

Migrant Workers in the Seaweed Sector in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

This article uses the content analysis (CA) to examine the secondary data on the migrant workers in the seaweed sector in Sabah, Malaysia, and analyzed the migrant workers' contributions to the sector and kinds of socio-cultural, economic, and legal challenges they faced. Through online academic publication searching, six academic papers and reports, and threemedia news stories about the migrant workers in the seaweed sector in Malaysia were found. In these articles and newstories, three major themes were identified: the number of migrant workers, their contribution to the seaweed sector, and the problems and challenges they faced. Under theme three, the subthemes included stereotypes, threats, risks, poverty, wages, and exploitation. The article found that migrant workers produced most of the seaweed in different regions in Sabah, Malaysia. However, the authorities do not directly recognize the contribution of migrant workers, as most workers in the seaweed sector are undocumented. The stateless status of most migrant workers has jeopardized the workers in the sector and provided power to the middlemen to exploit them. Stereotypes concerning migrant workers—low daily wages and low production rates—are significant issues and problems in their lives, which together exacerbate their economic and social misery and vulnerability. Although occupational health and safety are a prime concern in seaweed farming, no details were found concerning the health and safety of the migrant workers in the sector. Cumulatively, these factors (challenges to the migrant workers) may decrease the quantity and inferior quality of seaweed in Malaysia.

Keywords

Malaysia, migrant workers, undocumented workers, seaweed, occupational health, poverty

Introduction

In 2013, the Malaysian seaweed sector contributed 1% (269,431 metric tonnes) of the total world seaweed production (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2015). The promotion and expansion of the seaweed sector gained importance in the 10th Malaysia National Plan from 2010 to 2015. In the Malaysian National Agro-Food Policy 2011 to 2020, seaweed has also been viewed as a high-value commodity. Under the policy, by 2020, the government aimed to “capitalize on Malaysia’s competitive advantage” (Safari, 2015, p. 1) and raise seaweed production to 900,000 metric tonnes, which could be equal to approximately 1.4 billion Malaysian ringgit (approximately USD 344.76 million) (Safari, 2015). Studies on seaweed farming in Malaysia have paid considerable attention to the macro-level commercialization of seaweed production (Nor et al., 2017; Phang et al., 2017) as well as the biological aspects of different categories of seaweed, the sizes of species, and their industrial usage (Phang, 2010; Yong et al., 2015). Although Malaysia is the third-largest international seaweed carrageenan producer—20,297 tons of dried seaweed in 2016—the seaweed sector has faced ethnic tensions between indigenous growers and migrant workers, which has resulted in a poor understanding of the

sector (Nor et al., 2020). In this tension, issues relating to the welfare of the seaweed-cultivating migrant communities (whether legal or illegal), and their social, cultural, and economic problems, have received little attention in social science research. Although many migrant workers have been engaged in the seaweed sector for over three decades in Sabah, Malaysia (Abubakar, 2015; Nor et al., 2017), their work and contribution to the sector are little recognized and have received scant consideration in research studies or the government. Overall, the role of migrant workers in the seaweed sector has been ignored and under-highlighted (Hussin & Khoso, 2017).

Consequently, seaweed production might have reduced in terms of quantity and quality. Hence, this article investigates the scale of their contribution to the seaweed sector and the problems and challenges migrant workers faced in the sector.

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