural barriers prevent migrant workers from participating in social or civic life, thereby impeding their sense of connection and value. Policies that promote community integration—such as local engagement programs and multilingual information services—are crucial for improving this dimension of well-being.

In relation to *social acceptance*, the study finds that migrant workers face widespread discrimination and stigmatization, which profoundly affect their sense of worth and dignity. The testimonies revealed that both documented and undocumented workers experience fear of arrest, verbal abuse, and stereotyping. Many expressed feeling treated as "outsiders" or "disposable labor," echoing findings by [Aun and Pereira \(2023\)](#) and [Delvino and Spencer \(2019\)](#). This lack of acceptance fosters chronic stress and emotional distress, undermining

workers' confidence in their environment. Social acceptance, as defined by Keyes, implies perceiving others as kind, trustworthy, and supportive—a perception that is nearly absent among BMWs. Enhancing public awareness and anti-discrimination campaigns, alongside inclusive workplace practices, would help to challenge these negative social attitudes and foster a more respectful environment for migrants.

The domain of social contribution focuses on whether individuals perceive themselves as valuable and productive members of society. Despite their central role in Malaysia's construction and service sectors, Bangladeshi workers often feel that their contributions go unrecognized. Wage disparities between locals and migrants reinforce perceptions of unfairness and invisibility. Many respondents expressed pride in their hard work yet frustration that their labor was undervalued, consistent with studies by [Devadason and Meng \(2014\)](#) and [Rashid, Ansar, and Khaled \(2023\)](#). [Keyes \(1998\)](#) notes that social contribution is tied to the belief that one's work is meaningful and beneficial to others; however, the exploitative recruitment systems and lack of recognition described by participants diminish this sense of purpose. Addressing these inequities through wage standardization, recognition programs, and fair employment laws could help restore workers' confidence in their social value and role.

Social actualization—the belief that society and individuals can grow and improve—emerged as another weak domain. Workers reported limited opportunities for skill enhancement, career progression, or personal development. Many have remained in low-skilled positions for years, with few prospects for advancement. This lack of mobility not only restricts economic improvement but also diminishes hope for personal growth, aligning with findings by [Liem, Wang, Wariyanti, Latkin, and Hall \(2021\)](#) and [Reza et al. \(2023b\)](#). According to Keyes, social actualization requires optimism about the future and a sense that society supports personal and collective development. The stagnation described by respondents reflects a lack of institutional support and training opportunities that could empower them to move beyond survival-level employment. Strengthening bilateral training initiatives and providing access to adult education or vocational upskilling could foster greater social actualization and long-term well-being among migrant populations.

The final dimension, social coherence, reflects the extent to which individuals perceive their social environment as predictable, meaningful, and understandable. Among BMWs, there is a pervasive sense of uncertainty and mistrust regarding legal protections, workplace rights, and immigration systems. Workers expressed confusion about visa procedures, inconsistent enforcement of labor laws, and arbitrary treatment by authorities. This lack of coherence leads to psychological distress and feelings of powerlessness, resonating with the findings of [Keyes \(1998\)](#) that social coherence is essential for mental stability. The unpredictability of their environment—compounded by exploitative recruitment and opaque governance—creates a social order perceived as unjust and incomprehensible. Building coherence thus requires transparent institutional mechanisms, better communication about rights and entitlements, and a trustworthy grievance redressal system accessible to all workers.

In addition to the interviews, observational data supported these themes by providing a contextual understanding of migrants' living and working environments. Site visits revealed overcrowded housing units with minimal ventilation, limited access to clean water, and shared sanitation facilities. Workers often cooked on open stoves near sleeping areas, exposing themselves to fire hazards. Their workplaces lacked adequate safety gear and signage, corroborating participants' accounts of frequent injuries and unsafe conditions. Observations also indicated social clustering within work camps, where interactions were confined primarily to fellow Bangladeshis, reinforcing both social integration within their community and isolation from the broader society. These lived realities visibly reflect the material and psychosocial dimensions of low social well-being identified across the five domains.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the social well-being of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia is undermined across all five of Keyes' domains, resulting in a pattern of structural exclusion, social alienation, and diminished human dignity. Economic exploitation, limited access to healthcare, and legal insecurity are not isolated issues but interlinked factors that

perpetuate systemic inequality. The multidimensional framework of social well-being enables a deeper understanding of how these challenges extend beyond material deprivation to encompass the emotional, relational, and existential dimensions of life. Addressing them requires integrated policy action—combining labor regulation, social inclusion initiatives, and psychosocial support systems. In essence, this research contributes to a growing body of evidence calling for a rights-based, human-centered approach to labor migration that acknowledges not only migrants’ economic contributions but also their aspirations for belonging, dignity, and holistic well-being.

6. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the multidimensional challenges confronting Bangladeshi migrant workers (BMWs) in Malaysia, revealing a persistent deficit across all five domains of social well-being identified by Keyes (1998). From experiences of social exclusion and discriminatory treatment to economic exploitation and legal uncertainty, the well-being of these workers is systemically undermined by national policies and transnational labor structures. These findings underscore the urgent need for a holistic policy response that not only alleviates economic vulnerabilities but also addresses the psychosocial and structural dimensions of marginalization.

The issue of *social integration* emerged as a major deficit, with migrant workers lacking meaningful participation in Malaysian society due to legal restrictions, linguistic barriers, and spatial segregation. National migration policies must therefore adopt a more inclusive approach, fostering integration through community-based programs, legal aid services, and culturally competent outreach mechanisms. Similarly, social acceptance remains limited, as workers are frequently dehumanized and viewed as burdens or threats rather than contributors. Legal frameworks and public discourse must shift toward recognizing migrants as rights-bearing individuals, supported by campaigns against xenophobia and discriminatory enforcement practices.

In terms of social contribution, although BMWs perform essential labor and sustain key economic sectors, their efforts are seldom acknowledged through equitable wages or job protections. This disconnect between economic contributions and social recognition calls for reforms such as wage-parity legislation, public recognition of migrant contributions, and stronger enforcement of fair labor standards. Social actualization, or the opportunity to grow and thrive within society, is similarly constrained. Migrants remain trapped in low-skilled roles with little opportunity for advancement or training. Bilateral labor agreements must include provisions for skill recognition, mobility pathways, and continuing education, ensuring that migration becomes a platform for empowerment rather than entrapment.

Perhaps most strikingly, *social coherence*—the ability to make sense of one’s environment and have faith in institutional justice—is lacking among most workers. The unpredictability of visa renewals, lack of labor law enforcement, and complex administrative procedures create a climate of confusion and fear. Transparent and accountable governance structures are essential to restore trust. Migrant workers must have access to timely, accurate information about their rights and remedies, supported by consular services and independent monitoring bodies.

These findings have broader implications within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework, particularly Goals 1 (No Poverty), 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Upholding migrant rights is not only a moral imperative but also a developmental necessity. Policies that reduce recruitment fees, guarantee healthcare access, ensure legal protections, and combat discrimination are essential to safeguarding both human dignity and economic stability. Moreover, recognizing the global nature of migrant exploitation, including in other destination countries, reinforces the need for multilateral cooperation, ethical recruitment practices, and shared accountability.

In closing, the well-being of Bangladeshi migrant workers must be seen as a measure of societal justice, both within Malaysia and across the global labor regime. Realizing the vision

of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development requires centering migrants' voices and rights in policy discourse. This study calls for a paradigm shift: from viewing migrants as mere economic inputs to acknowledging them as full social actors deserving of dignity, recognition, and the opportunity to flourish.

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