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Critical times: gendered implications of the economic crisis for migrant workers from Burma/Myanmar in Thailand

Jackie Pollock and Soe Lin Aung

This article draws on the grassroots experiences and research of MAP Foundation to examine the gendered impacts of the economic downturn on migrants from Burma/Myanmar who are working in Thailand. The article looks through a gender lens at the wages, working conditions, family relations and safety and security issues. It finds that migrant women have experienced decreases in wages, lay-offs, increased restrictions on reproductive rights and increased risks of harassment and extortion as a result of the economic downturn. It also finds that the usually resilient Burmese migrant communities are being stretched beyond their limits, and need urgent protection.

Key words: migrants; Burma; Myanmar; Thailand; gender; economic downturn; labour

Introduction

On December 18, 2008, the International Labour Organization (ILO) released a statement marking International Migrants Day. In it, Juan Somavia, Director General of the ILO, spoke of the global economic crisis, in relation to migrant workers:

The current global financial and economic crises have serious implications for migrant workers worldwide. Past experience makes us painfully aware that migrant workers, especially women workers and those in irregular status, are among the hardest hit and most vulnerable during crisis situations. While the full impact of the crisis on migrant workers is yet to unfold, there are reports of direct layoffs, worsening working conditions including wage cuts, increasing returns, and reductions in immigration intakes. (Somavia 2008)

At that time, the economic crisis was just a few months old. Only considerably later would the United Nations (UN) General Assembly call it, ‘the worst financial and economic crisis since the Great Depression’. Yet, even at this early point, Juan Somavia already saw fit to draw special attention to the situation of migrants in the economic crisis, and the situation of women and irregular migrants in particular.
In Thailand, the heavily export-oriented economy left the country inordinately exposed to adverse macroeconomic impacts. With exports accounting for more than 65 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), it can be little surprise that by the first quarter of 2009, the Thai economy had already contracted 7.1 per cent since the previous year. This was particularly significant for migrant workers, who are employed in large numbers in the garment manufacturing industries, the seafood export industry, and the vast orchards and plantations that are the source of fruit, rubber, vegetables for many countries around the world.

This article draws on the grassroots experiences and knowledge of the MAP Foundation, a Thai non-government organisation (NGO) that was founded in 1996. MAP Foundation aims to improve the rights of migrant workers from Burma/Myanmar who are working in Thailand. It focuses particularly on the labour rights of domestic workers, factory workers, construction and agricultural workers.

The article draws on research published as a report, entitled *Critical Times* (Aung and Aung 2009), which explored the gendered implications of the economic crisis on migrant workers in Thailand. The research involved 374 migrants from Burma/Myanmar who are working in Mae Sot. Most are employed in sectors of the economy which produce goods for export, and are dependent on foreign direct investment.

Our research aimed to find out about the impact so far of the economic crisis on migrant workers and their families. In particular, we were interested in how its effects differ for women and men. The analysis here focuses on these concerns, and in particular explores how they are playing out in Mae Sot, Tak province. Mae Sot is an increasingly industrialised district, on the Thai–Burma border. It provides a good case study for this article, owing to the profusion of export-oriented garment and textile factories, with a mainly female workforce and because MAP Foundation works closely with the migrants in this area to support the formation of migrant workers associations which can address the pervasive exploitative conditions, to provide legal assistance for migrants pursuing complaints of exploitation by their employers and to advocate for full protection of rights of migrants. The research involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods: four focus group discussions (with a total of 28 migrants); 15 in-depth interviews; and a survey with 331 migrants took place between June and August 2009. To protect the confidentiality of the migrants who took part in our research, we have not used their names in this article.

**The context: Burmese migrant workers in Thailand**

The 2009 UN Development Programme (UNDP) report ‘Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development’ explains the pull for migrants from Burma/Myanmar stating that: ‘Someone born in Thailand can expect to live seven more years, to have almost three times as many years of education, and save almost eight times as much as someone born in Myanmar [Burma]’ (UNDP 2009, 9). Most estimates suggest that
there are between two and three million migrants from Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia and Lao PDR working in Thailand, over 80 per cent are from Burma/Myanmar. Only figures for migrants who register once they are in Thailand and apply for the temporary work permits are available. The number of migrants applying for these work permits has fluctuated, from 300,000 in 1996, to 1.28 million in 2004, decreasing over the following years and increasing to 1.3 million in 2009. These numbers reflect the accessibility of the registration policies rather than the actual number of migrants.

The vast majority of migrants from Burma/Myanmar arrive in Thailand without any form of documentation. Thailand first responded to this situation in 1992 (World Bank 2006; Huguet and Punpuing 2005) with policies which allow Burmese migrants already in the country to register to work for a year at a time. These policies are intended for ‘migrants who entered the country illegally’ to register to work for one year ‘while awaiting deportation’ (translations of the wording in the Royal Thai Government Cabinet Resolution, 25 June 1996). Despite the temporary nature of the policies, workers have been able to renew them annually for nearly two decades.

In 2003, the Burmese regime signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Thailand to regularise migration. However, it took the next six years for the two countries to come to an agreement on how to implement this MOU. In 2009, the Burmese regime set up offices in three locations along the border, in Tachilek, Myawaddy and Kawthuang to interview migrants who had been working in Thailand to verify their nationality and issue temporary passports.

In looking at the various effects of the global financial and economic crisis on migrants and their communities, we not only have to understand that these are different for women and men, but we also need to recognise how global capital actually perpetuates and causes inequality between women and men by the ways in which it shapes the lives and work of migrants:

Perhaps the most notable feature of female migration is the extent to which it is founded upon the continual reproduction and exploitation of gender inequalities by global capitalism. For the most part, female labor migrants perform ‘women’s work’ as nannies, maids, and sex workers – the worst possible occupational niches in terms of remuneration, working conditions, legal protections and social recognition. In this way, gender acts as a basic organizing principle of labor markets in destination countries, reproducing and reinforcing pre-existing gender patterns that oppress women.

(UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women [UN-INSTRAW] 2007, 3–4)

Migrant women who meet monthly to share experiences in 11 different locations along the Thai–Burma/Myanmar border in the Women Exchange programme organised by MAP Foundation, say that Thailand offers them a mix of opportunities and threats. The opportunities include paid work, access to healthcare, the possibility of official protection under the labour laws, and exercising other rights. The threats, on the other
hand, include poor occupational health and safety conditions, which may result in death or injury; the constant fear of arrest and deportation; debt-bonds to employers, and dependency on informal brokers. The migrant women also relate their feeling of being deliberately isolated, whether it be as a domestic worker with no legal protection guaranteeing days off to meet their friends, or as factory workers housed in dormitories behind the closed gates of the factory, or as construction site workers living in shacks on the site. These arrangements are, in their understanding, condoned by the authorities.

In the next section, we explore in greater detail migrant women’s experiences of working in Mae Sot during the economic crisis.

**Mae Sot and women’s work experience there**

Mae Sot is a district on the Thai–Burma/Myanmar border in Thailand’s Tak Province. Owing to its geographic proximity to Burma/Myanmar, Mae Sot has long been a major destination for migrants leaving the country to work in Thailand. Numbers of migrants in Mae Sot increased in the mid-1990s when the town became a production centre for garment factories (Macan-Markar 2003). The combination of rapid industrialisation and the presence of a highly-mobile labour reserve has not had a positive effect on local employment conditions. Indeed, the large pool of non-unionised labour to be found in Mae Sot appears to be an attraction to both the local and foreign companies.

Thailand continued to develop economic corridors based on Greater Mekong Subregion and ACMECS schemes. According to the Economic Cooperation Strategy (ECS) initiated in 2003, Mae Sot belongs to the East West Economic Corridor (EWEC) which promotes trade and investment with Burma/Myanmar. On 19 October 2004, the Thai cabinet decided to create a border economic zone in Tak province, covering three districts of Mae Sot, Phop Phra and Mae Ramat. On 6 October 2009, the Cabinet approved the Ministry of Commerce’s project to develop the special economic zone, which also consists of a one-stop service centre and logistics park (Government Public Relations Department 2009). The Tak Chamber of Commerce has called for incentives to attract industries such as garments, textiles, ceramics and furniture. There are currently an estimated 300 factories in Mae Sot, which it is speculated may be expected to relocate to the proposed industrial estate (Tsuneishi 2007). Each of the factories employs between 100 and 1,000 workers, while about another 200 unregistered ‘home factories’ would employ between 5 and 20 workers (Kusakabe and Pearson 2007).

For Thailand, this economic co-operation is tied to its own internal regional development. By shifting agriculture and labour-intensive manufacturing to border economic zones along the corridors, Thai industries can benefit from cheap labour and resources from neighbouring countries, while the neighbouring countries can benefit from job creation and the development of consumer markets.
The history of the industrialisation process here is also a history of the continued suppression of labour rights. In a press interview, Phil Robertson, head of the Thai office of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, a Washington, DC-based international NGO, judged Mae Sot to be ‘the cesspool of labour rights of Thailand. All labor laws are violated ... You find the most systemic oppression of workers in Thailand’ (Macan-Markar 2003). Other observers for example, Pongsawat (2007) and Sang Kook (2007), see the suppression of labour rights in Mae Sot is part of an active campaign on the part of public and private actors to encourage and consolidate investment in the area. According to Arnold and Hewison (2006), employer organisations such as the Chambers of Commerce or the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) actively constrain the action of workers, particularly by limiting freedom of association and colluding to maintain low wages.

These local conditions combine with national restrictions on migrant workers, which include severe restrictions on the right to travel, or change employers, and the restrictions in the Thai Labour Relations Act B.E. 2518 (AD 1975) on non-Thais holding any official position in a union. Thus, migrants are effectively banned from forming their own unions or travelling to meet and join Thai unions. Since 2007, the Action Network for Migrants (Thailand) has been working with the Thai Labour Solidarity Committee (TLSC) initially to introduce Thai workers to migrant workers issues, and more recently to facilitate migrant workers joining Thai unions.

Apart from labour law violations, migrant workers’ lives are also made insecure and precarious by laws and policies which make it much easier and simpler for a migrant to lose their legal status than to gain it. MAP Foundation facilitates monthly meetings of workers, at these labour exchanges, workers report how employers confiscate their work permits, which exposes all migrants to extortion by the police and for women migrants also exposes them to sexual harassment from immigration and police officers when they cannot produce their documentation. As noted previously, with the economic downturn migrants have to move more frequently to find work, but since migrants are not allowed to travel, this situation again increases their risk of arrest and deportation.

Since the first landmark case of migrant workers of the Nut Knitting Factory in Mae Sot winning compensation of around £1,000 each in 2004 (MAP Foundation 2006), MAP Foundation has provided paralegal assistance to over 1,000 migrants each year in Mae Sot for unpaid wages and exploitative working conditions. Seventy per cent of these workers are women and face particular harassment when they first start to make a complaint. During the legal processes, MAP Foundation, together with our local partner, the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association, have been called on to respond to situations where the women workers leaders have been abducted and threatened, thugs have been sent into their dormitories at night and they have been arrested and deported. According to information provided to MAP Foundation’s grassroots
programmes with women workers, general campaigns of intimidation are waged against women workers who dare to organise and demand their labour rights.

In the next section, migrant women talk about how they experienced the economic downturn in Mae Sot and how it impacted on their lives.

Gendered impacts of the economic downturn

Given the high concentration of export-oriented industries in Mae Sot, it can be little surprise that the current economic downturn has produced severe negative impacts for Mae Sot’s factories, and in particular for the migrants and their families, whose livelihoods depend on them. Knitwear factories, which produce warm clothing largely for very hard-hit US and European markets, are said to be struggling disproportionately, with demand dropping steeply alongside Thailand’s broader 26.5 per cent year-on-year contraction in export earnings (Moe Swe, Yaung Chi Oo Workers’ Association, interview, 14 August 2009). In Mae Sot’s factories overall, orders have dropped across the board. The local chapter of the FTI claims that orders have dropped by 12 per cent (The Economist 2009).

Wages

In Mae Sot, in general single men and women work in factories, while family units work in agricultural areas and on construction sites. A few factories have special dormitories for couples and even fewer say they provide facilities to families. According to reports from workers in Mae Sot, these latter factories are often the most exploitative because the families have so few choices. In agricultural and construction sites, women workers are paid much less than the men workers; while in the sectors where the majority of workers are women, such as textile factories or domestic work, the wages are kept low. Thailand has a legal minimum wage, which employers must pay all workers, regardless of their immigration status. Thailand’s Constitution also lays out anti-discrimination policies between men and women. Nevertheless, migrant women are receiving less than the minimum wage and less than men for the same job; this was the reality before the economic downturn and will very likely outlast it. This helps explain the way in which the downturn appears to have aggravated gender inequalities in pay-scales within Mae Sot’s migrant communities. At the launch of the report, Critical Times, (Foreign Correspondents Club Thailand, September, 2009), one of the panellists, Tim De Meyer, labour standards specialist in the ILO, said that: ‘All too often migrant workers in poorly visible categories of work tend to be the shock absorbers during an economic downturn’, and that the ILO had the female migrant workers from Myanmar in mind when it said earlier that year that the current economic meltdown had a ‘woman’s face’ since women labourers are affected more severely, and differently, compared with their male counterparts.
Our research shows that the economic downturn has worsened wages for workers. According to MAP Foundation’s research, only slightly more respondents – 43.8 per cent – reported a year-on-year decrease in income, compared with 42.7 per cent who reported no change to their income. However, compared with this, a full 85 per cent of respondents reported finding themselves in difficulty owing to being unable to afford goods which are rising in price. Migrants reported explicitly that year-on-year wages had fallen significantly in real terms. High-season earnings in 2008 for a knitting factory employee would have been around US$180 per month, and US$90 per month for garment factory workers. A year later, all factory workers were reporting an average of about US$75 per month:

At this time wages are so low. I just get 30 to 90 baht [US$0.9–2.7] per day. And spending costs have increased, so I cannot save money right now.

(IDI, knitting factory employee [female]; Aung and Aung 2009, 26)

In many different parts of our research – through surveys, written statements, focus-group discussions, and in-depth interviews – migrants consistently drew attention to a growing gap between wages and goods prices when describing their economic difficulties. Even an income that has not changed will be associated with increased daily struggle, while an outright decline in income spells a serious and increasing threat.

Analysing our research findings by gender and employment sector revealed significant difference in the situation of women and men. Women are considerably more likely than men to report falling income – 47 per cent of women, and 39.1 per cent of men, reported declines. Factory work has seen negative changes in wages, with 57 per cent of factory workers reporting an outright decline in income:

At this time wages are so low. I just get 30 to 90 baht [US$0.9–2.7] per day. And spending costs have increased, so I cannot save money right now.

(Knitting factory employee [female]; Aung and Aung 2009, 26)

Households, and extended families in Thailand and Burma/Myanmar, who depend on female wages are struggling most to make ends meet in the face of the crisis. In other income-related findings, a majority of respondents – 67 per cent – reported that they were finding it increasingly difficult to save money, and even more – 72.2 per cent – were finding it increasingly difficult to support their families. Women were more likely than men to report savings difficulties, as were factory workers compared with workers in all other sectors.

The economic crisis is creating conditions in which women workers, who are already are relatively undervalued and underpaid because of gender stereotypes about the sectors in which they are employed, find that wages are being affected worse than those of men in other ‘masculine’ employment sectors. Sector-specific economic effects of the crisis – on export-dependent textile factories especially – map onto gender-specific
impacts with troubling clarity. In Mae Sot, the suffering of certain industries can hardly be separated from the suffering of the women migrants who disproportionately work in them.

With fewer savings, migrants reported a drop in the levels of remittances to their relatives inside Burma/Myanmar. This has also been compounded by an unfavourable increase in the exchange rate of the kyat Burmese currency against the baht Thai currency. Migrants reported that usually they sent remittances home quarterly or yearly, and thus the hardships which migrants experience immediately when their wages fall and purchasing power decreases are not immediately passed on to the communities back home; rather, the hardships will ripple down over the following year:

Over 30 people have come to work in Thailand from my village. There are six people in my village that are depending on the money I remit home Earlier I could remit money four times a year; now I can only send twice a year.
(Ms Deng Lungiong, 26-year-old Shan domestic worker speaking on the panel at the launch of the Critical Times report at the Foreign Correspondents Club Thailand, September 2009)

I can’t support my parents because I’m not in a good job situation. My brother and sisters are also not OK – they also can’t support with any money. Sometimes, we argue with each other.
(Survey 2, ID 6, carpenter [male]; Aung and Aung 2009, 27)

If I cannot send money to parents, they have to face health problems and social problems, and they have difficulty with daily costs.
(Survey ID 68, knitting factory employee [male]; Aung and Aung 2009, 29)

Unable to support their families and barely able to support themselves, migrants in Mae Sot have to make difficult decisions regarding their future. The vast majority of those workers interviewed for this research – 95.4 per cent – reported that they would rather stay in Mae Sot during the economic crisis than return to Burma/Myanmar:

I have been living in Mae Sot for four years. My economic situation is not okay now. Income and spending are not balanced. Therefore, even if I want to go back to Burma, I cannot go back.
So I am very depressed.
(Survey 2, ID 14, female factory worker)

During one of the initial discussions about the research with a group of migrants in Mae Sot, they reported that some women who had been dismissed from factories had returned to Burma/Myanmar with a broker who was organising for them to travel to Jordan for work in factories. Later, 500 of these women who were working in a Chinese factory in Irbid, Jordan contacted MAP Foundation when there was a labour dispute.7
Working conditions

The suppression of labour rights in Mae Sot discussed earlier is important in understanding the impact of the economic downturn on migrant workers in Mae Sot; the conditions are already so poor that there is very little scope for deterioration.

The question of working hours is quite complicated, owing mostly to distinctions between workers, who are categorised by employers into those workers whose skills are valued (referred to as ‘skilled’), and those whose skills are not perceived and hence unvalued (referred to as ‘unskilled’). Women’s jobs are more likely than men’s to be classed as un-skilled or semi-skilled. In a textile factory, the machine work on the shop floor is considered unskilled work, while the workers who make the samples for orders, who make designs or work on complex designs and the foremen are called skilled workers.

According to MAP Foundation’s research, the impact of the economic crisis was complex. Working hours for the ‘unskilled’ declined year-on-year during the middle quarters of 2009. It was these workers who were most likely to be dismissed because of worsening economic conditions. As orders declined, the numbers of workers needed on the shop floor decreased and the workers are immediately dismissed. Should orders increase, the factory has a large pool of workers in Mae Sot looking for jobs that they can employ and dismiss as needed. In contrast, factories prefer to keep their skilled workers on the payroll than dismiss them and risk them using their skills (for example, in design or sampling) in another competing factory. While waiting for new contracts, skilled workers work on the shop floor to fill the shortages created by the dismissal of the supposedly ‘unskilled’ workers. Low-skilled workers in Mae Sot, as we have seen, are both more likely to be women, and more vulnerable to retrenchment when economic conditions threaten the financial security of their employers. Because they are disproportionately numbered among the workers considered low- or unskilled, women were more likely than men to find their working hours decreased, including overtime hours. Working long hours is essential if migrants are to be able to save.

Interestingly, a different dynamic was reported by some skilled workers who said their working hours had increased, rather than decreased, as a result of the economic crisis.

Despite reportedly steep declines in production, the fact that there were now fewer employees resulted in those who remained gaining more hours on the factory floor.

Interestingly, migrants in Mae Sot were not convinced that either the lowering of wages or the laying-off of workers was always directly linked to the economic downturn. This is supported by the history of suppressing labour rights, referred to earlier. It had been no surprise for the workers in Mae Sot to find that notices declaring that the factory was closing because of the economic crisis were posted at factories where workers were making complaints about decreasing wages or deteriorating working conditions. The workers’ scepticism is well-founded; in more than one instance, a business which had apparently crashed financially, re-opened just down the
road under a new name and of course, with a new, unversed in labour rights, set of migrant workers (discussions between workers and MAP Foundation and Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association volunteers, August 2009).

In Thailand, the Labour Laws are said to protect all workers, regardless of their immigration status. These laws specify severance pay packages for workers who are laid off in such circumstances. Nevertheless, no migrant worker has yet received an official redundancy package. The vast majority were notified of the loss of their jobs on the day they were required to leave, and were sent away without even the wages owed to them.

They told us to pack up and leave. I heard someone ask for their wages and the foremen shouted that he was ready to call immigration if anyone wanted to make a complaint. We all hurried to pack up our things.

(Discussions between MAP Foundation staff and female factory workers in Mae Sot, August 2009)

The study’s results for working conditions were among the least conclusive findings generated. Intuitively, the decline in factory earnings in Mae Sot would lead to a deterioration in working conditions. However, this is not reflected in our findings. Of the respondents, 71.9 per cent in fact reported no change from the previous year in general working conditions, and the remaining 28 per cent who did report changes were roughly split between reports of deteriorating conditions, and improved conditions, again this is a statement on the general working conditions that are the norm in Mae Sot.

**Impact of the economic downturn on family dynamics**

Our research exposed little noticeable change in family dynamics that could be linked to the economic situation. However, it is significant was that only 67 per cent of those surveyed chose to respond to this question. This may, however, be because of shortcomings in our research methods: migrants may well have been reluctant to get into discussions about family relationships and sensitive issues including domestic violence in mixed-sex groups and formal research settings, including interviews and focus groups. Several organisations in Mae Sot offer support and refuge to survivors of domestic violence, but it is difficult to see any changes in reported violence which can be linked to the economic crisis.

The economic crisis has, however, visibly put further strain on migrant families who have children in school. While the implementation of the UN Education for All policy in Thailand permits all migrant children to attend free state schools, there are costs involved for the parents, including paying for transport to the schools, school uniform, books, and so on. Migrant families on agricultural and construction sites reported to the Rights for All project of MAP Foundation that, with decreases in salaries, they were only able to keep one child at school. When the families had one son
and one daughter, they reported that they were more likely to take the daughter out of school, reasoning that she could help the family at home. These families also reported that their mobility had increased as a result of the economic downturn, as they had to move more often to find work, increasing instability for the family, and often resulting in the children not being able to attend school regularly:

All our community had wanted was for our children to go to school. We asked MAP to help organise that to happen a couple of years ago, and we were so excited when they went to school. But now, many families are taking the children out of school. Our community lives far from the school and we are always a little scared when the truck comes to pick up the children, now we either don’t have the money or are even more afraid that the children won’t be returned at the end of the day.

(Discussion between MAP Foundation staff and agricultural workers on Mae Sot-Phop Phra road, August 2009)

With decreased incomes, migrant couples are faced with dilemmas regarding planning their families. Many migrant women from Burma/Myanmar have been or will be in Thailand for the best part of their reproductive life. It is only in recent years that the babies of migrants could obtain a birth certificate, and registered migrant women have been entitled to general health care, including limited reproductive health care such as contraception.

Nevertheless, when women are pregnant and cannot work, they immediately lose their jobs and their housing, which is, as mentioned earlier, linked to their work. Such restrictions mean that women have few options and may result in unsafe abortions, excessive use of the emergency pill, unemployment and lack of livelihood for mothers. They are also likely to breed resentment among the migrant community, whose members require recognition not just as workers, but as families, as mothers, and as young people with potential and dreams.

**Impact on security and stability**

Throughout 2009, migrants had lived with multiple levels of insecurity and instability. They had to deal with job (and therefore livelihood) insecurities as a result of the global economic crisis, but also had to deal with the threats of mass deportations in February 2010, according to the Cabinet Resolution of 2008 on Migrant Workers, which allowed migrants to register for work for the final time in Thailand, with the final date being 28 February 2010. During 2009, levels of stress increased as migrants were pressured into entering a process to engage with the Burmese regime to have their nationality verified. As 2009 drew to a close, the tensions and hardships of the year bubbled near the surface. In December, 2,000 female migrant workers at the Top Form Brassiere factory in Mae Sot went on strike over an assault on two of the employee’s relatives by four security officers. The workers’ anger could not be quelled even by the show of armed force by the Thai authorities. Soldiers armed with rifles faced off the
angry workers. The workers demanded that the factory owner re-hire the workers who had been sacked and provide the welfare benefits they were due.

The future
Migrants from Burma/Myanmar have faced the economic downturn with resilience, but it is taking its toll, and situations like the one at the Top Form Brassiere factory may well flare up if migrants are further marginalised by the impact of the economic downturn and are excluded from recovery packages and from policy discussions which affect their lives.

The restrictions on migrants forming unions in Thailand has left migrants stranded in this time of economic crisis with few options available to ameliorate the situation. As a significant section of the labour force in Thailand, migrants must be able to have a voice and a standing to ensure that all work places provide decent work in Thailand.

Migrant workers are actively trying to improve their working conditions and to address the insecurity and exploitation they face. Migrant workers have formed their own labour associations, are educating themselves about Thai unions and discussing with union leaders the possibilities of joining Thai unions. They are co-ordinating with other sectors of the host population, a strategy that is particularly important for migrant women, who do well in leading and organising workers informally, but who do not currently take the lead in more formal structures like associations. Migrant women have connected with Thai and regional women’s movements to improve not only their working conditions, but also their safety and security in the household and in daily life and to strengthen their role as advocates for justice.

If migrants are ignored in these critical times, their social safety nets will continue to wear thin, and community structures may break down. Policies of exclusion, and tolerance of exploitation or certain sectors of society, harm the fabric of society, creating antagonism and anger. Therefore, the building of social cohesion and the integration of migrant workers and their families into Thai society is of particular importance now. Integration can be facilitated in the workplace, at educational facilities and in social and religious activities. Women migrant workers will be leading players, and are already leading the way with their connections of sisterhood and solidarity nationally and regionally.

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MAP Foundation continues to work closely with the migrant communities and to document current situations. Our Women Exchange Program, supported by the Nobel Women’s Initiative, is conducting workshops and focus group discussions with migrant and refugee women along the
Thai–Burma border to develop a report on Discrimination Against Migrant Women. Soe Lin Aung, with institutional support from MAP Foundation, was awarded a grant from the Global Consortium on Security Transformation to develop a paper on ‘Situating (In)Security: Transforming Security Paradigms Vis-à-vis Migrant Communities on the Thai–Burma Border’.

Notes

1 In June 1989, the ruling military regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar. The UK, the USA and democracy activists continue to use the name Burma.


3 The term ‘irregular or undocumented migrants’ refers to people who migrate in search of employment in violation of laws and regulation governing migration. A much less acceptable term is ‘illegal migrants’, unacceptable because it suggests the migrant is illegal rather than that their actions are illegal.

4 Figures published by the Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour, reproduced on the MAP Foundation website, www.mapfoundationcm.org

5 The Ayeyawady–Chao Phraya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) is a co-operation framework amongst Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam to utilise member countries’ diverse strengths and to promote development in the sub-region. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra of Thailand initiated the establishment of this co-operation framework in April 2003

6 Ministry of Labour analysis suggests that there were 300,000 children aged 15–17 years legally employed in registered establishments in 2005 (60 per cent male and 40 per cent female) (ILO 2008; Seangpassa 2009).

7 These workers later contacted MAP Foundation from Jordan when they were being threatened with deportation after arguments erupted between Burmese and Bangladeshi migrant workers. See also Pi Pi (2010).

8 Discussions in recent Women Exchange meetings. Also noted in Belton and Maung (2004)

9 Evidence from eye-witness accounts by MAP Foundation volunteers and a report in The Nation (2009).

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