
Ruth Pearson and Kyoko Kusakabe. *Burmese Migrant Women Factory Workers: Thailand's Hidden Workforce*. London: Zed Books, 2012, 205pp

This short volume is a well-researched book full of details analyzing the experiences and struggles of migrant workers as cheap labour from Burma working in the export-oriented factories of Thailand. It makes two important distinctions upfront: first that this cheap migrant labour is both legal and “illegal” (undocumented or unregistered) and that these migrants are not to be confused with refugees accepted into Thailand. The latter, they say, have “shelter in a series of camps for displaced people” and have received widespread international attention. This statement leaves the impression, intended or not, that refugees might be better off. The book does not discuss refugees but my research suggests that the situation for Burmese refugees is equally precarious and full of difficulties similar to that of undocumented workers.

This book is part of the Asian Arguments series published by Zed which includes short works that are “scholarly but engaged”, something John Saul (2006) and others has long advocated as an important methodology for university scholarship. Their methodology involved a team of Thai and Burmese researchers together with the two authors conducting interviews, surveys, participatory workshops and so on over a four-year period (2006-2010). They focused primarily on Burmese women migrant workers in three different areas of Thailand where export factories are

located, two in border areas (Mae Sot and “Three Pagodas Pass”) and one in the central region (Samat Prakan). Choosing such different locations to carry out their research was very astute as it enabled them to unearth the complexities in the everyday life experiences of these migrant women workers and also, from time to time, of men migrant workers. They provide good descriptions of these areas under study, even though they are not the largest areas where Burmese migrants reside. My research suggests that Mahachai has the largest number of Burmese migrants. The strongest part of their research is made up of direct quotes narrating the migrant workers experiences, especially Chapter 6 entitled “After the crisis: new struggles and possibilities”.

In many respects, their research illustrates that migrant women workers are not a homogenous group; it often depends on where they are located. If they are close to the border between Burma and Thailand, they tend to keep their cultural identity and language more easily with the presence of various “Burmese’ institutions (community organization, health clinics, schools and so on) and can commute back and forth. In the central region of Thailand, Samat Prakan near Bangkok, there is a stronger impetus to integrate or merge within Thai society thus averting discrimination. However in the factories, their work day experiences as cheap labour, exploited and insecure, are very similar. Throughout the book, this community-work distinction is relevant to understanding their struggles.

The opening chapter broadly reviews the relevant literature on migrant women workers in export-oriented factories and sets the global context for what is to be their detailed account of these Burmese women workers; they are “part of a worldwide army (sic) of female workers” labouring to produce manufactured goods of corporations which are primarily destined for Western consumer markets. They correctly emphasize that the Thai government officially makes “public commitments to guarantee the rights of migrant workers” but this is “sadly not generally the case on the ground” (p.17). Chapter 2, which focuses on Thailand’s industrialisation and labour migration policies, traces the evolution of these policies and discusses the shifts in the Thai strategy, which are often approved by the World Bank and parallel the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s (where in 1997/98 repatriation policy led to 300,000 deportations of mainly Burmese foreign workers; many of whom returned illegally) and then again in 2008 (important registration exercises

became increasingly restrictive with often absurd limitations on the migrant workers). The difficulties related to registration policies are central to why migrants choose to remain “illegal” or unregistered. The Appendix at the end of the book provides the history of these registration exercises over sixteen years (1996-2012), changing at least seven times.

The ownership and management of most of the factories under study are subcontractors for international overseas corporations (p.25). As well, in addition to constant discriminatory measures towards migrant workers, Thai policies tended to divide the workforce, favouring Thai workers especially in times of crisis. It is stated that there are schemes to retrain retrenched Thai workers and that they receive higher wages and benefits; none of these applied to migrant workers whether they were legal or illegal. However, the authors then state that the “number of (Thai) workers covered by social security remains low” (p. 23).

The research focuses on what motivates these workers, 70% of whom are women, to leave Burma for work in often deplorable conditions, unprotected and with cheaper wages than Thai workers. Even with all the problems of being underpaid, withheld wages and so on, their research reported that the migrant workers are still better off than what they would experience in Burma. They are often able to help their families back home with remittances where my research suggests that a third of the 60 million people of Burma live below the poverty line. In spite of the rhetoric about democratic reforms in Burma, the military continues to discriminate against its ethnic minorities, many of whom can never receive nationality cards that could enable them to register in Thailand as migrant workers or to live safely within Burmese communities.

The discrimination faced by migrant workers is not just “labour rights abuses” but also relates to citizenship, especially of their children. This reproduction dimension is the focus of Chapter 5 as they detail the experience of Burmese migrant families living in Thailand. And, here is where we see the continual problem with this book in terms of statistics. On page 17, they estimate that “officially there are currently over 100,000 stateless and (sic?) migrant children in Thailand”... “subject to exclusion and discrimination”. When we get to page 114 of Chapter 5, they estimate over “500,000 stateless children already living in Thailand”.

Throughout, they repeat that migrant workers in Thailand are “estimated at between 1.5 and 3 million, with 80% coming from Burma” (p. 47 and elsewhere). They repeat that these Burmese workers do the work that is “dirty, dangerous and demeaning” (3Ds). The repetition and confusing use of statistics undermine the importance of this research material; these statistics really became a hindrance to the analysis especially around pages 81-82. The authors go on and on about numbers in various years, then end on page 82 with the statement that it is “difficult to determine precise numbers”, followed by the next paragraph that gives precise numbers of workers employed in the largest Mae Sot factory.

The authors refer to surveys but at times, there is no clear idea of how many were surveyed and when. Two of the tables give us some idea of the extremely small sample. We know for example that they surveyed 496 respondents about the birth of their first child.

Other problems with this book relate to contradictory statements. For example, on page 78 they state: “Because of the insecurity and precariousness of the occupations in which they work, most migrant workers change jobs frequently”. Ten pages later, there is a list of the draconian “obstacles if they wish to change their jobs” (p. 89). The handling of voluminous research material over several years in three different locations will understandably give contradictory results.

This book would have made a better contribution if some attention had been given to removing the repetition, especially of statistics, and contradictory statements. The research undertaken is obviously rich, vitally important and urgent to understand politically; even with some reservations, the book succeeds in drawing our attention to the devastating situation for migrant Burmese workers in Thailand.

Rosalind Boyd

Founding Editor, Labour, Capital and Society
Retired, McGill University

Reference

John S. Saul. 2006. *Development after Globalization: Theory and Practice for the Embattled South in a New Imperial Age*. London: Zed Books.