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Primary and Secondary Education for Refugee Children in Malaysia: Facing Barriers with Resilience

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Repository citation: Ling, Fara Shu Sean, "Primary and Secondary Education for Refugee Children in Malaysia: Facing Barriers with Resilience" (2020). *19th Annual Celebration of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity (2020)*. Paper 3.

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Problem

Refugee and asylum-seeking children in Malaysia face numerous barriers in obtaining an education. The barriers covered in this study fall into three categories: legal and administrative failure, social alienation and stigmatization, and inadequate structural support.

Legal and administrative

- Grossly insufficient legal protection
 - Malaysia has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and fails to recognize refugee rights enshrined in international law
 - Punitive domestic legislation: Immigration Act 1959/1963 and Passports Act 1966 make no provision for asylum-seekers
- Illegal for refugees to enroll in public schools and universities or work
- Government-sanctioned violence against refugees
 - Police and RELA (paramilitary civil volunteer corps) brutality and human rights abuses against refugees go unpunished

Social

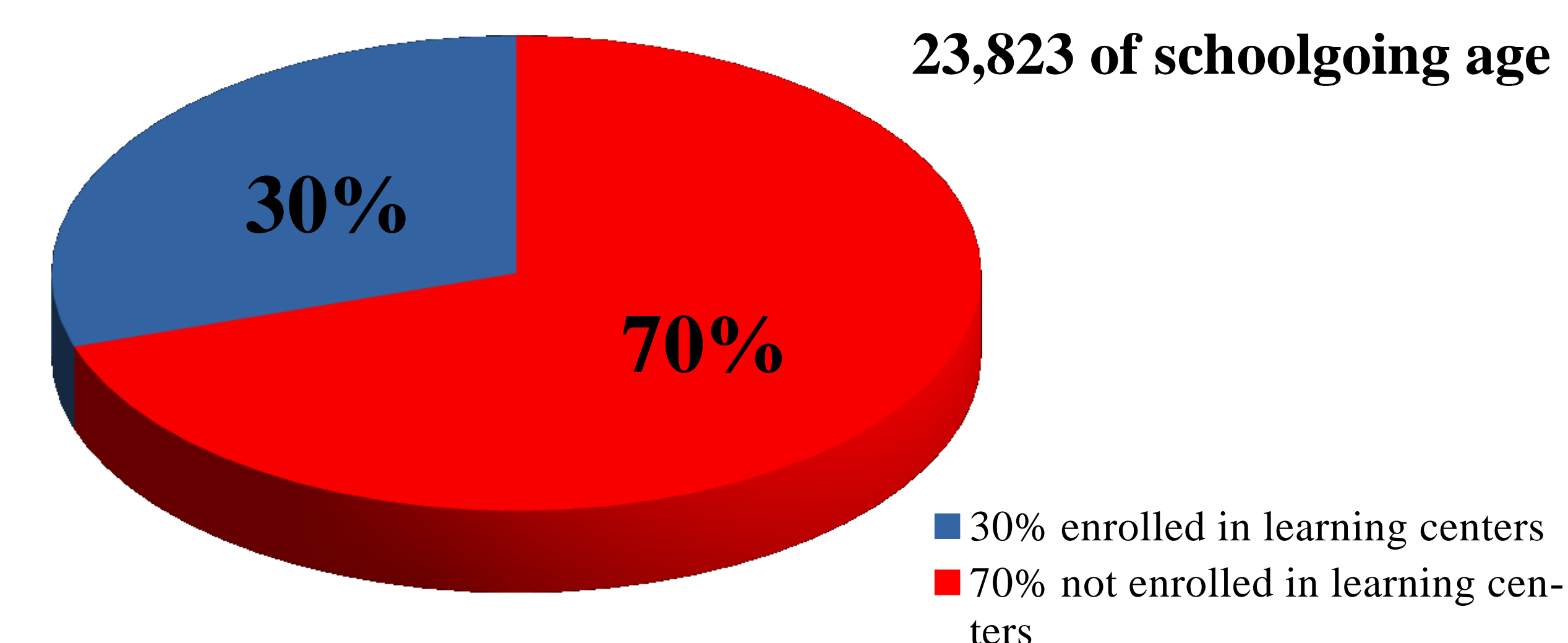
- Alienation of refugees from Malaysian society compounded by Malaysians' ignorance and stigmatization of refugees' situations
- Refugee children drop out of learning centers to ease financial strain on their families and find work
 - Refugees may stay "in transit" in Malaysia for well over a decade before UNHCR resettles them in countries with a higher commitment to humanitarianism (e.g. Canada, U.S., U.K., Australia)

Structural: learning centers

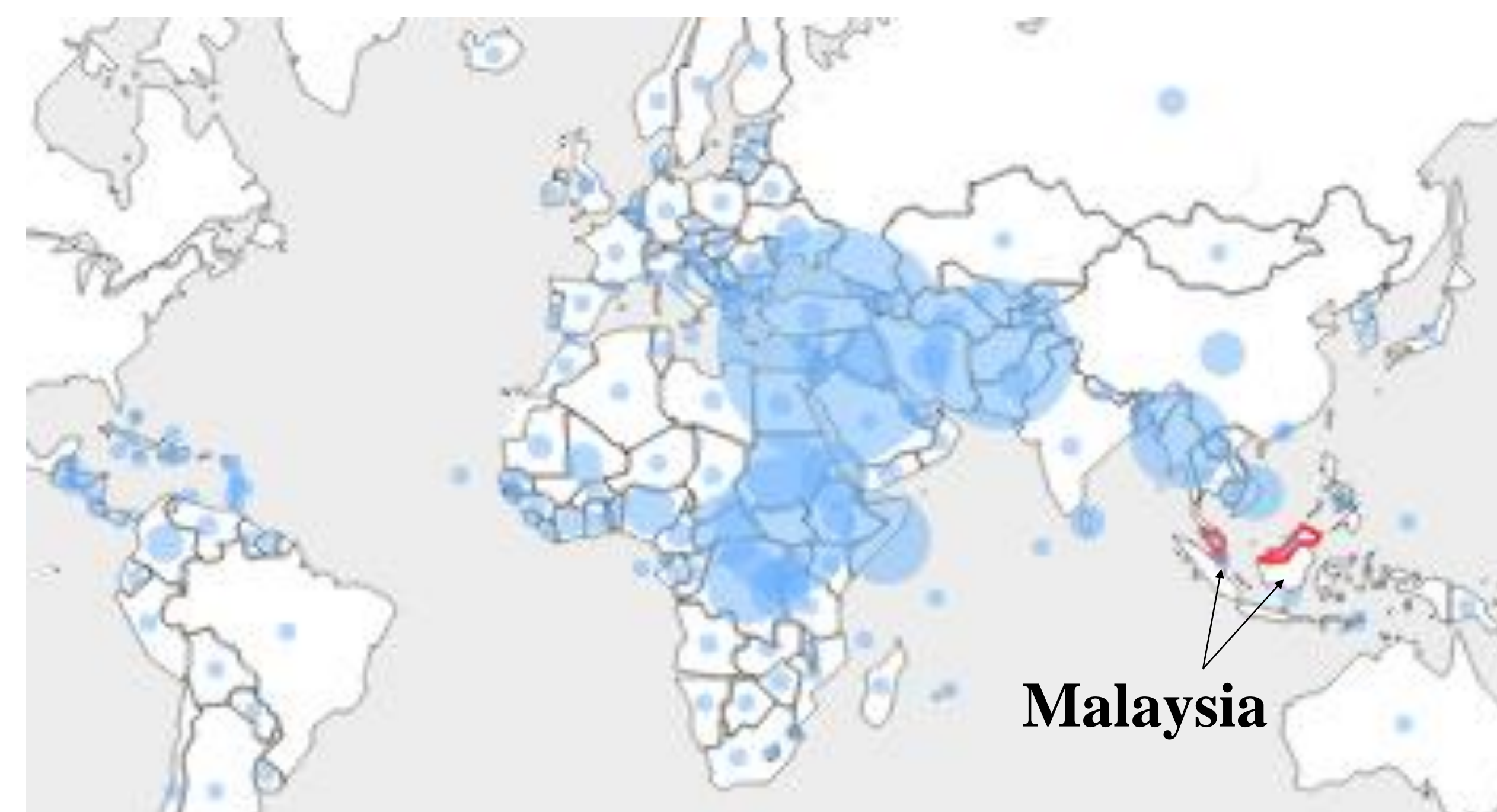
- Challenges of the center model
 - Insufficient funds and structural support (provided by NGOs, other donors, and refugee communities' resources)
 - Informal, fluid structure reliant on unpaid/underpaid volunteers
 - Inadequate physical space and facilities: classrooms non-conducive for learning (crowded, noisy, with multiple grades in a room)
 - No standardization of syllabus: lack of certification through public exams
- Absence of data on children not enrolled in learning centers

Context

Population of concern



Countries of origin



Learning Centers

- Malaysian government does not finance alternative education; UNHCR partners with local NGOs and refugee communities to establish learning centers
 - Centers offer primary and secondary education and sometimes vocational training. Examples of centers include:
 1. Dignity for Children Foundation
 2. Refuge for the Refugees
 3. Fugee School
 4. ElShaddai Refugee Learning Center
 6. Ruth Education Center



Resilience and Success

Academics and vocation

- Some students take international high school exams (like the IGCSE)
 - A smaller number get accepted into private 2- and 4- year institutions: 8 refugees currently are enrolled in higher education in Malaysia
- Many students gain vocational skills while enrolled in centers (e.g. sewing, hairdressing, entrepreneurship)
- Children resettled in more humanitarian countries benefit from access to their public schools and universities

Arts

- Acquiring new skills and hobbies empowers children and enhances personal development: platform for creativity, self-expression, exercising agency (learning musical instruments, writing/directing/acting in plays)
- Opportunities include school productions, community theater (such as Parastoo Theatre), the Refugee Festival, and Migrant Poetry Competition.

Conclusion

Implications

- Education = access to information + how to process information.
- Depriving refugee children of education perpetuates cycle of powerlessness
- Inability to integrate into Malaysian society makes social adjustment in future resettlement harder

Predictions going forward

- Government has not changed stance publicly on refugee education; given recent political flux, legal reform will take time.
- Promising: more public dialogue recently about refugees

Action steps

- Set up more schools and prepare students for publicly/internationally-recognized exams
- Raise Malaysian public's awareness of refugees' situations
- Educate state and national leaders about the need for refugee education