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# Saviour or Stigmatized? A Malaysia Perspective on COVID-19 Frontliners

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**Help spread the news!***Rashid Ating**Researcher at Social Wellbeing Research Centre**Faculty of Economics and Administration**University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.*

*This piece of work strictly represents the author's personal view,  
not on behalf institution or any organization.*

*The author can be reached through his e-mail: [rashid\\_ating@um.edu.my](mailto:rashid_ating@um.edu.my)*

It has been ten months since the COVID-19 hit the world since the first case reported at Wuhan, China in early January this year. The pandemic is not even close to an end. With a second wave in some countries despite restrictions imposed, which further exposed them as either they are prepared or getting caught in other matters aside from containing the pandemic. It was evident from the protest in Indonesia regarding the new labour law



(New York Times, 2020), while the neighbouring country, Malaysia, the political upheaval among politician continues even at this critical time. (TODAYonline, 2020). Regardless of status, the virus does not discriminate in infecting people, from top world leader to unemployed citizen that lives in the congested slums at the outskirts of the capital.

While some countries already passed the first wave of the pandemic, second wave was tougher than expected. Malaysia experience this when the confirmed cases suddenly astronomically spike into three-digit numbers in the last few weeks. The integral part in dealing with either the first or the second wave are the front-liners. They are the core-elements in eradicating, treating and as a first line of defence against unseen enemy in this invisible war. The front-liners or health care workers (HCW) comprises of medical staff i.e: doctors, nurses and their assistants, paramedics, ambulance staff, hospitals porters, physicians, medical officers, graduated medical officers, medical experts, pathologists, police and others (Tan Poh Tin, 2020). They are humans with spouses, families, and children waiting for them at home. The Malaysia government owes much from this group of people. They are putting their lives at risk every day by treating patients with COVID-19. They have been praised for their efforts, given some allowances by the government apart from their monthly salary as a reward, and treated with respect. There was also an especial counter payment at the supermarket for the front-liners wearing their uniforms (Tesco Malaysia, 2002). They were even considered as national heroes after successfully curbing the first wave of this outbreak.

The front-liners in Malaysia do not face serious physical violence like their counterparts in other Southeast Asian countries. In the Philippines, an attacker poured bleach to hospital utility workers (Tan Poh Tin, 2020). In Indonesia, citizens ignored health care workers that walked at the main street, giving the warning to stay at home during the first wave of the outbreak. Some Indonesians also refuse to follow instructions from the government related to Friday prayer despite earlier warning to suspend any religious activities (CNA, 2020).

Despite that, Malaysian front-liners also face psychological violence and stigma discriminating their children due to their professions. People think that other children might be exposed since they share the same childcare centres as the children of the front-liners. However, they do not have any options apart from sending their children to childcare centres because of their long hours of work. Their duty required them to be in full gear suit protection (PPE) that does not allow them to eat, drink and go to the toilet for long periods. After some retaliation from local paediatricians and medical professional associations, this stigma slightly reduced after the statement released by Women, Family and Community Development Ministry stated in Appendix 12, Section 2.1.2 "that front-liners children in a higher risk of getting COVID-19 infection from

their parents. The best place for them is at home, and if they intend to send their children in childcare centres, they must be isolated from other children". (CodeBlue, 2020). This statement enraged the frontlines because they feel that it is a violation of their human rights.

The battle is still far from over. The front-liners are exhausted, and their mental conditions are already deteriorating after long hours of work which was different compared to their normal work hours before the pandemic. In some situation before the first wave end, some hospitals in Malaysia quarantined their staff for a few days, to prevent the spread of the virus in their communities. Such measure discouraged the front-liners, as they are not able to see their loves one for some time. The responsibility to ensure the well-being of this group should not only lie on the shoulder of government only but to society. Corporate organizations need to step in and take actions. For example, by providing additional benefits or compensation for the front-liners and their heirs if they get infected or in the worst-case scenario, died because of this pandemic. For the long-term program, it is suggested that the government should provide a PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) to the front-liners, similar to any veterans of a conventional war (Tan Poh Tin, 2020).

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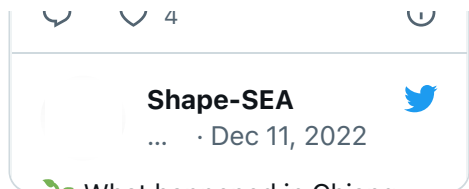
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