Sense of Place and Power Geometry of Female Myanmar Migrant Workers in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

This study examined the sense of place and power geometry of female Myanmar migrant workers in Bangkok and the relationship between sense of place and power geometry with migrant workers' other characteristics. This qualitative study is based on interviews with 15 Myanmar migrant workers, using snowball sampling. Ten Thai citizens were also interviewed, including employers, academics and officers working with migrants, in order to examine attitudes, power relationships, reciprocities and prejudices towards Myanmar migrant workers. The results show that all of the migrant workers had moved to Thailand illegally, via brokers. Thus, at the beginning of their stay in Thailand, they all lived in Thailand without any legal documents. Thailand, in the opinion of migrant workers, is a place of 'fun, convenience, beauty, wealth, and freedom.' Access to information technology via mobile phones allows them to build a new sense of place that shrinks the distance between their home villages and Thailand. While maintaining the linkage between families, friends and other people, migrants experience new emotions and feelings that can help to reduce their tensions. Regarding power geometry of Myanmar migrant workers, the power of Thai authorities has great influence on the migration process in Thailand. It appears to increase the power of brokers to recruit, arrange documents and find jobs for migrant workers. This power affects migrant workers, who are more likely to rely on informal support, either from brokers, relatives or friends in Thailand who are mainly from the same ethnic groups. However, a growing sense of place toward Thailand-their workplace and new home-strengthens migrant workers' ability to continue staying in Thailand for long periods although they face many difficulties with Thai laws and regulations and with the anti-migrant prejudices of Thai people.

Keywords: migration, mobility, female, Myanmar, migrant, sense of place, power geometry

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาครั้งนี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาผัสสะต่อสถานที่ (Sense of place) และ
ความสัมพันธ์เชิงตำแหน่งของอำนาจ (Power geometry) ของแรงงานหญิงเมียนมาใน
กรุงเทพมหานคร และเพื่อศึกษาความเกี่ยวข้องเชื่อมโยงระหว่างลักษณะเฉพาะส่วนบุคคล
ผัสสะต่อสถานที่ และความสัมพันธ์เชิงตำแหน่งของอำนาจของแรงงานหญิงเมียนมา
ใช้วิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ สัมภาษณ์แรงงานหญิงเมียนมา จำนวน 15 คน การเลือกตัวอย่าง
ใช้วิธีการแบบ Snowball sampling นอกจากนี้ได้สัมภาษณ์ประชาชนไทยจำนวน 10 คน
จากกลุ่มนายจ้าง นักวิชาการและผู้ปฏิบัติงานด้านแรงงานข้ามชาติ และบุคคลทั่วไป เพื่อ
ทราบทัศนคติต่อแรงงานหญิงเมียนมา ความสัมพันธ์เชิงตำแหน่งของอำนาจ รวมทั้ง
ความเกื้อกูล และอคติต่างๆ แรงงานหญิงเมียนมา ผลการศึกษาพบว่า แรงงานทั้งหมด
เข้าประเทศไทยโดยผ่านนายหน้า และลักลอบเข้าประเทศโดยไม่ถูกต้องตามกฎหมาย
ในระยะแรกที่เข้ามาอยู่ในประเทศไทยจึงไม่มีที่มีเอกสารหลักฐานใดเลยจากประเทศเมียนมา
ภาพลักษณ์ของประเทศไทยในสายตาของแรงงาน คือ "สนุก สะดวก สวยงาม รายได้ดี
มีอิสระ" ขณะที่การเข้าถึงเทคโนโลยีสารสนเทศผ่านโทรศัพท์มือถือในปัจจุบัน สามารถ
สร้างผัสสะต่อสถานที่แบบใหม่ที่ย่นย่อระยะทางระหว่างบ้านเกิดกับสถานที่ทำงานและที่อยู่
ณ ปลายทาง (ประเทศไทย) ความรู้สึกเชื่อมโยงกับครอบครัว เพื่อน ญาติ ผู้คนอื่นๆ ง่ายดายขึ้น
ซึ่งผ่อนคลายความวิตกกังวลของแรงงาน ในด้านความสัมพันธ์เชิงตำแหน่งของอำนาจ
พบว่า ตำแหน่งต่างๆ ของบุคคลที่แวดล้อมแรงงานหญิงต่างมีอิทธิพลต่อแรงงาน ขณะที่
อำนาจของรัฐมีอิทธิพลในกระบวนการเข้ามาทำงานของแรงงานในประเทศไทย และอำนาจ
ของรัฐเองได้ส่งผลให้ระบบนายหน้าในการจัดหางานและดำเนินธุรกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับ
แรงงานมีอิทธิพลต่อแรงงานอย่างมากเช่นกัน ท้ายที่สุดแล้วแรงงานต่างต้องพึ่งพิงความ
ช่วยเหลือแบบไม่เป็นทางการ ทั้งจากนายหน้า ญาติพี่น้อง และเพื่อน ที่อยู่ในประเทศไทย
ผัสสะต่อพื้นที่ทั้งประเทศไทย สถานที่ทำงาน ที่พักหรือบ้าน ทำหน้าที่โยงใยผูกยึดให้
แรงงานสามารถทำงานอยู่ในประเทศไทยได้อย่างยาวนาน แม้จะมีความยากลำบากและ
ต้องต่อสู้กับกฎเกณฑ์ต่างๆ ของรัฐ และทัศนคติของคนไทยที่หลากหลายทั้งแง่บวกและลบ

คำสำคัญ: การย้ายถิ่น การเคลื่อนย้ายทางพื้นที่ สตรี ชาวเมียนมา ผู้ย้ายถิ่น ผัสสะต่อ
สถานที่ ความสัมพันธ์เชิงตำแหน่งของอำนาจ

Introduction

Thailand has become the center of migration in Southeast Asia due to
its economic growth and high demand for unskilled labor (International
Organization for Migration and Asian Research Center, 2013). The
number of registered migrants via government channels from the
neighboring countries of Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia was
1,023,416 in 2013 (Ministry of Labor, Department of Employment,
2014). However, it is estimated that the number of migrants was actually
more than twice that figure, or about 2.76 million (Huguet, 2014:2).
Among the registered migrants in 2013, those from Myanmar were the
majority among the three countries with 777,144 migrants. Gender data
regarding migrants is available only for those with working permits via
national verification. Of 717,167 registered Myanmar migrants in 2013,
295,073 or 41.1 percent were females (Ministry of Labor, Department
of Employment, 2014). The wide gap between the estimated number of
migrants and the number of registered migrants illustrates the
complications in official monitoring of illegal migrations as well as for
migration policy. Because of the obstacles to gaining legal migrant
status, illegal migrants, especially females, tend to face difficulties in
working, in getting welfare and in their daily life.

The working conditions of both legal and illegal female migrants
are more likely to be generally worse than those of males. Female
migrants are at risk of both physical and sexual harassment and violence
from men, both in their migration to Thailand and in their work (Pearson
and Kusakabe, 2012: 76). The strict policies and complexities of legal
applications force women to migrate through informal channels, leading
to exploitation and trafficking (UN Women, 2013).

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was implemented
in late 2015 to enhance economic cooperation among the ASEAN
countries of Thailand, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Malaysia,
Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia and Brunei. ASEAN has
signed several agreements with the goal of creating a single market and
production base, characterized by free flow of goods, services and

investment, as well as freer flows of capital and labor (Invest in Asean, 2016). There is awareness among Thais about the overwhelming flow of labor into Thailand as a result of the agreements. However, the agreement known as the Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) allows only skilled labor to move freely among the Asean countries. The term "skilled labor" refers to engineers, nurses, architects, surveyors, dental practitioners, medical practitioners, accountants and tourist professionals. For unskilled migrant workers, the move is fraught with obstacles and high expenses, such as the processing of passport applications andwork permits, or even arrangements for illegal crossing of the border into Thailand (Songsri, 2013).

This study applies the concepts of sense of place and power-geometry of time-space compression (Massey, 1994) to analyze the power of female migrants. The findings represent preliminary results of research conducted from January to March, 2015. Qualitative methods were used for data collection. Fifteen female migrant workers were interviewed as well as ten Thais involved with Myanmar migrants. The research also includes a review of the existing literature and policy environment.

Migration in Thailand

Over the past two decades, Thailand's economy has been growing rapidly, much more than that of neighboring countries, including Myanmar, while the Thai labor force has shifted from unskilled labor to skilled labor (International Organization for Migration and Asian Research Center, 2013). Thus, unskilled labor has been in high demand in Thailand, and labor from neighboring countries seems to be necessary to fill in this gap. Currently most migrants in Thailand are from Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia, with an estimated total of around 2,455,744 migrants in 2009-2010 (Huguet, Chamratrithirong, and Richter, 2011: 9).

In the past two decades, Thai policy and laws on immigration into Thailand have had a great impact on migrants from neighboring countries. Because of concern over the numbers of migrants, Thailand began issuing migrant worker cards to persons from Myanmar in 10 border provinces in 1992. In 1996 the issuing of migrant worker cards expanded to include migrants from Cambodia and Lao PDR. In 2001, the work permit system covered all provinces in Thailand for essentially all low-skill jobs (Huguet, 2014). Thailand began signing and implementing Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) on cooperation in the employment of workers with Lao PDR in October 2002, with Cambodia in May 2003, and with Myanmar in June 2003 (Huguet, Chamratrithirong, and Ritcher, 2011). However, only very small numbers of migrants were recruited via the MOU due to the high fees and complicated administrative process involved. In 2009, the Thai government announced the nationality verification (NV) process for migrant workers in Thailand, which regularized their nationality and provided temporary passports and valid works permit by 14 December 2012. Further entry into the NV process was closed effective 11 August 2013. This process would eventually cover over one million migrants from Myanmar (Huguet, 2014). In November 2012, the Ministry of Labor issued Ministerial Regulation No. 14 (B.E. 2555) (C.E.2012) under the Labor Protection Act B.E. 2541 (1998). The regulation applies to employers whose employees are engaged in domestic work but not in business.

The Concept of Mobility

The contemporary idea of mobility has largely expanded in definition, focus and interpretation over time. Mobility is now considered more than the act of movement between locations; it also includes products and producers of power and a dynamic equivalent of power of place (Cresswell, 2006). This new mobility paradigm was introduced in the social sciences by Seller and Urry (2006). They argued that mobility in our contemporary world has grown immensely by the vastly increasing number of mobile people; by forms of mobility which include bodily and visual mobility; by perceptions of mobility; and by new places and

technologies that allow people to be more mobile more rapidly, leading to increased cosmopolitanization. The new mobility paradigm, thus, is not only about the massive number of people on the move, but it also covers the speed and intensity of various flows. The modern concept of mobility includes the complex mobilities of cultural and ethnic diasporas and transnational migrants in the modern world. Faist (2013: 1638) suggests that two main approaches reflecting the new mobility paradigm are the transnational approach and the network society approach. In the transnational approach, social space is crucial in order to capture flows across boundaries, such as borders; while the concept of network society focuses on global and local binary connects, which are closely linked with mobility of people, capital, goods or information.

Urry (2011) identifies five interdependent 'mobilities': (1) the corporeal travel of people for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, escape and migration; (2) the physical movement of objects to producers, consumers and retailers; (3) the imaginative travel effected through the images of places and people which then construct and reconstruct visions of place; (4) virtual travel transcending geographical and social distance and (re)forming multiple distance communities; and (5) communicative travel through person-to-person messages via communications channels. These fast and massive 'mobilities' are associated with the growth of auto-mobility, cheap air travel, high-speed trains, new kinds of global leisure environments that attract people to visit, and manufactured goods (Ibid.).

Sheller (2008) emphasizes freedom of mobility, in that it should focus onnot only human mobility and the rights that attach to persons and groups to enable their mobility, but also on contexts and spaces that allow for mobility in particular kinds of places.With this focus, Sheller argues that personal mobility involves 'personal', 'civic', and 'sovereignal' freedom. Civic freedom, for instance social protests, may sometimes interrupt the personal mobility freedom of other citizens, while sovereignal freedom, including issues of governance, legitimacy and power, whether in a home, an organization, a city or a nation, may block personal freedom and mobility as well (Ibid.).

However, mobility is not always equal to freedom or empowerment. For example, a study of the oral history of women and men who remained in Ireland in the 1950s by Gray (2011) reveals that women who stayed in Ireland could positively inhabit their feminine selves and attain happiness and fulfillment there. This is in contrast to emigrant women who may have become wealthier, but who were assumed to experience a less successful family life. Gray also asserts that leaving or staying is associated with connections between place and belonging. This idea is consistent with Sheller's assertion (2008: 29) that mobility is not always a desired good; it can be coerced under conditions such as slavery or trafficking. Fallov, Jørgensen, and Knudsen (2013) argue that mobility should not be associated only with perspectives of progress, modernity and freedom, but it can also be associated with forms of power and domination, restrictions and anxieties. The different choices of mobility are related to the complexity of freedom and constraints (Ibid.).

Place, Space, Sense of Place and Power Geometry of Time-Space Compression

Over the last 20 years, space, place and sense of place have been broadly applied in studies related to gender (e.g., McDowell, 1999; Donnan and Wilson, 1999) and gender mobility (e.g., Massey, 1994; Uteng and Cresswell, 2008, Cresswell, 2006; Silvey, 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006). Since the geographic analysis focuses on the intersection of production and reproduction spaces, geographers simply incorporate gender as a fundamental parameter in study processes. Likewise, scholars of feminist social theory have been long interested in the relations between gender and space. In feminist social theory, spatial arrangement is explained as a product of factors that differentiate women's and men's status, resulting in gendered spaces that reduce women's access to knowledge and are used by men to reproduce power (Peet, 1998: 270-274).

In comparing space and place, the definitions of the two terms appear to overlap. Space and place are familiar words; they denote common experiences (Tuan, 1977: 3). They are not, however, interchangeable. *Space* is the general idea that people have of where things should be in physical and cultural relation to each other. It is the conceptualization of the imagined physical relationships that give meaning to society (Donnan and Wilson, 1999; Lefebvre, 1991). Likewise, Tuan (1977) posited, "Space is an abstract term for a complex set of ideas. People of different cultures differ in how they divide up their world, assign values to its parts, and measure them." The different groups of people who live in the same space may create their own boundaries around or within that space by subtle means (McDowell, 1999:5).

Place, on the other hand, is both the distinct space where people live as well as the idea of where things are (Donnan and Wilson, 1999:9). Place implies a location and an integration of society, culture and nature. It generates psychological and emotional links between people and specific locations, which depend on the range of experiences that people have with particular locations (Golledge and Stimson, 1997: 393). McDowell (1999:4) elaborated place as the production of geographical scale and the connection of boundaries. McDowell further proposed that place is made through power relations which construct the rules and define boundaries that determine who belongs to a place and who may be excluded. Thus, place is often contested, fluid and uncertain.

Sense of place

Over the last two decades the concept of sense of place has been increasingly defined, theorized and used across diverse disciplines and is an important concept for understanding the complex relationships between individuals and groups and their natural and cultural environments (Converym, Corsanem and Davism, 2012). Sense of place powerfully shapes and drives the behavior of individuals and groups (Attanapola, 2006). It is also highly gender differentiated as a result of gendered socialization specific to particular places (McDowell, 1999).

The concept of sense of place was first and most commonly applied in the field of cultural geography (Martin, 1997). Initially, sense of place was defined as reflecting different experiences and emotions attached to a landscape (Tuan, 1974). In the early studies of sense of place in the 1970s, the focus was on the experiences of home or rural villages as being particularly positive and fulfilling (Attanapola, 2006). Later, the focus was more on how sense of place changes as a consequence of changes in society and connectivity in the modern world (Massey, 1994). Massey (1994) coined the term "global sense of place" to demonstrate the impacts of economic globalization and advanced technologies that lead to time-space compression.

According to Massey's (1994) concept of sense of place, places are processes; they are not static, do not have boundaries, do not have a single unique identity. Rather, places have a specificity that arises from the accumulated history of both the local and the wider world. People move with a certain sense of place, and people expand or shrink the places they travel to and from. Massey (1993, 1994) focused on sense of place in order to understand the impact of our living in current global economic and technological circumstances, as a result of which people experience time-space compression. Massey (1993) criticized the term 'time-space compression,' initially conceived by Harvey (1990), arguing that Harvey's original concept paid far too much attention to capital, and that there are many other influences on the experience of space and time, such as ethnicity and gender. In the critique of Harvey's conception of time-space compression, Massey (1993: 61) introduced the term "power-geometry of time-space compression," which she explained as follows:

> ...different social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't;…it is also about power in relation *to* the flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.

Thus, in time-space compression, the main parties are not those who are moving and communicating, but rather, those who control it. Massey emphasized that there are groups who do the physical moving but are not in charge of the process, such as refugees and migrant workers who cross borders. By extension, mobility and control of mobility by some people or groups can weaken other people or groups. In response to the assertion by Harvey (1990) that time-space compression produces insecurity, Massey argued that it may not always result in insecurity because of the progressive nature of sense of place, i.e., that places do not have single unique identities, do not have to have boundaries, and are not static, but rather are processes, with specificity of place. Sense of place that weakens over one time period can strengthen over the next, even under the influence of time-space compression.

Golledge and Stimson (1997: 393) defined sense of place as "the felt coherence of features in a setting and the feelings and emotions that the place generates." How places are perceived, what they symbolize, and the meanings attached to them are all fluid. As McDowell (1999: 7) argued, socially-expected behaviors and actions of women and men change with time and place. Wit (2013) defined sense of place as "the human experience of place in its all dimensions: physical, social, psychological, intellectual, and emotional." This includes the beliefs, perceptions, attitudes toward a place and attachments to place, feelings about local political and social issues, and feelings toward other places. Sense of place can be a strong influence on personality, group, and community. Holloway and Hubbard (2001) stated that sense of place establishes an emotional tie to a place and can be more emotional than rational.

According to the conception of power-geometry by Massey (1994) mentioned above, mobility involves not only who moves and who does not, but also the relationships between different social groups. In this study, power-geometry refers to the power of each parity in various positions related to female migrant workers. Sense of place refers to feelings and emotions that place generate, together with power and relations through which individuals interact with social

groups in places. These places include home villages, the home country, Bangkok and Thailand. This study of female migrant workers in Bangkok takes into account five distinct social groups: (1) migrants, (2) families of migrants at their destination, (3) job brokers, (4) employers in Thailand, (4) other migrants, including migrants' relatives, and (5) Thais and Thai authorities. The study also examines how the sense of place of migrants influences their relationships and their power practice. In addition, the framework guiding the study takes into consideration the context of policies, regulations and laws on migration in Thailand, which is crucial for analyzing the power-geometry of the five social groups and shapes the sense of place of migrants. The study's guiding framework is represented by Figure 1.
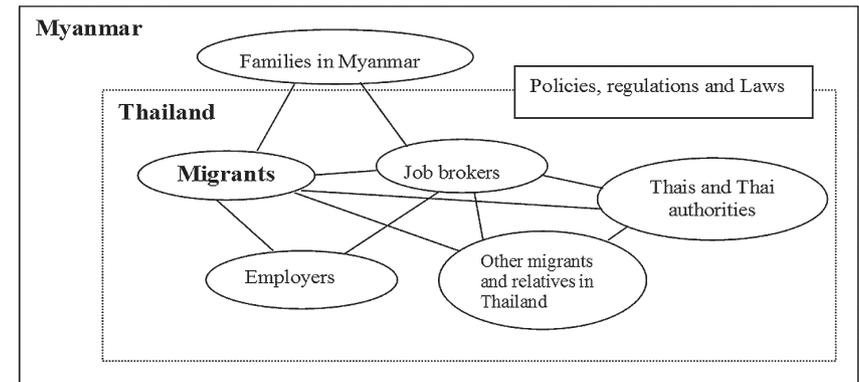

Figure 1 Framework of the study: Power-geometry and sense of place.

Methodology

The research methods used in this study were secondary data collection and in-depth key-informant interviews. The secondary data collection included data on Myanmar migrants and Thai migration policies. For the key-informant interviews, 15 Myanmar female migrants were interviewed, using snowball sampling, taking into account variation in types of work, duration of work and ethnicity. Questions dealt with

individual characteristics; experiences and processes of mobility to work in Thailand, remittances sent home, perceptions of place and space (house, community, Myanmar, Thailand and borders); relationships with employers, job brokers, other Myanmar migrants and Thai people; difficulties in living in Thailand; and ways of solving problems. In addition, the study interviewed ten Thai people, including employers, academics, and government officers working with migrants, in order to examine attitudes, power relationships, reciprocities and prejudices towards Myanmar migrant workers.

Characteristics of female migrant workers

Key characteristics of the 15female migrant workers in this study are presented in Table 1. Seven were aged 30 or older and the rest were younger than 30. Three of the workers were younger than 15 when they first arrived in Thailand. Seven workers were married, three were married but separated, and five were still single. Ten of the workers were of Karen ethnicity and four were Mon. Only one worker was of Burmese ethnicity.

Regarding the process of migration, none of the migrants were forced to migrate to Thailand by their parents or families. Nevertheless, they needed their parents' permission. In order to cross the border to work in Thailand, all migrants had to use the services of job brokers. The job brokers were always of the same ethnicity as the worker. The fees they charged were about 10,000 to 15,000 baht per worker. Most migrant workers (13 of the 15 interviewed), spent about two days travelling from their home villages to their destinations in Thailand. Only two of the workers had worked in Thai border provinces, Mae Sod district in Tak province and Kanchanaburi, before moving to Bangkok.

Table 1 Characteristics of female migrants interviewed.

Name	Age	Education	Marital status	Ethnicity	Duration in Thailand	Job	Income (Baht/ month)
Mai	33	grade 12	married	Karen	8 years	employee in fried food shop	10,500
Va	31	grade 8	married	Burmese	18 years	employee in dessert shop	12,000
Vee	31	grade 6	married	Karen	6 years	employee in grilled food restaurant	9,000
Un	32	grade 4	married	Mon	12 years	employee in sweet drink shop	12,000
Ja	33	grade 4	married	Mon	10 years	employee in beverage shop	8,400
Gan	16	grade 8	Single	Mon	2 years	employee in beverage shop	5,000
Ma	25	grade 6	married	Karen	10 years	housemaid	9,500
Wan	35	grade 6	married	Karen	15 years	housemaid	10,000
Ann	23	no education	single	Karen	3 years	housemaid	9,000
Dee	23	grade 6	single	Mon	2 years	employee in food and beverage shop	10,000
Fa	31	grade 4	married	Karen	8-9 years	cleaner of company	8,200
Arm	19	grade 8	married	Karen	1 year	employee in sweet shop	10,000
Sri	24	grade 4	single	Karen	8 years	cleaner of apartment	9,000
Na	27	no education	married	Karen	14 years	employee in a food shop	9,000
Nee	26	no education	single	Karen	6 years	cleaner in clinic	9,000

Note: Interviewees' names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Sense of Place and Power Geometry

According to Holloway and Hubbard (2001), sense of place establishes emotional ties to a place and builds up responses that are more emotional than rational. According to interviews with female Myanmar migrants, Thailand has a good image as a country with more prosperity, facilities, entertainment options and beautiful women than their home country. In other words, Myanmar perceptions of Thailand can be summed up as "fun, beautiful, and rich." Workers perceived Thailand as a livable country. Some respondents expressed the view that Thailand offered more safety and freedom than Myanmar, and therefore, living in Thailand was more convenient. Department stores and convenience stores, especially 7-Eleven, were images of the convenience and decent places of Thailand. Most migrants did not want to move back to their home village in Myanmar, as can be seen in their comments below.

> "There are lots of people from Burma. It motivated me to come…Many friends are here and there are only elderly left in Myanmar. I definitely won't go back now. It is not fun there. Here, I have a job and money. I can buy food, shop with my kid, travel around. This is much more fun (compared with staying in Burma.)" (Wan [Pseudonym], 2016).

> "I have fun staying here...I miss home sometimes but I like it here and like to stay here as it's more convenient and safer. Besides, Burma was not a democratic country back then. We had to be careful to act, to say, and whatever…. I experienced this civilization and I realized that our country is much worse. It is more fun and much better to stay here. I can go wherever I want to go. I can eat whatever I want to eat. When I went back to Burma and thought about what I wanted to eat, it wasn't there. In Thailand it is better." (Mai [Pseudonym], 2016).

> "We stay here because we want more freedom. We want to have a comfortable life. Oh, today we want to eat here and we can get anything, but if we stay there, we have to commute very far and it is difficult. Look at my three children; they said they don't want to go back where is no 7-Eleven." (Wan [Pseudonym], (2016).

However, regarding the feeling of "home," most of the migrants, 14 out of 15, even those living with their husbands, felt that Thailand was only a place to work. Thailand was not "home," and they planned to move back to Myanmar one day.

> "I will continue to work and live in Thailand until my house in Myanmar is built completely. I will definitely go back home in Myanmar one day, but I do not know when it will be." (Ja [Pseudonym], (2016)

> "I want to go back home, but for now I need to save money to build a house. I already bought some land from earnings I had from work here in Thailand." (Ann [Pseudonym], 2016).

On the other hand, there was one case of a migrant who did consider Thailand her home. She had been living in Thailand for 15 years and now lived with her husband and three children in Bangkok. She even wanted to buy a house in Bangkok if she had the right to do so.

> "I will stay here (in Thailand) until my children graduate with their degrees. (Her oldest sons studied in grade 1 in Bangkok, and her two daughters were in pre-school.) We can go back and forth to Myanmar but I don't want to go back now. If we can buy this house, I want to buy it." (Wan [Pseudonym], 2016, aged 35)

In terms of power geometry, the results were consistent with the studies of Massey (1994), who explained that migration involves not only people who moved or not, but also the relationships of various social groups. It was demonstrated that groups of friends of similar age

and their success in migration are significant factors in the decisionmaking of Myanmar females to move to Thailand as workers. Also, the needs of female migrants' families back in Myanmar (for example, house construction or child care) play a significant role in determining the expenses of migrants. All female migrant workers had an obligation to contribute about80-90percent of their income as remittances to their families in Myanmar.

The well-being of migrants depends heavily on good relationships with Thai employers. The interviews indicate that several migrant workers had experienced very harsh and abusive employers, and that one of them was slapped in the face. However, interviews with Thai employers indicate that they viewed Myanmar female migrants as "diligent, well-behaved and clean" and that they preferred them over those from other neighboring countries and even Thai workers. At the same time, the findings show clearly that employers exert powerful influence over migrant workers. For example, only a few employers arranged work permits for Myanmar employees, fearing that they would resign shortly after acquiring the permit. The burden of applying for work permits thus becomes the obligation of migrants themselves. This is in contrast to Thailand government plans to require employers to ensure the procurement of work permits. Migrants, thus, have to depend on job brokers, who arrange the work permits through special processes that usually involve corruption. One other difficulty is that migrant workers can respond to abusive employers or terrible working conditions only by resigning or running away from their jobs.

However, a good attitude on the part of Thai employers seems to be more important than the fact that they neglect to arrange work permits for employees. Particularly among migrants who had been in Thailand for long periods of time (over three years), the kindness of employers in everyday life is important to them in deciding whether or not they want to stay or leave this employer. At the same time, sense of place could be built through time and relationships with employers, which lead female migrants to become attached to places.

"I do not mind arranging for my work permit by myself. It is the thing that workers like us can do. I just pray that Thailand will allow us to work, won't stop us. Otherwise, I cannot work in Thailand. Any place that is good, I don't want to change. If I can stay for a long time, I will. Now I don't earn much and the rent for my room is expensive, but it's ok. I try to economize. If my boss is good and my colleagues are good, I won't change jobs. I like this job." (Fa [Pseudonym], 2016, aged 31, has lived in Thailand over eight years)

This attitude is in contrast to younger migrants who have lived only a short time in Thailand, for whom both attitude and arranging of work permits seem to be important because they need security for their life. It reflects the power relationship between employer and migrant worker.

"Working here is great and fun, but if my boss had not arranged the work permit for me, I would have left. I don't know many people who can do this for me. My aunt could help me have a work permit but when my boss did it for me, it was much easier." (Gan [Pseudonym], 2016, aged 16)

Relationships with relatives and friends in Thailand of the same ethnicity are extremely important. Migrant workers commonly need support from relatives and friends in solving problems related to work, employers, health or even living expenses. All these forms of support help relieve the stress caused by loneliness and difficulties at work for workers far from their homes. Support from relatives and friends reassures workers and makes them feel safer and more willing to continue their stay in Thailand.

In contrast, relationships with friends from different Myanmar ethnicities seem to be not very important for migrants. While most Thai people may consider all migrants from Myanmar to be Burmese, in fact, migrants from most ethnicities never consider themselves Burmese. Thus, it is not surprising that migrants feel uncomfortable communicating

with people from other ethnicities, even if they come from Myanmar. This feeling results not only from lack of trust but also from language differences.

Migrant workers depend heavily on job brokers, who not only ease the way in finding jobs, but often also support workers in their daily lives and even arrange all official documents that Thai authorities require, such as extension of passports, applying for work permits and sending back remittances to families in Myanmar. Migrants tend to have their own networks and often do not rely on only a single job broker. Each migrant interviewed had at least two or three job brokers to support them.

In terms of Thai authorities and the Thai state, Thai regulations that change frequently afflict migrant workers and force them to rely more on job brokers who understand the regulations. Burdens from new regulations, however, are never put on Thai employers. The process of work permit application has effectively become the sole responsibility of migrant workers although the rules require agreement between migrant workers and Thai employers. This study found that in practice there were very few cases where employers went to apply for work permits for their employees. Thai employers are much more likely to hire migrant workers who already hold work permits from other Thai employers. Thus, most migrant workers did not have any record of real Thai employment on their work permit documents. This issue appears not to concern either the Thai government or Thai employers. The complicated process of hiring migrant workers leads Thai employers to ignore all regulations regarding the hiring of migrant workers. In the end, migrant workers are the ones who have the least amount of power in the process of migration.

In addition, migrant workers fear the police more than anything else in Thailand. Among the 15 migrants interviewed in this study, three (ages 25, 31, and 35) had been arrested by the police. Some migrant workers said that although they hold passports or work permits, they could be arrested at any time, for any reason. Police can freely interrogate migrants and ask to check other documents at that time, documents that might not be available. Also, migrants could be accused of stealing the

employer's property. Thai police, in migrant workers' views, represent the power of Thai regulations and Thai authorities, a power that can control their freedom and life in Thailand. Below is one example.

> "I was caught two times without a work permit. The first time was when I visited my brother. The police said I had to pay 10,000 baht (US$303) even if I had had a work permit. I didn't want to pay, but he frightened us so much about sending us back to Myanmar. I was so scared. So, I bargained with him to pay 5,000 baht (US$152). These police want our money. In fact, if we have a work permit they should not arrest us for not having a have passport. I heard that someone who had a passport but could not speak Thai was also arrested by the police. The police took the passport, tore it up and threw it away. That is why I was so scared then and am always really careful about the police." (Vee [Pseudonym], 2016, aged 31)

On the other hand, the case below shows that a good relationship with an employer and a person's ability to bargain can sometimes help in critical situations with Thai authorities.

> "I have been caught twice. One time I didn't bring my passport and work permit with me. I told the police that I forgot the documents and I asked him to call my boss. My boss told me to give the police six shirts from his shop. Then, I asked them to drop me off at the boss's house. When the police dropped me at the house, he didn't want to talk to my boss anymore. He might have been also scared because I had all the documents." (Wan [Pseudonym], 2016, aged 35)

Consequently, female migrant workers have to follow all Thai regulations, particularly those under the authority of the police. Although the perception of Thailand among female migrants is likely to be positive, they still have fears. Bargaining power seems to depend on individual abilities to negotiate with the authorities, to communicate in Thai and to have a good relationship with employers.

Conclusions

This study employs the power geometry concept in order to explore the power of female migrant workers. It visualizes their lives across multiple dimensions. It reveals that power and freedom in females' lives are not related to individual matters only. The position of each actor related to a female migrant greatly influence she weakness, freedom and power. This state of affairs indicates the need to take into consideration a variety of factors that determine the power and independence of female migrants. Among the most important of these are state policies, regulations and stakeholders such as employers, job brokers, relatives and fellow migrants of the same ethnicity. The study also includes an analysis of the determinants of women's sense of place towards Thailand.

The concepts of migration, mobility, sense of place and power geometry enhance our understanding of foreign migrant workers, both broadly and deeply. The flow of female migrant workers to Thailand from Myanmar is not caused only by economic determinants. Sense of place towards Thailand, with its changes from time to time, can be among other important factors that influence females to move to work in Thailand and stay for long periods of time. The concept of power geometry, in particular, supports the analysis of the linkage between female migrant workers and social networks, such as those with friends and relatives in Myanmar as their home country and in Thailand as their destination country. Migrants' important relationships include those with brokers and Thai authorities who have power over their lives. This study shows that the more formidable the state regulations and implementation are, the more important job brokers are for migrant workers. However, the services of brokers do help migrants to continue living in Thailand with less stress. The brokers arrange all official processes by themselves, and consequently, migrants do not need to show up at the Thai offices in order to extend their stay, renew their visa, or apply for work permits. In addition, migrant workers also rely on brokers in finding new jobs and sending their money back home.

While Thai regulations have a powerful impact on migrant workers, adding to their anxiety throughout the migration process, these regulations are not able to force Thai employers to follow the regulations in hiring migrant workers. Thai regulations appear to enhance the power of job brokers, while limiting the freedom and power of migrant workers to legally acquire and hold official migrant documents. This issue needs to be considered at the policy level. For example, the process for obtaining work permits should be simplified so that migrant workers can apply for work permits themselves and not have to rely on brokers.

There seems to be a disconnect between the positive perceptions that female migrant workers have of Thailand and the negative practices of employers, Thai authorities, and police regarding them. However, the framework of sense of place, together with power-geometry, contributes to an understanding of this issue. Sense of place cannot be produced by individuals and places themselves, but is determined to a great degree by the power relations between migrant workers and other parties. In Thailand, while migrants endure demanding working conditions, intimidating authorities, and lack of help in obtaining work permits from most Thai employers, there is always support from other parties, such as brokers, relatives, friends or even employers. These parties can sometimes even have power over Thai authorities, and they are very important for female migrant workers in their perception of place. Thus, working in Thailand can be very difficult and complicated for Myanmar female migrants, but perception of place, influenced by relationships with these supporting parties, can give them the power to meet the difficulties.

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