

Gender Issues among Migrant Workers in Thailand: Creating a Space of Their Own

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Abstract

Most of the migrant workers in Thailand plan to stay temporarily and assimilation or acculturation is not on their agenda. Despite this, they actively participate in home-building for their security and for survival. Drawing on the concept of home building (Castles and Davidson 2000), this paper discusses the necessity and the associated costs that women migrant workers need to pay for in home building exercise in Thailand.

Women migrant workers heavily rely on home-building for various reasons. They need support in childcare, seek information and connections, procure Burmese food and other essential goods to save time and create a sense of home. Additionally, they manage their small living spaces to accommodate various activities crucial for their survival. While these home-building exercises are vital, there are drawbacks in forming communities. Women may encounter violence from their fellow countrymen without having a means to raise their voices. Consequently, they must allocate more resources for the security of their homes. Moreover, they find themselves adhering to gender norms from their place of origin due to the influence of their social networks in these communities.

Keywords

Myanmar, Thailand, migrant workers, women, home building

Labor migration has been discussed extensively in various places, and the analysis through gender lenses has brought new dimensions in migration studies (Gammage and Stevanovic 2019; Truong et al. 2014). Especially link-

ing how women and men experience the space differently—both in the place of destination and place of origin as well as the move between these two spaces—have brought about deeper understanding on gender power relations (Mahler et al 2015; Khumya 2023). In this paper, as part of the Japanese Association of Feminist Economics' 2023 Conference under the theme of Feminist Economics and Locality: Freedom of Migration and Range of Lives, focuses on how women and men Burmese migrant workers in Thailand experience spaces differently, focusing on their process of home building.

As Boccagni (2014) argues, temporary migrants inhabit “here” while they invest “there”, meaning that they consider their place of destination as their home and put priority in their investment back home, remitting as much as possible. However, at the same time, migrants engage in “home building” (Castles and Davidson 2000) in order to create a sense of home in the place of destination. Sense of being at home is supported by various feelings including security, familiarity, community, sense of possibility (Hage 1997). Boccagni and Musenbach (2020: 1) defined home as “an emplaced relationship that prioritizes certain socio-material contexts over others, by virtue of emotional, affective, and practical values attached to them, in forms and degrees that change over space and time.”

Such connections are important for migrants. It is especially important during their transition from the place of origin to place of destination. Newcomers are provided with orientation from their kins and friends to survive in the place of destination and provided access to jobs and housing (Kochan 2016; Moskal 2015). Researchers have highlighted the crucial roles that social network plays in the lives of migrants (Castles and Davidson 2000; Wijers 2013; Wu 2002). Where they live—their housing—becomes the basis of the membership in the migrant community and belonging to certain social networks (Boccagni 2014), and because of the network, the housing tends to be hometown based. Hometown based bonds form the largest source of social network (Liu et al. 2012; Kochan 2016). Migrants tend to stay in certain residences not be-

cause of the residential satisfaction but more because of neighborhood social bonds (Sheng et al. 2017). Although living in such enclaves will provide sense of security, it also isolates the migrants from outside world (Boeri et al. 2015).

Migrants thus make and create space for themselves (Listerborn 2013). This is especially the case for women migrants who put importance on security (Kusakabe et al. 2019). Safe housing and access to services are important for women (Owusu-Ansah and Addai 2013). Women and men are targeted differently by policy and immigration officials (Freedman 2012) –men are seen more as a security threat while women are seen as available to any kind of treatment (Pearson and Kusakabe 2012a), and hence face different types of vulnerability. Forming a community is important both for women and men migrants for security, but for women migrants, adherence to social norms of their place of origin is necessary to be accepted in the migrant community and to be engaged in “homemaking” at the place of destination.

It is important to note that most migrant workers in Thailand say that they are temporary here in Thailand, and their aspiration is to earn enough money and go back home. But the period of stay can be longer than what they have planned (Khumya 2023). They still see their place of origin as “home”, but they still need to be engaged in “home building” in Thailand to create a support network to survive. Hence, the Burmese migrant workers’ home building is different from the ways immigrants who aim to stay in the place of destination for a long time and try to assimilate to the local community. Their aim is not to assimilate but to survive and for their convenience during their stay in the place where they work. This is where this paper contributes to the body of literature: the process and outcome of home building by migrants who are not planning to immigrate, unlike in the cases that are often seen in Europe and other industrialized countries where assimilation and acculturation become an issue (as can be seen in studies like la Roi and Mood 2023; Kalmijn and Kraaykamp 2018).

Table 1 : Migrant workers in Thailand in year 2023

Type	Men	Women	Total
Memorandum of Understanding	307,891	256,992	564,883
Board of Investment	41,821	6,003	47,824
Ethnic minorities without Thai nationality	49,673	43,793	93,466
Registered migrants from neighboring countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam)	1,060,711	851,320	1,912,031
Border pass (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos)	6,919	6,057	12,976

Source: Department of Employment, As of May 2023.

This paper is largely based on the study of housing of Burmese migrant workers in Thai Market (Talat Thai) in Pathumthani province in central Thailand conducted in 2016-2017 (see Kusakabe et al. 2019) , as well as series of previous studies conducted on Burmese migrant workers in Thailand by the author since year 2010 (see Pearson and Kusakabe 2012a, 2012b, Kusakabe and Pearson 2013; 2016).

Burmese migrant workers in Thailand

As can be seen in Table 1, around two million workers from neighboring countries come to work as migrant workers in Thailand – around 80% of them being Burmese. Almost the same number of migrants are estimated to be in the country unregistered. Migrants who came under the “Memorandum of understanding (MoU)” are those who came from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar following the government-to-government agreement with Thailand. Employers register the requested number of workers and these countries’ governments send workers based on the demand. Thai government considers this form of labor migration to be the most desirable. Workers under the “Board of investment” are employees sent from foreign companies under foreign direct investment scheme to Thailand and would not include the migrant workers who we are focusing in this study. “Ethnic minorities” are people who live mainly along the border and who do not have Thai nationalities but have been living in the area for generations. The “registered migrants from the neighbor-

Table 2 : Employment of migrants by industry

Industry	Women (%)	Men (%)
Agriculture	39	61
Construction	26	74
Domestic labor	59	41
Fisheries	33	67
Food processing	85	15
Entertainment	65	35
Manufacturing	53	47
Services	57	43
Wholesale	71	29
Others	76	24

Source: IOM 2023: 12.

ing countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam)” refer to those who are working in Thailand without going through the MoU process, but got their stay regularized through a nationality verification process that is carried out ad hoc by the government. They will receive a temporary stay card and work permit and are required to be covered by migrant health insurance or social security scheme. The “border pass” workers are only applicable to border provinces where workers can cross the border and stay at the border provinces to work. They are not allowed to go further inside the country with this pass. The main workers that are focused in this paper are the registered migrant workers.

As can be seen in Table 2, there are gender segregation in the type of work that these migrant workers are engaged in. More women migrants than men migrants are working in food processing, entertainment, domestic labor and wholesale, while more men are working in construction, fisheries and agriculture. There are almost equal number of women and men workers in services and manufacturing. As can be seen in Table 3 (next page) , more women are working without employment contracts and more Burmese workers are doing so as well.

Table 3 : Percentage of migrant workers without employment contract

Category of migrants	Percentage without employment contract (%)
Women	51
Men	36
Cambodia	10
Myanmar	43

Source: IOM 2022: 12.

Problems that labor migrants face in Thailand

A number of studies have pointed out the challenges that migrant workers face in Thailand (Harkins 2019; IOM 2021; 2022) , which can be summarized as below.

High cost for registration

Going through MoU process is costly, time consuming and requires a lot of paperwork, so workers prefer to come to Thailand and register in Thailand. Still with that, the process is complicated, and the workers normally rely on agents to process for them. Employers need to do the process of registration for them, but small-scale enterprises find it difficult to handle the process, so migrant workers themselves resort to hiring agents to register themselves. The official rate of registration is not expensive, but because they need to rely on agents, the price of registration will be different depending on the demand and the wages that they can get in each province. Table 4 (next page) shows the estimated cost of registration studied by the International Organization of Migration. The relationship between the cost of registration and wages is clear when we look at the ratio of migrant workers who are working below minimum wages. In Rayong province, only 4% of the workers are working below minimum wage, while in Tak province 75% of them do so (In Chanthaburi and Trat, it is 17%, and Ranong 24%) (IOM 2023). Such high registration fee leads to many migrant workers not able to register and stay undocumented in Thailand, risking arrest.

Table 4 : Cost for registration by provinces

Province	Cost for registration (THB)
Rayong (where a large industrial area Eastern Sea Board is located)	7,100
Chanthaburi (province just east to Rayong)	6,500
Trat (province east to Chanthaburi, bordering Cambodia)	4,500
Ranong (province in the South facing Andaman Sea)	2,500
Tak (province in the west bordering Myanmar)	1,200

Source: IOM, 2023: 6.

The working conditions at the border areas tend to be worse than in the central areas, and rural areas tend to be worse than in the urban areas (MMN 2020), especially since the government surveillance does not reach the remote areas and they tend to be isolated. In urban areas, there are many migrant communities, where information can be shared. In the same way, domestic workers are isolated and can be out of this information and support network.

Border provinces have both registered migrant workers as well as border pass workers, and since the workers can commute, there are many who are not registered, and work with low wages without contracts. Many are also staying at the border area to explore possibilities of going further in-country for better jobs.

Since the labor migration registration system has been in practice in Thailand for a long time, some workers are here for a long time. They can hire their “employers” to get themselves registered.

Confiscation of documents

Employers often pay for the registration cost, and then deduct from the workers’ salaries. In order to ensure that workers do not run away after

registration, many employers confiscate their documents, such as passport and registration cards. This is illegal, but the practice persists.

Organizing labor unions

Thai law does not allow migrant workers to organize their own unions, although they can be a member of existing Thai labor unions. This makes it difficult for migrant workers to raise their own concerns and problems that are different from Thai workers.

Social protection

There are three types of social protection for migrant workers in Thailand – social security fund (SSF), workmen's compensation fund (WCH), and migrant health insurance scheme (MHIS) (IOM 2021). Those migrant workers who are employed full time are eligible to be covered by social security fund and workmen's compensation fund. Around 40% of the migrant workers are covered under SSF, while slightly less women workers are covered than men (43% men, 40% women). SSF covers maternity leave and child benefits, and thus women workers made claims more than men, making two-thirds of the total claims (ibid.). Those who are seasonal will be covered by migrant health insurance scheme. Around 29% of migrants are covered under MHIS.

Although the migrant workers are entitled to social protection, it depends on the employers whether they are covered or not. The lengthy and complex process to receive benefits also deters migrants from making claims (ibid.). Especially those who are in seasonal or temporary work are not able to access these schemes. There are less workers at the border provinces that are covered by these social protection schemes, since they do not have contracts. Women are covered less especially since domestic worker where women dominate, are excluded from SSF coverage (ibid.).

Childcare

Although Thailand provides anti- and post-natal care to migrant work-

ers as well as allow their babies to stay in Thailand with their parents, upon applying for work permit, workers need to go through a pregnancy test. The government says that the test is not to exclude pregnant women, but in practice, some employers discriminate against pregnant women, making it more difficult for them to find work (Mendoza 2018). Children can attend Thai schools under the Education for All policy of Thailand. However, even if they have been in Thailand for over 10 years, there is little possibility that they can obtain Thai nationality. Thus, many become stateless – although being raised more like a Thai and never lived in Myanmar.

After childbirth, many parents send their children back home to be taken care of by their parents (Kusakabe and Pearson 2013). But many others do not have any relatives that they can entrust their children to, or the parents back home are already overburdened with care of other siblings' children. Some sub-districts have childcare centers and migrant workers' children can also attend these centers. But still, like many poor Thai workers, migrant workers do not have access to childcare services, and as they have less social network and other resources for support in Thailand, they have more difficulties than Thai parents to manage childcare (ibid.).

Housing conditions and freedom of movement

Migrants tend to live together and form a community (Kusakabe et al. 2019). Depending on the location, access to water and waste management can be a problem. The housing tends to be crowded, making migrant workers vulnerable during COVID-19 pandemic (Ruckthongsuk 2021). Migrants' registration is with the province, and they are not able to move out of the registered province, restricting their mobility.

Gender issues among migrant workers in Thailand

Although both women and men experience vulnerability in Thailand as was discussed above, there are several issues that women experience differently from men. Women migrants tend to be paid less than men – 80% of

male migrants are paid minimum wage, while only 65% of women are (IOM 2023:13). This is also the case for lower income Thai workers, but more so for migrant workers since they have less options. They also have longer hours of work (Kusakabe and Melo 2019).

Both women and men migrants remit back home, but often, men would remit more, but less frequently, and women would remit constantly and for a greater number of years (Kusakabe and Pearson 2015; Harkins 2019). Women feel higher obligation in remitting, especially for their parents and siblings, and if their children are raised back home (Jampaklay et al. 2022).

Women migrant workers are more in disadvantaged position than men, but they exercise their agency to make small improvements in their workplaces. For example, domestic workers tend to be more vulnerable than other workers since they work in isolated places in private homes alone. However, some domestic workers can use their cultural background and age to establish more egalitarian relationships with their employers. For example, Nepali-Burmese women domestic workers in Thailand tend to be hired by Indian households in Bangkok since they speak the language (Veena and Kusakabe 2021). These domestic workers work in diaspora Indian homes and learn their cultural practices and cuisines well. They use this accumulated knowledge to negotiate with employers as well as establish superior relations when their employers are young women. Women migrant workers, similar to men migrant workers shift their work place quite often, looking for better wages and working condition.

Women migrant workers are able to manage their problems and vulnerabilities at the individual levels to a certain extent. However, they are still left vulnerable since there is a large limitation in how much migrant workers can do at the individual level. Therefore, they need to get support from other fellow migrants to secure their stay in Thailand.

Home-making in Thailand

There are several merits for migrant workers in Thailand to live together in a community. One is that it is safer for migrants. If migrants are walking alone, they tend to be stopped by the police and get arrested or have to pay bribes. However, if they are walking in a migrant community, such arrest would not happen. Men migrant workers are more vulnerable to such arrests, and for security reason it is better to live together.

Secondly, it is easier to care for children. For example, at the border town of Mae Sot, there are many relatives of migrant workers who come and stay and since they are at home during the day, they take care of others' children for a small fee. Such arrangements are more difficult to manage in Bangkok, so women with small children prefer to live at this border town where it is easier to manage childcare. In another case of Cambodian migrant workers, they build small huts in an open area and form a quasi-Cambodian village and live together. Since there are many Cambodians around, children are taken care of by someone in the community. There is a large merit in living together and forming a community in order to manage childcare.

Thirdly, it forms social capital and information network. Although many of the migrant workers have mobile phones and access to the internet, information on employment can be more easily shared if they live nearby. Newcomers normally stay with their relatives when they first come to Thailand, where they get orientation in how to survive in Thailand. Many times, it is the women old comers who arrange for their stay often at their own place and look after them until they get a job.

Fourthly, by living in a migrant community, it is easier to access food of the place of origin. Markets sell ingredients to cook Burmese food, sell Burmese dried fish and other food. Nang Lun Khum Synt (2023) has identified the strong preference of local food among the migrant workers, and especially native food that can be prepared easily (like dried fish) is considered handy by

working couples. It is easy to imagine that it would be easier and faster for migrant workers to cook their own native food since they are used to it, and in the migrant communities such ingredients are available.

Fifthly, forming a migrant community can expand their “own space” – space where they are able to use for their own purpose. Migrant workers live in small rooms since they try to economize their living expenses as much as possible. Migrant workers, by regulation, are not supposed to run their own business in Thailand and can work only as employees. However, in order to supplement their low income, migrants try to do small business by selling cooked food, dried fish, and other condiments. Since their rooms are small, they need to prepare these products outside of their rooms. By being in a migrant community, such overflowing of food preparation activities to outside of the room into the apartment corridors and public spaces are tolerated and accommodated and will not raise alarm that can lead to arrest or confiscation of their wares. If a police officer comes, they can always say that they were cooking outside. Such expansion of their own living/ working spaces is possible in the migrant communities, which would be more difficult in a mixed or Thai communities.

These merits are all the product of “home-making”. They see the merit in forming communities and living close by. For migrant workers, there are many merits in forming a community and engaging in home-making. Such “home” is even more important for women migrants, because of their major role in childcare as well as reproductive work, and for connection and support as well as access to information and connections. These are merits that are not possible to obtain through individual agencies that was discussed earlier, and thus they prefer to live in these migrant communities. Women migrant workers find that living in such migrant communities more secure.

Dangers at “home”

Women migrant workers are reported to be more vulnerable to vio-

lence compared to men migrant workers. Even though there is a higher risk for men for physical violence, women are more vulnerable for sexual violence and harassments from employers (Meyer et al. 2019; Kanyajit et al. 2018). Women migrants are even more vulnerable, since they do not have access to legal justice when faced with violence (Meyer et al. 2019; Teppunkoonngam 2022). Having a community/ home might not be able to help the women follow legal justice but help in emotional support as well as sharing of information.

Although women migrant workers feel secure in the migrant communities, and willingly take part in “home-making”, there are some drawbacks and costs that women migrant workers need to pay in this “home-making” exercise. Firstly, such home-making does not necessarily protect women from violence, since perpetrators of violence are not only the employers but also their own countrymen (Pearson and Kusakabe 2012). Living in migrant communities not only does not protect them from violence but might even aggravate the situation.

Secondly, since they live among the migrants, this can make them isolated from the Thai society. Hence when such violence against women incidence happens, they will not report to the Thai police or other authorities. Women migrant workers would not have anywhere to ask help to in this case.

Thirdly, since security is important for women and they need to protect themselves, women tend to pay higher rent to live in a more secure house than men, increasing their cost of living (Kusakabe et al. 2019).

Fourthly, migrant women, in order to be accepted by the Burmese migrant community, they need to conform to Burmese gender norms. Studies (Wilkins 2016; Kusakabe and Oo 2007) argued that one of the push factors for women to migrate is to be free from the suffocating social norms of the place or origin. But to benefit from the merit of living in migrant communities, women migrants still need to follow the gender norms back home. What is

more, they are not able to be free from the surveillance of people back home, since in the community, there will be someone who knows her relatives back home, or are from the same village/ area. Whatever they do will be reported to the village back home. McDowell (1999) called it “relational space”. That is, the geographical space is far, but the human relations between these spaces are dense with news transmitted very fast to their place of origin.

Conclusion

The study highlighted the importance of home-building for migrant workers in Thailand. It has also shown that women see higher need in such home-building exercise because of their need for a safe place, and because they need support network for childcare and other reproductive work. They also need such support for information. Women, because of their care responsibilities and general lack of access to information and network need to be dependent on the migrant communities more than men.

Migrant communities function as “home” for these women migrant workers, providing what they need. However, there are costs that they need to pay. Home-building of migrant workers is not providing a safe and secure place for migrant workers to live independently, but it is providing a space where it forces women to make a tradeoff between their freedom and independence that forces them to conform to gender norms.

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