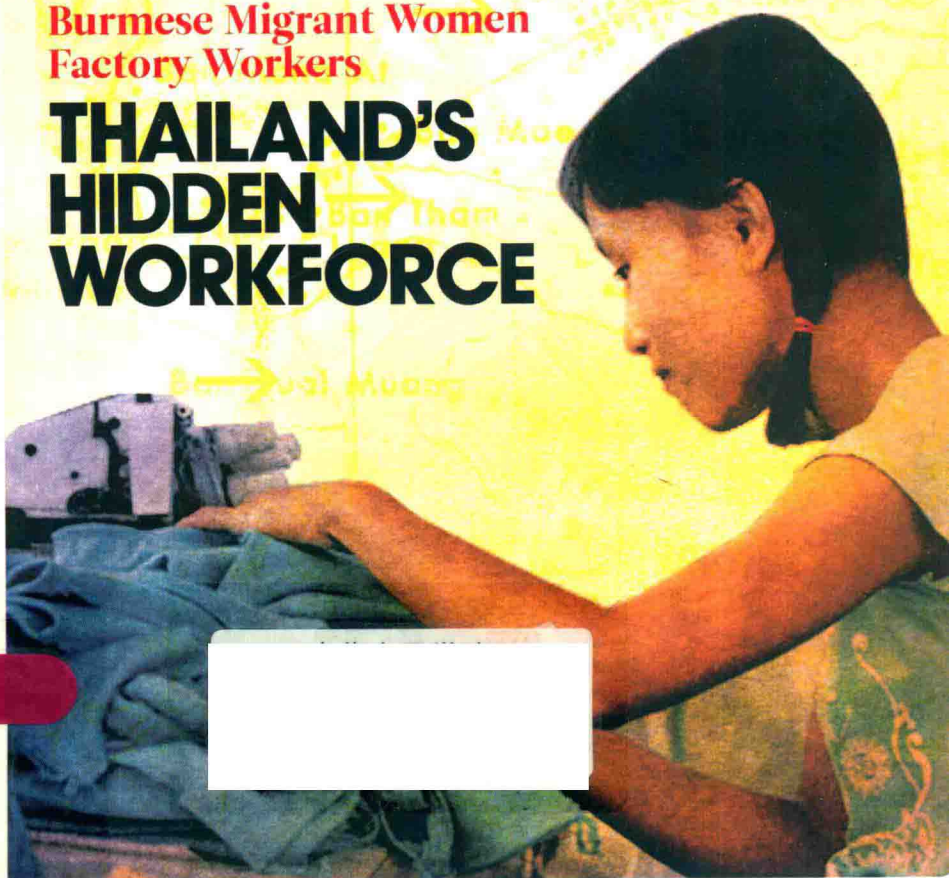


Ruth Pearson
and Kyoko Kusakabe

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Burmese Migrant Women
Factory Workers

THAILAND'S HIDDEN WORKFORCE



Thailand's Hidden Workforce

Burmese Migrant Women Factory Workers

RUTH PEARSON & KYOKO KUSAKABE



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Asian Arguments

ASIAN ARGUMENTS is a series of short books about Asia today. Aimed at the growing number of students and general readers who want to know more about the region, these books will highlight community involvement from the ground up in issues of the day usually discussed by authors in terms of top-down government policy. The aim is to better understand how ordinary Asian citizens are confronting problems such as the environment, democracy and their societies' development, either with or without government support. The books are scholarly but engaged, substantive as well as topical and written by authors with direct experience of their subject matter.

About the Authors

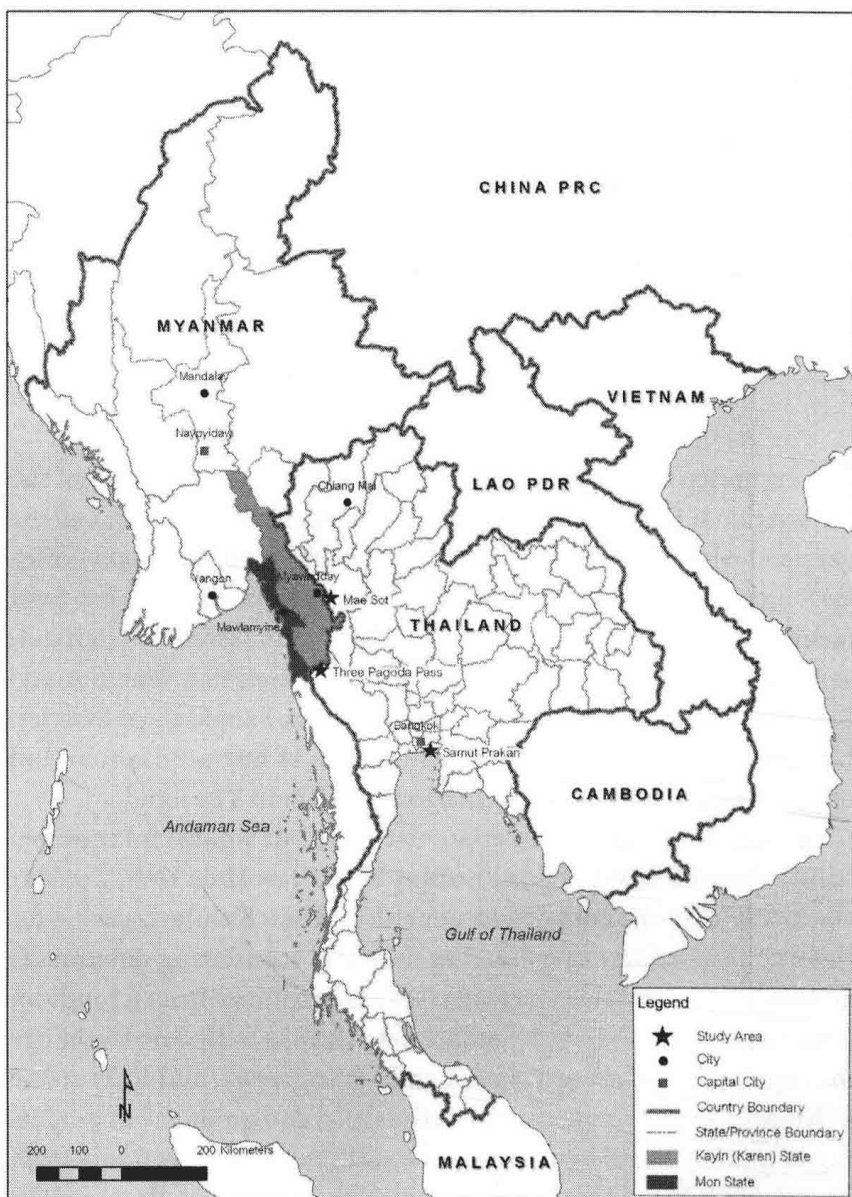
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Thailand and surrounding countries

Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| ACMECS | Ayeyarwady–Chaophraya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| BEAN | Border Essan Action Network |
| BLSO | Burma Labour Solidarity Organization |
| BMWEC | Burmese Migrant Workers' Education Committee |
| CDC | Children's Development Centre |
| COMMIT | Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking |
| CPPCR | Committee for the Promotion and Protection of Child Rights |
| DKBA | Democratic Karen Buddhist Army |
| ECS | Economic Cooperation Strategy |
| FTUB | Federation of Trade Unions – Burma |
| GMS | Greater Mekong Subregion |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IOM | International Organization for Migration |
| ITUC | International Trade Union Confederation |
| KNU | Karen National Union |
| MOU | memorandum of understanding |

| | |
|-------|---|
| NGO | non-governmental organisation |
| NICs | newly industrialised countries |
| NLD | National League for Democracy |
| NRIE | Northern Region Industrial Estate |
| SAW | Social Action for Women |
| SPDC | State Peace and Development Council |
| TGMA | Thai Garment Manufacturers' Association |
| 3D | dirty, dangerous and demeaning |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| YCOWA | Yaung Chi Oo Workers' Association |

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I

Thailand's hidden workforce: Burmese women factory workers

Burmese migrant workers in Thailand: hidden from the global gaze

This book tells the story of women who migrate from Burma¹ to work, as part of a large and exploited workforce, in Thailand's export factories. It deals with a part of the current globalisation story which is rarely glimpsed either from the West or indeed within Thailand and other parts of Asia. Most of the migrant factory workers in Thailand, like factory workers in garment and textile industries all over the world, are young women, though there are also a number of older women and men among their number. Their experiences of exploitation echo those of many women workers in export factories all over the world.² But what is particularly poignant about the story of the Burmese workers in Thailand is that they are not only migrants, seeking better lives for themselves and their families, away from the dire situation they face in their native country;³ very often they are illegal or 'unregistered' migrants, with no legal right to remain in the country of destination, or even in their jobs. They have no recourse to legal protection from any kind of oppression or abuse, be it low wages, excessive overtime, harsh factory regimes, illegal deductions from

their wages, restrictions on their mobility, or harassment by police, immigration authorities and local citizens. Although courted by Thai industrialists seeking to access cheap labour in order to make their products competitive in global markets often characterised as 'a race to the bottom',⁴ Burmese migrants are frequently reviled by Thai people, who view them as a threat to social stability and job opportunities for themselves, a perception frequently fuelled by politicians seeking to distance themselves from the reality of domestic civil unrest and economic problems within Thailand.

There are an estimated 2 million migrant workers in Thailand,⁵ most of whom work in the unregulated construction and agricultural sectors, moving between workplaces and employers as demand for their labour shifts, living in miserable conditions without regulation or protection. This represents a significant number given that the total recorded labour force in Thailand is some 11 million,⁶ though there is very little acknowledgement, either within Thailand or outside, of the significant role played by migrant labour in the Thai economy. This contrasts strongly with the widely discussed presence of approximately 150,000 Burmese refugees who have sought shelter in a series of camps for displaced people on the Western borders with Burma,⁷ which have received widespread publicity both in Thailand and throughout the Western world, particularly in North America, which is home to a relatively large Burmese diaspora.

The context: push-and-pull factors underlying Burmese migration to Thailand

The Burmese women and men who cross Thailand's border in search of employment conform in many ways to a classic model of push-pull migration. Certainly the economic and political conditions in their homeland provide a clear rationale for those who want to leave. Three decades of economic decline and political repression in Burma under increasingly oppressive military regimes have decimated the country's once substantial physical

infrastructure and thriving economic sectors, which once supplied rubber to many parts of the world.⁸ The ousting of Aung San Suu Kyi after her victory in the 1990 democratic general election heralded the rule of a series of autocratic and idiosyncratic military generals, often seemingly ruled by astrology rather than logic,⁹ who have denied the population the opportunity for political participation or economic advancement. These governments have sought to impose the dominance of the ruling Burman ethnic groups against other ethnic groups, including the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon, who have at various times conducted armed insurrection against the government. This has not only resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, but has also led to the development of a forced labour regime in which the government requisitions labour for the armed forces or construction projects, as well as food and other goods from minority populations. Repression is particularly strong in the border provinces, causing real hardship and insecurity as well as various types of human rights abuse.¹⁰

Even those from the central Burman heartlands have faced increasing economic insecurity as well as political oppression, and the migrant workers in Thailand come from all ethnic groups in the population. Most of the migrant workers we talked to recount tales of families falling into debt, with no possibility of jobs or incomes in the crumbling economy, claiming they are motivated to seek work in Thailand as much to support their families back home as to seek a better life for themselves. The push factors have been exacerbated in recent years by escalating repression and unrest. The so-called 'saffron revolution' in 2007 led by Buddhist monks on the streets of Yangon (Rangoon¹¹), which was followed by severe repression of the students and ordinary citizens who gave their support to these protests. Those who came from the Irrawaddy Delta were further destabilised by Cyclone Nargis, which hit in 2008, with people in rural communities losing their homes as well as their land and livelihoods,¹² leading to further pressure on people to seek opportunities elsewhere.¹³

Indeed, working in Thailand does seem to offer a solution, particularly to their economic problems. The difference in wages between Thailand and Burma is large; official estimates say that wages in Thailand are up to ten times higher than in Burma,¹⁴ which makes it very clear why young Burmese women and men are attracted to working in factories and in other parts of the Thai economy, in spite of difficult conditions and low wages in comparison to the pay of Thai workers. Many migrant workers we spoke to told us with pride that, although their wages were low, they were able to save money and send regular remittances to their families, whereas if they had stayed at home they would not have been able to help in this way. They also complained that in Burma the cost of education, transport and health was growing continuously, and wages at home, if they had jobs, would not cover all the family's expenses.

The growth of migrant workers in manufacturing and export factories in Burma dates from the 1990s, when Thai exports were increasingly challenged by competition from lower-waged economies in the region such as Vietnam and China. In order to take advantage of cheaper labour both in lower-wage parts of Thailand and in the form of migrants from neighbouring countries, the Thai government instituted a policy of industrial decentralisation, with the overt objective of closing the development gap between itself and its poorer neighbours. Whilst this objective has never been achieved, there has since the mid-1990s been a significant growth in factories employing migrant labour, and especially after the Asian financial crisis in 1997–98, which forced the pace of economic recovery measures. The majority of the factories (re)locating to border areas were set up in the western town of Mae Sot in Tak province. By 2004 there were nearly 125,000 registered Burmese workers in Tak province, though this is widely considered to represent less than a third of the total number of migrants, including those not official registered, making it the largest concentration of registered Burmese migrants outside Bangkok. The high proportion of women among these migrants – nearly

70 per cent – reflects the high concentration of employment in Tak province in garment and textile factories, which traditionally employ a high percentage of women in their workforce. Mae Sot grew from a small and isolated border trading outpost with 50,000 inhabitants in 1988, most notable for its (contraband) trade with neighbouring Burma in precious gemstones and teak, to a bustling urban centre ten years later with a resident population of traders – mainly Burmese Muslims and Chinese – supplemented by Buddhist Burman and Christian Karen workers from different parts of Burma. The population had grown fivefold by 2010.

Not all factories relocated to the border towns; still the largest concentration of Burmese and other migrant workers in Thailand are to be found in the small workshops and factories in central Thailand, both in the capital Bangkok and in other towns in the adjacent provinces of Pathumthani and Samut Prakan. More recently there has been a growth in the establishment of factories employing Burmese migrants in the town known as ‘Three Pagodas Pass’, a border crossing point in the Sangklaburi district of Kanchanaburi province; since 1996 a number have been producing garments, furniture and even mosquito nets, aimed at both domestic and export markets.¹⁵ In this part of Thailand, unlike in the central areas and Mae Sot, the organisation of migrant workers is fairly informal due to the fact that this area is relatively isolated both from Yangon and from Bangkok, with poor road infrastructure on both sides of the border. Most of the Burmese workers employed in Three Pagodas Pass walk daily through the informal crossings that straddle the town, returning to their homes on the Burmese side when their shifts have ended; the exception is those – not infrequent – occasions when they are forced by the demands of the job to work all night, which requires them to sleep in the very place where they work all day.

The other concentration of Burmese workers, in the central provinces around Bangkok, are those who have been hit the hardest by economic downturn, first in the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s, and more recently in the deteriorating conditions of

2008–09, following the financial crisis in the West. The export factories only started to hire Burmese workers after the 1997–08 crisis as an alternative strategy to decentralisation, in order to reduce costs and improve their competitiveness. Many of the factories in these areas are relatively large, though they tend to coexist with informal workshops and home-based subcontracting. The larger factories generally employ only registered migrants who have the appropriate documents, often people who have been in the country for some time. Undocumented migrants can be found in the more informal workshops, where the pay and the working conditions are inferior.

Mae Sot and Three Pagodas Pass feel like migrant towns, de-linked from mainstream Thai society, whereas the high numbers of (mainly) Burmese migrants in the town of Samut Prakan in central Thailand fail to make a significant impact on this large Thai city, except maybe in certain marginal neighbourhoods where migrant workers and their families are concentrated. Unlike in Mae Sot and Three Pagodas Pass, where migrants wear traditional Burmese dress (women in *salong* and men in *longi*), Burmese people in Samut Prakan tend to make more effort – and have more opportunities – to assimilate into Thai society. When they go out – even to the weekend language schools, which teach both Thai and English – migrant workers, in white shirts and black skirts, resemble Thai university students. Their clothing, like their tendency to display photographs of the Thai royal family, is a deliberate attempt to demonstrate ‘respect’ to the local Thai population. However, in Mae Sot, where only 5 per cent of the registered workforce in the garment factories are Thai, there is very little pressure to imitate the dress or other lifestyle preferences of Thai people

Background to the research

This book is based on research carried out by the authors, together with a team of Thai and Burmese researchers, between 2006 and