

Migrant Domestic Workers: From Burma to Thailand

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Abstract

Migration from Burma is the largest migration flows in Southeast Asia over the past decade. Now, there are more than ten thousand women from Burma registered as domestic workers in Thailand. Although there is a growing awareness of their isolation and vulnerability to labor exploitation and violence, there is little data available. This results in the alienation of domestic workers (including Thai domestic workers) the disregard for their labor and basic rights. The ultimate goal of the project is to provide information to policy makers and service providers to be used in developing appropriate interventions for migrant domestic workers in Thailand, and to offer a resource for advocating and protecting the rights of these women and girls. 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 Chiangmai, Thailand.

The research found that no women and girl from Burma in this study knew about their jobs until they arrived at the employers' house. The employers set working conditions, accommodations, salaries, sick leave, care or pay without agreement from their employees. In addition to receiving below-minimum wages, almost everybody work more than 8 hours a day. Many of these women and girls worked seven days a week, with no regular days off, no overtime pay or compensation by their employer regardless of the hours they worked. Only a third was given their own private room, while a fifth was made to sleep in open areas with no privacy. 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 reported having to care for children, the elderly or the infirm, and a third was expected to help with their employer's business in addition. 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. 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. As a result, migrant domestic workers are caught in a dependence upon their employer, which in this case was

reinforced by the efforts of the Thai government to register migrants from Burma. Migrant workers found themselves threatened by deportation, harassment and arrest as a result of their inability to prove their legal status.

In conclusion, in order to alleviate the abuse and exploitation of migrant domestic workers. To recognize and protect the basis human rights, activities should be implemented at the international, national and local levels. For example, at the national level, Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) should address the causes of mass migration to Thailand (and elsewhere). 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, and other fringe benefits.