



## Thailand's Hidden Workforce: Burmese Migrant Factory Workers

Ruth Pearson and Kyoko Kusakabe

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Reviewed by John Walsh, Editor, *SIU Journal of Management*, School of Management, Shinawatra University, Thailand

There has been an increasing amount of attention given to migrant workers in academic literature – although as the recent reports on workplace conditions and relations in the Gulf states appearing in the *Guardian* and elsewhere indicate, this is an issue which is rarely brought to the attention of the public and, when it is, the discourse is so often degraded by those who wish to stir up anti-immigrant rhetoric. This is a phenomenon that is very evident in Thailand, which is the subject of this excellent and penetrating analysis of the lives of Burmese women migrants in Thailand's factories. As authors Ruth

Pearson and Kyoko Kusakabe point out, recent Prime Ministers General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin and Abhisit Vejjajiva have been among prominent figures who have made dangerous populist appeals to nationalism by talking of migrant workers as a threat to national security and of a tidal wave of babies born in Thailand who would overwhelm public services.

Outbreaks of nationalism have the potential rapidly to become uncontrollable and violent, a various recent incidents have shown. It draws upon the source of unease felt among sections of Thai society resulting from the intensification of market capitalism in the country and the effects of the creative destruction which is dissolving so many of the social relations created in the past. This may be more important for anti-foreigner sentiment than animus felt by members of the working class who might face competition for their jobs, since most of those jobs are in the 3D category (i.e. dirty, dangerous and demeaning) which Thai workers are said no longer to wish to do for the wages available. Nevertheless, the presence of migrant workers in under-regulated workplaces does exert some negative pressure on wages.

Stirring up anti-migrant sentiment is a well-trodden path, even in Thailand where so much political and public discourse has been limited by needless and needlessly draconian laws. It is greatly to the credit of the authors that they move both beyond this political reductionism and the also familiar (though nevertheless still shocking) story of the abuses and exploitation suffered by the migrants to a deeper exploration of the lives lived by the women concerned – women who, as is acutely pointed out, undertake these voyages during their prime child-bearing years. A space exists, partly filled by this book, in which not just the day-to-day lives of the women concerned can be explored but also the interaction between their hopes and aspirations and their new lives, in which they find themselves separated from a family they have been raised to believe they should support and in which they have to adjust rapidly to a wholly alienating

style of living. As a result, many contract relationships with men they do not know very well and of whom their families might not approve and then face the need to give birth to a child in a country where people are hostile to such an event.

This does not happen to everyone, of course, and it does not happen without reason or because of thoughtlessness. Lack of resources and the policy of the Myanmar government – the survey on which much of the research reported on in this book took place before the recent partial switch to democracy in that country – mean that it has been difficult, time-consuming and expensive to obtain reliable birth control. There are women for whom, for the most part, an hour here or a few baht there can make the difference between being able to remit money back home and having to ask for support from those same family members. It is in these areas of the personal lives of women migrants that the book makes its greatest contribution. Relying as it does on an extensive programme of quantitative research, the book provides both empirical data with a level of confidence that is greatly needed and, also, the ability to distinguish between different conditions in the three research sites selected. There is a great deal of difference between living and working conditions in the periphery of Bangkok and Mae Sot and these differences arise from a variety of geographical, historical, political and interpersonal factors that have significant impacts on the lives of workers. While wages may be higher in one are *per se*, that might be outweighed by the number of hours of overtime available or the presence of other migrants who might offer social solidarity and the opportunity to share childcare responsibilities. Since the women factor workers have to work more or less continuously for all but one or two days a month (as long as orders are in), they can do little more to take care of any small children who might be accompanying them. The research provides valuable details of how the respondents navigate these daily issues and would represent an excellent starting point for any organization that might wish to improve their lives.

Pearson and Kusakabe avoid much political discussion and do not point out, for example, how pronouncements on the status of migrant workers are correlated with the presence of elected or unelected governments. They also eschew any overarching conceptual framework to explain the phenomena related with migration and its effects. Instead, they use what in management studies would be called an eclectic paradigm. That is, the research describes clearly what actually happened, embracing as it does so the diversity within the experiences of the different members of the sample and the variation in their responses to external environment changes. A model based on such an approach incorporates this variety by explaining that some events tend to bring about certain responses and other events are associated with different responses but that it would be overly simplistic to draw the conclusion that all the women involved will always respond in the same way to a certain event. Life is more complex than that and, by investigating some of the factors that cause people to behave in different ways, this book has made a significant contribution to helping readers understand what is the reality of life facing these much maligned and often abused workers.