



The Migration of Female Labor Force from the Southern Border Provinces to Malaysia

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Abstract. The migration of female labor from the southern border provinces of Thailand to Malaysia involves a complex interplay of economic, social, cultural, and network factors. Through semi-structured interviews with female laborers from the border provinces of Thailand who have moved to work in Thai restaurants in Malaysia, the authors found that while economic challenges and limited job opportunities contribute to the migration, it is crucial to recognize the influence of social and cultural aspirations, including desires for autonomy and a modern lifestyle. Moreover, the proximity between the regions and shared cultural and religious identities further enhance the appeal of Malaysia. Additionally, migration networks play a significant role in facilitating and supporting the migration process by providing valuable information, job opportunities, and personal assistance. This article also challenges the notion that violence solely triggers women's migration, highlighting the historical continuity of women's roles in economic activities. By considering these multiple factors, a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics of female labor migration is attained.

Keywords: Labor Migration, Malay Muslim woman, Migration Networks, Southern Border Province of Thailand, Thai Restaurants in Malaysia

Introduction

The migration of female labor from the southern border provinces of Thailand to Malaysia has become a social phenomenon that is widely believed to be a reflection of economic and livelihood challenges. Particularly, after the occurrence of unrest in the region, women have transitioned from their traditional roles to seek stability and financial resources for their ongoing livelihoods. However, it is worth noting that the current migration of female labor from the southern border provinces to Malaysia is not solely driven by economic factors. Observations indicate that personal motivations of young women and sociocultural dimensions also influence this phenomenon.

Previous academic studies have provided comprehensive explanations regarding the migration of women from the southern border provinces of Thailand to Malaysia, with a primary focus on economic issues. For instance, Suthiphon Boonmak

and Muhamad Salabin [1] conducted a study titled "Economic Outcomes of Cross-Border Migration between Malaysia and the Southern Border Provinces of Thailand: A Case Study of Skilled Thai Malay Labor in Malaysia." The findings of this study revealed that the economic outcomes of skilled Thai Malay labor working in Malaysia are connected to the economy of the southern border provinces through: remittances, investments, and cross-border trade. Similarly, Nisakorn Klangkan [2] conducted a study titled "Migration of Female Labor from the Four Southern Border Provinces to Malaysia." The study found that the main factors driving women to migrate for work, both domestically and internationally, include the limited job opportunities in their local communities and insufficient household income. Their earnings from working in Malaysia are primarily used for household expenses.

However, the authors believe that attributing the causes of migration solely to economic dimensions only provides a partial understanding. Relying solely on economic factors fails to acknowledge the social and cultural aspects that cannot be disregarded. In addition to such explanations, there are other factors that influence migration decisions. This is evident in the work of Naruemon Klatookwan [3]. In her study titled "Toward a Big City: Causes of Female Laborer's Migration and their Adjustment in Nara Nakorn Industrial Zone". The study discovered that although economic necessity is a significant factor driving rural women to migrate to urban areas, there are still other motivations such as financial independence and the desire for new experiences. These factors indicate a new identity of Asian women who break free from the confines of domestic roles.

For women in the southern border provinces, their experiences are often intertwined with the occurrence of violence in the region. Research on Malay Muslim women under these precarious conditions has been conducted, such as Supawan Kongsuwan's study [4] titled "From Now On, Women Will Speak: Exploring Lives Amid Violence of Women in the Southern Border Provinces." The study found that as violence escalated, men's roles had to diminish for safety reasons, which result in many women shouldering the responsibilities of caring for the family, managing finances, and even taking on the role of a spouse. They faced social challenges and domestic violence. As a result of the escalating situation, women in the southern border provinces increasingly had to seek work outside their homes.

Additionally, Vasinee Sukka's study in the journal of the Institute of Asian Studies titled "Surviving in Contested Spaces: A Case Study of Pattani Province and the Lower South of Thailand" found that the loss of husbands due to the violence had an impact on vulnerable women: This situation forced them to transition from their traditional roles to unfamiliar ones, including assuming the role of the head of the family. These women received widespread acceptance in the society of the southern border provinces after the violence led to changes in the traditional roles of women in the region.

Although the unrest in the three southern border provinces reflects political dimensions, the violence that has infiltrated the area has also caused economic prob-

lems. For example, a study by Omjai Wongmonthat [5] titled "The Impact of the Southern Border Provinces Crisis on the Local Economy: A Case Study of Muang District, Pattani Province," found that the instability in the southern border provinces has led to economic challenges for communities. Economic insecurity and a decrease in community stability have resulted in reduced investment and financial institutions' confidence. As a consequence, communities have experienced lower income levels, and labor has migrated elsewhere for work. However, it is important to note that even before the occurrence of the 2004 violence in the Southern border region of Thailand, women in Southeast Asia were already accepted in the workforce, both within and outside their country. According to Dicky Sufjan's study [6] titled "Religion, Public Policy and Social Transformation in Southeast Asia," women in Southeast Asia have historically held high status. They have often benefited from cultural traditions that grant them ownership rights, inheritance, and economic power. One distinctive feature of women in this region is that they are not confined to domestic roles within families but have a long history of engaging in agricultural work and small scale trading, as well as playing significant roles in politics. The engagement of women in work outside the home has traditionally been linked to the pursuit of financial gain and the reciprocation of charitable acts or filial piety. However, this phenomenon has emerged from societies grappling with economic challenges in the region. It is important to note that historical female labor migration took place in a different context compared to the present, where globalization and a desire for a modern women lifestyle are shaping societal dynamics.

This article thus revisits the framework of studying the migration of female labor in the southern border provinces, focusing not only on the economic dimensions but also on the social and cultural dimensions. It explores the cultural proximity across national borders, the network of migrants, and the status of Muslim women in the Malay ethnic group to reflect a new understanding that differs from previous studies.

Causes of Migration to Malaysia: A Study on Women in the Southern Border Region

The ongoing socio-economic challenges in the three provinces of the southern border region of Thailand continue to be a pressing concern for the local population. According to the reports on poverty and economic inequality in Thailand from 2003 to 2020 by the National Economic and Social Development Council, Pattani ranks first with the highest proportion of people living in poverty, and Narathiwat is among the top ten. The severity of poverty poses a daunting threat to the livelihoods of individuals, as they are forced to rely on four essential factors for survival. Consequently, a considerable number of people from the region have migrated to Malaysia over the past several years. One study conducted by Nisakorn Klang [2] explains that the primary economic factors driving the increased migration of women from the southern border region to Malaysia are the limited job opportuni-

ties in local villages and inadequate household income. It is not uncommon for individuals to migrate to different areas in pursuit of economic rewards, given the constraints of village employment and insufficient household income.

Although economic factors have driven them to work in Malaysia, the emphasis on this issue has overshadowed other important issues. Based on interviews conducted by the author, it was found that these female workers are not the most economically disadvantaged individuals, but rather belong to the lower middle class. Working in Malaysia requires a certain amount of capital to cover travel documents, legal requirements, and transportation expenses. The farther the job is from the border, the higher the travel costs. These expenses indicate that these workers are not among the poorest. Therefore, the reason why female workers choose to work in Malaysia is not solely due to poverty but also personal preferences and other factors.

The first factor is the personal desire of the labor force. For instance, Dari, (1) This study use pseudonyms for person to protect the privacy of information a 21-year old participant, provided information that her family is not economically disadvantaged and has enough resources to support themselves. However, she chose to work in Malaysia because she desired a higher income and a greater autonomy in shaping her life. Conversely, working in her hometown provided less income, and she felt constrained by the congested surrounding. She expressed, "When I was at home in Narathiwat, it was crowded because we lived in a village. But when I came to work in Kuala Lumpur, the fact that people were living separately made me prefer Malaysia, both for the money and the freedom." This desire for independence in life is not exclusive to this particular female worker. Another example is Tassanee, a 38-year-old female laborer who did not come to work in Malaysia solely for economic reasons. She anticipated the opportunity to experience an independent life in a foreign country, to travel, and to create new experiences. This rationale is similar to the reason why Fatim, a 20-year-old, chose to work at a Thai restaurant in Kelantan, Malaysia, as she desired work experience more than pursuing further education. Fatim shared, "Before I got married, my parents didn't want me to work. They wanted me to finish my studies first. But I preferred to work. And when I was in Thailand, the people around me constantly observed and criticized my actions. Sometimes, I was bothered by people who ask me to lend them money. But when I came to Malaysia, I hardly encountered such problems."

Although the three female workers provided different detailed reasons for migrating, there is a common factor that led all of them to choose to work in Thai restaurants in Malaysia, which is the additional "benefit" beyond just the salary. They all mentioned the benefits they would receive after agreeing to work, such as accommodation provided by the employer without having to pay rent and utility bills. The employer would take care of these expenses. They also mentioned receiving two meals a day or having the opportunity for where they earn 50 Ringgit per day, if they don't have personal expenses, it means that the wages they receive are hardly used.

The personal desires of these female workers demonstrate a growing focus on self-fulfillment, qualifications, and enhanced autonomy. When these female workers had to move away from their families to work in Malaysia, these factors became significant reasons, even more so than economic considerations. The outcomes of their relocation to Malaysia have reflected a new form of self-identity for female workers. For instance, one observable change is in their fashion style. In Pattani, Tasneem had to adhere to conservative and tidy clothing norms. However, when she started working in Malaysia, she began dressing more comfortably, wearing jeans and experimenting with new styles. Furthermore, there nighttime activities have also changed. In Pattani, Tasneem was usually prohibited from going out at night and required her mother's permission to go anywhere. However, after starting work in Malaysia, she has had the freedom to go wherever she wants, particularly during days off. She enjoys going shopping at malls in Malaysia. These examples further emphasize that a mere economic perspective is no longer sufficient to explain the multifaceted dimensions of their transformation.

The second factor of these migrations is the cultural proximity. These female workers are from the three southern border provinces. Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat which share a border with Malaysia, specifically with Perlis, Kedah, Perak, and Kelantan. The proximity of these regions is another reason why female workers decide to work in Malaysia instead of going to work in the capital city of Thailand. As an example, Tassani chose to work in the state of Kelantan because the travel time from her home in Pattani to Kelantan is only 40 minutes. In case of emergencies at home, she can quickly travel back, which is in stark contrast to the journey from Bangkok to Pattani, which takes up to 14 hours.

The aforementioned geographical proximity has led to a cultural proximity, whereby the southern border provinces and the northern states of Malaysia are connected based on shared cultural identity, ethnicity, language, and religion. The majority population in the northern region of Malaysia has a significant presence of Malay ethnicity and a culture that closely resembles the Malay Thai people. During interviews conducted to gather data on female workers in the border provinces, it was found that one of the workers had difficulty using standard Thai language and required an interpreter to communicate. Interestingly, this particular female worker was able to communicate fluently in the local Malay language. In the lower border region of Thailand, it is common for people to use the local Malay dialect, which is almost alike to standard Malay. However, the local Malay dialect differs significantly from the Thai language. Therefore, if female workers are not proficient in the Thai language, opting to work in Malaysia, which has linguistic similarities, may be easier than adapting to the linguistic differences in the capital city of Thailand.

Cultural proximity also encompasses religious beliefs. The population in the three border provinces predominantly follows Islam, similar to the majority population in Malaysia, while in Thailand, only 4.6% of the population practices Islam. Working in an area with similar religious beliefs can facilitate religious practices, such as performing the five daily prayers, fasting during religious festivals, and adhering to religious customs. "Malaysia is a country that is predominantly Malay and Muslim. It is

easy to live there and do many things. I feel a sense of comfort and ease, Yamie, a 24-year-old woman originally from Narathiwat who is currently employed in the state of Kelantan reflects.

The last factor that contributes to the increasing migration of female labor to Malaysia is the role of migration networks. Through interviews, it was found that migration networks play a significant role in supporting the movement of female labor from the three border provinces to Malaysia over the past few decades. These networks are often established through relatives or close acquaintances already working in Malaysia, who provide information on job opportunities, income, and new experiences, which they then share with people in their communities.

Nulaila is a female worker who is often surrounded by relatives as soon as she returns home. "When I come back home, my relatives will ask about job openings. If there are vacancies, they would like to work in Malaysia as well." Information exchange among individuals is crucial in influencing the decision-making of female labor to migrate and work in Malaysia. The information obtained from close acquaintances is often considered reliable, and the insights shared by migration networks has helped establish guidelines and comprehension of the necessary preparations before entering the workforce in Malaysia safely and comfortably. These preparations involve tasks such as identifying suitable workplaces, organizing required documents, receiving vaccinations for communicable diseases, and obtaining necessary medical certifications, among others. While working in Malaysia can provide higher economic returns, it comes with the challenge of managing documentation. Proper documentation is essential as working in Malaysia requires various types of documents, such as travel documents, work permits and for foreigners, and specific documents for certain occupations, like the case of female labor in Thai seafood restaurants. Tasneem, aged 38, was required receive a specific vaccine for restaurant businesses before working in Malaysian restaurants. Additionally, Malaysia often mandates health training for Thai restaurants in Malaysia. Nulaila herself has been previously apprehended by the Malaysian police in Pasir Puteh state due to an expired work permit.

Therefore, for those who intend to work in Malaysia, the lack of any required documents can put these female workers in a vulnerable position, risking apprehension and, in the worst-case scenario, being deported back to their home countries. Yama, aged 24, shared her experience, stating, "Every week when I return home, I witness the strict measures taken by Malaysian authorities regarding travel documents and calling visas for migrant workers. Those who enter illegally face extreme difficulties in Malaysia. About two months ago, there were inspection units visiting various shops to check if there were Thai workers. Anyone found to be working illegally would be given a warning and sent back to Thailand." It is, therefore, crucial to have migration networks that can assist in preparing the necessary documentation before migration, similar to what happened with her relative Darien, who had previously worked in Malaysia and received help in finding a job and preparing the required documents. If she encounter any issues, she can always seek advice from that relative.

In addition to serving as important sources of information, migration networks also play a role in assisting female laborers from the three southern border provinces during their migration journeys to work in Malaysia. This is particularly significant in exceptional circumstances, as exemplified by Tasneem. After saving a portion of her earnings as a restaurant worker, She made the decision to establish her own Thai restaurant in Pahang. However, due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus, she had to temporarily close her restaurant for an extended period and return to Pattani following the country's lockdown measures aimed at curbing the virus spread. As soon as Malaysia reopened its borders, she promptly returned without any delay. Unfortunately, a local Malay landowner seized her restaurant, claiming that she had kept the restaurant closed for too long. Consequently, she had to become a hired worker at her friend's restaurant once again due to her depleted finances. However, she has now accumulated sufficient capital to reopen her own Thai restaurant in Kelantan. Six employees in her restaurant are also females from the three southern border provinces. These individuals are of relatives from both Tasneem's and her husband's sides. When Tasneem first started working in Malaysia, she had friends who helped her find employment. Presently, she assists and supports female workers from the three southern border provinces. Drawing on her more than 15 years of experience in Malaysia, she is familiar with Malaysian society, culture, and can effectively communicate in the Malay language.

It can be said that the influence of the migration network has provided significant support to female laborers both before their migration and during their work in Malaysia. These networks encompass various aspects such as safety, information, job opportunities, emergency contacts, and personal support. Therefore, it is evident that in addition to the challenges faced by female workers themselves, the migration network plays a crucial role in empowering female laborers from the three southern border provinces to improve their social standing and pursue their desired lifestyle. The authors suggest that, particularly for woman, it is necessary to have relationships with relatives, friends, or acquaintances who have prior experience working in Malaysia to ensure their own safety and peace of mind, as well as that at their families.

The reasons behind the increasing flow of female laborers from the three southern border provinces to Malaysia, as mentioned by the author above, go beyond just economic hardships or dimensions. They are driven by personal satisfaction and desires, such as the need for freedom in lifestyle choices, the desire for freedom in traveling and the aspiration for more challenging life experience abroad. In addition to the personal desires of female laborers, cultural connections are another significant factor that motivates them to work in Malaysia, such as similarities in ethnicity, language, and religion, as well as the short distances and travel time from the three southern border provinces to the northern region of Malaysia. Furthermore, the migration network can be seen as another important force that supports and encourage female labor[4]ers to migrate to Malaysia. Therefore, these social and cultural dimensions collectively explain why female laborers from the three southern border provinces choose to migrate and work in Malaysia.

Status of Women in the Malay Community

The Southern Border Provinces of Thailand have been affected by long-standing instability rooted in the historical relationship between the Thai state and the Malay ethnic group. The initial outbreak of violence took place on November 7, 2004, and has impacted the status of Malay women in the region. Research conducted by Supawan Kongsuwan [4] titled "From Now On, Women Will Speak: Exploring the Lives Amid Violence of Women in the Southern Border Provinces" examines the impact of security conditions on Malay women. The study reveals that due to safety concerns, men had to suspend their roles, resulting in many families losing their male breadwinners. Consequently, women had to take on responsibilities such as caring for their families, managing finances, and assuming the role of a spouse. These women faced social challenges and domestic violence. The deteriorating situation in the region compelled many women to seek employment outside their homes. Another study by Vilasinee Sukka [7] titled "The Livelihood of Women in Conflict Areas: A Case Study of Pattani Province and the Lower Southern Region of Thailand" highlights the profound impact of violence on vulnerable women, leading to a transformation of their traditional roles and thrusting them into unfamiliar roles, such as being the head of the family. Over time, these women have gained broader societal acceptance in the southern border provinces, as the violent events have resulted in a shift in traditional gender roles in the region. These studies emphasize that the necessity for women in the southern border provinces to seek employment outside their homes is a consequence of the violence experienced in the region. The authors of this study recognize that the described situation reflects a shared reality. When male family members were forced to suspend their roles for safety or lost their lives in violent incidents, women faced the imperative of earning a living, which compelled them to seek employment outside their homes in order to sustain their livelihoods. However, women working outside their homes is not a recent phenomenon in Southeast Asia. It is not a development that emerged and gained acceptance solely in the past 20 years following the escalation of violence. Instead, it is a historical continuity that has existed for a long time. While Muslim women may encounter certain constraints imposed by religious regulations, Malay Muslim women in Southeast Asia comparatively experience a relatively more favorable gender status compared to their Muslim counterparts from other regions. They play significant roles within families, particularly in terms of their economic influence within households. Tasneem expressed, "When my mother was still alive, all of the family's financial matters revolved around her. She was the one who handled the money and made important financial decisions. Now that I'm married and have children, I have the freedom to make decisions about all the money I earn." Dari, another informant, also shared with the authors that after her mother passed away when she was a child, she and her older sister had to depend on their grandmother's care. Throughout that time, Dari witnessed her grandmother being the one who managed all the financial matters in the household, including deciding what ingredients to buy for every meal consumed by everyone in the house. Her grandmother held the decision-making power. These examples highlight the status of women as well. The information gathered from these two interviews aligns with

the study conducted by Dicky Sufjan [6] on the status of women in Southeast Asia. The study asserts that women in Southeast Asia traditionally hold a high status and often benefit from cultural traditions that grant them property rights, inheritance rights, and maintain their economic power. Another notable aspect of women in this region is that they are not confined to the family unit but have a history of engaging in agricultural work, participating as small-scale traders in marketplaces, and playing significant roles in political leadership.

Based on the information obtained from the interviews, the aforementioned narratives reflect the memories of the interviewees regarding their encounters with mothers or grandmothers as economic decision makers in the household. Looking back at the historical context in the three southern border provinces and the broader context of Southeast Asia, Malay Muslim woman played important roles both within and outside. These aspects highlight the historical continuity of women's roles within Southeast Asia, which aligns with the current understanding of Muslim families in the southern border provinces. It is widely recognized that the "mother" holds significant economic power within the family. Yamin, a 21-year-old peer of the authors who grew up in the southern border province, also shared the same story. His father serves as a community leader in Pattani province. Yamin mentioned that, as a current undergraduate student, he typically relies on his mother for financial support, including monthly expenses, miscellaneous expenses, tuition fees, and dormitory fees. His mother is the one who provides the money. In some cases, when the family makes a purchase, his father may make the initial choice, but ultimately it is the mother who covers the expenses.

Conclusion

The migration of female labor to Malaysia has been a long-standing phenomenon in the Malay Muslim society of the Thai southern border region. This can be attributed to the widely held belief that working in Malaysia offers substantial economic benefits. However, the authors have discovered that economic factors are not the sole reason behind this phenomenon. Other factors come into play, such as the personal aspirations of the laborers for lifestyle freedom, decision-making autonomy, and a modern way of life that aligns with their self-identity. Additionally, the proximity of the border region plays a crucial role by facilitating convenient travel in terms of distance and time, making it easier for female laborers to cross over. This physical proximity also leads to cultural proximity between the two areas, including ethnicity, language, and religion, contributing to the comfort and ease experienced by female laborers. Moreover, migration networks continue to be a significant influence in the decision-making process, providing assistance to laborers before and after their migration. Therefore, the authors suggest that in addition to economic factors, social and cultural factors can also explain the phenomenon of female labor migration from the three southern border provinces to Malaysia.

The problem of violence in the southern border provinces of Thailand has had a significant impact on the economic and quality of life of the people. Some studies have suggested that the role of women working outside the home in the region emerged and gained more acceptance after the occurrence of violent events. However, the authors challenge this argument and propose that the role of women's work outside the home in the southern border provinces of Thailand, as well as in the broader context of Southeast Asia, existed and was acknowledged even before the onset of the violence. Considering the historical context of women's status in the region, they have always been central figures in their families, holding significant economic power that has afforded them important roles both within and outside the home.

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