

Migrant Domestic Workers: From Burma to Thailand¹ **Sureporn Punpuing², Therese Caouette,³ Awatsaya Panam³ and Khaing Mar Kyaw Zaw³**

Abstract

Millions of people from Burma⁴ have migrated into neighboring countries over the past decade. Most have left their country in search of security and safety as a direct result of internal conflict and militarization, severe economic hardship and minority persecution. This exodus represents one of the largest migration flows in Southeast Asia.

Fearing persecution, the vast majority of those migrating from Burma find themselves desperate to survive, obtaining work in underground and, often, illegal labor markets. The majority of those fleeing Burma migrate to neighboring Thailand, where an estimated two million people from Burma work in “3-D jobs” (dangerous, dirty and difficult). Although there is a growing awareness of their isolation and vulnerability to labor exploitation and violence, there is little data available documenting their realities. This results in the alienation of domestic workers and perpetuates the disregard for their labor and basic rights.

This paper presents the findings of research proposed and implemented by members of the Shan Women’s Action Network and the Karen Women’s Organization regarding girls and women who have migrated from Burma into domestic work in Thailand. This paper focuses on the roots causes of migration from Burma to Thailand, the harsh conditions in which foreign domestic workers are employed and their inability to defend their most basic rights while they are in Thailand, and lastly on their future aspirations.

Foreign domestic workers interviewed in this study described that the major cause of migration were related to political and economic situations in Burma. The push-pull theory explains this migration stream. In Thailand, the migrant domestic workers being expected to work on demand, without agreed upon responsibilities or a written contract delineating working hours, days off, accommodations, salaries, sick leave, care or pay. However, they had their dreams and hopes of securing a better future for their families and themselves. In the recommendations, roles of both Burma and Thai governments, NGOs and CBOs in helping establish appropriate interventions to reduce the abuse, exploitation and trafficking of migrant domestic workers are stated. The importance of recognizing domestic work as labor as well as the need to provide protection for the domestic workers under national labor laws is emphasised in this study.

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⁴ The authors recognize that the official name for Burma is Myanmar, as changed by the ruling government in 1989. However, the migrants interviewed in this study referred to their country as "Burma," which the authors have acknowledged by using that reference throughout this report.

Introduction

Millions of people from Burma⁵ have left their country in search of security and safety due to nearly a half-century of conflict, militarization, economic hardship, ethnic uprising and minority persecution.⁶ Over the past fifteen years the number of people leaving Burma has grown to one of largest migration flows in Southeast Asia.

As a direct result of the grave political, economic and cultural conflict in Burma, many million people have crossed Burma's borders into neighboring countries without documentation. Fearing persecution, and often without recognition of their rights to receive refugee status and international protection,⁷ the vast majority of those migrating from Burma find themselves desperate to survive, obtaining work in underground and, often, illegal labor markets.

The majority of migrants from Burma who flee their country end up in neighboring Thailand, where an estimated two million people from Burma have taken up squalid residence working "3-D jobs" (dangerous, dirty and difficult), for pay well below minimum wage.⁸

There are over one hundred thousand female domestic workers from Burma in Thailand,⁹ though many estimate the numbers to be much higher.¹⁰ There is little information available on the realities faced by these domestic workers, yet a growing awareness exists of their isolation and vulnerability to labor exploitation and violence.¹¹

⁵ Generally, the phrase "people from Burma" is used in this report rather than "Burmese" since the latter term, in addition to referring to people from Burma is also used to identify a specific minority group in Burma.

⁶ Smith, M. (2002). *Burma (Myanmar): A Time for Change*. London: Minority Rights Group International.

⁷ Caouette, T., Archavanitkul, K. & Pyne, H.H. (2000). *Sexuality, Reproductive Health and Violence: Experiences of Migrants from Burma in Thailand*. Nakhonprathom: Institute for Population and Social Research at Mahidol University.

⁸ Broadmoor, T. (August-September 2001). "Labor Pains: The Thai Government's Latest Resolve to Control the Growing Migrant Worker Population Lacks Resolve." *The Irrawaddy*. Vol. 9, No. 7.

⁹ Over 82,000 female migrants registered as domestic workers with the RTG in 2001, of which over 80 percent were from Burma. Only one third of the estimated migrants in Thailand registered and, therefore, the estimate of over one hundred thousand migrant domestic workers is a conservative estimation.

¹⁰ The actual number of female migrants workers in Thailand and internationally is not known, though it is documented to be increasing rapidly. The largest sector of employment for female migrants is in domestic work. See for example:

¹ Archavanitkul, K. (2003). *Understanding the Situation of Migrant Workers in Thailand*. Nakhonprathom: Institute for Population and Social Research at Mahidol University.

² Paitoonpong, S., Plyweij, J. & Sirikul, W. (2002). *Thailand: Improving Migration Policy Management with Special Focus on Irregular Labour Migration: Case study of Housemaids*. Bangkok: Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI).

³ Ehrenreich, B. & Hochschild, A.R. (2002). *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

¹¹ ¹ CARAM Asia. (2001). *Consultation on Thai and Migrant Domestic Workers*. Bangkok: Author.

Causes of Mass Flight

At independence in 1962, Burma, a country of abundant natural resources and human potential, was deemed to have the brightest future of any of its neighbors. Forty years later, and following roughly a quarter century of General Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism," this nation was designated by the United Nations as one of the world's "least developed countries" in 1987.¹²

A principal factor in Burma's troubled history of conflict and oppression are ethnic minority issues, which, ever since General Ne Win's policy to "Burmanize" the country's ethnic populations, continue to stand as the central challenge. Not only do ethnic minorities make up more than one-third of the population, but they also reside in areas of the most acute political and humanitarian crises in Burma.¹³ Furthermore, ethnic minority groups have been the junta's greatest obstacle to domination and national unity. Over the past decade, the minority insurgency groups have been pressured into ceasefire agreements with the State Peace and Development Council- SPDC. To date, only the Shan, Karen and Karenni factions continue to fiercely confront the Burmese authorities.¹⁴

The SPDC has intensified its mission to eradicate the threat of ethnic minority groups. Forced relocations of minority villages, especially in areas where ethnic opposition groups are active, have become increasingly common. Consequently, there are over one million internally displaced persons within the country.¹⁵ Individual townships, especially in the Shan and Karen States, have reported forced relocations, forced labor, torture, rape and extrajudicial killings, causing massive refugee flows into neighboring Thailand.¹⁶

² United Nations. (2002). National Tripartite Seminar on the Future of Migration Policy Management in Thailand. Bangkok: Author.

¹² Zo T. Hmung. (October 25, 2000). *Ethnic Political Crisis in the Union of Burma*. New Haven: Council for Southeast Asia Studies at Yale University.

¹³ Smith, M. (2002).

¹⁴ BBC Reporter. (July 17, 2002). "Burma 'Terrorising' Ethnic Minorities," *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*. Retrieved August 11, 2003 from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2132986.stm>.

¹⁵ ¹ The Shan Human Rights Foundation. (April 1998). *Dispossessed: Forced Relocation and Extrajudicial Killings in Shan State*. Chiang Mai: Author.

² Burma Ethnic Research Group. (April 1998). *Forgotten Victims of a Hidden War: Internally Displaced Karen in Burma*. Chiang Mai: Author and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

¹⁶ ¹ Human Rights Watch. (2003).

² Bangkok Post Reporter. (July 16, 2003). "Foreign Press, NGOs Barred from Border." *The Bangkok Post*.

³ Freedom House. (June 24, 2002). *Freedom in the World, Political Rights and Civil Liberties: Burma*.

⁴ Washington D.C.: Author. Retrieved August 11, 2003 from:

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2002/countryratings/burma2.htm>.

⁵ Amnesty International. (2001). *Amnesty International Report 2001: Myanmar*. London: Author. Retrieved August 11, 2003 from:

<http://web.amnesty.org/web/ar2001.nsf/webasacountries/MYANMAR?OpenDocument>.

In addition to these atrocities, excessive and arbitrary forms of taxation and agricultural policies have made daily life unbearable. The continuous and dramatic inflation rates in Burma, ranging from 24 percent in 1989 to 38 percent at the beginning of 2000,¹⁷ have led to escalated commodity prices of basic necessities, which, even according to the Burmese authorities, increase by over 20 percent per year.¹⁸ The price of rice, the staple for people across the country, hit 50 cents a kilogram during January 2003, four times the official rate.¹⁹

Jobless and financially crippled by the escalating commodity prices, people in Burma find themselves in debt for daily life expenses and forced to comply with unpredictable taxes imposed by the authorities.²⁰ In this context, limited employment opportunities cannot be used to lift individuals out of poverty and ultimately the individual becomes caught in a cycle of debt that continuously pressures those from Burma to look beyond to solutions outside this environment.

Thai Policy Towards Migrants from Burma

Since the early 1990's, the Thai government has faced the immense task of bringing order to the massive influx of undocumented migrant populations throughout the country. The Thai government addressed the problem by classifying the undocumented population in order to properly integrate them into the worker registration system or temporarily displaced persons camps. This process of classification separated those from Burma into six groups: displaced persons, undocumented migrants, refugees from threats of war, students/intellectuals, visitors who overstayed their Thai visas and illegal migrant workers.²¹

Since Thailand has not ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the Thai government is not obliged to recognize anyone from Burma as refugees. Thus, the Thai government has granted "temporarily displaced persons" status to a select few, in spite of the obvious human rights violations from which so many have fled.

Thai relations with Burma continued to roller coaster as fighting spilt over onto Thai soil, borders closed and negotiations intensified to resolve the conflicts and reestablish trading opportunities. However, efforts to resolve the conflict and resume trade were soon initiated, including the introduction of the new worker registration process in September/October 2001 and later with the Sixth Joint Cooperation Meeting between

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Thien, Win. (February 1999). "New 1,000-Notes a Sign of High Inflation." *The Irrawaddy*. Vol. 7, No. 2.

¹⁹ Irrawaddy Reporter. (January – February 2003). "Rumor Mill Working Overtime." *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 11, No. 1.

²⁰ Soe Soe. (July 15, 2002). *Migration Report: Burma: Identifying the Issues and Needs of Migration from Burma into Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Joint Research Project of the Federation of Trade Unions Burma and Asian Migrant Center.

²¹ Ibid.

Thai and Burmese representatives in January of 2002. The Thai government called on all migrant workers in Thailand to register and obtain work permits valid for one year, pending a six-month health check-up by March 2002. Upon completion of the health testing, work permits were renewed for 409,339 migrants (of the original 568,249 registered in 2001), including 63,317 domestic workers (from the original 82,389 domestic workers registered).²² Migrants from Burma made up 83% (340,029) of all those re-registered.

In August 2002, the Burma and Thai governments had organized bilateral negotiations that would deal with reopening the border and other critical issues, such as drug trafficking, migrant repatriation and trade in the coming months.²³ At this time, the Thai government also sought to develop a new worker registration policy in an effort to analyze labor needs, budget the costs of migrant worker and refugee programs, and create more efficient mechanisms for both migrant integration in and deportation from the Thai labor field.²⁴

Thailand has initiated several migrant worker registration policies since the early 1990s. The first attempt to come to grips with the massive, migrant labor flow into Thailand took place in 1992. This attempt, however, failed due to the extremely high “bail” it imposed on employers who were to register their workers.²⁵ Four years later, Thailand’s migrant labor problems had expanded throughout the country with large numbers of migrant workers, mostly from Burma, moving toward Thailand’s inner provinces. Unable to determine needs and adequately assess the impact on the different labor sectors of its economy, the Thai government aimed to gain control and learn from its previous mistakes. In June 1996, the Thai Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare implemented a registration policy open to eight industries that required a much lower registration fee. As workers without proof of registration faced deportation, this resolution compelled larger numbers of migrants to register.²⁶

Following the economic crisis of 1997, the Thai government was faced with the urgent task of restructuring its labor field to make room for the masses of newly unemployed Thai nationals. While this resulted in the deportation of nearly 250,000 illegal migrants in 1998, the RTG was unable to find Thais willing to replace workers in “3-D jobs.” Consequently, by April and May 1998, the Thai Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare found it necessary to reassess the labor force’s employment needs and initiate a new registration phase. Although Thai officials calculated that roughly 231,000 jobs needed to be filled, only 99,974 migrants had registered by December of 1999.²⁷ The void required

²² Royal Thai Government. (2002). *Result of Registration of Alien Workers Following the Cabinet’s Resolution in 2001 and 2002*. Bangkok: Author.

²³ Yuwadee Tunyasiri. (August 22, 2002). “Talks to Focus on Resolving Disputes Fast.” *The Bangkok Post*.

²⁴ Commission on Irregular Immigrant Workers. (August 2002). *Cabinet Resolution on Illegal Migrants*. Bangkok: Thai Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare.

²⁵ Caouette, T., Archavanitkul, K. & Pyne, H. (2000).

²⁶ The 1996 migrant worker registration provided 303,088 work permits, of which 87 percent were granted to people from Burma.

²⁷ Ibid.

the RTG to readjust its labor policy to facilitate a more effective registration of undocumented migrant workers (from Burma, Cambodia and Laos) from September to October of 2001. This initiative resulted in the registration of persons from ten labor sectors, not including seasonal workers, workers in the service industry or child workers.²⁸ During this registration period, 568,249 migrants received work permits of which 451,255 were from Burma.²⁹ However, this figure, while large in comparison to those registered in earlier years, is still strikingly low when held against the estimated two million undocumented migrants from Burma.³⁰

This great disparity between migrants registered and the total number actually residing in Thailand led to many extensive discussions among RTG officials, NGOs and migrant leaders. Two of the main reasons given for why migrants did not register were the lack of information about the process and the inability to travel and register when employers refused to participate.³¹

The majority of migrants, factors deterring them from registration were far more complicated. First of all, the efforts by the Thai government to register migrants from Burma reinforced workers' dependence on their employers. Those who registered with a specific employer were given permits valid for only one year and only with that one employer, after which if their employment with that employer ended, so did their legal status in the country.³² Furthermore, employers typically kept the work permit, giving the worker a photocopy, if any documents at all. Without such documentation, even registered migrant workers found themselves threatened by deportation, harassment and arrest as a result of their inability to prove their legal status.³³ Workers also expressed grievances regarding the regulation that prohibits them from changing employment for a period of one year, as this prevented workers whose contracts were terminated from finding a new job.³⁴ It is also worth noting that many families have been separated as a result of registration. Children under the age of 18 were not allowed to register and, given the high cost of registration, most families did not register all adult members for fear of incurring large debts.³⁵

²⁸ Caouette, T. & Pack, M. (December 2002).

²⁹ Royal Thai Government. (December 6, 2001). *The Result of Registration of Alien Workers*. Bangkok: Author.

³⁰ Broadmoor, T. *The Irrawaddy*. (August-September 2001).

³¹ Document for Discussion distributed at the NGO Forum on *Migrant Worker Policy on Transnational Worker Protection Mechanism* held at Chulalongkorn University on February 21, 2003.

³² Caouette, T. & Pack, M. (December 2002).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Onnucha, H. (January 30, 2002). "Paperless Foreign Workers Facing Police Harassment." *The Bangkok Post*.

³⁵ Federation of Trade Unions/Burma. (2001). *Situation Report: Migrant Workers from Burma in Thailand*. Bangkok: Author.

However, under the revised registration regulations, in July 2004, there were 1,269,074 migrant workers registered in Thailand.³⁶ The new regulations allow migrant workers to change their employers, and their dependents are allowed to register too. The migrant workers receive one-year work permit.

Vulnerability of Migrant Domestic Workers

There is a growing international awareness of the vulnerability faced by domestic workers worldwide as labor laws fail to recognize their jobs with the protection of regulated employment.³⁷ Only recently have some countries made efforts to regularize and protect domestic workers through national policies and labor laws. Thailand's Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare first included "domestic workers" in its mandate when registering migrant workers in 1996,³⁸ prior to that Thai labor laws never mentioned domestic work as a category for immigrant work (including Thai domestic labor overseas). In subsequent registrations, domestic work was excluded and only reinstated in the 2001 registration when 568,249 migrants received work permits, with over 82,000³⁹ registered as domestic workers.⁴⁰ Although domestic workers received work permits, the labor laws did not protect their work. The only protection provided is the Thai 1998 Labour Protection Law, which covers those who worked in households involved in other economic activities.⁴¹ Therefore, though migrant domestic work was recognized by the Thai Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare in 1996 and again in the 2001 registration, there are no rights or protections ensured to this labor sector for Thais or migrants.

Although migrant domestic workers have been allowed to register to work in Thailand, their ability to do so and keep valid their permit depends entirely on their employer. For those unable

³⁶ Archavanitkul, K. (2004). Unpublished paper for the workshop on "Illegal migrant workers and health dimension with management programme of the Thai government", Royal Rattanakosin hotel, Bangkok. September 10.

³⁷ ¹ Human Rights Watch. (2001). *Hidden in the Home: Abuse of Domestic Workers with Special Visas in the United States*. New York: Author.

² Rockefeller Foundation. (2002). *Women at Work: A New Framework for Women in a Globalizing World*. New York: Author.

³ Parrenas, R.S. (2001). *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

³⁸ In 1996, 34,000 migrant domestic workers had registered for work permits in Thailand according to: CARAM Asia. (2001). Presentation by Supmol Tawarnraru of the Overseas Employment Administration Office of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. "Domestic Workers in Thailand and Abroad." Published in *Consultation on Thai and Domestic Workers*. Bangkok: Author.

³⁹ Domestic workers accounted for 30 percent of the total number of registered female migrant workers, representing the highest proportion of work engaged by female migrant workers according to Paitoonpong, S., Plywej, J. & Sirikul, W. (2002).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ CARAM Asia. (2001). Presentation by Charut Neesit of the Lawyers Society. "Protection of Employees in Work Related to Housework." Published in *Consultation on Thai and Domestic Workers*. Bangkok: Author.

to obtain work permits, they remain particularly vulnerable to exploitation.⁴² Even with work permits migrant domestic workers are unable to claim labor rights and as elsewhere in the world they are seen as ‘partial citizens’ who are neither fully eligible under home or host country labor laws.⁴³ As a result, migrant domestic workers around the world are caught in a dependence upon their employer and their fears of reprisal, arrest and possible deportation.⁴⁴

Researching the Situation of Domestic Workers from Burma in Thailand

This paper aims to analyse the life experiences, perceptions and decision-making considerations of migrant girls and young women from Burma working as domestic workers in Chiang Mai and Tak Provinces. And to build a community awareness and response that advocates for laws that formalize their work and protect their basic rights.

Research Methodology

The study was implemented by two research teams, one in Chiang Mai City of Chiang Mai Province and the other in Mae Sot town of Tak Province. All of the researchers were members of the Burmese migrant community in Thailand. Each team had a Research Coordinator, two Field Researchers and a Documenter/Translator. In addition, the study was supported by a Research Advisor who worked with teams throughout the entire research process.

The research data for this study was collected through direct and participatory observations, as well as 133 in-depth interviews, and a survey conducted with 528 migrant domestic workers from Burma in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, Thailand. There were 68, and 65 domestic workers participate in the in-depth interview in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot respectively. The team surveyed 242 domestic workers in Chiang Mai, and 286 in Mae Sot.

Initially, the Field Researchers randomly met domestic workers in the markets or temples and others were introduced to the Field Researchers through various community-based organizations. After the initial introductions, the Field Researchers relied on snowball sampling with referrals from domestic workers themselves.

The Field Researchers never tried to interview on the first meeting. The initial meeting was to introduce themselves and the project, request their consent to participate, observe the environment and discuss the best way of meeting again.

⁴² United Nations. (2002). Presentation by Sravooth Paitoonpong from the Thai Development and Research Institute. Published in *Case Studies of Industries Dependent on Migrant Workers*. Bangkok: United Nations.

⁴³ Parrenas, R.S. (2001).

⁴⁴ ¹ Migrant Action Programme. (2001). *Migrant Domestic Workers from Burma in Thai Homes*. Chiang Mai: Author.

² Human Rights Watch. (2001).

The in-depth interviews were undertaken over extended periods of time, often necessitating five to six visits over a three-month period. The majority of these interviews were conducted face-to-face, however, in some instances, part, or all, of the interview was conducted over the telephone.

The implementation of the survey often required more than one visit to complete the questionnaire. The majority of the questionnaires were conducted face-to-face with the Field Researcher. However, in attempts to reach domestic workers who were not allowed out of the house or to communicate via phone (and, therefore, were not included in the qualitative phase of this study), efforts were made to deliver the questionnaires to domestic workers (either directly by the Field Researchers or through friends), requesting that they fill the survey out themselves. This however, was only effective for those who were literate in the Shan, Karen or Bamar languages.

Finally, nearly 70 percent of the surveyed questionnaires were completed by the Field Researchers in face-to-face sessions with the respondents and 14 percent of the questionnaires were filled out by the respondent on her own time and returned directly to the respective Field Researcher at each site. In an effort to reach domestic workers whose employers would not allow them to contact the field researchers, another 16 percent were given to domestic workers to fill out via their friends (also domestic workers who were surveyed).

The Field Researchers also had informed consent forms explaining the rights of the participants and requesting either written or verbal agreement for involvement in the project. Brochures and cards informing domestic workers of social services operating for migrant women in their area were also made available to participants throughout the project. Field researchers also kept a journal of their work, personal thoughts and experiences, which was used as a supplementary for the data analysis. The Field Researchers received training with the entire team and also ongoing support and feedback from the Research Coordinators.

In addition to the domestic workers who participated in this study, key informants in the community were also interviewed in order to corroborate information and provide their perspectives on the life experiences of women and girls from Burma employed as domestic workers in Thailand. These key informants also helped to develop project guidelines, but they are not included in the sample population or directly quoted anywhere in this paper.

Study Population

The study's population sample primarily included females under the age of 30 who were born in Burma and were currently employed as domestic workers in Tak or Chiang Mai Provinces in Thailand. However, the research teams also agreed to involve women over 30 years old who expressed an interest in participating in the research study.

Most of the participants were between the ages of 15 and 24, were single without children, of Shan or Karen ethnicity and spoke their native language and at least one other language. The majority were born in the Shan, Karen or Mon States (bordering Thailand). Most participants in Chiang Mai could speak some Thai whereas the majority in Mae Sot could not. Approximately one sixth of all the participants had no formal education (with those in Chiang Mai having a

slightly higher educational attainment rate). One third of the participants had attended primary school, another third had attended secondary school and the remaining one sixth had passed their 10th standard exam. The majority of the participants came to Thailand between 1996 and 2000, with approximately half having registered for work permits.

Conditions in Burma and Along the Migration Journey

Most of the domestic workers interviewed in this study explained that they left Burma largely as a consequence of war and government policies that fueled a crisis in both the economy and their families. The women and girls in this study spoke at length of how the political and economic conditions in Burma led to the breakdown of their families, leaving many in foster care or to survive on their own.

Given these conditions, Thailand seemed to provide an opportunity to seek refuge and improve working conditions. In weighing their options, the domestic workers in this study believed that migrating to Thailand was worth the risk of possible harassment and/or of being trafficked.

My life disappeared with the sound of bullets and bombs. My family, relatives and everything in the village was destroyed, never to be returned. We lost everything – our relatives, house, land, clothes and food. I lost my future and everything that I had hoped for. Even my hopes to study have been lost along with everything else. . . .

I fled from the war to Thailand. For over a year we hid in the jungle and didn't dare return to our village. However, at night, we would sneak into nearby villages to ask for food. Then, we would go through the jungle until we came to another village and could ask for food and a place to stay for the night. Sometimes, we went for two or three days without coming upon any village. At these times, we ate jungle fruit and thrashed the branches of the banana trees for sap to drink. We were always hungry and cold. It rained very heavily. We didn't have shelter to avoid the rain. We didn't even know where we were going or what would happen to us. Finally, we decided to go to Thailand. It took over three months to get here because we had to flee the fighting. Along the way, we learned that our house had been seized by the Burmese military. They took everything, even our clothes. We have nothing left.

A 32-year-old single Shan female, whose first time migrating to Thailand was not disclosed, currently working in Chiang Mai.

The study participants described the constantly changing political and military situation that impacted the ease of travel, the number of checkpoints encountered, border control policies, crackdowns and other realities that largely dictated the route, means and cost of their journey. Many spoke of the need to use clandestine efforts, often organized by brokers or “carriers”⁴⁵ who accompanied them to or across the border. Large sums of money were required and either paid in advance or incurred as debt to the “carriers”.

⁴⁵ “Carrier” is the term used by study participants to describe the individual(s) who helped to transport them to Thailand and, in some cases, from the Thai border to jobs further towards the interior of the country.

At the border, we stayed at a Chinese house for two nights. We met about thirty people waiting to go further into Thailand like us. On the third night, a car came to take us to Chiang Mai. The carrier said that we had to go without our belongings and that they would come later. But later, he said that the police seized our possessions on the way because they couldn't find the owners. We were angry but there was nothing we could do. We paid 3,200 baht each. The people who had money just paid the money for the transport to get to Chiang Mai, but those who didn't have any money agreed to work around that area first to pay the costs.

A 20-year-old single Shan female who first migrated to Thailand a year ago currently working in Chiang Mai.

However, only rarely did they know ahead of time the type of work they would be given, where or with whom they would be working, or the terms of their employment. Other participants, rather than using “carriers” to find employment, went to particular areas where employers were known to come to look for migrant labor. Women and girls waiting to be approached for work became particularly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. In this context, migrants were hired by employers on the spot and immediately taken to the employer’s household to work.

Employment Conditions

Most of the women and girls in this study reported that they were informed by their employer of what their salary would be upon arriving at their employer’s household, they were not informed of the terms of how their salary would be paid or what deductions would be withheld, what benefits, if any, they would receive such as sick days, holidays, personal days, or what their job responsibilities would entail.

I am always looked down upon by my employer. Many others face the same problems as me. It would be best if before we go into a house and work that we have some agreement with the employer about our monthly wages, including benefits and deductions as well as what jobs they expect us to do. But, this never happens and so there are many problems.

A 24-year-old single Karen female who first migrated to Thailand two years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

Wage and Working Hours

The majority of study participants earned less than half of the Thai minimum wage.⁴⁶ National minimum wage standards in Thailand vary according to geographic location, with urban areas providing higher salaries because of the increased cost of living. The Thai Ministry of Labour

⁴⁶ Given the arbitrary nature of employment conditions for domestic workers in Thailand, it is not possible to calculate the value of employee benefits, such as room and board, provided to most of the study participants. For some, these benefits when added to the below-minimum-wage salary they received might equal or possibly exceed national wage standards. Nevertheless, as this chapter will illustrate, the “benefit” of room and board tended to contribute to exceedingly long working hours and unfair working conditions.

issues different minimum wage requirements for each of the country's seventy-six provinces based upon the cost of living in each area. The daily minimum wage between Chiang Mai and Mae Sot differs by only twenty baht a day. However, among the domestic workers interviewed for this study salary differentials were far greater, with those in Chiang Mai receiving substantially higher salaries. This most likely is due to the equal-distance of the two study sites from the Burmese border. Travel to Chiang Mai is more difficult and expensive and, therefore, the supply of migrant workers not as readily available, so that the pay scale here is higher. Mae Sot's close proximity to the border means that migrants are able to easily enter the city, so there is a greater pool of potential workers.

Table 1 Percentage distribution and number of survey respondents by monthly salary and research site

Monthly salary in baht	Research Site		Total
	Chiang Mai	Mae Sot	
Less than 1,000	2.9 (7)	57.1 (163)	32.2 (170)
1,001-2,000	18.2 (44)	40.1 (115)	30.1 (159)
2,001-3,000	45.5 (110)	2.8 (8)	22.3 (118)
Over 3,000	33.4 (81)	-	15.4 (81)
No. of respondents	242	286	528

Several domestic workers explained that their employers refused to pay them on a monthly basis.

The employer told me I have to work for one year and then they will pay me my salary. They said if I do not work for one year, they cannot give me my money. When my mother was ill I wanted to send money home to her, but they only gave me 1,500 baht to send home even though I have earned much more. When I wanted to go back they gave me only 3,000 baht even though I had worked for nine months.

An 18-year-old single Shan female who first migrated to Thailand four years ago currently working in Chiang Mai.

I tried to ask for my salary every month, but the employer said she would keep it with her. Some months I really need it and argue with her until she gives it to me. Other months I don't need it and don't argue too much. But, this way it is difficult to keep track of my money.

A 25-year-old single Karen female, whose first time migrating to Thailand was not disclosed, currently working in Mae Sot.

Approximately half of the domestic workers interviewed reported that once they paid off their debts for traveling to Thailand and for securing employment, they felt fortunate to have their job, despite receiving a salary well below minimum wage.

Now I work as a housekeeper and the salary is 3,100 baht. I get it every month too. Some of it was given back for the car's fare when I came. With the rest, I bought some clothes because people in this country don't wear the same clothes as in our country. I save my money and buy one piece of clothing each month. It is enough for me to use, but there is nothing left to save.

An 18-year-old single Shan female who first migrated to Thailand four years ago currently working in Chiang Mai.

In addition to receiving below-minimum wages, 98 percent of the surveyed respondents were expected to work more than eight hours a day, with 80 percent working 12 hours or more a day. In fact, only two percent of the study participants reported working a standard eight-hour day (see Table 2).

Table 2 Percentage distribution and number of survey respondents by number of working hours per day and research site

No. of working hours per day	Research Site		Total
	Chiang Mai	Mae Sot	
1-8	2.9 (7)	1.4 (4)	2.1 (11)
9-12	30.0 (72)	8.1 (23)	18.1 (95)
13-14	19.6 (47)	18.7 (53)	19.1 (100)
15-16	22.9 (55)	34.8 (99)	29.4 (154)
17-18	20.8 (50)	33.8 (96)	27.9 (146)
19-20	3.8 (9)	2.8 (8)	3.2 (17)
21-24	-	0.4 (1)	0.2 (1)
No. of respondents	240	284	524

*Note: 4 respondents did not answer of working hours per day.

Many of the domestic workers interviewed for this study noted that their employers expected them to be available to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Moreover, the majority of them noted they had little or no rest incorporated into their workday.

I have no time to rest. I have to look after my employer's children and take them with me wherever I go. Moreover, I am responsible for an old paralyzed woman and cannot abandon her.

A 29-year-old married Mon female who first migrated to Thailand three years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

Almost all of the domestic workers in this study reported having no set working hours or benefits. They explained that everything depended on their employer’s decisions on a day-to-day basis. The vast majority of study participants explained that they worked consistently long hours, with no regular days off and no overtime pay.

In addition to not having any standard times for breaks or rests, 62 percent of the domestic workers surveyed for this study reported they had no regular days off and the days off they did receive were randomly decided by their employer (see Table 3).

Table 3 Percentage distribution and number of survey respondents by number of days permitted off and research site

Number of days permitted off	Research Site		Total
	Chiang Mai	Mae Sot	
None	54.1 (131)	68.8 (196)	61.9 (327)
Weekly	10.7 (26)	4.6 (13)	7.4 (39)
Monthly	18.6 (45)	10.9 (31)	14.4 (76)
Annually	16.6 (40)	15.7 (45)	16.2 (85)
No response	-	0.3 (1)	0.2 (1)
No. of respondents	242	286	528

The women and girls in this study who did not receive days off explained that this was because their employer needed them to work at all times.

As a domestic worker, I have to work from early in the morning until dark without rest. At night I still have to iron the clothes. I have worked here for two years and I remember only two days I was free to go out.

A 27-year-old married Karen female who first migrated to Thailand twelve years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

Whenever there was a special event at the temple, I didn’t go. When the Shan New Year took place, I used to ask to go, but the employer said that, ‘If you go, you will get nothing. If you want to go, obviously you don’t need any money.’ I did not want to lose my job, so I never went anywhere.

A 32-year-old married Shan female, whose first time migrating to Thailand was not disclosed, currently working in Chiang Mai.

Accommodation

Majority of the domestic workers were provided accommodations, though only a third were given their own private room or shared a room with a family member or members they were responsible to care for, or with other employees, while about one fifth were made to sleep in open areas with no privacy (data does not shown here) .

At night he [the employer's son] sleeps with me. Then, he cannot be separated from me and cries to see me until his parents let him sleep with me. He really loves me, but it is so tiring.

A 22-year-old single Tavoyan female, whose first time migrating to Thailand was not disclosed, currently working in Chiang Mai.

I have a room about five feet by six feet with a mattress on the floor. It is just enough room to sleep and keep my clothes.

A 15-year-old single Burman female who first migrated to Thailand two years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

I stay in the employer's house and am at home like in my own house. I have my own room and they furnish it with everything, even a TV.

A 20-year-old single Karen female who first migrated to Thailand four years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

Given the arbitrary and unregulated nature of employment conditions for domestic workers in Thailand, it is not possible to calculate the value of room and board provided to most of the study participants. For some, these benefits when added to the below-minimum-wage salary they received might equal or possibly exceed national minimum wage standards. Nevertheless, the "benefit" of room and board tended to contribute to exceedingly long working hours and exploitative working conditions with no overtime pay or compensation.

Work Expectations

As a result of being a "live-in" worker, job responsibilities, more often than not, consisted of a wide range of duties beyond housework. Over two-thirds of the domestic workers in this study (64.4%) reported having to care for children, the elderly or the infirm. Often employers expected that those domestic workers caring for young children be available to work at all times, with many expected to be on call throughout the night should the children need any attention. Thirty-one percent of those surveyed were expected to help with their employer's business in addition to handling the household chores, and be available to meet their employer's arbitrary demands, such as giving massages to members of the household (see Table 4).

Table 4 Percentage distribution and number of survey respondents by household responsibility and research site*

Household responsibility	Research Site		Total
	Chiang Mai	Mae Sot	
House cleaning	97.1 (235)	97.2 (278)	97.2 (513)
Washing and ironing clothes	79.3 (192)	88.1 (252)	84.1 (444)
Cooking	66.9 (162)	66.1 (187)	66.5 (351)
Taking care of children, elderly or sick	60.3 (146)	67.4 (194)	64.4 (371)
Washing cars/bikes	56.6 (137)	38.5 (110)	46.8 (247)
Taking care of animals	41.7 (101)	35.7 (102)	38.4 (203)
Cleaning employer's store	43.8 (106)	27.3 (78)	34.8 (184)
Helping employer in his/her business	45.0 (109)	20.6 (59)	31.8 (168)
Massage	28.5 (69)	33.2 (95)	31.1 (164)
No. of respondents	242	286	528

* **Note:** Respondents were allowed more than one response so the percentage distribution is equal to the number of participants who reported each answer based on the total number of respondents. Therefore, the total percentages do not add up to 100 percent and the numbers in parentheses when combined are greater than the total number of respondents.

Since employers often did not discuss or clearly outline specific job responsibilities or what was expected, the domestic workers interviewed described feeling obliged to be working at all times.

I have to work the whole day. I don't have any time to rest. When they ask me to do something, I have to stop whatever I am doing at the moment and do what they ask as quickly as possible. There is no regular fixed time to work.

A 13-year-old single Karen female who first migrated to Thailand a year ago currently working in Mae Sot.

The daughter of the employer is spoiled and can do whatever she wants. I have to pick up after her all day long. I even have to turn the water off after her shower and flush the toilet for her. She is a teenager and it is very demeaning to be treated like her slave.

A 15-year-old single Shan female who first migrated to Thailand six years ago currently working in Chiang Mai.

The domestic workers interviewed described expectations that they were to serve everyone in the house, including each time the employer's family grew or had visitors.

The relatives of my employer brought over their children for me to look after also. They were always telling me to do things for them. I had not even finished my last task and they would ask me to do something else. They all asked me to do things for them. My mind feels so troubled.

A 19-year-old single Karen female who first migrated to Thailand five years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

However, there were a few domestic workers reported that they can handle the job.

I do not have to cook and I can use the washing machine. What I have to do is sweep the dirt, clean the house and be home when no one is there. I only have to iron the clothes every three or four days. As there are few people in the house there is no need to wash or clean so much. The employer does not leave her child with me. During the long school holidays, she usually takes her child with her when she goes out.

A 19-year-old single Karen female who first migrated to Thailand two years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

In the morning, I clean, sweep, wash dishes, cook and cut vegetables. It is like the housework that we do at our house. It is not more than I can handle.

A 34-year-old married Shan female, whose first time migrating to Thailand was not disclosed, currently working in Chiang Mai.

Incidents of withholding or non-payment of wages were frequently reported by the study participants, while others explained that without constant reminders and requests, they would not receive their salary from their employer. By not receiving their wages on a timely basis or having their wages randomly withheld or deducted by their employers, the women and girls in this study noted that they felt vulnerable and violated because of the lack of recourse to confront their employers' fraudulent actions.

My money is with my employer. When I need money to send home, I ask for it from the employer. I worked for that employer for one year, but when I want to go home I have to return secretly because the employer doesn't want me to go. So, I lost 3,000 baht of my salary that was being held by employer.

A 19-year-old single Karen female who first migrated to Thailand six years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

I got paid as the employer said, but I keep it all with her (the employer). If I keep it with me, I am afraid it won't be safe. Since I do not have a Thai identity card I can't open a bank account. So, it is better she holds on to my earnings.

A 34-year-old single Shan female, whose first time migrating to Thailand was not disclosed, currently working in Chiang Mai.

Access to Outside Contacts

Confinement within the household and limited access to outside contact with friends and family was often imposed by the employer, either through threats or through the lack of free time. Less than fifty percent of those surveyed reported that about two fifth of their employers permitted them to leave the house to meet others or allowed visitors into the house (see Table 5).

Table 5 Percentage distribution and number of survey respondents by type of contact employer allowed and research site*

Type of Contact Employer Allowed	Research Site		Total
	Chiang Mai	Mae Sot	
Receive mail	41.3 (100)	76.6 (219)	60.4 (319)
Send mail	37.6 (91)	79.4 (227)	60.2 (318)
Receive a phone call	67.3 (163)	37.1 (106)	50.9 (269)
Go out to meet others	41.3 (100)	44.7 (128)	43.2 (228)
Allow visitors in	43.4 (105)	39.9 (114)	41.5 (219)
Telephone to someone	28.1 (68)	15.7 (45)	21.4 (113)
Other	6.2 (16)	-	3.0 (16)
of respondents .No	242	286	528

* Note: Respondents were allowed more than one response so the percentage distribution is equal to the number of participants who reported each answer based on the total number of respondents. Therefore, the total percentages do not add up to 100 percent and the numbers in parentheses when combined are greater than the total number of respondents.

Less than half of the women and girls surveyed reported that their employers allowed them to go out to meet others (43.2%) or allowed others to visit (41.5%).

Where I work, I am not allowed to go anywhere at all. They lock the door and unplug the phone and ask me to work inside the house only. After eight months, I tried to go out on my own when the employer was away from the home, but I was not brave enough and didn't know where to go. So, I just keep living like this seeing no one but the employer.

A 27-year-old single Shan female, whose first time migrating to Thailand was not disclosed, currently working in Chiang Mai.

Many others did not leave their workplace even though the employer allowed them to. The domestic workers interviewed explained they were too busy, feared arrest as an undocumented worker, were unfamiliar with the city and/or lacked friends or relatives to visit.

After finishing my work, I stay home and watch TV. I have just come to Thailand and I don't dare to go anywhere. If the employer doesn't take me out, I don't dare to go on my own. I am afraid I won't be able to find my way back.

A 19-year-old single Shan female who first migrated to Thailand two years ago currently working in Chiang Mai.

Communication and Language Barriers

Language barriers further aggravated the interactions between the domestic workers and their employers as well as the employers' family members. While more than of the women and girls surveyed in this study were able to speak some Thai, about one-fifth could not speak Thai at all. Language proficiency was often a key determinant in the salary provided and treatment of domestic workers by their employers. Those who were unable to speak Thai reported difficulty in finding good jobs as well as conducting and negotiating the jobs they did secure. The women and girls interviewed in this study also recounted occasions in which their inability to speak Thai elicited verbal and physical abuse from their employer.

My employers never beat me, but they scolded me often. As I didn't understand their language, it was easy to make mistakes in my work. For example, when they asked me to get the feeding bottle, I got the child's clothes by mistake. When they asked me to wash the clothes, I thought they asked me to clean the house. What I did was not according to their wish so they yelled or scolded me. I felt a lot of trouble in my mind.

A 20-year-old single Karen female who first migrated to Thailand two years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

I face a lot of problems because I can't speak Thai. If they ask me to go shopping, they have to give me a sample of what they want me to buy. If they don't find a sample for me I am sure to bring back the wrong thing from the market.

A 27-year-old single Mon female who first migrated to Thailand six years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

These realities often left the domestic workers extremely vulnerable and frightened. Verbal abuse was the most common violation experienced by the domestic workers in this study.

Verbal abuse was the most common violation experienced by the domestic workers in this study, with 54 percent reporting having been yelled at, 37 percent cursed at and 36 percent threatened. Nearly one in ten of the women and girls surveyed for this study reported being subjected to physical abuse (see Table 6).

Table 6 Percentage distribution and number of survey respondents that reported employer abuses by research site*

Type of employer abuse	Research Site		Total
	Chiang Mai	Mae Sot	
Yelled at you	40.0 (96)	65.4 (187)	53.6 (283)
Swore at you	38.8 (94)	36.0 (103)	37.3 (197)
Threatened	45.0 (109)	28.3 (81)	36.0 (190)
Tricked you with a lie	17.4 (42)	7.3 (21)	11.9 (63)
Touched you don't want	14.5 (35)	13.6 (39)	14.0 (74)
Locked up/confined	9.1 (22)	4.5 (13)	6.6 (35)
Cheated/kept your money	7.4 (18)	14.0 (40)	11.0 (58)
Thrown things at you	6.6 (16)	6.6 (19)	6.6 (35)
Punished you	4.1 (10)	0.3 (1)	2.1 (11)
Sexually touched you	4.1 (10)	7.3 (21)	5.9 (31)
Slapped or hit you	2.5 (6)	10.1 (29)	6.6 (35)
Pinched you	1.7 (4)	8.0 (23)	5.1 (27)
Pushed	2.1 (5)	10.8 (31)	6.8 (36)
Raped you	0.8 (2)	1.5 (3)	1.0 (5)
Other	19.0 (46)	1.5 (3)	9.3 (49)
No. of respondents	242	286	528

* Note: Respondents were allowed more than one response so the percentage distribution is equal to the number of participants who reported each answer based on the total number of respondents. Therefore, the total percentages do not add up to 100 percent and the numbers in parentheses when combined are greater than the total number of respondents.

It is widely known that domestic abuses are under-reported by women throughout the world and what was disclosed to the researchers in this study is most likely a reflection of a more widespread reality. The women and girls who were interviewed in depth described incidents of being slapped and, in some cases, severely beaten.

The employer loves her child very much. When the child cries I have to soothe her at once, if she does not stop crying the mother blames and yells at me every time.
A 16-year-old single Tamel female who first migrated to Thailand three years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

When the employer is in a good mood she is very nice. But, when she is in a bad mood, she has such a bad temper and screams at me calling me all sorts of things as though I am her slave or buffalo.

A 15-year-old single Shan female who first migrated to Thailand six years ago currently working in Chiang Mai.

The working conditions for the majority of the domestic workers in this study consisted of innumerable abuses for which they had little or no recourse. By arbitrarily setting the conditions and terms of employment regarding salaries, benefits, working hours, accommodations and access to outside contacts (without informing or negotiating such terms with the domestic workers), the employers maintained complete control over the lives of these women and girls.

Many reported incidents of withholding or non-payment of wages, while others explained that without constant reminders and requests, they would not receive their salary from their employer. Job responsibilities, more often than not, included a wide range of duties beyond housework, such as caring for children, the elderly or the infirm; tending animals; gardening; and, in quite a few cases, helping with the employer's business.

Majority of the domestic workers were provided accommodations, though about a third were given their own private room or shared a room with a family member or members they were responsible to care for, or with other employees, while only one-fifth were made to sleep in open areas with no privacy.

Confinement within the household and limited access to outside contact with friends and family was often imposed by the employer, in many cases, either through threats or through the lack of free time. Less than fifty percent of those surveyed reported that their employers permitted them to leave the house to meet others or allowed visitors into the house.

Language barriers further aggravated the interactions between the domestic workers and their employers, often resulting in verbal and physical abuse. Fear of their employers' threats and the inability to seek recourse has kept these girls and women's abuses hidden from the outside world. Their isolation inside private households has also effectively barricaded migrant domestic workers from the cautions of the community, NGOs or government agencies. Wider public awareness and scrutiny into the private households where thousands of domestic workers are employed is urgently needed to help address the abuses faced by these women and girls.

Future Aspirations

A number of the domestic workers expressed plans for their future that entailed returning home permanently to Burma, while others explained they only wanted to visit temporarily. A significant number noted that they would not return until the political and military conflicts in Burma are resolved. Those considering returning home discussed the physical difficulties in getting back home safely as well as the problems associated with confronting the strong judgments made of those who have been to Thailand, especially of those returning without savings or with a fatherless child.

Others interviewed discussed their aspirations for finding safer working environments or better paying jobs. Several domestic workers interviewed described wanting to further their studies and their unwillingness to marry in their present circumstances, if at all. Some of the women and girls could not imagine their future and expressed how dejected they felt with their life, not being able to see themselves ever overcoming the obstacles they face.

Saving Money

The majority of domestic workers interviewed explained that their focus was on saving money in an attempt to secure their future.

I can't say how long I will stay in Thailand. Now, I already have farmland and a house (back in Burma). I worked in Thailand for four years and it is a long time. But, some people in my village have worked here for more than ten years. When I go home I want to bring money with me. My parents bought rice fields for me with the money I sent. They also use it. When I deduct some for what I will use each month I can save 1,500 baht. It is a good income, so I shouldn't quit this job too soon.

A 22-year-old married Karen female who first migrated to Thailand four years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

Now, I don't want to go back yet, because I have no money to bring with me. At least I have to have enough money to cover the traveling costs and the gold that I had sold to come to Thailand. My parents are getting older, so I want to go within this year too. If I can save some money and go back this time, I won't come back to Thailand again.

A 17-year-old single Shan female, whose first time migrating to Thailand was not disclosed, currently working in Chiang Mai.

Sending Money Home

As has been noted throughout this report, the majority of domestic workers migrated to Thailand in order to earn money to send home to their families and relatives in Burma. Among the survey respondents, almost 80 percent of the domestic workers reported sending part of their earnings back home. They used a number of different means to send money home. More than half of the respondents sent money through a friend or relative returning to their village in Burma, while another one third sent the money themselves (often by meeting a relative at the border and handing the cash over directly). Approximately 28 percent reported sending money home via a broker, while 15 percent chose to use a money transfer outlet to transmit money to Burma, with 9 percent using a bank to transfer their funds (see Table 7).

Table 7 Percentage distribution and number of survey respondents who sent money home by method of transferring funds and research site*

Method of sending money home	Research Site		Total
	Chiang Mai	Mae Sot	
Send with a friend	72.4 (123)	52.3 (124)	60.7 (247)
Send yourself	39.4 (67)	25.7 (61)	31.4 (128)
Send through a broker	2.9 (5)	46.8 (111)	28.5 (116)
Send through a shop	24.7 (42)	8.4 (20)	15.2 (62)
Send through a bank	10.6 (18)	8.0 (19)	9.1 (37)
Other	1.2 (2)	5.5 (13)	3.7 (15)
No. of respondents	168	237	405

* Note: Respondents were allowed more than one response so the percentage distribution is equal to the number of participants who reported each answer based on the total number of respondents. Therefore, the total percentages do not add up to 100 percent and the numbers in parentheses when combined are greater than the total number of respondents.

The women and girls interviewed described problems finding a safe way to send money home.

My mother comes to the border every month or two to collect the money I have saved. Now, my mother bought a house and is planning to start a business.

A 15-year-old single Burman female who first migrated to Thailand a year ago currently working in Mae Sot.

I contact the man I came to Thailand with, because he goes back often and knows where my family lives. I am afraid the money will get lost, but I don't know any other way to send it home. The travel costs from my village to Thailand are very high so it is not possible to go or ask my family to come here.

A 34-year-old single Shan female, whose first time migrating to Thailand was not disclosed, currently working in Chiang Mai.

The study's survey did not address future aspirations but during the in-depth interviews participants discussed a wide range of perspectives and plans regarding their future. The responses ranged from hoping to go back permanently to Burma to wishing to visit temporarily, to expecting never to return.

Of those who envisioned returning home permanently to Burma, many had children that they left behind there when migrating to Thailand.

I don't want to stay in Thailand any more and intend to go to see my children this year. I will check out the situation and if I can work there, I will stay with them in Shan State. If the situation is still so bad, then I will come back and work in Thailand because I already have a work permit. If it is possible, I want to stay with my children and support them to study as best I can.

A 29-year-old married Shan female who first migrated to Thailand four years ago currently working in Chiang Mai.

I worked for three years in Thailand and saved enough money. I will go back to my village for the Water Festival and I do not intend to come back. I have to take care of my mother until she gets better. Now, my home in Burma is quite well equipped. While taking care of my mother I will help my brothers and sisters do the farm work. I don't want to open a shop and sell things, because in my village there are too many shops. We don't have electricity in my village but if my brothers want to buy a generator and open a video theatre, I will support them.

A 20-year-old single Karen female who first migrated to Thailand four years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

Other women and girls interviewed hoped to return home for a temporary visit and spoke of the conditions that determined their ability to do so.

I cannot decide when to go back to my country. When I was single, I could go back anytime I wanted. But, now I am married and have to consult with my husband. I intend to request from the employer to let us go home and pay homage to our parents. But, we haven't decided to go back permanently. When we go back to our village we have to do the farm work, but my husband doesn't want to do farm work anymore.

A 25-year-old married Karen female who first migrated to Thailand six years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

Others interviewed explained that if they could go home for a visit, they would return to work in Thailand after a short period of time.

I will go back to Burma for the Water Festival. I may return, I cannot say yet because I don't know the situation at home. But, if I am away from here for a long time my employer will find a new person. My employer is very kind and it will not be easy to find another as good as this one.

A 20-year-old single Karen female who first migrated to Thailand four years ago currently working in Mae Sot.

I will go back and stay with my mother for a while. I will ask my mother to send my youngest brother to the nearby town to study. Then, I will take my younger sister with me to work in Thailand. Together with me, we can send much more money home.

A 31-year-old single Karenni female who first migrated to Thailand three years ago currently working in Chiang Mai.

The majority of girls and women in this study spoke of their wishes to save their earnings so that they could send money home to their families. Many hoped that they could work in Thailand for a specific period of time and then return to Burma with sufficient capital to help provide a decent livelihood for their parents and, of those married, for their own families as well. Yet, they faced enormous difficulties in the simple act of trying to transfer funds home. Some did not know anyone they could trust to carry the money to Burma. Others did not know how to get back home.

Some of the women and girls could not imagine their future and expressed how dejected they felt with their life, not being able to see themselves ever overcoming the obstacles they face. Living in Thailand was far more difficult than most had envisioned. Yet, for many, returning home was not an option.

Conclusion

The root causes of migration from Burma to Thailand were explicitly related to political and economic situations including poverty at the origin. While there is a growing economic economy in Thailand, the destination. The push-pull theory can explain the massive flow of migration from Burma to Thailand.

At the national level, Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) should address the causes of mass migration to Thailand (and elsewhere), including domestic policies that result in extensive unemployment, inflation of basic commodities and forced relocation. The SPDC should also recognize that in order to solve the fundamental problems in Burma, a national reconciliation process must take place and political reforms must be promoted. If people from Burma want to seek employment in neighboring countries, the SPDC should permit them to do so legally, take responsibility to ensure their protection abroad and allow them to return home without harassment. SPDC must also strive to incorporate and enforce labor laws and rights for all people.

Similarly, the Thai government should acknowledge domestic work as labor protected by Thai labor laws and ensure that domestic workers' rights are upheld, including the right to a written contract that defines work expectations, guarantees a minimum wage, fixed working hours with optional overtime, holidays and benefits. In honoring and protecting domestic workers' rights. The Thai government should include efforts to educate employers about the rights of domestic workers, establish channels for reporting complaints, prosecutes and abusive employers. In this last respect, the Thai government should provide translators to facilitate reporting of complaints by migrant workers as well as provide referrals to legal assistance and protection.

The Thai government should also provide educational opportunities for migrant workers, such as Thai language classes and other special adult education programs that could be held on the weekends or evenings. Thai education law provides equal education opportunities for all and efforts should be enhanced to see that migrants are included.

Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) play a critical role in reaching out to and communicating with migrants. They must continually strive to work with local community networks to make contact with migrant domestic workers, raise awareness of their hidden and isolated realities, identify their critical issues and recommend action strategies. Finally, all organizations and government institutions should seek the inclusion of the migrant community in developing policies, practices and responses should be considered to help establish appropriate interventions to reduce the abuse, exploitation and trafficking of migrant domestic workers.