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In search of a better life

Female migrants bearing the burden of essential care work in Southeast Asian cities are all-too vulnerable to exploitation

'This work is a way out of poverty. Sometimes our children help us out, in the homes where we work. We do it to help our children, our parents, our husbands, our sisters, our brothers.'

These words from a domestic worker in Bangkok tell a common story. They show why women and men from lower incomes move out of their homes to search for work in faraway places. They explain why this Thai woman is prepared to take on endless roles as a cleaner, childminder, pet-sitter, carer for the elderly and disabled, grocery shopper, gardener, car-washer, cook, laundry worker, general dogsbody. Thanks to increasing urbanisation and ageing populations, there is a need for care services in Southeast Asia – and the burden is falling on female migrant workers.

The World Health Organisation estimates that 15 per cent of the 625 million people in the 10 countries in Southeast Asia have disabilities. Longevity is the norm in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei, and the ratio of the frail elderly to young adults who can support them is high, due to falling fertility rates. As long as governmental and community structures do not sufficiently support families, people will want the cheapest form of labour to care for their children, elderly parents, or disabled sibling.

Urbanisation in Southeast Asia is also on the rise – 16 per cent in 1950, 43 per cent in 2010 and a projected 52 per cent by 2030. This growth makes cities attractive places where itinerant workers can make money and then return home. Movements of people from rural areas to the city or to another country are motivated by the lure of earning quickly and legally, allowing them to jump up the socio-economic ladder.

Exporting unemployment

In spite of its economic growth, however, there is a high level of poverty

in the region. The World Bank definition of $2 a day as a benchmark of poverty shows that there are 200 million people below that line today, a vast increase from 70 million in 2010. Academics cite various factors: underdevelopment in previous decades; better development programmes that have also led to rising costs; social injustices against communities in the name of progress; increasing competition that has led to suppression of wages to sustain industries; and individual materialistic desires.

Beyond this, there is the political will that encourages people to leave. For example, in a recent media report, Indonesia's new minister of manpower and transmigration was quoted as saying that the government would continue the practice it began in 2001 to 'facilitate labour export' as a solution to unemployment, with about 40 million people jobless. With no internal national solutions to tackle poverty and unemployment, many, like the Thai domestic worker, find themselves having to leave in search of work in big cities or abroad.

But the free flow of people as labour is problematic. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) refers to an informal economy as work done by workers that are – in law or in practice – not covered (or insufficiently covered) by formal employment arrangements. Even with a contract, a person may be working informally, and the way they are treated can be unregulated and ungoverned.

Slavery in all but name

The recruitment process remains a challenge, as there are always shifts in agreement by agents on the supply chain; rising debts following sudden increases in the cost of transport, food, accommodation; shifts in political will as workers from one country are preferred over another. Those caught in this bind can easily become informal, undocumented workers. Some might be trafficked into unpaid care work with their wages used to pay off debts. Some might pay off their debts by turning to the sex industry, or be trafficked into it. This is slavery.

These workers are vulnerable to non-payment of wages, have little or no training on occupational hazards for their own safety, no social protection in terms of health insurance, lodging benefits, medical benefits, pensions or emergency funds for unexpected family situations. Some are abused – physically, verbally, sexually – and some are psychologically affected by living in cramped places with teenage or adult sons, forced to live in kitchens and storerooms. Others have no documentation to their name, as passports are held by the agent or the employer.

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Despite these risks, women are still moving to cities in search of better opportunities. This informal labour force – not all of whom are working in care services – accounts for 60 per cent of the workforce worldwide. And while the situation for many is bleak, there are some informal domestic workers who are well treated.

A recent study by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and its partners shows that almost 49 per cent of migrant workers are women. A 2015 factsheet on data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, compiled by UN Women and the ILO, shows that female migrant workers aged between 20 and 64 make up 47.8 per cent of the 6 million migrant workers in Southeast Asia. The majority of those are informal workers. Studies show that 63 per cent of Thailand's total workforce are informal workers, while in Indonesia the proportion is 66 per cent. The Malaysian Federation of Employers has said that for every one documented worker, there are three informal workers without documentation. In 2015, officials claimed there were 630,000 Indonesian domestic workers in the Middle East. The unofficial figure – taking into account those without documentation – was almost three times that, at 1.8 million.

Most female migrant workers are in the care industry, often earning less than other employees. In Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei and Singapore, most are in domestic service. Numbers are difficult to consolidate, but it is estimated that 65 per cent of female migrant workers are in vulnerable employment, leaving them open to exploitation as their contractual terms are not respected.

A silent workforce

While domestic workers account for a huge section of the workforce, recognition of their work remains vague in almost all Southeast Asian countries. A 2016 World Bank Report states that the informal economy's contributions comprise 4 to 6 per cent of the total GDP in developed countries and more than 50 per cent in developing countries such as Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia. This comes through

remittances that formal and informal workers send home. In 2013, total remittances in the region exceeded $50 billion. More than half came from women, working formally and informally, who were often earning less than men and formal workers.

These women are frequently their own development programme. In their towns and villages, they have built homes and their children are able to go to school, leading to greater economic stability and development – at the expense of family life.

Most countries in Southeast Asia or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) are not signatories to the eight key ILO Conventions on domestic workers, migration employment, protection of wages, maternal protection and social security – part of the conditions of decent work. This means the countries do not follow a unified approach, despite being part of a regional bloc.

Signs of hope

While Asean countries have signed the 2007 Asean Declaration on the Protection and Promotion on the Rights of Migrant Workers, most countries have yet to ratify the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Based on this Asean declaration there is a provision for a framework to protect all migrant workers regardless of their legal status. This has yet to come into effect. But there is hope, with the 2016 Vientiane Declaration on Transition from Informal Employment to Formal Employment towards Decent Work Promotion in Asean. The terms in this declaration hold much promise. There is also a longstanding decision that Asean country leaders must review, to allow visa-free entry into each other's country.

Data remains a challenge, as the definitions of terms, decent work conditions and collation of information are not consistent and transparent. What is needed most, even as we wait for policies, is more protection for domestic workers, whether employed formally or informally, in the private space of a home or in a care centre. As an informal worker, she remains vulnerable.

This protection must be a combined effort between many bodies. Non-governmental organisations, international bodies, governments, the private sector, the community and employers have to work together and follow the conditions on decent work, respect and human rights. Like that Thai woman in Bangkok, women are doing this work to give their families a better life.



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