

War on Want, 'Restricted Rights: Migrant women workers in Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia', written by Reiko Harima, Managing Director of Asian Migrant Centre, May 2012.

<http://www.waronwant.org/attachments/WOW%20Migration%20Report%20low%20res.pdf>

Restricted Rights reports on the latest migration trends concerning migrant women workers in Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia.

Most migrant women workers in Cambodia are from within, whereas those in Thailand and Malaysia are largely from overseas including Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines. This report contains valuable and insightful up-to-date information from the field based on interviews with the workers. For those in Thailand and Malaysia, Burmese women living and working in the two countries were interviewed.

There are some differences in workers' migration patterns and lived experiences. However, some notable key cross-cutting themes discussed are the factors that were drivers of the movement of these women workers, including: companies' desire to pay their workers as low as possible to compete in the global market; and the women workers' need for economic survival and safety from political oppression and persecution. In all three countries, the interviewees were from the manufacturing sector – specifically garment and electronics factories. Reflecting the diversity and complexity of migration in the region, the migration patterns noted in the report are economic, forced, rural-urban and cross-border.

The report recognises that employers' exploitation of workers remains unchecked by national governments, and legal systems have failed to protect workers, particularly in terms of wage, working conditions and abuse from the employers. It is clear that in all three countries market needs trump labour laws and regulations, and in fact, often determine workers' conditions. Also provided is the latest information on the activity of grassroots organizations advocating for the rights of migrant workers. Their challenges and successes are explained along with the names of organizations that are playing important roles. It is the voices of these groups that make this book particularly useful in strategising on further advocacy points.

In country-specific terms, the Cambodian case presents a unique set of issues within the context of rural-urban, internal migration. The Thai and Malaysian cases outline issues stemming from international migration frameworks (including laws, regulations and policies), which have unfortunately failed to ensure protection for migrant workers. Agencies and brokers who facilitate the movement of workers are noted as key players who seek to gain maximum benefits from migrants. In contrast, it is extremely difficult for migrant workers to speak out about their low wages, poor working conditions and employers' abuses (such the holding of immigration documents), due to their fragile immigration status and lack of protection from arbitrary termination of contracts and/or deportation.

The report presents an excellent overview of migration of women workers and their living and working conditions in three of the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) member countries, where the economy heavily depends on the work of migrant workers, and presents a set of critical issues that demand more awareness and urgent action.