

Migrant Housemaids in Thailand: A Case Study

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I. INTRODUCTION

The number of migrant domestic workers registered during September 24 and October 25, 2001 is 82,389 persons. This accounts for 14.5 percent of the total migrant workers registered, and equals to approximately 40 percent of the number of domestic workers in Thailand. Out of the registered migrant domestic workers, 73,006 are women; they form the highest proportion (about 30%) of the registered migrant work force.

This study was conducted under a technical cooperation project on “Improving migration policy management with special focus on irregular labour migration” carried out by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the International Labour Office and the International Organization of Migration. As part of the project activities, the study is aimed at examining migrant housemaids’ patterns of employment and work conditions in Bangkok and other concentrated areas. It also studies the employers’ socio-economic background, market demand for domestic and foreign housemaids, and their wages and qualifications. The impact of government policies is studied by scrutinizing government sectors responsible for enforcing Thai labor and immigration laws, and also provided are recommendations for employing effective management of foreign labor. Due to time constraints, the study focuses primarily on in-depth interviews of a small number of migrant housemaids, Thai housemaids, employers of registered migrant housemaids, registration officials and policy makers. A survey of 458 domestic workers, 440 employers and 96 workers of other occupation in Bangkok area in 2001 (DLWP 2001) and a report on “Domestic Workers Consultation” (MAP 2001)¹ were analyzed to form the data for this report.

II. ECONOMIC ASPECTS (OF HOUSEMAIDS)

2.1 Evolution of Demand for Migrant Housemaids

In Thailand approximately 200,000 domestic workers have been employed each year during 1991-

2000. The employment ranges from 158,000 in the third quarter of 1997 to 250,000 in the first quarter of 2000. The number fluctuates by season reflecting some relationship with the supply of, rather than the demand for, rural migrants who have to return home during the agricultural season. Many households in Bangkok and large cities employ domestic workers. Traditionally, internal migration for domestic work was from poorer to richer areas; generally, from northern and northeastern areas to the central region. Internal migrants became less interested in migrating in 1990s particularly for domestic work, and employers turned to migrant workers (Martin 2002, 27). The composition of housemaids according to the DLWP (2001) study indicates that maids in Bangkok from northeast comprised of 40.2 percent, the central—28.6 percent, and the north—17.9 percent. Most housemaids come from poor families in the rural areas. Housework, as compared to the work in a rice field or on a farm, is relatively light and comfortable and these skills can be easily learnt. Housemaids are in demand because of increased participation of the homemaker in the labor market.

It has not been known when the demand for migrant workers as housemaids began in the Thai labor market. It has been speculated that “families that used to hire internal migrant workers from the northeast as maids increasingly turned to foreign migrant workers in the 1990s.” (Martin 2002, Appendix 1). The laws and regulations concerning the employment of foreign labor, however, suggest that the use of migrant housemaids may begin around 1978. When the Royal Decree (Revolution Order) 281 (พ.ร. 281) was issued on 24 November 1972 to reserve /protect occupations for Thai people—with Article 12 specifying 27 occupation permit for aliens, housemaids were not mentioned (Pantip 1997). Based on Article 12 of the Foreigner Employment Act 1978, a Ministerial Order was issued by the Minister of Interior to specify 27 types of occupation permit for foreigners. The occupations include “Laundry” and “Laborer” (Pitsawat and Pathamaporn 1997, 54). The practice, therefore, by government employment service agents has been to register domestic workers in these two categories.

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Since 1978 there was still no direct mention of “domestic workers” in laws and regulation on employment of foreign labor until 1996, when the Cabinet Resolution of August 6, 1996, specifically identifies “domestic workers” (housemaids) as work allowed for immigrant workers (Pantip 1997, 75). The following three registrations in 1998, 1999 and 2000 excluded domestic workers from the occupations that could register to work legally (MAP 2001, 5). Again in 2001, the Cabinet Resolution of August 28, 2001 stipulated that “domestic work” is permissible for migrant workers (Manager Daily, 26 December 2001).

The shift in trend of hiring internal migrants to immigrant domestic workers has not been clearly investigated. One of the main reasons could be because of the shortage of domestic workers. The attitude of most Thai workers toward domestic work is relatively negative. Domestic worker is a polite term for “servant.” The work is therefore viewed as not honorable. Additionally with development and industrialization of Thailand and increased educational standards, domestic workers have the advantage of better job opportunities available to them (DLWP 2001, 7).

The domestic worker also has a negative approach to work. This is reflected from statements employers made in this study. One employer viewed Thai domestic workers (who were laid off) as “irresponsible, dirty, and slipshod or careless.” Another employer said that Thai maids “were lazy, liars, fussy and misbehaved.” This employer also said that her migrant workers are much more attentive and efficient.

To reduce the shortage of domestic workers, the Department of Employment with a budget of 1.5 million baht conducted a project in Bangkok and some provinces, called “Supply of Domestic Workers 1999.” Only 326 trainees and 248 persons (76%) who were already employed as domestic workers participated in the program. The project had a problem of recruiting trainees. On completion of the training, a number of trainees were not ready to work, while some wanted to work only near their residential areas. Some employers did not want to hire the trainees because of the high wages they demanded.

More than half of migrant housemaids are based in Bangkok. The 1996 record of registered migrant workers indicate that 37 percent and 15 percent of migrant housemaids worked in Bangkok and the central region respectively. Another 23.2 percent were in the north (mostly in Tak, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Nakhon Sawan). In 2001, the proportion of those in Bangkok increased to 54.8 percent while those working in the central region remained unchanged. The proportion of those working in the north drastically decreased to 12 percent (from 23.2%) while the absolute number increased a little. The change in number of registered migrant housemaids between 1996 and 2001 is depicted in Table 1.

What happened to previous internal migrant workers who filled the jobs – did they go abroad for jobs, or find better jobs in Thailand? The DLWP (2001) study reveals that internal migrant workers opted for other employment opportunities over housework. The booming textile industry as well as commerce in the 1980s² together with increasing education provided a better choice. A number of prospective housemaids moved to or preferred to work in textile industry or in department stores as salesgirls for they did not view domestic work as honorable.

2.2 Supply of Migrant Housemaids

The majority of migrant housemaids are from Myanmar, and some from Lao PDR and Cambodia. These migrants enter Thailand by utilizing the services of the employment or the migration agents, though some do enter the country on their own. Agents usually charge a lump sum payment of 5,000-6,000 baht. This includes brokerage fee, travel expenses and bribes for Thai authorities. Some agents are Buddhist monks, while many Thai policemen also act as middlemen. Migrants usually prefer to use the services of the agents as it is safer and more convenient. In addition to the services of the employment agent, some of the migrants have connection with relatives or friends who are already in Thailand. They play the role of helping these migrants to integrate in the society by recommending or helping the migrants to locate employment.

Table 1 Registered migrant housemaids, 1996 and 2001

	1996		2001		Change 1996-2001		Average per year	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Whole Kingdom	34,283.0	100	82,389.0	100	48,106.0	140.3	9,621.2	28.1
Bangkok	12,929.0	37.7	45,130.0	54.8	32,201.0	249.1	6,440.2	49.8
Central region	5,244.0	15.3	13,005.0	15.8	7,761.0	148.8	1,552.2	29.6
Eastern region	1,984.0	5.8	4,313.0	5.2	2,329.0	117.4	465.8	23.5
Western region	2,989.0	8.7	2,245.0	2.7	-744.0	-24.9	-148.8	-5.0
Northern region	7,959.0	23.2	9,883.0	12.0	1,924.0	24.2	384.8	4.8
Northeastern region	231.0	0.7	3,006.0	3.6	2,775.0	1,201.3	555.0	240.3
Southern region	2,947.0	8.6	4,807.0	5.8	1,860.0	63.1	372.0	12.6

Source: Office of the Administrative Commission on Irregular Migrant Workers, Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (2002, Tables 5 & 6).

Karen housemaids during interviews revealed that they entered Thailand from Myanmar through Mae Sot, Tak Province; and through Sangkhla Buri, Kanchanaburi Province. A Laotian migrant came into Thailand via Nakhon Phanom by boat and on foot. The arrangement fee for the Laotian case was about 3,000 baht per head.

Labor migration agents also have their network spread in the sending countries. Migrant workers informed that they employed their own Myanmar agents to arrange the border crossing and employment services. In each village, there is a group migration agent who provides such services. Once agreed, a prospective migrant worker pays a fee or expenses in stages: 1,500 baht for traveling from the village to Mae Sot, and if they wish 5,000 baht from Mae Sot to Bangkok. For the return trip, the migrant pays 1,500 baht from Bangkok to Mae Sot, and another 1,500 baht from Mae Sot to his/her village. The services of the Myanmar agent is multiple and much favored because they: oversee travel arrangements, reduce the risk of being caught by Thai policemen, and take care of remittances that needs to be sent home.

The skills required for domestic work are generally semi-skill such as house cleaning, laundry, cooking, grocery shopping, gardening, pet keeping, and baby nursing. Most migrants have primary education. Only two out of 11 interviewed had secondary education (grade 9 and grade 11). The migrants worked according to the will and satisfaction of their employers. As regards the Thai domestic workers, the interview shows that three have grade 4 and two have grade 6 education, accounting for 60 percent and 40 percent of primary and secondary education. The data from the DLWP (2001) survey also reflects a similar composition of education of Thai maids, 61 percent had primary education, 24.3 percent had secondary education, and almost 10 percent had no education at all.

2.3 Wages and Employment Conditions of Migrant Housemaids

The salary of the interviewed migrants are between 2,000-4,000 baht per month, compared to the salary of the interviewed Thai domestic workers of 3,000-4,000 baht. The DLWP (2001) study indicates that the salary of the Thai domestic workers range from 2,000-5,000 baht. Thus there is no significant difference between the salary of migrants and Thai workers. However, the level of salary also depends on work conditions and the length of employment. Also, when two maids are employed in the same house they draw less salary in comparison to the one maid employed, because the work in the house then gets distributed.

All interviewed migrant housemaids live-in with their employers. The benefits enjoyed are: leave, bonus, gifts, clothes, medical expenses, etc. Most of the interviewees are satisfied with their working and living conditions. Many of them do feel homesick. The unfamiliar environment usually restricts their movement,

and often they are unable to take advantage of their entitled leave.

To find out the opinion of other Thai workers toward domestic work, DLWP (2001) survey of workers in textile, electronic, and food processing industries (factory workers) indicates a rather balanced view toward this area of work. For example, the proportion of those who think domestic work is hard and heavy is about 30 percent, approximately the same as the proportion of those who do not agree. Whether they considered domestic work as boring, about 41 percent agreed while about 36 percent disagreed, and 25 percent had no comment (which could reflect lack of information in the labor market). When questioned if domestic work was viewed as the most comfortable (decent) job, 71 percent of the respondents agreed. As regards earnings, 45 percent of the respondents thought that domestic work yielded better income after the deduction of living expenses, while only 15 percent disagreed. However when asked if they would choose to be a housemaid in the event of non-availability of any other work, about 47 percent said it would be their last choice and about the same proportion said they would prefer not to work at all.

III. SOCIAL ASPECTS

3.1 Profile of Migrant Housemaids

All of the interviewed migrant housemaids were women, aged between 18-35. Eight persons out of 11 were single. As already mentioned, the migrants had mostly primary education. The ages of the five Thai maids interviewed ranged from 18-47. Two were single, two were widows, and one was *de facto* separated. Their education was upto the primary level (grades 4-6). Four of the maids hailed from the northeast and one from the north regions. The DLWP (2001) study reflects that most Thai domestic workers are women (89.3%), and 71.2 percent are single. About 39 percent are aged between 25-34 and 36 percent between 15-24. As already mentioned, most of Thai maids had low education.

3.2 Living Conditions

As explained earlier all migrant workers live with their employers and enjoy good benefits and conditions. Aside from salary, room and board, most maids (both migrant and Thai) are given clothes, gifts on special occasions, bonus and raises, and medical expenses. Although they are supposed to work from 6.30 to 18.30 hours, the maids have erratic working schedules, simply because in most households, during the day time members of the family are not at home. The bonding between the employers and the maids with time becomes strong. Many employers expressed we "treat them like our own children or our folks," and "Kah Kao Tao Liang" for servants who served their master honestly for a long time and shall continue to serve or to live with the

master until the day they die. Many employers also teach the migrants the Thai language. This aspect demonstrates an intricate relationship of the master and the servant in the Thai culture, which is not to be considered solely on the basis of wages earned.

A fieldwork in Mae Sot also validates the above findings. Most housemaids in Mae Sot are from Myanmar, who have been working in the same household since they were young. They now have families, and the employers even look after the welfare and schooling of their children. The relationship developed is deep rooted and one of the reasons given is that the shared border also reflects common cultural beliefs and values. Mae Sot, traditionally, has always sheltered people from Myanmar whenever they migrated due to drought or for any other economic reasons. These migrants later return to their home country after earning a good income.

3.3 Integration into Host Community

It is difficult to interpret if the migrant maids are discriminated in the Thai society, because most migrant maids do not go out often. By and large, they are integrated well into the community partly because Thailand is a relatively free country, and partly because they maintain communication with large number of their peers through public and mobile phones. The Thai housemaid who works in the same house as a migrant maid does not have strong objection to alien maids. One Thai maid said “at first, it was difficult to communicate because of the language. I don’t think they (migrant maids) will take away our job.” Another Thai maid said, “I’m not scared of them. We get along fine.”

The assertion that “Migrant workers, particularly from the Southeast Asian region, are looked upon as forming a social class of their own, not allowed by their employers to integrate with the local community” may not be applicable to migrant maids in Thailand (ILO 2000, 127). None of the employers forbade their maids to take an evening off, or to go to theater, or even disallowed the maids to watch TV with them in the living room.

The migrant maids interviewed did not report any exploitation or abuse. In comparison, according to the Human Rights Watch (HRW), immigrant domestic workers routinely suffer the following impositions on their well-being and livelihood:

- Wage below the minimum required by labor laws;
- Breach or lack of contract including excess number of work hours, no days off and no compensation for overtime;
- Psychological abuse including but not limited to verbal abuse and threats, and invasion or lack privacy;
- Physical abuse, sometimes including sexual harassment or abuse;

- Limitations on freedom of movement and/or communication with others including: withholding identification or immigration documents, physical restricts such as locked doors, permitting either limited contact with others or requiring accompaniment when outside the compound, withholding address or phone number of resident, and restricting access to the telephone;
- Conditions that compromise health such as denying days of rest generally or when ill, placing limitations on food including inadequate portions or only providing left-over and old food, or denying hospitalization or medical attention;
- Sleeping quarters that are either insecure or unsanitary (MAP 2001, 36).

3.4 Life Aspirations

Most migrant maids expressed a desire to return home after working in Thailand after a period of time. Their length of stay could vary from five years to as long as “I am happy” to making “enough money to buy a house.” Prospective Myanmar migrants observed that when the migrants returned to their villages from Thailand, they had newer and nicer homes. Some even became prettier and attractive (because of better living conditions, more modern cosmetics, etc.) and they had many men proposing marriage to them. Access to better living conditions and a good husband thus becomes life aspirations for prospective migrants.

IV. EMPLOYERS’ PERSPECTIVE

4.1 Main Reasons for Hiring Migrant Workers

In our interviews, three employers reasoned that Thai maids were difficult to find, while another three opined that “Thai maids are lazy, disobedient, dishonest.” Taking advantage of nobody being home, a Thai maid moonlighted by doing express laundry for the neighbors using the employer’s washing machine and other laundry equipment. Although one employer hired a maid through an employment agent, the Thai maid worked poorly and dirtily, while at the same time they made a lot of demand about their working conditions and holidays. On the other hand migrant maids were more devoted and “better behaved.” They did not “flirt” like the Thai maids. Myanmar maids were honest, responsible, diligent, obedient and pleasing. Because many of them were illegal migrants, they did not want to be caught on the wrong side of the law. Their attitude was therefore more malleable. Among the maids from Myanmar, employers had a clear preference for maids from Karen or Mon than those who hailed from parts of Myanmar.

4.2 Displacement of Thai Housemaids by Migrant Housemaids

In the survey most employers had no desire to replace the migrant maid with a Thai maid. Employers are very discerning, especially, about honesty and hardworking factors a housemaid may possess. Often prevailing wages are not acceptable to the Thai maid. Even when Thai maids are out-sourced through employment agents, they are not reliable. On the other hand migrant maids are much easier to out-source through immigrants' or the employers' own connection. The employer who has a migrant maid also becomes an intermediary for sourcing out migrant maids in her social circles.

Other major attributes desired are: some household experience; as regards marital status employers prefer maids who are single or widowed; middle aged maids are sought for their experience and maturity; if the head of the household is male or if there are many young boys in the house, young and pretty maids are not desired. Lack of language or communication skills is not a hindering factor for most employers believed that it could be taught.

The length of employment of the migrant maids ranged from four months to five years. Five out of 11 migrants were employed for more than one year. Four of them (or almost 40 percent) had been in employment for more than four years.

Thai maids do not consider their jobs were being encroached upon by migrant maids. One even expressed that "Migrant maid is OK. I'm not scared of her," which could be interpreted as she did not look at a migrant maid as someone coming from another country as threatening. This attitude is a typical reflection of Thai culture.

4.3 Demand Cycle

There is no obvious demand cycle for housemaids. A maid works on a year-round basis. Although the data from the labor force survey shows a fluctuating pattern of employment of housemaids by major seasons (dry and wet seasons), it is more likely due to the supply cycle of native internal migrants from the rural areas, which increases in the dry season (less work on farm) and decreases in the wet season (more labor demand from the farm). Comparatively the migrant maids do not go on leave because of difficulties and high-cost of travel. Additionally, their movements get restricted because of the fear of being arrested by Thai authorities.

4.4 Replacing Migrant Housemaids

In the hypothetical event of replacing migrant housemaids with Thai workers, what provisions concerning wages and benefits, productivity and working conditions, and inducements in form of any hidden payments etc., is needed? Firstly, since housework is

viewed as an undignified occupation; foremost, the change in Thai attitude toward housework is required.

"In Thai society and the general population's perception household work is an unskilled job with no worth, no meaning. In the past workers in the household have been expected to work for next to nothing and there has been no change in the status of the job. For the workers too, they are not proud of their work, they do not see worth in their work, most workers do not dare tell other people they are domestic workers, so they do not speak of it, do not acknowledge the work they do as work. Thai society respects work in an office but not work in a home. There is even a different view of office cleaners "mae barn samnakngan" and house cleaners "khonchai," (directly translated as servant³). The latter are most discriminated against and do not have right at work, occupational safety and humanitarian principles are often violated. In fact, household work is fundamental to the well-being of the people in the house, but it is work that has always been mostly done by women and therefore not recognized in the formal sector and is still not covered by the labour laws of the land" (MAP 2001, 10).

Some Thai workers mentioned that it was the temperamental quirks of the employers that was unbearable. On the other hand employers were of the opinion that their treatment depended to a large extent on the behavior, conduct, or quality of the maids. Some employers even mentioned that they were willing to hire and willing to pay more wages if the Thai maids improved their conduct and quality of work.

Secondly, along with correction of attitude, housework could become more acceptable if a contract is drawn where work hour, days off, wage and benefits, work and living conditions etc., are clearly defined. This would make the housework not tedious or demanding but work with definite responsibilities. Also, labor inspection should be more strongly enforced.⁴

Thirdly, orientation needs to be provided to upgrade the standard of housemaids as well as to make their career path more favorable.

Fourthly, enforcement of immigration laws needs to be strictly enforced to control the supply of migrant maids. The newly established Office of Irregular Migration should seriously study the loopholes in the laws, and monitor and penalize corrupt officials involved in labor trafficking.

Fifthly, there are not adequate personnel for labor inspection and immigration control to check discrepancies (interviews with local officials, January 22, 2002).

Sixthly, No worker should earn less than minimum wage. This should be more closely monitored to make any job acceptable, including housework.

Last but not least, just like Singapore, employers of migrant maids must be levied to some extent so that the demand for migrant maids is reduced and externalities falling on the Thai workers and society is compensated.

4.5 The Effect of Replacement of Migrant Maids

What would be the implications of such an eventual change from the viewpoint of the employers, the maids, and in the society?

If migrant housemaids are replaced by Thai housemaids and if domestic work becomes more formally regulated, in terms of increased wage burden, the employer may not be much affected. Most employers on an average do pay prevailing market wages. Maid services, however, would be affected, as hours and type of work would be limited, and the freedom to command or to give order would be restricted. These changes would transform master-servant or familial relationship into a more employer-employee type of relationship. Maids in general would have more bargaining power. This new type of relationship or phenomenon is likely to increase the standard and acceptability of domestic work, which in turn could increase the supply and availability of domestic housemaids.

4.6 Alternatives

Besides replacing migrant housemaids with Thai housemaids, another possibility is to replace illegal migrant housemaids by legal migrant housemaids. This could be done through formal G-to-G arrangement between the Thai government and the government of sending countries. As such, developing diplomatic relationships between Thailand and those countries is also an important factor.

V. LESSONS LEARNED

5.1 Summary of Findings

Most employers have no plan or have never thought that they should stop employing migrant workers. It is probably unrealistic to think that the government can simply stop registering irregular migrants and expect that enforcement alone will bring employers into compliance with non-migrant policies. Some form of cooperative government-household effort is likely to be required to gradually reduce employers' current and growing dependence on immigrants. In the case of housemaids, employers have been satisfied with migrant maids' work ethics, while their attitude toward Thai maids was negative.

It has been observed that domestic work requires workers with little education. Put it another way, workers with little education do domestic work. An implication is that if educational level of Thai workers increases, there will be less uneducated workers. Hence there will be even less supply of domestic workers. Although the number of domestic workers has been relatively stable (approx. 200,000), the ratio of domestic workers to the total labor force has declined slowly.

Further, the intensity of rural development programs has resulted in increasing employment

opportunity (increase in non-farm employment in particular) in the rural areas. Accordingly, it is anticipated that there will be less supply of rural migrants who want to do domestic work.

Migrant domestic workers are in great demand in Thailand. The number of registered migrant housemaids increased from 34,283 in 1996 to 82,389 in 2001, a total increase of 48,106 or an average of 9,600 workers a year. The supply of migrant workers, on the other hand, depends very much on the political and economic situation of the country of origin as much as the differential wages and work conditions in Thailand.

5.2 Main Achievements

All or most of the migrant maids interviewed under this study were satisfied with their working and living conditions. Their wages are comparable to Thai counterparts. None of them were exploited or abused. Although the work hours do seem to be long, the work itself is flexible, and there are times during the day when they have long breaks.

Domestic workers help to increase the homemakers' opportunity to participate in the labor market. Migrant domestic workers fill the gap felt due to the shortage of supply of native domestic workers. As such, migrant housemaids contribute in giving more opportunities for Thai women to participate in the labor market or in giving the homemaker more time to socialize.

The employers interviewed are likely to continue to hire migrant housemaids because Thai maids are unreliable and untrustworthy. These employers opined that registration term for migrant maids, therefore, should be at least a minimum of one year.

Another supporting reason for the need of migrant maids is that Thai women have high labor participation rates. Housemaids help alleviate their housekeeping work. Economically, the costs of housekeeping are high or low depending on the type of work engaged. It is rational for a housewife to hire a maid if she finds that outside work is more productive. Therefore, for economic reasons, it is fair to employ migrant housemaids. The important thing is to maintain records of these migrants (through periodic registration system) and implement a close monitoring system so that their size is kept under control. In Singapore, especially in the years after Asia's 1997/1998 financial crisis, more women stepped in to supplement the family income. As the family structure increasingly took the shape of double-income families, more households began hiring foreign maids (Bangkok Post, 12 December 2001).

Do migrant housemaids create unemployment for native workers? On an average Thai unskilled workers do not possess the required attributes desired by employers. Besides, domestic workers prefer factory jobs to household jobs. Thus "direct competition between immigrants and natives is negligible because immigrants tend to be concentrated within certain labor market segments" (Biffl 1998, 559).

5.3 Main Gaps

Migrant domestic workers depress the wage rate of native domestic workers and related service workers as their work encompasses from taking care of laundry to cooking to nursing of the baby or the old among others. Migrant domestic workers contribute marginally to local consumption of goods and services. Most domestic migrants send large portion of their earnings home. Housemaids (whether Thai or migrant); however, contribute indirectly to the economy as the homemaker becomes increasingly freer to participate in the labor market. They also aid in alleviating the burden of the homemaker in tending to the welfare of the elderly and the children. On the other hand, the elderly often find that their traditional role of taking charge of the grandchildren and the house, has been reduced.

As regards repatriation of irregular migrants, officials and policy makers revealed that the campaign in the past has not been successful. Out of about a million irregular migrants, they were able to repatriate only 268,259 and 26,354 in 1998 and 1999 respectively. And these repatriated migrants keep returning. One problem is that there are no official receiving points in the sending countries to register the irregular migrants. In Myanmar, for example, the government says it cannot take necessary action because a large proportion of migrants are from minority groups who are not under full control of the government.⁵ Another speculative reason is possibly the sending governments are not inclined to take action on their erring citizens. Other logistics problems that the Thai government face in implementing repatriation are: long borders which are difficult to patrol, corrupt officials, and strong network of migrant trafficking among others.

The problem of ineffective repatriation and/or restriction of irregular immigration is compounded by the fact that economically speaking, the burden of costs is not borne by the irregular migrants and their employers. To the migrants the initial costs are minimal in comparison to the potential income they will earn from working in Thailand. For employers, no additional costs are placed on them by the government for hiring immigrants instead of Thai workers. These costs include both monetary and social ones. The social costs could be much higher if there is a more serious enforcement of the law. Since there are no serious repercussions, both the government and the employers do not have the will to find alternatives to reduce the dependence on irregular migrants.

The registration process needs to be upgraded so that the procedures become more stringent in fostering better management of irregular migrants as it would aid in reducing the dependence of the migrant worker, and help in keeping track of their activities.

It has been observed that the problems of irregular migrants and repatriation must be tackled, but that it cannot be totally eliminated. "Experience in Europe and the United States with legalization of the illegal and the introduction of more severe border and

work permit controls in firms showed that these were short-term measures that did not tackle the real problem; illegal inflows return to their former levels" (Biffi 1998, 562).

The migration infrastructure in Thailand needs to be built. There are no formal employment agents who would match migrant workers with current demand. The existing system is informal or clandestine, simply because irregular migration is illegal. Migration infrastructure will automatically follow if the employment of migrant workers becomes more open and systematic.

5.4 Main Challenges

If all migrant maids are expelled what would be the impact of the homemakers' participation in the labor market? Would there still be a dearth of domestic workers, despite programs designed to encourage them to work as housemaids? Would the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare have sufficient manpower to conduct labor inspection at household level? Domestic workers (migrant or not) are not contracted. Should it be made mandatory that all domestic workers be contracted so that supervising or monitoring can be done more easily? Obviously, more research is needed to answer these issues (MAP 2001, 33).

Aside from research needs, it may be noted that protection of migrant workers are covered by two specific Conventions: the Migration for Employment Convention of 1949 (No. 97) and the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provision) Convention of 1975 (No. 143) (ILO 2000, I). Yet, the issue of illegal or irregular migration, particularly as regards to political security and economic constraints of the receiving country needs to be considered. The urgent need is to formulate policies that will maximize the interests or benefits of the receiving country.

Furthermore, in the long run, market mechanism (wages, benefits, and other social factors) will determine the existence of migrant workers. At present the wage demanded by a foreign worker is comparable to a Thai worker, while their service is much more satisfactory. If this condition is changed, the demand for migrant housemaids may change. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, there is still a question of national security. Although this study finds that migrant housemaids are satisfied by their respective employers, elsewhere there are cases of crime, robbery and homicide against employers by Myanmar workers.

ENDNOTES

¹ Due to space constraint, this paper does not include sections on the registration process and the recommended actions.

² Between 1986-1989, textile industry employment were 606.5, 975.1, 1,122.6 and 1,143.9 thousands respectively. The sex (female-male) ratio of employment was 67:33.

- ³ A stronger Thai word is “Khi-kha,” which implies a close to slave condition.
- ⁴ This measure could be controversial if one thinks of the Thai culture of having a maid in a house. Many Thais still think that a maid is like their own relative whom to share the living in the house. There are actually those unpaid family workers who are responsible for domestic work in return for room and board. To introduce a formal intrusion into a house may destroy this culture. However, it can also be argued that this culture or practice is diminishing as the economy becomes more industrialized.
- ⁵ An interview with an official of the Department of Employment in December 2001.

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