

## Existence of quality of life among Myanmar migrant workers under Thai socio-cultural context in Samut Sakhon Province, Thailand

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### Abstract

A qualitative investigation of the Quality of Life of Myanmar migrant workers was commissioned by the research “Lifestyles of Myanmar Migrant Workers under Thai Social and Cultural Context: A Challenge of State Management in the Future” (April 2016 – December 2017). This research has aimed to study the living conditions so called Quality of Life indications among Myanmar migrant workers in Samut Sakhon province of Thailand, as well as to explore new trends or existing problems so that some of the possible policy implications and state management direction would be recommended for promoting the migrants a better quality of life. With an application of WHOQOL indicators for outlining a semi-structure interview questions definitely specified on 5 domains of content analysis: Working and Living Environment, Employment and Financial, Care and Support Requirement, Community and Social Relationship, and Health Perspectives. Participant observation, in-depth interview, and focus group discussion were applied for gathering data from Myanmar migrant workers reflecting their certain livelihood. The research procedures took place at the Drop-in Center, working places and multicultural events collecting data from 36 selected participants who are working in 4 major working conditions; fishing boat, seafood processing industry, factory, and agriculture. The findings reflect insights and concerns over the Myanmar migrant’s current well-being conditions. It showed that nearly all the workers perceived quality of life as a state of general well-being, while working and living environment, employment, and social relationship conditions put forth significant effects on their perceptions of their quality of life. Most think that language adaptation will help them to have a better life. These phenomena make them lacking of recognition and accessibility of their basic rights, labor rights and public services. Significantly, relevant governmental agencies should join hands with employers to establish a common practices or appropriate regulations and policies in order to safeguard migrant’s rights, provide better opportunities, apply social standards, and generally uplift the quality of life of the migrants especially in the fishing boat and seafood processing industries.

**Keywords:** quality of life, Myanmar migrant worker, socio-cultural context

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### 1. Introduction

Global situation on migration is of grave concern to many countries. On policy agenda not only in third world countries but in developed countries also. Thailand, in a recent decade, evolves into a regional migration hub of South-East Asia. Thailand has enjoyed healthy economic growth supported by its export-oriented businesses. As a result, Thailand has been experiencing an excess demand for low-skilled workers. Over the years, this gap has gradually been filled by low-skilled migrant workers from neighboring countries, enabling the labor-intensive sectors to maintain Thailand’s economic growth. At present, the situation of migrant workers in Thailand is important in driving the economic system.

Migrants from three neighboring countries: Myanmar, Cambodia and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), have become an important part of unskilled labor in the manufacturing sector due to most Thai labors do not want to do so, which is called dirty, dangerous and difficult work. Over the past 30 years, Thailand has become the main destination for migrant workers, with Myanmar nationals being the largest migrant worker population, numbering estimated 2.3 million [1]. It is projected that Thailand, in the foreseeable future, will depend on migrant labor force to fill the widening gap between the increasing labor demand and decreasing labor supply, which can possibly increase to 5.36 million workers by 2025. And information from the

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Office of the Foreign Workers Administration reported that the number of migrants from the three neighboring countries; Myanmar, Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, was conflicting as it indicated the current migrant workforce in Thailand is as high as 1.5 million [2]. Actually, at present, Thailand plays host to around 3.5 million migrants, roughly 3 million of whom are working. The vast majority of migrant workers in the country consist of low-skilled workers, with Myanmar nationals being the largest migrant worker population, numbering estimated 2.3 million accounted for 79.28% of all migrant workers. Samut Sakhon is a province with a high density of Myanmar migrants with 307,443 people, accounting for 91% of all migrant workers [3].

Migrant workers from neighboring countries poured into Thailand with the hope that they would get greater access to employment, earn higher wages and create better opportunities for themselves and their families than was possible in their countries of origin. At the same time, migration has contributed to the richness in diversity of cultures, ethnicities and races in the destination country. Individuals who migrate experience multiple stresses that can impact their mental well-being, including the loss of cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems, adjustment to a new culture and changes in identity and concept of self [4].

Undoubtedly, most people aspire to have a good quality of life (QOL) [5]. When people attain a good QOL, they have a general sense of well-being, life satisfaction and happiness. The QOL concept is broad and sometimes ambiguous and can be defined in different ways that implied there is no clear consensus on the meaning of the term [6]. The World Health Organization defined QOL "as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and values systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns" [7]. Haas provided a definition of QOL as "a multidimensional evaluation of an individual's current life circumstances in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and the values they hold" [8]. It is clearly noted that the importance of cultural influences on QOL and that the concept exists in a psychological environment that is increasingly cross-cultural. It has both etic (universal) and emic (cultural-bound) properties [9]. Another definition of QOL is as "the general well-being of individuals and societies, outlining negative and positive features of life. It observes life satisfaction, including everything from physical health, family, education, employment, wealth, safety, and security to freedom, religious beliefs, and the environment. [10] For this reason, the study on Quality of Life of migrant workers in Samut Sakhon province, considered as a

home to a large number of Myanmar migrant workers, was conducted. Under the broad questions of how Myanmar migrants live among ethnic, racial, social and cultural differences, there is a great deal of difficulty. What is their way of life today? What obstacles do you face? How do they conceive their quality of life (QOL) while they work and live in Thailand? This information is useful for future management of migrant workers.

## 2. Objectives

This research has overall aims to describe the quality of life issues in 5 socio-cultural domains; Working and Living Environment, Employment and Financial, Care and Support Network, Community and Social Relationship, and Health Perspectives experienced by Myanmar migrant workers who have laboured continuously in fisheries processing and agricultural facilities in Samut Sakhon province. The special objective of this study is to explore new trends of socio-cultural problems of the studied area so that some of the possible policy implications and state management direction would be recommended for promoting a better quality of life for the migrants as well.

## 3. Research Methods

This research employed a qualitative method with an application of participant observation approach as a specific form of field research. The researcher who participated as an actor in the events under study<sup>4</sup>, therefore, made both scientific observations and general observations made with the target groups to track their experiences and gain better insight into their living standards and daily struggles.

### Population and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to recruit Myanmar migrant workers who worked in Samut Sakhon province classified by 4 major types of working facilities; 1) fishing boat, 2) seafood processing industry, 3) factory, and 4) agriculture sector. The total of 36 cases were selected for in-depth interview using contacts listed by one of key informants who also acted as a field researcher, coordinator and interpreter for this research. Alongside, two from each target group or 8 migrants were invited to engage in a focus group discussion. The researchers need to negotiate with participants on their availability for focus group discussion and interviews, so as not to interfere with their work schedule.

### Data Collection

The qualitative data were collected by two coordinators who also acted as our field researchers from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with capability to reach migrant communities in the target provinces and can understand a Myanmar language. The data collection

using observational check list, in-depth interview and focus group discussion techniques took place at Drop-in Center, a public place and meeting point for Myanmar migrants located in downtown of Samut Sakhon as well as at their places of work, from June 2016 to February 2017. A semi-structured interview guideline was developed based on the QOL concepts of WHOQOL. This research instrument WHOQOL assesses individuals' perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. Thirty-six individuals received in-depth interviews each lasting 60-90 minutes and audio records were made. In addition, field notes were taken to keep track of the researchers' informal interviews and participant observations, decisions and thoughts during the data-gathering process. Participant observation is a specific form of field research in which the researcher participates as an actor in the events by visiting them in the whole one month and have used scientific observations as well as general observations. The first two stages of assessing a group of Myanmar migrant workers were very time consuming, because research teams have to build trust with the target group. Also, researchers need to negotiate with participants on their availability for focus groups and interviews, so as not to interfere with their work schedules. What is more, the research team employs an ethnographic method by following up with the participants over a period of time in order to track their experiences and gain better insight into their living standards and daily struggles. The researchers test the scientific rigor of the study: validity, reliability and confirmability. First, validity relates to the truthfulness of the findings, where the determination is to report the participants' perspectives in an accurate manner. When data were collected and analyzed, the findings were checked with the participants to confirm that they reflected their views. Triangulation of data collection methods was also used to confirm the information. Second, reliability refers to consistency in the enquiry process. The researchers described the process of the study; explained and justified what was done and why. In this way, they created an audit trail that other researchers could follow to judge the adequacy and appropriateness of its methods. Last, confirmability deals with neutrality; ensuring freedom from bias in the procedures and the outcomes of the research [11]. It is impossible for a researcher to remain completely neutral, objective and orderliness in a qualitative study [12]. It is more appropriate, instead, to say 'relatively' neutral, because the interpretation of data is tinged by life experiences and a range of other influences [13]. Three techniques to enhance confirmability [14] – maintaining a reflexive journal, using an audit trail, and incorporating multiple methods of study– were employed in the

present study. The collection of data was guided by adherence to ethical principles. Ethics approval was granted to conduct the study from the Human Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Thailand. Five key ethical principles were adhered to in the study: obtaining informed voluntary consent; ensuring privacy and confidentiality; making sure the workers who took part did not experience harm as a consequence of involvement in the study; respecting their right to withdraw at any time without explanation or penalty; and maintaining secure storage of data.

#### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis focuses on the measurement of Quality of Life (QOL) called QOL indicators. A distinction is made between objective and subjective indicators of QOL. Objective measurement has put the emphasis on observable environmental conditions such as dwelling, employment, social and community relationship, health status etc. Subjective measurement is measuring feelings of satisfaction, happiness or related attitudes. These are mainly related with sociological and cultural awareness.

The data have been used for content analysis giving emphasis on five domains of QOL including 1) Working and Living Environment, 2) Employment and Financial, 3) Care and Support Requirement, 4) Community and Social Relationship, and 5) Health Perspective. The researchers transcribed the audio recordings into text and re-read the transcripts in order to become familiar with the data. Raw data were analyzed using line-by-line analysis, to break down and code the data. Following this, codes were clustered into groups and then categorized. Patterns and connections were then identified within and between categories.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The studied participants consisted of 36 migrant workers in Samut Sakhon province, comprising 20 males and 16 females. Most of them were in adult group aged 28 to 47 years old. Because of their poor family status, they have to come to work at an early age to earn for themselves and their families. Some have finished elementary and junior high school from Myanmar. Most participants were in a common law relationship or were single. Their average monthly income was over 5,000 Baht, and the average length of time that they had been a migrant worker in Thailand was 4 years.

Indications of Quality of Life among Myanmar migrant laborers in this study are identified in 5 domains: Working and Living Environment, Employment and Financial, Care and Support Inquiry, Community and Social Relationship, and Health Perspective domain. The findings clearly show as follows;

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of the participants (N=36)

| Characteristics                        | Number |
|--|--------|
| Gender                                 |        |
| Male                                   | 20     |
| Female                                 | 16     |
| Age (years)                            |        |
| 15-25                                  | 5      |
| 26-40                                  | 19     |
| 41-50                                  | 10     |
| 51-60                                  | 2      |
| Marital Status                         |        |
| Single                                 | 17     |
| Legally married                        | 7      |
| Common law marriage (De facto)         | 8      |
| Separated                              | 4      |
| Monthly Income (Thai Baht*)            |        |
| ≤ 2,000                                | 1      |
| 2,000-3,999                            | 12     |
| 4,000-5,999                            | 6      |
| 5,000 and over                         | 17     |
| Length of Working Duration in Thailand |        |
| ≤ 1 year                               | 1      |
| 1-2 years                              | 9      |
| 3-4 years                              | 20     |
| ≥ 5 years                              | 6      |

\* As of April 2017, the exchange rate was about THB33 to US\$1.

### I. Working and Living Environment

The findings show that working on fishing boats is extremely in poor conditions, and much worse than those in other sectors: seafood processing industry, factory, and farming sector. It is no doubt that migrant workers who are being forced to work are more likely to end up working aboard fishing boats. Physical and verbal abuse by employers is common in the fishing sector, and alarmingly this seems to be more commonly faced by child workers aged below 15 [15] and as pointed out by one migrant laborer .... "I have observed that especially amongst child laborers they can't leave because if they leave they won't get paid, and if they want to leave at the end it's only if the employers let them. Unless the young child leaves without their money and (pink) card, they have to obtain permission". While migrants work under poor conditions, they feel they can't leave their jobs because of certain constraints, mostly relating to fear of arrest by the police.

Duties on fishing boats are less attractive than in fish processing factories and agricultural farms because the nature of work is tough, dangerous and it is lonely being far away from family. Fishing boat employers explained that they often had to take desperate steps to try and recruit workers, despite offering incentives, such as payments in advance. Despite such incentives, it still

seems as though jobs aboard fishing vessels are the "last resort" for migrant workers.

Home environment is often more noisy than calm with strong tendency for fights to occur. From their responses it is clear that most respondents described their home environments as bad. They did not get peace and comfort. Their houses were small. Most families were out of control and disorganized. There was no peace and freedom at home, even after a hard day of languishing labor. Workers' living conditions affected their perceptions of QOL.

There were concerns about several aspects of their living circumstances, such as the number of people who shared dwellings, unhygienic conditions, and the close proximity of their homes to their places of work. In relation to the level of occupancy, some lived in overcrowded conditions lacking in privacy. For instance, two families who shared a small room had to take turns to carry out personal activities like dressing and undressing. With regard to their concerns about hygiene, most residents lacked proper cooking facilities; food was prepared and cooked on the ground. In relation to the poor environment conditions, many were at risk to get ill. It was found that most their children frequently developed respiratory and digestive illnesses, such as common colds, coughs, diarrhea.

## II. Employment and Financial Domain

It has shown that most migrants on average work 12 hours per day as they start working early, even before 5 am on days when there is a heavy workload, and a few get an hour or less break time per day with average 4 days off per month, only some are paid during their days off. Certainly, working such long periods of time is considered unacceptable among the migrants. Unfortunately, when migrant laborers work more than eight hours a day, it cannot be guaranteed they receive overtime pay or treated similar to Thai workforce. Migrant workers employed on fishing boats receive low rates of payment as well as work in deteriorate conditions, in nearly all aspects, when compared with migrants employed in the other 3 job sectors. Most jobs for migrant workers in the fishing sector are insecure due to variable working hours, payment methods and rates. Migrants employed on fishing boats clearly work in inferior conditions, in nearly all aspects, when compared with migrants employed in fish processing. Jobs on fishing boats are less attractive than in fish processing factories because the nature of work is tough, dangerous and it is lonely being far away from family. In light of this, migrants working aboard fishing vessels may be those who have nowhere else to go, or those who have fewer job opportunities, such as unregistered migrants or child workers. This easily force these workers into more vulnerable situations than other migrant workers.

Evidently, financial considerations affected the migrants' perceptions of QOL. Some workers, who were satisfied with their wages, were paid more than the standard wage since their salary was dependent upon the level of productivity. Some daily wage earners, who received less than standard wage, were dissatisfied but were reluctant to raise this with employers as they were fearful of losing their jobs. Significantly, the findings showed that nearly all the workers were poor, however, those who have stable employment and earned an adequate income enabled them to meet their basic needs and were able to send money to family in Myanmar, were more satisfied with their jobs. Whilst workers who were paid less than the standard wage felt unhappy and were dissatisfied with their jobs [16].

As a whole, most workers accepted they had insufficient money to cover their expenses. As they had increasing debts from a combination of sending money to family members in their homeland and having to spend money to live and work in Thailand. This seems to cause declining quality of life amongst migrant workers.

## III. Care and Support Requirement Domain

Generally, family and relatives are central support figures for most migrants, this is especially the case for

child workers and migrants employed in fish processing. Migrants employed on fishing boats depend more on their workmates and friends and less on family members and relatives. This is due to the unique physical environment of working on fishing boats and spending long periods at sea.

Attaining a better education may help reduce the risk of migrants being trafficked. Very few migrants currently attend school and no migrants reported that their employers permit child workers to attend school. In Thailand, part of a solution to address the isolation facing migrants has been for NGOs to tap into and strengthen migrants' sense of community [17]. However, very few migrants working in the fishing sector currently participate in any type of activities in their communities. Encouraging migrants to be part of community organization might be possible and meaningful because most migrants express an interest in joining a group or club, particularly with regard to the subject of health issues.

There is no consistency amongst employers on how to care and support needs of their migrant workforces. The migrant workers are very dependent on employers for basic information such as work registration and accessibility to health services. As one migrant complained that *"I think we need help. Sometimes we need the company that will be able to help with everything because for me was hard to sometimes that you must look for everything in different places."* Therefore, information and advice could be provided through leaflets, Drop-in centers, Multicultural events and etc. which are existed, but not accessible to them. Therefore, in order to ensure that the migrant workers have access to general information and advice some work needs to be done to access the Myanmar migrant community through employer networks.

## IV. Community and Social Relationship Domain

Social and community networks play a major role in connecting migrant laborers with relatives, friends and employers. Social support can be seen as both tangible (informational and instrumental support) and intangible support (emotional support) that a person receives from network members. It is well documented that social supports are the functional aspect of social relationships and act as mediating factors between social networks and health [18]. Many migrants rely on their social network as a key source of information, which they may consult before deciding to work aboard or take up a job at a specific place [19]. From one research reveals that some migrant workers have been employed in an industrial plant since the age of 14 with the help of insiders. They might be familiar with the facility's human resource officers or foreman. Social networks also help facilitate a migrant family's living arrangements [20]. These agents are an essential element which

enables the cycle of labor migration to Samut Sakhon to continue. In this sense, agents and broker are also parts of the mechanisms sustaining the seafood processing industry, which is essential for Thailand's economic structure.

Some workers developed good relationships with the Thai people in the local communities where they resided. Some workers established close personal relationships and married Thai citizens. In contrast, a few workers perceived that the Thai communities they lived in discriminated them. Some workers lacked self-confidence to approach or initiate activities with the Thai people in their community, perceiving that they were viewed as foreigners. As one migrant worker said that ...

*"I stay in the factory all the time. I have never joined in any activities in the community. I go out only to buy things in the market. When I walk in the market, I feel Burmese. I am afraid that someone might catch me."*

Most workers felt they maintained good relationship with their family members, while a few acknowledged that their relationships were poor. Generally, however, they loved each other and perceived that conflict, such as disagreements between spouses, was a normal part of family life. Several workers indicated that they maintained good relations with their Thai employers. They believed their employers were generally good people who did what they could to support them, such as providing a place to live, taking ill workers to hospital, and occasionally lending money without charging interest. When workers experienced difficulties, they usually consulted their employers.

A few workers reported having very stressful relationships with employers who also exploited them. They claimed they were verbally abused, insulted and frequently underpaid by employers. Even though they acknowledged that this was a very unpleasant situation, they persisted with their employment: the need to earn money took precedence over personal concerns about stress and exploitation.

## V. Health Perspective Domain

From a health perspective, workers with limited knowledge, understanding or choice, were exposed to work-related hazards and poor lifestyle perceived that their QOL was poor. Most male workers, including women who worked in the factories, engaged in risky behaviors that were potentially harmful to their health. Alcohol and cigarette use amongst male workers could bring about adverse effect on their objective QOL. In contrast, they gained pleasure from using these substances but sometimes they were fearful of illness occurring because of the harmful effects of alcohol and cigarettes. Problems of alcohol abuse and other matters have been figured out in other studies too, such as it showed the consequences of illness were increased

health costs, decreased ability to work, and loss of income [21-23], which showed that migrant workers experienced multiple problems as a result of their declining health situation.

The nature of work environment and the type of work undertaken affected the workers' perceptions of their health. The migrants worked in a range of occupational settings, including on fishing vessels, seafood processing, factory, and farms. Several of these enterprises, especially the factories, have dusty work environments. The workers in these wards felt that they were at risk of developing respiratory problems like asthma and chronic lung disease.

Interestingly, the findings showed that the workers' migration status affected their QOL by obtaining or denying access to health related services. Accessibility to health care and welfare services permitted only to whom with legal migration status [24]. Unfortunately, Thai legislation and law did not make coverage of health service to their spouses and children. This contributed to suffering and unhappiness in families, particularly when ill health occurred. Also, the study spotlighted that illegal migration status directly resulted in more disadvantage to the workers when they or other family members became ill because they were rejected access to appropriate health and welfare services, lowering their QOL. This finding is similar to the Paman et al. [25] study of Burmese migrant workers and their families who were unable to access health care services. Accordingly, many migrants turned to self-medication or become worst in their health conditions.

## 5. Conclusions

Migration between countries is at higher levels than ever before. The movement of people across national boundaries influences economic development, labor, population and health, as noted by WHO in 2010 and by OECD in 2012. Certainly, studies of immigrant health have steadily increased as have efforts to develop appropriate policies to address it. It is increasingly recognized that health and social policies within and between countries can influence the health of immigrants, their families, and population health patterns

There are several factors stimulated and frozen the migrants' experience and interpretation of the QOL concept: conditions of work, including legal status as a migrant worker; social and living circumstances; and social interaction. While there were improvements in some aspects of their QOL since they moved to Thailand, there was some deterioration in other aspects. Similarly, each domain had different levels of importance and was perceived differently by each migrant. For instance, most workers experienced a good QOL as a consequence of having a job, being able to access health care services, experiencing satisfaction and pride, maintaining good

relationship with others and receiving the standard wage.

Most workers conceptualized HRQOL as a state of general well-being, life satisfaction in relation to their goals, expectations and concerns, when they illustrated as *“Having money, a house, a television, mobile phone and a car...make me happy”* and *“I think health is very important. I don't think about anything. If we are healthy, we can work happily and to live with all members of my family, I feel happy and satisfied”*. However, for others, their QOL was adversely affected by factors, such as substance abuse, hazardous working conditions, perceived discrimination, sub-standard wages, feelings of sadness and abusive relationships.

A noticeable QOL assessment demonstrated that fully documented and appropriately paid migrants have higher levels of satisfaction working in Thailand and more positive attitudes towards stay; moreover, their planned stay (work and live) would be longer. While a future constraint in the supply of migrant workers from Myanmar may prove to be a challenge for Thailand, the recommended strategy is to provide migrants with the opportunity for documentation and to have proper wages and working conditions to make their migration experiences more positive and increase their willingness to be employed in Thailand.

Overall, not all workers experienced an improvement in their quality of life in Thailand; for some workers, their quality of life deteriorated in the new country. Since the study was carried out with a group of migrant workers from Myanmar, the findings are context bound to the participants and the specific setting [26]. While the findings can be confirmed an existence of quality of life for especially Myanmar migrants, and may help inform strategies and mandates to enhance the QOL of migrants who come to Thailand from similar Southeast Asian countries.

On the part of the government, consideration should be given by migration and employment policy makers and legislators to provide more equitable access to health and welfare services for the workers' families. Authorities should also take steps to ensure that migrant workers receive the standard wages. As regards employers, they need to take major steps to provide more favorable working conditions to maintain the workers' occupational health and safety, to adhere to standard wages, and to provide more suitable housing for the workers and their families. Host countries have a responsibility to recognize the contributions of migrant workers, which is a step to fostering better understanding between the local population and the migrant workers. Finally, academics are enjoined to evaluate initiatives to enhance the workers' situation, such as the effects of environmental care, sustainable development, including occupational health and safety.

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