

Gender, Citizenship and Strategies: Current Crisis and Future prospects for migrant workers on the Thai-Burmese Border

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The utilization of cheap migrant labour from Burma and elsewhere has been a growing element in Thailand's industrialization policy over the last two decades. But in the current situation, with the government facing instability on both the economic and the political front, it is important to think about the future. In economic terms the signs of disruption are already apparent. As the fall out from the global financial crisis hits demand for Thailand's cheap labour exports, economic activity is being negatively affected as factories have started to reduce the number of days they operate, eliminate over time, or close down completely. In border areas jobs are particularly vulnerable; here investment is often precarious, factories are generally small scale, there is little scrutiny from the media, and there are no effective trade unions. The Thai state is putting overt pressure on migrant workers to return their home countries.

However, as our research indicates, this is not a simple, viable or desirable solution. The women workers we have talked to in the course of our research have invested their labour, love and ingenuity into building a future for themselves and their families on the Thai side of the border. Without employment prospects in Burma, without savings, to cushion any transition, and faced with pressure to maintain the flow of remittances against the post-cyclone appreciation of the Burmese kyat against the Thai baht, migrant workers are falling back on desperate strategies – relying on still-employed friends for support, eating wild fruits and vegetables or re-shuffling the distribution of their families on both sides of the border; But returning home is not an option- given the hostile nature of the Burmese state as well as the long term family and personal investment in migration.

How will the Thai state respond to this situation? Will forcible deportation meet the approval of civil society, of the enterprise owners who have profited from the employment of cheap migrations? From the ASEAN powers who are raising their visibility in the region and beyond. What kind of position does Thailand seek in the next decades within the GMS and how important is access to Burmese resources, markets and political support? What will be the effect of accelerating the adoption of the MOU on migrants to Thailand? How are issues of nationality and citizenship to be resolved for the large numbers of migrant workers and their families already in Thailand? How is the political debates over the governance and government deal with issues of Thainess, exclusion and inclusion. Future research agendas, as well as organization and demands by civil society in the region needs to focus not just on the economic drivers and impact of the crisis, but also on the exploration of the political and gendered reality of the situation, which raises questions about nationality, citizenship and the ways in which labour is reproduced as well as appropriated within the Thai economy.
