A peer-reviewed journal published by Faculty of Law Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia. The title has been indexed by SCOPUS, SINTA, GARUDA, BASE, OneSearch.
ISSN 2654-8313 (Print) 2654-8305 (Online)
Online at https://journal.unnes.ac.id/journals/JPHI/index
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15294/jphi.v9i2.58465

JURNAL PENGABDIAN HUKUM INDONESIA
Indonesian Journal of Legal Community Engagement

Submitted	: July 3, 2026
Revised	: October 11, 2026
Accepted	: October 12, 2026
Published	: October 29, 2026
Available Online	: October 30, 2026

Strengthening Human Rights Awareness among Children with Uncertain Citizenship Status through Community-Based Legal Education at Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kampung Pandan, Malaysia

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Abstract

Malaysia's challenge with children holding unclear citizenship status is a significant human rights issue, especially in migrant communities that face barriers in getting legal identity documents. The absence of documentation does not necessarily imply uncertain citizenship. Still, uncertainty about nationality status may limit children's access to basic rights such as education, health care, and legal recognition of identity. Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg Pandan is a non-formal educational institution that is run through the network of the Muhammadiyah community in Malaysia, which provides learning for Indonesian migrant children, including those with uncertain citizenship documentation and legal identity. This study aims to study the socio-legal status of children with an uncertain citizenship status and to study the role of community-based legal education in increasing human rights awareness among migrant communities at Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan and PCIM Malaysia. The community engagement activities were carried out through the qualitative empirical approach. Field observation, semi-structured informal interviews, participatory engagement, and legal education sessions were used to collect data from children, educators, administrators, parents, and community representatives. The data were thematically analyzed for patterns of uncertainty of citizenship, access to rights, and awareness of human rights. Evaluation: Participants' involvement in the activities was evaluated qualitatively. The results show that there are approximately 30 Indonesian migrant children in Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan is not a clear citizen itself. The exact number of undocumented and stateless children in Malaysia is unknown but is thought to be in the tens of thousands. The findings also reveal that legal education and community engagement address issues of uncertain citizenship and human rights. The findings emphasize the significance of community legal education and institutionally collaborative approaches in tackling the problem of ambiguous citizenship and improving human rights protection for migrant children.

KEYWORDS *Empirical Study, Human Rights, Legal Education, Malaysia, Citizenship Documentation Uncertainty.*

Introduction

Citizenship status is a core element of legal identity and a vital channel for exercising other human rights. Uncertain citizenship, according to international human rights law, is a distinct status in which a person is not deemed a national of any state under the operation of its law. However,

uncertain citizenship status, lack of documentation, and absence of nationality verification should not be automatically lumped together as uncertain citizenship, as each legal situation has different implications.

In this study, therefore, the term 'children with uncertain citizenship status' is used to refer to children whose nationality status has not yet been definitively established from the available documentation and administrative records. This distinction is important because legal invisibility can be caused not only by lack of nationality but also by obstacles to birth registration, documentation procedures and access to mechanisms of nationality determination.[1] Children who are unaware of their citizenship status are a particularly vulnerable group, given the extent to which children's development depends on the recognition of legal identity and access to essential services. Lack or unclear documentation can constitute a barrier to education, health care, social protection, and administrative recognition. Therefore, the problem should be considered not only as a problem of nationality but also as a problem of human rights, especially the implementation of children's rights.[2] One particularly vulnerable group is children who are uncertain of their citizenship status, as so much of their development depends on recognition of their legal identity and access to basic services.

Lack of or uncertainty about documentation may create barriers to education, health care, social protection, and administrative recognition. Therefore, the problem should be seen not only as a nationality issue but also as a broader human rights issue related to the realization of children's rights.[3] Clear normative guarantees of the right to nationality are set out in

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[1] Musaiyadah Ahmadun et al., "Education without Citizenship and Its Importance to Literacy : A Comparative Analysis of Stateless Children ' s Rights in Malaysia and Indonesia," *The International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 9, no. 2454 (2025): 5571–84, https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] Ahmad Iffan, "The Concept of Fulfillment of Children's Rights in the United Nation Convention on the Right of the Child (UN-CRC)," *Jurnal Peradaban Hukum* 1, no. 2 SE-Articles (2023), https://doi.org/10.33019/jph.v1i2.13. *See also* Zubaedah Zubaedah. "Sociolegal Analysis of Child

international human rights instruments. Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirms that everyone has the right to a nationality and shall not be arbitrarily deprived of it.[4] Furthermore, Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that every child has the right to be registered immediately after birth, to have a name, and to acquire a nationality. However, despite these legal frameworks, implementation at the national level remains inconsistent, particularly in countries with high levels of migration.[5]

Malaysia is a country with a complex migration context, where children from migrant families may face difficulties in obtaining legal identity documentation. Uncertainty about the status of children's citizenship can stem from irregular migration status, cross-border family relationships, administrative requirements, and incomplete civil registration processes. But these cases are different from those of legally recognized uncertain citizenship, which is a formal determination that no state recognizes the individual as its national.[6] Children of migrant families are often not officially registered and therefore denied legal recognition by the state. This means limited access to formal education, health care, and legal protection.[7] Empirically, children living with citizenship documentation uncertainty in Malaysia are not only a legal category but also a lived social reality. Without official identity documents, these children have limited access to basic public services and face barriers to social mobility. Official national data on children facing uncertainty about their citizenship documentation is not readily available. Still, international reports indicate that Malaysia has a large population of migrant workers,

Marriage Prevention Policies in Rural Indonesia". *The Indonesian Journal of Sociolegal Development* 1, no. 1 (2026): 101-120. https://publications.inleads.id/index.php/IJSLD/article/view/13

4 Rizal Agung Mufti, Tajul Arifin, and Ine Fauzia, "Protection of Citizenship Status in National Law as a Human Right Is Linked to Article 15 Paragraph 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *Al-Afkar, Journal For Islamic Studies* 8, no. 4 SE-Articles (October 2025): 132–41, https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v8i4.1794.

5 Gianluigi Palombella, "Access to Justice: Dynamic, Foundational, and Generative," *Ratio Juris* 34, no. 2 (2021): 121–38, https://doi.org/10.1111/raju.12309.

6 UNHC, "UNHCR Report Reveals Debilitating Impact of Statelessness on Children," 2015.

7 Zen Yie Ko and Manique A E Cooray, "Legal and Social Issues of Stateless Children in Malaysia," *Asian Journal of Law and Policy* 4, no. 1 (2024): 77–98, https://doi.org/10.33093/ajlp.2024.4.

refugees, and undocumented individuals, and children make up a significant portion of them.[8] But children with uncertain documentation are rarely disaggregated, as they are counted within general categories of undocumented or migrant populations, making it difficult to estimate their numbers accurately.[9]

This study is based on empirical field engagement in Sanggar Bimbingan (Learning Center) 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan, Malaysia, and legal awareness activities in collaboration with PCIM Malaysia (Persatuan Cabang Istimewa Muhammadiyah Malaysia), a society duly registered under the Registrar of Societies, Malaysia. Sanggar is a non-formal educational institution that provides access to education for children of Indonesian migrant workers, including those without citizenship. The Sanggar, run by the Muhammadiyah organizational network, plays an important role in filling the educational gap in the formal school system, which is inaccessible to migrant children. Field Observations at Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan identified "some 30 children born to Indonesian migrant worker families who do not have a clear citizenship status". These children depend on the Sanggar's informal education as their main learning environment. The Sanggar can still perform well with the help of volunteers and community educators, despite limited facilities, underscoring the important role of civil society in tackling educational exclusion. This study also forms part of legal education activities in collaboration with PCIM Malaysia, in addition to educational observation. These activities featured interactive discussions and question-answer sessions covering uncertain citizenship, human rights principles, and international legal systems on child protection. The preliminary results suggest that the participants have limited knowledge of uncertain citizenship as a legal problem. This underscores the importance of legal

[8] Biju R K, "Childhood Statelessness: Critiquing International Norms and Enforcement Strategies," *Brawijaya Law Journal* 8, no. 1 SE-Articles (2021): 113–31, https://doi.org/10.21776/ub.blj.2021.008.01.07.

[9] Yordan Gunawan, M. Fabian Akbar, and Eva Ferrer Corral, "Kafala v. Human Rights Migrant Workers at the 2022 Qatar World Cup," *Journal of Indonesian Legal Studies* 9, no. 2 SE-Research Article (2024): 571–98, https://doi.org/10.15294/jils.v9i2.2601. *See also* Siti Kurniawati. "Citizenship Without Belonging: Legal Identity and the Continuing Marginalization of Indigenous Belief Communities in Indonesia". *Indonesian Minority Justice Review* 3, no. 1 (2026): 13-26. https://doi.org/10.65815/tcykh052

education in enhancing human rights knowledge within the community. One approach commonly used in practice is to repatriate children to Indonesia when they are old enough to be eligible for citizenship. However, this creates a complex social situation since this often leads to children being separated from their parents, who continue to live and work in Malaysia. This situation is a conflict between the need for legal identity and the need to preserve family unity.

The uncertainties of Malaysian citizenship are not a problem for some, but a systemic issue affecting a larger population of migrants.[10] Undocumented and stateless children are thought to be part of a much larger group that could number tens of thousands. But there are no exact figures because of deficiencies in civil registration systems and overlaps in legal categories. The lack of reliable data hampers the resolution of this issue, and points to the need for better institutional arrangements. The international standards of human rights and their legal transposition into the national context are separated by a huge gap. While Malaysia is a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, challenges persist in ensuring universal birth registration and access to citizenship determination procedures. This gap is part of the ongoing exclusion of children from legal recognition.[11]

The protection of nationality rights, birth registration, and access to essential services within the framework of uncertain citizenship and undocumented populations has been extensively explored in previous studies from international legal and human rights perspectives. International legal scholarship has identified uncertain citizenship as an obstacle to the realization of children's rights, especially where legal identity

[10] William Worster, "Customary International Law Requiring States to Grant Nationality to Stateless Children Born in Their Territory," *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 4 (July 2022): 113–39, https://doi.org/10.35715/SCR4001116. *See also* Hengki Setiyono. "Justice for the Stateless and Almost-Stateless: Legal Protection of Refugee and Migrant Minorities in Indonesia". *Indonesian Minority Justice Review* 3, no. 3 (2026): 183-198. https://doi.org/10.65815/81v5hb81

[11] Rodziana Mohamed Razali, Tengku Amatullah Madeehah Tengku Mohd, and Asmaa' Arinah Zulkifli, "Analysis of Gaps of Completeness of Birth Registration in Malaysia," *Journal of Education and Social Sciences* 23, no. 1 (2023); Rodziana Mohamed Razali, Tamara Joan Duraisingam, and Nessa Ni Xuan Lee, "Digitalisation of Birth Registration System in Malaysia: Boon or Bane for the Hard-to-Reach and Marginalised?," *Journal of Migration and Health* 6 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmh.2022.100137.

and recognition of nationality are lacking.[12] Previous studies in Malaysia have found that children with documentation problems face difficulties in accessing education, healthcare, and legal recognition due to administrative and legal barriers.[13] However, little attention has been paid to the experience of uncertainty of citizenship documentation at the community level among Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia, and the role of non-state actors in addressing the associated rights vulnerabilities. Current debates are largely concentrated on legal structures, nationality determination, and policy challenges. The practical mechanisms through which community institutions provide legal awareness, educational access, and rights-based empowerment remain relatively underexplored.[14]

This study addresses this gap by examining the interaction between citizenship uncertainty, children's rights protection, and community-based legal empowerment. Rather than measuring uncertain citizenship as a legal status, this research investigates how uncertainty of citizenship documentation affects access to rights and how community actors, such as Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan and PCIM Malaysia respond to these challenges. This approach contributes to socio-legal studies by demonstrating how community-based institutions act as complementary mechanisms in raising human rights awareness among migrant communities, while acknowledging that the formal determination of nationality is the responsibility of state authorities.

Based on the above legal and empirical considerations, this study poses three research questions: (1) How do the children with uncertain citizenship documentation experience the barriers of legal identity and access to the basic rights at Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan, Malaysia? (2) What are the vulnerabilities in realizing children's rights, particularly in terms of education, healthcare, and administrative

[12] K, "Childhood Statelessness: Critiquing International Norms and Enforcement Strategies."

[13] Ko and Cooray, "Legal and Social Issues of Stateless Children in Malaysia."

[14] Markus Simbolon, "Educational Barriers for Children? A Study of Fulfillment to the Rights of Education for Undocumented Indonesian Children in Malaysia," *Politika Progresif : Jurnal Hukum, Politik Dan Humaniora* 2, no. 1 (July 2025): 310–21, https://doi.org/10.62383/progres.v2i1.2092; Bambang Adji Pamungkas. "Feminist Legal Critique of Child Marriage Dispensation Practices in Indonesian Religious Courts". *The Indonesian Journal of Feminist Legal Studies* 1, no. 1 (2026): 33-82. https://publications.inleads.id/index.php/IJFLS/article/view/2.

recognition, arising from documentation and citizenship uncertainties? (3) What can be done by community-based institutions such as the 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan and PCIM Malaysia join hands to raise awareness on human rights and legal empowerment for migrant communities.

Methods

This research adopts a community engagement approach and a qualitative socio-legal research design. The research was conducted at Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in collaboration with Persatuan Cabang Istimewa Muhammadiyah (PCIM) Malaysia. This study investigated the experiences of children with ambiguous citizenship documentation and legal identity status in Indonesian migrant communities, including the obstacles to the realization of children's basic rights and the role of community-based legal education in increasing human rights awareness. The research and intervention were conducted as part of community engagement activities. Conversely, the empirical research component examined qualitative data regarding uncertainty about citizenship documentation, access to children's rights, and participants' understanding of human rights principles. The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement and relevance to the research objectives. 68 participants attended the legal education activities; 30 students of Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan: The FGD was attended by 6 volunteers/educators, 32 student parents, and other community participants. The 30 students were flagged through institutional records and conversations with educators as uncertain about their citizenship paperwork and legal identity status.The study does not, however, consider these children to be de jure stateless persons, as the formal determination of uncertain citizenship requires verification by competent state authorities.

The data collection methods included field observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and participatory engagement in legal education activities. Field observations carried out to observe the educational environment, the learning process and social conditions experienced by children in Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg.

Pandan, especially regarding access to education and the support systems offered by institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators, administrators, and representatives from PCIM Malaysia to explore barriers to citizenship documentation, children's access to fundamental rights, and community responses to migrant families. In addition, an FGD was conducted with 32 parents of students and other community participants as part of the legal education activities organized with PCIM Malaysia. The discussion covered participants' experiences and understanding of nationality rights, birth registration, legal identity, access to education, healthcare rights, child protection, and administrative mechanisms for citizenship documentation. The FGD was facilitated using prepared discussion themes to encourage participants to share experiences, identify challenges, and reflect on the need for legal identity and the protection of human rights.

Thematic analysis of the data collected was facilitated by grouping field notes, interview results and FGD discussions into recurring themes of citizenship uncertainty, rights vulnerabilities, community-based educational support and legal empowerment. The qualitative assessment of human rights awareness was based on the discussions of the participants, their ability to identify human rights issues and their reflective comments after the legal education activities. Indicators considered included knowledge of rights to nationality and legal identity, birth registration, access to education and health care, principles of child protection and available legal and administrative mechanisms. There were no quantitative pre-test and post-test measures used in this study; therefore, the results are interpreted as changes in understanding observed through qualitative evidence, rather than statistically measured improvement. Data credibility was verified through methodological triangulation by comparing results from observations, interviews, institutional records, and FGDs. In the study, we did not reveal personal identities, and in involving children and vulnerable migrant communities, we did not disclose personal identities or sensitive documentation to protect confidentiality. The results were presented in general categories simultaneously to minimize potential social and legal risks to the participants.

Results and Discussion

A. Citizenship Documentation Uncertainty and Legal Identity Vulnerability

The results suggest that uncertainty surrounding documentation of citizenship and legal identity is a significant vulnerability faced by Indonesian migrant children at Sanggar Bimbingan ‘Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan. Based on ground-based observations and data collected from educators, 30 students with problems related to citizenship documentation and recognition of legal identity have been identified for participation in Sanggar's educational activities. Such conditions include a lack of complete administrative documentation and problems of obtaining formal recognition of their legal identity. However, the findings do not establish that those children are legally stateless, as legal statelessness requires a formal determination by competent authorities.

Empirical results show that documentation uncertainty is not only an administrative problem, but also affects children’s eligibility for different social protection programs. The absence of, or uncertainty around, legal identity puts one at risk, as documentation is an institutional gateway to education, healthcare, and other public services. Hence, the problem of these children should be considered not only as a problem of national status, but also as a wider socio-legal problem related to the protection of children’s rights and administrative accessibility.

This means the relationship between legal identity and the realization of children’s rights. The right of every child to nationality and registration is acknowledged in international human rights instruments, but the actual implementation of these rights is largely dependent on administrative procedures and the ability of families to meet documentation requirements.In migrant communities, factors such as mobility, incomplete family documentation, and limited access to registration mechanisms may create situations where children remain legally uncertain despite having established social ties within a community. The findings are consistent with previous studies showing that children experiencing documentation barriers in Malaysia often face difficulties accessing formal education and other services because administrative systems frequently rely

on recognized legal identity documents.[15] Therefore, the situation observed at Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan illustrates how broader structural challenges in migration governance and civil registration systems are experienced at the community level.

In practice, these children rely on the Sanggar Bimbingan's non-formal education as their primary learning environment. The Sanggar serves as a community-based educational institution that provides education to children excluded from formal schooling. Sanggar routinely provides structured learning activities supported by volunteer teachers, but its infrastructure and learning resources are limited, underscoring the importance of civil society in filling the education gap.

The field findings also demonstrate that a lack of citizenship status directly impacts children's access to basic public services. They have limited access to health services, administrative registration and formal protection mechanisms in absence of legal identity documents. The case exemplifies how uncertain citizenship operates as a structural impediment that affects multiple domains of child development, not just education, but social and legal recognition as well. From a community engagement perspective, this condition is symptomatic of a larger structural problem of migrant legal status. The citizenship status of children is closely related to their parents' administrative status, especially for Indonesian migrant workers. This demonstrates that precarious citizenship is not a condition of an individual alone, but an intergenerational issue embedded within systems of migration and documentation. The following statement was observed from the community context during field engagement:

> *"Children in this condition are still trying to continue their education through non-formal learning spaces, as they are not able to do so through formal channels due to their legal status."*

This statement reflects the reality of the community's life. Where the continuity of education is very dependent on other institutions, such as Sanggar Bimbingan. Overall, the empirical results support that Malaysian children facing uncertainty over their citizenship documentation are

[15] *Ibid*.

subject to multidimensional exclusion, mainly in the spheres of legal identity, access to education, and social protection. ‘Aisyiyah Kg. Sanggar Bimbingan Pandan addresses these shortcomings by creating a safe, structured educational environment, but it is not a full-fledged alternative to formal state responsibility.

Figure 1
Learning activities of children who experience citizenship documentation uncertainty at Sanggar Bimbingan ‘Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan, Malaysia



Sources: Authors, 2026

B. Citizenship Documentation Uncertainty and Barriers to the Fulfillment of Children’s Rights

The results show that uncertainty about the registration of citizenship puts children at risk of not being able to exercise their basic rights, particularly in education, health care and legal recognition of identity. The condition has to be considered not only as a question of nationality but as a socio-administrative problem that impacts on children’s access to rights protected by human rights frameworks. From a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) perspective, access to public services should be grounded on the principles of universality, equality and accountability. In contrast, the best interests of the child principle means that administrative

obstacles should not deprive children of their fundamental rights.[16] In the education system, children who are unsure of their citizenship papers are blocked from entering formal schools because they do not have the official identity documents that the administrative systems demand. Field observation at Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan demonstrates how children who lack citizenship status are excluded from formal education structures and instead rely on non-formal spaces of community-based learning.[17] This condition is indicative of a structural inequality in which the right to education guarantyd under Article 28 of the CRC is not realized in practice.[18] Such community-based alternative to state responsibility is reliance on Sanggar Bimbingan. This reveals the dissonance between normative legal obligations and institutional delivery.

Uncertain citizenship also creates significant barriers to accessing medical services from a healthcare perspective. Children without valid identification often face administrative barriers to treatment in formal health care settings. This condition causes delay in medical treatment and access to preventive healthcare services thus making them more vulnerable to health threats. The CRC's Article 24 enshrines the right of all children to the highest attainable standard of health, but empirical evidence shows that legal invisibility is a barrier to its realization.[19] This is a classic example of a disjunction between legal normativity and administrative accessibility. Moreover, uncertain citizenship produces legal invisibility in civil registration systems. Children who are not formally documented through birth registration are not included in state administrative databases and are therefore partially invisible in legal governance structures.[20] This exclusion

[16] Amelia Fatimatuzzahra, "Indonesia's Interpretation of the Convention on the Rights of Child," *Jurnal Independent* 11, no. 2 (September 2023): 553–62, https://doi.org/10.30736/ji.v11i2.240.

[17] UNHC, "UNHCR Report Reveals Debilitating Impact of Statelessness on Children."

[18] Gerison Lansdown and Ziba Vaghri, "Article 28: The Right to Education," 2022, 247–60, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84647-3_26. *See also* Rodiyah Rodiyah, and Ridwan Arifin. "Human Rights Education in Indonesia: Between Policy and Practice". *Contemporary Issues on Indonesian Human Rights Law and Policy* 2, no. 2 (2025). https://doi.org/10.65815/96pvmn16

[19] Helene Lambert, "Comparative Perspectives on Arbitrary Deprivation of Nationality and Refugee Status," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 64 (September 2014): 1–37, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020589314000475.

[20] Rofi Wahanisa et al., "Advancing Child Rights in Urban Governance: An Analysis of Policy Implementation and Challenges in the Child-Friendly City Initiative in Indonesia," *Masalah-*

has long term consequences, not only for present access to services, but also for future opportunities such as continuity of education, access to employment and legal protection. Structurally, this is an example of what might be understood as "administrative exclusion," where systems of governance inadvertently reproduce marginalization by virtue of eligibility criteria based on documentation.

The field engagement, in collaboration with PCIM Malaysia, provides further insights into the social and cognitive aspects of uncertain citizenship in migrant communities. The participants in the legal education sessions had little prior knowledge of uncertain citizenship as a legal and human rights issue. Interactive discussion and question and answer sessions gradually improved awareness on the implications of legal identity, citizenship frameworks, and child protection norms. Legal consciousness, therefore, remains important in constructing community responses to uncertain citizenship, particularly in migration contexts where information about formal legal rights is scarce. The results further point to a close link between uncertain citizenship and the administrative position of migrant parents, structurally and intergenerationally. The legal vulnerability of children is inherited from the documentation gaps their families have suffered, especially in the case of migrant workers. This means that uncertain citizenship is not a personal phenomenon but a systemic condition embedded in migration governance and civil registration systems. The intergenerational transmission of legal vulnerability thus highlights the need for integrated policy approaches that account for both parental documentation and child registration systems.

This study also corresponds to wider macro-level empirical observations that stateless and undocumented children in Malaysia form part of a larger population estimated to be in the tens of thousands. However, exact numbers are not available due to weaknesses in national registration systems and overlapping legal definitions. The disconnect between the population estimates and data collected at the field level exhibits a significant data governance gap, further confounding policy formulation and rights-based interventions. In brief, the findings show that

Masalah Hukum 54, no. 3 (November 29, 2025), https://ejournal.undip.ac.id/index.php/mmh/article/view/71502.

uncertain citizenship results in multidimensional poverty in legal identity, education, health care and social protection. Community level institutions such as Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. The role of pandan is crucial as a mitigating tool through non-formal education. Its role is complementary and cannot replace the state's obligations. These empirical realities indicate the critical importance of a rights-based policy approach that combines legal reform, administrative inclusion and community empowerment to address the structural roots of uncertain citizenship.

Finally, these challenges highlight the need to strengthen community-based legal education initiatives, as demonstrated in this study.[21] The observed improvements in participants' awareness indicate that legal empowerment can serve as an important instrument for bridging the gap between human rights norms and lived realities, particularly for marginalized migrant communities.[22]

C. Community-Based Institutions and Legal Empowerment

The results show that Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan acts as a community-based education support institution for children who face barriers to citizenship documentation and access to formal education. Sanggar is an alternative learning space where children of Indonesian migrant worker families can continue their education despite limited access to formal education. In addition to educational activities, Sanggar also has another function. The institution also acts as a social support system, linking children and migrant families to community resources, information and assistance on children's rights. The Sanggar is a place for children to maintain the continuity of their learning through an educational environment. At the same time, families are assisted in understanding the legal and administrative intricacies of citizenship papers. The empirical findings of this study show that the Sanggar functions not only as a learning center, but also as a multidimensional social institution which offers

[21] Agung Aditya et al., "The Development of ANTIC (Anti Bullying Cards) as a Medium for Introducing the Characteristics of Bullying in Criminal Act," *Indonesian Journal of Advocacy and Legal Services* 8, no. 1 (2026), https://doi.org/10.15294/ijals.v8i1.47048.

[22] Rofi Wahanisa et al., "Creating a Child-Friendly District: Strengthening Psychological First Aid Skills for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (PPPA) Cadre in Pemalang Regency," *Jurnal Pengabdian Hukum Indonesia* 8, no. 2 (2025): 375–96, https://doi.org/10.15294/jphi.v8i2.32395.

educational access, psychosocial support and informal protection to the children of Indonesian migrant workers who are excluded from state educational services due to the lack of citizenship documentation. Field engagement indicates that approximately 30 children with unclear citizenship status are actively engaged in learning activities at the Sanggar. The educational activities are conducted on a regular basis and include basic literacy and numeracy, religious education, and character building sessions. Learning is delivered through a flexible, informal pedagogical approach combining group learning, individual guidance and participatory interaction. This structure allows children to continue their education even if they are excluded from formal schooling systems. From an operational perspective, the Sanggar is built upon a community-based volunteer system consisting of educators and local coordinators. Teaching activities follow structured timetables but are flexible according to conditions in the community. It reveals that the Sanggar serves as a ground-up educational instrument to fill the gaps left by formal institutional education. In this sense, the Sanggar is a kind of social resilience strategy in the migrant community.

The Sanggar also has an important function in giving psychosocial stability to children who are in uncertainty of their citizenship documentation, besides its educational function. Based on field observations, children were more actively involved and more comfortable emotionally in the Sanggar environment, which provides a safe and inclusive learning space free from legal discrimination. This condition reflects the importance of non-formal institutions in reducing the psychological effect of legal invisibility to which children experiencing uncertainty of citizenship documentation are subjected.

Theoretically, the role of the Sanggar can be viewed from the perspective of the community resilience theory and the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). The results show that Sanggar Bimbingan ‘Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan is a supporting mechanism based on community to realise children’s rights. Its function does not replace the duties of state institutions in relation to access to formal education, nationality status or legal recognition. The Sanggar, however, is an example of how community institutions can assist in alleviating the short-term effects of administrative

barriers experienced by migrant children. The partnership with PCIM Malaysia furthers the Sanggar's mission of combining education support with legal awareness campaigns. PCIM Malaysia contributes by facilitating activities in legal education, providing information on human rights principles and creating spaces for dialogue between migrant communities and legal perspectives. This collaboration shows that community-based responses to citizenship uncertainty require not only educational support but also access to legal knowledge and institutional networks.

This research contributes to understanding the functioning of community-based institutions as socio-legal resilience mechanisms in situations of uncertainty for children about their legal identity. This study also points to the middle ground of community actors in reducing the vulnerabilities of rights through education, awareness of the law and community empowerment rather than only focusing on nationality determination. The findings, however, also highlight the challenges of community-based intervention. Kg. Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Pandan and PCIM Malaysia were not able to determine the nationality status as the determination of nationality remains within the purview of relevant state institutions. The sustainable protection of children in situations of uncertainty about their citizenship documentation requires cooperation between community organisations, migrant families and state authorities responsible for civil registration and nationality administration.

This substitution, however, does not respond to the structural drivers of uncertain citizenship, particularly those related to legal identity and civil registration systems. Furthermore, the empirical results show that the performance of the Sanggar is improved by the cooperation with PCIM Malaysia that helps in the organisational coordination and legal awareness activities. This partnership goes beyond education as it brings the awareness of human rights into community engagement practices at the Sanggar. This combination is a major innovation of the community service programme; education and legal empowerment are integrated into one grassroots institution.[23]

[23] Wahanisa et al., "Advancing Child Rights in Urban Governance: An Analysis of Policy Implementation and Challenges in the Child-Friendly City Initiative in Indonesia."

The Sanggar, despite its important role, has some structural limitations that make it difficult to fully replace the formal education system. Such limitations include the lack of formal accreditation, limited access to national standardized curricula and lack of formal recognition of students' educational achievements. Thus, while the Sanggar ensures the continuity of education, it does not tackle the legal barriers related to uncertain citizenship or provide formal certification pathways for children. Overall, the results suggest that Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan is a hybrid institution, combining educational provision and social protection and community empowerment functions. It serves to underline the importance of civil society in the struggle against the exclusion from education of children whose status of citizenship is uncertain. But the Sanggar also shows the limitations of community-led solutions in the absence of structural legal reform. The novelty of this study is to recognize the Sanggar as a socio-legal resilience mechanism that connects humanitarian needs and legal exclusion in migrant communities, rather than just an educational substitute institution.

PCIM Malaysia's field engagement activities included interactive legal education sessions, discussion forums and question-and-answer (Q&A) activities on uncertain citizenship, citizenship rights and international human rights framework. These activities were done in cooperation with Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan integrates legal literacy into the everyday education of migrant children and their communities.

Figure 2

Legal education and discussion session on uncertain citizenship conducted with PCIM Malaysia



Sources: Authors, 2026

The FGD findings indicate that participants initially understood citizenship-related problems primarily as administrative difficulties rather than as broader human rights issues. Some participants associated the absence of documentation primarily with practical obstacles to accessing education, healthcare, and government services, while the relationship between legal identity, nationality rights, and the protection of children's rights was not fully recognized. Through legal education activities, participants were introduced to the relationship between citizenship documentation and fundamental rights, including the principles of birth registration, nationality recognition and child protection. This is confirmed by a field statement from the Chairman of PCIM Malaysia who said:

> *"The issue of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is a very important problem that needs to be addressed immediately, especially regarding their citizenship status. "Many migrant families and children are unaware of their legal status, which directly impacts their access to fundamental rights, including the right to education and social protection."*

One practical response that is noted in the field is the policy approach in the community context where children are sent back to Indonesia to get the citizenship once they are administratively eligible. However, this solution has important social implications, as it often involves the separation of children from their parents, who are still alive and working in Malaysia. This situation is a reflection of the complex humanitarian dilemma between the solution of legal identity and the protection of family unity. Furthermore, the integration of legal education with community-based learning in Sanggar Bimbingan is an important innovation in this community service program. This integrated approach enhances knowledge-level awareness and influences community perceptions regarding children's rights and legal protection.

Figure 3
At grant handover ceremony, community service program PCIM Malaysia helps children with citizenship documentation under uncertainty



Sources: Authors, 2026

In general, the empirical evidence suggests that PCIM Malaysia plays an important role in raising awareness on human rights and promoting legal literacy among migrant communities. But it is a complementary role, having no formal power to determine the status of citizenship. Its contribution must therefore be understood within the framework of a wider ecosystem of community-based responses to uncertain citizenship.

Figure 4
Group photo documentation of community service activity with PCIM Malaysia & Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan participants



Sources: Authors, 2026

D. National Context and International Legal Analysis of Citizenship Documentation Uncertainty among Indonesian Migrant Children in Malaysia

The uncertainty of Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia regarding citizenship documentation needs to be understood in relation to the interaction between Indonesian nationality law, Malaysian administrative regulations, and international human rights standards. The circumstances of these children are not necessarily ones of precarious legal citizenship but of challenges to establishing and documenting legal identity in complex cross-border migration contexts. From the point of view of the Indonesian nationality law, children born to Indonesian migrant workers can have legal relations to Indonesian nationality under the principle of descent (ius sanguinis) as regulated in Law No. Law No. 12 of 2006 on Citizenship of the Republic of Indonesia. Indonesian citizenship is by descent, and the law establishes procedures to determine citizenship status. However, actualisation of this right is subject to administrative recognition, such as birth registration, and the availability of supporting documents.

The main problem for Indonesian migrant families in Malaysia is not necessarily the lack of entitlement to nationality but the difficulty of completing administrative procedures that are necessary to formally establish legal identity. Factors such as undocumented births, incomplete parental documentation, migration status, and limited access to registration mechanisms can generate uncertainty regarding children's citizenship documentation. The problem is therefore one of administrative and legal recognition, not of automatic classification of uncertain citizenship.

UNHCR Malaysia's data aligns with the scale of the problem nationally. According to UNHCR Malaysia, there are more than 200,000 refugees and asylum seekers registered in Malaysia, with a large percentage of the population being children. However, this dataset does not disaggregate children with citizenship documentation uncertainty from other children, as they are often counted as part of other groups, such as undocumented or mixed-status populations.[24] Moreover, international reports and policy analysis suggest that the number of stateless and

[24] UNHCR Malaysia, "Looking Ahead: Towards a Comprehensive Asylum System," 2026.

undocumented children in Malaysia could be in the tens of thousands. But there are no precise official statistics due to limitations in civil registration systems and overlapping legal categories.[25] The lack of disaggregated data highlights a major national data governance gap that undermines the ability to accurately identify, track, and intervene with policy for children who experience uncertainty regarding citizenship documentation. The empirical results of this study found 30 Indonesian migrant children who did not have a clear citizenship status at Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan also shows how this macro-level invisibility is mirrored in the micro-level of community life.

Uncertainty about documentation of citizenship is closely linked to the protection of children's rights from an international human rights perspective. The right to a nationality is enshrined in Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) affirms the right of every child to registration at birth, a name, and acquisition of a nationality. These principles recognize legal identity as a fundamental basis for the protection and realization of other rights of the child. Article 15 of the UDHR says that "everyone has the right to a nationality" and that "no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality". Similarly, Article 7 of the CRC guarantees every child the right to be registered immediately after birth and to acquire a nationality. These provisions reaffirm that legal identity is not a matter of administrative discretion but a fundamental human right, the gateway to the enjoyment of all other rights.[26]

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[25] Simbolon, "Educational Barriers for Children? A Study of Fulfillment to the Rights of Education for Undocumented Indonesian Children in Malaysia." *See also* Wahyu Wibowo, and Achmad Zevano Al-Khalif. "Public Legal Education As a Tool for Addressing Social Problems: A Community-Centered Approach". *Lentera Masyarakat Hukum* 1, no. 3 (2024). https://doi.org/10.65815/7msxes57; Narendra Maheswara, Putri Kania Tisnawati, Mohd Rayyan Fattah Abd Malik, and Omar Fawzi. "Educating Diversity: Policy Design, Cultural Recognition, and Educational Justice in Plural Societies". *Indonesian Education Policy and Justice Review* 2, no. 4 (2025): 1-30. https://doi.org/10.65815/xgh4dz77

[26] Lucitania Rizky, Safri Salampessy, and Isna Achdyana, "Effectiveness of The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Regime by UNICEF in Encouraging the Implementation of Child Protection in SoutheastAsian Countries," *JASSP* 2, no. 1 (May 2022): 12–20, https://doi.org/10.23960/jassp.v2i1.50.

However, such normative frameworks do not bridge the gap between international legal obligations and their domestic implementation in the Malaysian context. A major structural problem is posed by birth registration systems, particularly in migrant communities, where administrative barriers, demands for documents, and constraints on legal status often make it difficult to register children properly at birth.[27] The result is a de facto uncertain state of citizenship in which children live within a state's territory but are not legally recognized in its civil registry system.[28] This is an example of what international legal scholarship calls a normative-implementation gap, where states commit to human rights treaties but struggle to ensure their domestic implementation.[29] It also points to a lack of data visibility, as the absence of reliable, disaggregated statistics on children in situations of uncertainty regarding citizenship documentation reduces the capacity of both national and international actors to design specific measures.

The realization of other rights guaranteed under international law also suffers from uncertain citizenship. The lack of legal identity has direct implications for the right to education (Article 28 CRC), the right to health (Article 24 CRC), and the broader principle of child development. [30] Intergenerational cycles of exclusion are sustained through the lack of nationality and systematic denial of access to public services. The empirical findings of this study confirm that these structural issues are not abstract legal notions but are present in lived realities at the community level. 30 stateless or undocumented children at Sanggar Bimbingan ‘Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan shows how the shortcomings of international law are translated into real exclusion in education and society. While there is no official system

[27] Rizaldy Anggriawan et al., “Facial Recognition in Asylum Seeker Procedures: Criminal Implications of Data Misuse and Profiling,” *Jurnal Media Hukum* 33, no. 1 SE-Articles (June 2026): 99–117, https://doi.org/10.18196/jmh.v33i1.29861.

[28] European Network on Statelessness, “Ending Childhood Statelessness,” 2018.

[29] Gerard-René de Groot, “Children, Their Right to a Nationality and Child Statelessness,” in *Nationality and Statelessness under International Law*, ed. Alice Edwards and Laura van Waas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 144–68, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139506007.007.

[30] Yordan Gunawan, Carissa Novendra, and Aldha Febrila, “Indonesia’s Responsibility towards Rohingya Refugees: Analysis of the 1951 Refugee Convention,” *Legality : Jurnal Ilmiah Hukum* 32, no. 2 (April 2024): 182–94, https://doi.org/10.22219/ljih.v32i2.32164.

of recognition to gauge the scale of the problem, national estimates suggest many more children are facing uncertainty regarding their citizenship documentation.

Community-based institutions such as Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan and PCIM Malaysia, in this case, act as important mitigating agents, providing access to education and legal awareness in the meantime. However, these actors are working within a compensatory framework in international law and are not a substitute for the primary obligation of the State to guarantee universal birth registration and nationality rights. The analysis points to the inadequacies of national data and the failures of international law as sources of the ambiguous status of citizenship in Malaysia. The issue requires that national civil registration and administrative systems be strengthened and brought into line with international obligations under the UDHR and CRC, to prevent the perpetuation of legal invisibility among children.

Conclusion

The study finds that the uncertainty on citizenship documentation among Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia is a complex socio-legal problem that consists of legal identity, access to children's rights, and administrative recognition mechanisms. The findings indicate that children facing documentation challenges may be vulnerable in accessing education, healthcare, and other forms of social protection. However, the study does not confirm that these children are de jure stateless, as the formal determination of uncertain citizenship requires verification by competent authorities. The empirical engagement carried out at Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan reveals that children without a clear citizenship status are confronted with real and everyday forms of exclusion, especially with regard to access to formal education, health services, and legal recognition of identity. Absence of formal recognition of their physical presence in society signifies a status of legal invisibility that directly influences their life chances and developmental trajectories.

The study also shows the role of community-based institutions such as Sanggar Bimbingan in preserving access to education for children with

ambiguous citizenship documentation through non-formal learning mechanisms. These institutions serve as critical spaces to fill the gaps of formal state systems through providing basic education, psychosocial support, and inclusive learning spaces. But their presence also indicates structural gaps in the realization of state obligations toward universal child rights. Meanwhile, the legal awareness activities carried out in collaboration with PCIM Malaysia show that community engagement can be a major avenue to enhance the understanding of uncertain citizenship as a human rights issue, not merely a social condition. Through participatory dialogue and interactive discussions, migrant communities can start to understand the broader implications of legal identity, citizenship, and child protection frameworks. It demonstrates that legal empowerment at the community level is a key tool to fill informational and structural deficits.

More generally, the study also indicates the continuing gap between international human rights norms and their implementation on the national level. The UDHR and CRC clearly guarantee the rights to nationality and birth registration, but empirical evidence shows that these rights are not fully realized in practice due to administrative barriers, data limitations, and systemic exclusion in civil registration systems. Overall, the findings suggest a need for more than piecemeal interventions in terms of dealing with uncertain citizenship. A coordinated approach to legal reform, strengthening of administrative capacity, and empowerment at the community level is needed. The study demonstrates that the integration of grassroots educational initiatives and legal awareness programs can significantly contribute to mitigating the immediate effects of uncertain citizenship, while underscoring the critical importance of structural policy responses to ensure that no child is rendered legally invisible in any jurisdiction.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article.

Funding Information

This community service program was funded by Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, through its community engagement and service program. The funding supported the implementation of community service activities and the preparation of the manuscript.

Acknowledgment

The author expresses sincere gratitude to Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta for the academic support and assistance in implementing this community service program. Institutional support has been vital in facilitating field engagement and research activities on children experiencing uncertainty in citizenship documentation in Malaysia. Special thanks also to International Islamic University Malaysia and PCIM Malaysia for their valuable collaboration and assistance during the implementation of the program and also to Sanggar Bimbingan 'Aisyiyah Kg. Pandan for providing access to the learning environment and for enabling direct engagement with migrant children. The author also thanks the children, educators and community members who participated in the discussions and learning activities that made this study possible. Their openness and engagement was essential to comprehending the empirical realities of children experiencing citizenship documentation uncertainty in the field. Finally, thank you also to all persons and institutions who have contributed directly or indirectly to the completion of this community service research.

Generative AI Statement

In preparing this article, the author made limited use of artificial intelligence tools to refine the language and improve the clarity of the manuscript. In addition, a proofreader was involved in reviewing and refining the grammar to ensure linguistic accuracy and readability. All AI-generated output was carefully verified, edited, reviewed, and validated by the author to maintain accuracy and scientific integrity. The author retains full responsibility for all ideas, analyses, interpretations, conclusions, and the final content of the article. Artificial intelligence was used solely as an auxiliary tool and is not listed as an author or co-author.