

Reconstituting Thailand's Technology-intensive Shrimp Farms Through Gendered Migration¹

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Abstract

Thai shrimp farm owners' cost efficiency goals complement the needs for a conjugal home and workplace by migrant couple workers from Laos, Myanmar and northeast Thailand, which in turn has created a 'migrant slot' among Surat Thani Province's shrimp farms. The conjugal workforce in shrimp farms is however differentiated by the creation of the female worker subject, publicly defined as 'not a real worker.' By paying migrants a couple wage, employers re-create and solidify discourses on the work and labor capacities that differentiate women and men in shrimp farms. Women workers for their part acquiesce to 'not being a real worker' in order to achieve certain ends, such as exploring supplementary income sources or creating latitude for childcare. Only Thai women, however, are able to find other income sources, whereas Burmese and Lao workers are largely tied to husbands and employers due to existing legal impediments. Women workers' enactments of 'not being a real worker' thus in turn reproduce and differentiate migrant national subjects engaged in the fisheries sector of Thailand.

The paper argues that the production of gender and migrant differentiated identities constitute technology-intensive shrimp farming and its premium place in Thailand's export economy. By a focus on identities constituted by resource use, this paper puts in question essentialist and reified assumptions about gender and gender differences. Instead, we place social practices that produce gender subjects and their ontological differences at the center of analysis, thereby attentive to the diversity of subject positions available to different women in a single context.

Keywords: *gender, identity, migration, shrimp farms, Thailand*

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INTRODUCTION

The combined themes of gender and labor migration have carved a long and rich history of scholarship within gender, globalization and development studies. These have focused largely on a number of key domains, each structured by gender: (a) gender selectivity of migration flows for specific labor markets; (b) the differentiated working conditions, segregation, outcomes and terms of employment of female and male migrants in places of destination; (c) the growing 'care deficit' in developed regions of North and South that siphon scores of women from labor-abundant developing regions to constitute a distinct and feminized labor force. These studies have generally pursued both political economic and neo-classical analytical streams in labor migration, essentially pointing to structural forces that impede, govern and shape female migration processes on one hand, and view actions of migrants as atomized and rational women and men responding to push and pull factors on the other. Concurrently labor migration processes have been gender-selective and have resulted in gender-differentiated outcomes.

In part influenced by the analytical stream of political economy in migration studies, this paper will however pursue a more poststructuralist track that considers the mutual constitution of place and work with the production of gender and migrant identities in migration processes that pertains to a specific industry in the global food trade. It will connect with the growing trove of ethnographic and feminist geography studies that dwell on the constitution of 'work,' and 'place' through the production of gender (Hanson 1995; Nagar 2002; Secor 2003; Boyer 2006; Harris 2006; Nightingale 2006).

This study will focus on female and male migrants who work for biotechnology-applied shrimp farming in Surat Thani Province, south Thailand, an industry that produces genetically engineered shrimps for the export market. Biotechnology applications in the shrimp industry falls in line with Thailand's vision to become the "Kitchen of the World," advancing the strategic role of the food and agriculture sectors in meeting the development goal of export-oriented economic growth. The labor force in Surat Thani's shrimp farms comprise migrants mainly coming from northeast Thailand, Laos and Myanmar.

In this paper, we argue that work and migration processes linked to technology-intensive shrimp farming produce gender and migrant subjects alongside constructing a sense of 'place'. In other words, we fix our gaze on the ways of becoming a woman or man, and the making of place, through work and the migration process. We also consider these gender and migrant identities as not just emerging from a particular place or context but that they are also constituted in place. Practices of work thus call forth both gendered identities and places. We thus deliberately elide earlier theorizations on gender – thought to be *pre-determined* (thus essentialist) unequal relations and differences between women and men – as structuring the organization of labor and the outcomes of the migration process. That said, this paper will therefore ask: How do labor practices and the migration process in shrimp farms produce particular gender and migrant subjects while simultaneously

evolving a sense of place or a 'migrant slot'?

In what follows, we will first briefly discuss the theoretical premises of this study. Thereafter we will describe the methodological and research site context. In succeeding sections, our empirical and analytical findings will proceed from these earlier discussions to be followed by the paper's conclusions.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

In conventional political economy and gender studies, linkages are often being drawn between gender and globalization, thereby calling attention to the effects of globalization on women in developing regions. This perspective usually adopts a structuralist view in which globalization is often seen as a process driven by one 'global capitalism' which is propelled by the neo-liberal logic – and that this inevitably influences and determines international governments, households and families in ways that disfavor women (Connelly 1995; Peterson 1996). By and large, however, themes such as the effects and impacts of the internationalization of labor markets, global production regimes and the position of women within the global economy often project a dismal picture where women inevitably suffer the effects of globalization and are usually centered on women's experiences in their places of destination (Sen 1996; Grown, et al., 2000; Shiva 2000; Ghosh 2001; Chow 2002; Beneria 2003). This has been referred to as 'the economic turn' among scholars and practitioners in the field of gender and development (Davids and Van Driel, 2001). Variants of the structuralist perspective also underpin discussions on gender, globalization and migration. From this perspective, labor demand and supply are perceived to principally determine the patterns of movements of women from the rural areas and less developing countries as unskilled, semi-skilled or low-skilled workers who gradually move into the economically vibrant regions. The principal engine of women's mobility into cities has therefore been attributed to global economic restructuring, confining women's migration to economic explanations and a one-dimensional view of outcomes at destination.

Migration laws, economic and political change may also affect men and women differently, resulting in gendered patterns of migration and outcomes. These also have implications for male and female migrants' livelihoods, rights and entitlements. Thus migration is understood as being mediated by gendered norms, expectations, and opportunities that stratify migrant women and men from different ethnic and racial groups (De Haan and Rogaly 2002) (Piper, forthcoming).

In this study, we differ substantially from the foregoing notions of gender – principally viewed as structuring social relations of power – that govern the experiences and effects of globalizing processes on labor migrants. We instead employ a number of key countervailing theoretical frames, as follows.

First, we recognize the contingent link between the production of gendered migrant identities and the constitution of work and place. Through work

practices and migration processes, we see the iterative production of place and gender- and migrant-differentiated identities. Being a 'woman worker', 'male employer' or 'male migrant' are products of practices and concrete cultural and historical circumstances, and therefore are not objective or pre-determined as seem implicit in recent studies on gender, migration and globalization. What it means to be a migrant woman or man is context-dependent and to discover this, we place our scholarly gaze on how identities are differentially and fluidly created through daily interactions and discourses on work, and in the creation of a distinct place through the migration process.

The foregoing is premised on existing theorizations on gender subjectivity which we feel are particularly instructive for this study. For instance, by citing Foucault, McDowell points out that the subject, rather than being fixed and stable, enters into social relationships, is always fluid, provisional and in the process of becoming (McDowell 1999). Additionally, there is caution against a *priori* and reified perceptions on women's roles and recommends that we instead consider how women enter into and engage in social relationships and their ensuing outcomes (Rao 1991). Strathern further suggests that identities are outcomes of interaction: "It is the interactions of women and men that make men, men" (1988):128). We therefore view gender as unstable and unfixated – instantiated by discourses and practices of work and migration that serve to sediment ontological differences between women and men (Butler, 1990). Drawing from the work of Judith Butler, we understand that gender is produced by the practices and processes through which notions of sex difference come to appear as natural and stable, though they are iteratively (re)produced and shifting (Butler, 1990; 1994). Gender, therefore, is performatively materialized through practices. Through iterative practices, gender comes to become matter, 'producing the factness of difference' (Butler, 1993: 9). Additionally, by being attentive to the social practices that produce gender- and migrant-differentiated identities, we are also cognizant of the relations of inequality and uneven power that these maintain and co-produce (Cornwall 2007). This, then, is this paper's central conceptual pathway.

Second, in this study, we aim to link the community, the national and the global scales through the enactments of gender practices and discourses in technology-intensive shrimp farming in Thailand vis-à-vis the industry's positioning in the Thai global export trajectory. A feminist mantra in globalization studies today posits that women's undervalued work has buttressed and given shape to economic globalization. Nagar et al.(2002) and Harstock (2001) argue that the relations between high-skill and low-skill work, between formal and casualized economies, between production and caring work, between globalized and marginalized places (in south and north) have allowed global capitalism to assume its contemporary forms. For instance, the work of Bonds on call centers unpacks the ways in which call centers in the rural American West are linked to processes of transnational capitalism and rural restructuring, underscoring the social construction of call center work that concentrates women in occupations that tend to be clustered at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy in the "new information economy"(Bonds 2006).

We further argue that labor markets are not only constituted through economic and structural processes, but also through discursive and cultural meanings. For example, from Pratt's work, we learn that three discursive constructions of "Filipina" – as "suppliant pre-immigrant"; as inferior "housekeeper"; and, within the Filipino community, as "husband stealer – work to shape Filipinas' labor market experiences in Vancouver and the migrant flows of female aspirants to the nursing profession from the Philippines (Pratt, 1997). Pratt's analysis demonstrates that theories of subject formation can contribute more textured understandings of labor market dynamics and segmentation. Secor also shows that in Turkey, the discourse of a deferential femininity, or what makes 'a good woman,' is a significant part of the restructuring of local economies and the growth of low-wage, low-status, often casual jobs, for which women are seen as ideal recruits (Secor, 2003). Similarly, in our study, the notion of female migrants as being 'not a real worker' – materialized through concrete discourses and social practices – simultaneously helps shape the organization of labor in shrimp farms. By citing these studies, we thus emphasize that economic globalization processes are embedded in the community and household, and by linking these scales, contend likewise that Thailand's neo-liberal designed economy is not innocent of gender.

The foregoing theoretical frames serve to underpin the central focus of this study: the production of place, gender- and migrant-differentiated subjects among Thai, Laotian and Burmese labor migrants in Surat Thani's shrimp farms. We discuss our methodological approach in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a mixed methods approach where three sets of qualitative interviews and a survey were conducted between October 2006 and May 2007 in 120 shrimp farms of Surat Thani Province. The first set of interviews involved 11 farm owners where issues of production and labor employment were the focus of the interviews.

The second set of interviews involved 31 Lao and Burmese male and female migrant workers³ who were interviewed on migration processes, networks that brokered the migration process and general working conditions in Surat Thani. The key findings from this initial set of interviews in turn informed the items in a survey in order to test the pervasiveness of these initial findings on a wider population. The survey later made use of a purposive sample of 147 Thai, Burmese and Lao migrant workers.

The third set of interviews, involving 47 female migrant workers⁴ aimed to investigate labor and employment conditions in shrimp farms by gender in more in-depth manner. Questions in this last set of interviews explored

³ 9 Lao men, 6 Lao women; 12 Burmese men and 3 Burmese women

⁴ 12 northeast Thais, 13 Burmese and 16 Lao

historical shifts in livelihoods, marriage and social status, spatial mobility and gendered conditions of the migrants' present employment.

It is to be noted that this paper is part of a wider research project on policy-making processes in biotechnology where a much earlier random survey of 214 farm operators in the Province was conducted. This paper also draws from some results of that survey.

In what follows, we present the empirical sections of the paper. We briefly describe the shrimp industry in Surat Thani Province and migration policy in Thailand to set the stage for the succeeding subsections partitioned according to the production of (a) place and (b) gender and migrant subjects through the migration process and the practices of work in technology-intensive shrimp farms.

THAI MIGRATION POLICY, SURAT THANI'S SHRIMP FARMS, AND THE PRODUCTION OF GENDER, PLACE AND IDENTITY

Thailand's economic growth in the 1980s led to labor market expansion and an acute shortage of unskilled labor towards the 1990s. Local Thais were no longer interested in the unskilled labour market due to their increasing preference for work in the services sectors, where incomes were relatively higher. As a result, the private sector put pressure on the government to allow them to employ migrant workers. It was then in 1992 that Thailand started to adopt an immigration policy for unskilled foreign workers (Chantavanich 2007). Over time, the government of Thailand has evolved migration policies that implicitly began to recognize industries' growing need for low, semi-skilled and cheap labor that will enable them to carve a competitive niche within the export market, while simultaneously keeping migration flows in check through stringent legal monitoring systems.

As a case in point, the shrimp industry in Surat Thani Province is the second biggest producer of shrimps in Thailand due largely to shrimp farming intensification and the use of upgraded technologies in shrimp growing. The growth of infrastructure-driven and technology-intensive shrimp industry in Surat Thani Province has created an increasing demand for low- and semi-skilled migrant workers, many coming from neighboring Myanmar and Lao PDR.



Figure 1: Surat Thani Province, Thailand

In 2003, a proposed new approach that adopted a more “open door” policy was envisaged to manage rather than to reject migrant workers. This approach requires the registration of employers who employ migrant workers and for employers to issue public announcements of job vacancies initially to the Thai labor force. This is totally new for Thailand as the policies in the past were targeted to registering workers in order to monitor their presence in the Kingdom – rather than register employers.

On March 2, 2004, a cabinet resolution directed the Ministry of the Interior to develop a database for aliens from Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. All aliens living in Thailand were ordered to report for registration, with fines and imprisonment for those who violated this order, including workers, employers and those who provided lodgings for aliens⁵. Employers were required to pay government fees to register their migrant employees.

⁵ The new requirements were as follows: Registration of both migrant workers and their employers; failure to come forward to register subjects the former to deportation and the latter to punishment; medical test which migrant workers have to pass, leading to a medical certificate; failure to do pass the test subjects them to deportation, while passing the test leads to the grant of a work permit as well as medical social welfare parallel to that of the local population (Muntarbhorn, 2005: 5-7).

Early assessments of the new approach to migration management reveal teething problems such as employers resisting to pay the required registration fees since these were too expensive, thus slowing down the registration process (Chantanvanich, 2007; (Muntarbhorn 2005)⁶. Official records indicate that the biggest number of migrant workers with work permits is the Burmese. Interviews with farm operators in Surat Thani also revealed that many of them comply with the government requirements for registration and in turn, deduct the required fees from workers' wages. Table 1 below shows the number of Laotian and Burmese workers who have been granted work permits, and Thai employers who have been granted permission to employ migrant workers in the Province.

Table 1: Number of Laotian and Burmese with Work Permits and Thai Employers with Permits to Employ Migrant Workers, Surat Thani Province

Thai Employers (with permits to employ)	Burmese migrants (with work permits)	Laotian migrants (with work permits)
5,381	22,345	647

Source: Migrant Labor Administrative Office, Ministry of Labor and Employment, 2006

In-migration trends in Thailand therefore indicate that the Thai economy is absorbing migrant laborers for low-skilled types of work which Thai citizens do not find desirable. Migrants from poorer labor-supplying neighboring countries like Lao PDR and Myanmar continue to seek work in Thailand, as this is made possible by an informal infrastructure made up of networks of brokers who charge relatively inexpensive fees (5-7,000 baht) (Martin 2002). Employer dependence on migrant labor is likely to persist as industries in Thailand expand, in view of the need to reduce production costs in order to become more competitive in the global market. The nature of the recent Thai migration registration policy is therefore a concessionary one, ceding to the need to redress the scarcity of low- and semi-skilled labor for growing industries like technology-intensive shrimp farming on one hand, and for a way to control the flow of migrant workers through legal means that metes out stiff penalties on violators of existing requirements on the other.

Surat Thani's shrimp farm operators tap into the mobility flows of northeast Thais, Laotians and Burmese to address the demands of rapid, superior quality and high-volume productivity of shrimps for export, with minimum labor cost and maximum control of labor delivery. This pursues the track of export-oriented economic growth, framed in particular by the market niche that Thailand defines for itself: the "Kitchen of the World." Surat Thani's shrimp

⁶ However, it was found that there were more migrant registrants than in the past: Whereas 568,249 alien workers registered in 2001, in 2004 a total of 1,269,074 aliens reported (702,351 being men and 566,723 women). The majority – 905,881 – was from Burma (497,372 men and 408,509 women). A total of 181,614 of the registrants (80,981 men and 100,633 women) were from Laos (Ministry of Interior 2004 in Thongyou, M. and Ayuwat D (2005).

production alone accounts for 10% of Thailand's total shrimp export for year 2004 (Kingdom of Thailand 2006). All farm operators – big, medium and small – strive to produce shrimps of standard size and quality suitable for the global market.

Shrimp farms vary according to degree of capital and volume of production and earnings, types of technology and nature of labor investments. According to Smith, the systems of shrimp production are classified as extensive, semi-intensive, and intensive, relevant to their stocking levels and pond size (Smith, 1999). The largest farms in Surat Thani stock their farms with as many as 400,000 broodstock per rai⁷ compared with the traditional practice of 5,000 broodstock per rai.⁸ The shrimp harvest seasons may be twice or three times a year, depending on the degree of infrastructure and labor monitoring. Successful large farmers in the province can generate a net profit of 600,000 baht to 1 million baht per shrimp pond. The research project's earlier random survey of 241 farmers shows that big individual or corporate farmers usually operate more than 20 ponds, with an average annual operating capital of 32 million baht.

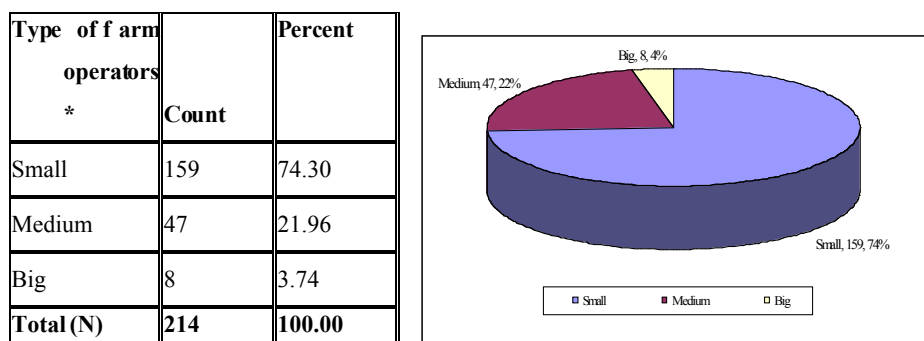
Large individual and corporate shrimp farmers in Surat Thani are successful in super-intensive farming due to the following factors: their capability to nurture superior broodstock through updated information and close connection with broodstock suppliers who use genetic engineering to improve seed and domestication techniques, good farm management practices, and the use of new shrimp farming technologies. An example of these updated farm technologies is the bio-secure system that uses polyethylene (PE) lining on the pond bed and walls, good roofing, water chlorination and intense water quality monitoring by a test kit specifically designed for the purpose. The large individual and corporate farmers are able to harvest high yields in their ponds due to the good survival rate of the superior broodstock and their use of upgraded technologies. Thus, large farmers are able to produce huge quantities of large-sized and highly priced shrimps that are attractive to foreign buyers.

Our earlier random survey of 214 shrimp farm operators revealed that small farms usually operate 1 to 5 active ponds. They do not have a water storage pond because their land is very limited. Medium-sized farms have 6 to 20 active ponds and they have a separate water storage pond to store water for later use. The big farms have more than 20 active ponds for shrimp cultivation. They have water storage pond and the size of one pond is generally 5-7 rai. For big farms it is important to maintain a water storage pond in order to earn a Certificate of (Good) Conduct (CoC) from the government that characterizes good quality control standards required by shrimp export protocols. The survey also further revealed that majority of shrimp farms in Surat Thani are small and medium farms. (See Figure 2)

⁷ 1 rai is approximately equivalent to 16,000 square meters; 1 hectare is equivalent to 6 rai

⁸ Traditional shrimp farming that was land intensive used to be widely practiced in Surat Thani up to the mid-1980s. This type of shrimp farming is no longer practiced.

Figure 2: Percentage of Farm Operators by Size (2006)



Data source: Authors' survey, 2007

The ranges of technologies used between small, medium and large farms differ widely. The big farmer operators have their own laboratories that can thoroughly check water quality and diagnose shrimp diseases, according to the same survey. They also have basic equipment such as boats, nets and aerator test kits. In contrast, the medium farm operators employ a more limited range of technologies, while the small farmers use only the most basic equipment (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Technologies Typically Employed, by Type of Farm Operators

Type	Technologies	Specific Use	Annual Mean Capital Investment (Baht)
Small n=159	Boat (100%)	Feeding	865,000
	Net (100%)	Check on water quality	
	Aerator (100%)	Animal protection	
	Test kit (100%)	Supply of oxygen	
Medium n=47	Boat (100%)	Feeding	4,210,000
	Net (100%)	Check on water quality	
	Aerator (100%)	Animal protection	
	Test kit (100%)	Supply of oxygen	
	Water storage pond/Waste water treatment pond (63.8%)	Check on water quality	
	Polyethylene (PE) (58.1%)	Water storage/ Water treatment	
Big n=8	Boat (100%)	Pond lining to prevent soil contamination	32,000,000
	Net (100%)	Feeding	
	Aerator (100%)	Check on water quality	
	Test kit (100%)	Animal protection	

	Water storage pond/Waste water treatment pond (100 %)	Water storage/ Water treatment	
	Polyethylene (PE 75%)	Pond lining to prevent soil contamination	
	Chlorination (75%)	Disinfection	
	In-house laboratory (50 %)	Water quality and disease check	

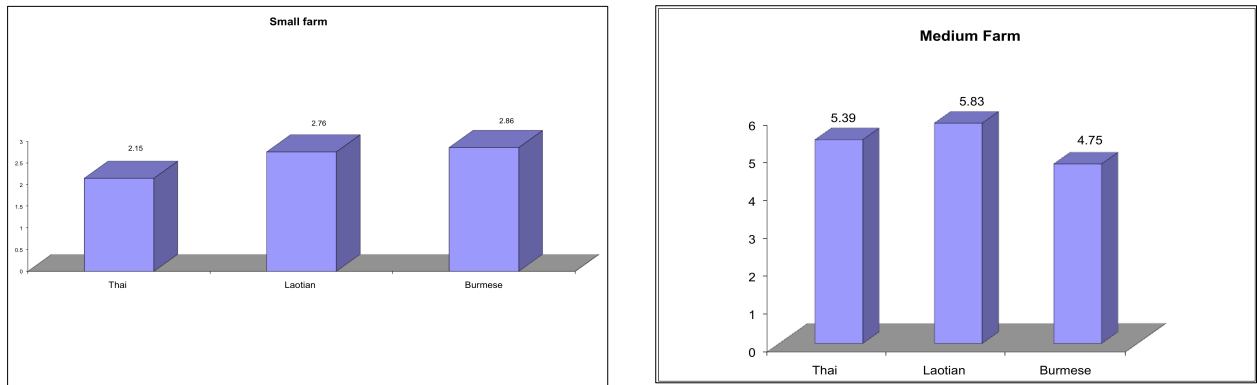
(Based on the authors' random survey of 214 farmer operators in Surat Thani, 2006)
N=214 Farmer Operators

The number of active shrimp ponds and the nature of farm technology usually determine the hired labor force in farms. Usually one worker is assigned care of one shrimp pond. Big farms hire a huge number of workers to apply chlorine, feed shrimp stock, replace PE, operate aerators, and regularly monitor water quality in both shrimp and storage ponds and treat waste water. High-skilled workers are also hired for in-house laboratories, machinery maintenance and financial management. Security guards are also hired to prevent thefts of any kind. Small and medium farms, however, require a smaller work force as gleaned from the work activities in Table 1. Due to the fewer ponds in small farms, family and kin labor usually manage and run the farms, hands-on, but also employ migrant workers.

Interviews revealed that big farms hire mainly Thai men from the northeast provinces. Medium and small farms, on the other hand, hire Burmese and Laotian migrant workers, many of whom are couple-workers. Mr Srisuban, a owner of a big farm, remarked: "Actually a Burmese wage is cheaper. But if we hire Burmese workers, they should be legal, not smuggled. However, hiring Thais...hmm...can also be difficult. They return to the northeast during Songkran (Thai New Year) holidays, so we are left without workers. Some farm owners I know don't want to hire Thais, especially from the southern region, since this is the area of shrimp trade outlets. These workers can steal the shrimps from us and bring them there since they know their way around." In the same interview, another farm owner added, "Some employers prefer to hire the Burmese. They are usually afraid of arrest, so they don't roam about and this is good for the shrimp farm." A farm owner from Jaidee Farm also expressed his preference for Burmese workers, pointing out that they if the employer is fair, they are generally grateful and diligent. "They do not drink like the Laotians or the Thais since they are a very religious people and pray a lot," he remarked.

From a survey of 154 small and medium farms in Ganjanadit and Punpin districts separately conducted by researchers of the wider project, the number of migrant workers is actually higher than Thai workers – in aggregate terms. Figure 3 below shows this pattern.

Figure 3 a/b: Average Number of Hired Migrant Workers in Small and Medium Farms, by Nationality, Ganjanadit and Punpin Districts, Surat Thani Province (N = 154)



Data Source: Authors' Survey, 2007

Most workers in these farms are migrant couples, and this is without coincidence. Cultural and economic processes intersperse as shrimp farms in Surat Thani continuously evolve into an emerging migrant 'slot' in south Thailand. Farm employers and migrant workers continue to produce and re-employ meanings around technology-intensive work that serve to sustain shrimp farming as a viable source of profits from global and domestic trade. Unlike others who have studied migrant identities that reference them to an ethnic group, place of origin or nationality that effect or pervade translocal or transnational identities, we will view them through their worker identities produced by concrete social practices and discourses (e.g. (Yeoh et al., 2003; Toyota 2003). The succeeding sub-sections analyze these processes in greater detail.

A. 'We work in the shrimp farm so we can be together'

In this sub-section, we focus on the production of place. Surat Thani's shrimp farms have become migrant enclaves of a distinct type, exemplifying the notion that 'place itself is a *process* that makes and is made by migration' (Silvey, 2006).

All Thai, Burmese and Laotian migrants are employed as 'couple workers' in the Surat Thani farms under study. Table 3 further presents the differences in civil status according to nationality among the sampled migrant workers.

Table 3: Civil Status of Migrant Workers by Nationality in Small and Medium Shrimp Farms, Surat Thani Province

	Thai (%)	Lao (%)	Burmese (%)	Total
Married	32 (.28)	28 (.19)	47 (.32)	107 (.73)
Living together	10 (.07)	17 (.12)	13 (.09)	40 (.27)
Single	0	0	0	0
Total	42	35	60	147

Data source: Authors' survey, 2007

Migrant couples disclosed that many of them had met, then began to live together and/or married elsewhere in Thailand or in their places of origin. They then traveled south to settle and work in one of Surat Thani's shrimp farms. Almost unanimously, migrants acceded to the fact that living and working in a shrimp farm was 'comfortable,' and allowed them a 'couple life.'

A Laotian couple from Mooring Ta Kag close to the Thai border has worked in a shrimp farm for two years. Mod said that she her partner, Boontawee, came ahead by a month to Surat Thani. "I came later so that he could first find us a home. He found work here in the shrimp farm, where we could also stay." During the slack season immediately after the harvest of shrimps, Boontawee is also employed by their boss to work in his factory. Boontawee prefers this arrangement instead of working for a construction firm like other Laotians he knows. "It is quite good to live and work here. I feel as though I am staying at home. Working for a construction firm is difficult since you need to move from place to place. It may be alright if you only have your wife with you. It will never work since we have a child."

Ta, a shrimp worker from northeast Thailand, recalls that prior to settling in Surat Thani, she worked as a housemaid in Bangkok for a year and a half. She left her workplace since she acquired a boyfriend, "so I moved here to live with him." "We met in Cha-am (3 hours south of Bangkok) where he was working in a shrimp farm and we later married in Nakhonpanom our hometown, just prior to coming to work in Surat Thani." As a housemaid, Ta used to receive a monthly pay of 4,500 baht – a bit more than what she currently receives as a shrimp farm worker (only 5,000 baht which she has to share with her husband). She reasons: "If I didn't marry I wouldn't have quit my job in Bangkok. But living in this farm with my husband is not bad at all because the cost of living is low, we are given rice and gas, so I can still send some money home to Nakhonpanom, to my parents." In Surat Thani, she did not attempt to apply as a housemaid since, as she pointedly says, "It's not good because we are a couple."

Sorn is *Isan* from Ubon Ratchathani, northeast Thailand. She also worked as a domestic helper in Bangkok, married her boyfriend and moved to Don Suk where he worked as a fisherman. They later moved to Surat Thani and have been working in a shrimp farm for the last two years. She thinks it is a better place they have in Surat Thani: "Here we have a place to stay and we both earn at the same time that we have a baby. I only help my husband so I have

time to care for the baby. That would not have been possible in Don Suk, since I was not earning – only my husband.”

Tai, a Burmese female worker says that ‘if a woman is single, she has no choice but to work in a rubber plantation, or be a merchant, or in a store – since she has no husband.’ Her husband, Seng, adds: “Women cannot work in shrimp farms, only men can. But they can stay with their husbands and help with the housework.” His wife Tai informed us that she and her husband work in the shrimp farm “for the price of one worker.” In the same conversation, another Burmese female worker, Teem, counters that in the shrimp farm, “We are comfortable. We pray a lot, do the laundry and sweep our houses and the owner’s as well.”

Small and medium farm owners prefer to hire couples because they feel assured of a greater sense of responsibility from workers than from single women or men. Couples, in their view, work together to stay together in one place. Interviews also revealed that due to the precariousness of shrimp farming – the need for close monitoring of shrimp health and regular feeding, risks of theft, and maintaining water quality and temperature – farm owners are inclined to hire couples who can easily take turns to do the work and can flexibly share these tasks. These farms do not require a huge workforce and therefore can afford to employ couples or small families to live within their farm compounds to keep a round the clock watch over the ponds. One farm owner remarked, “ I prefer to hire a good, reliable male worker who can watch and care for the ponds and have his wife with him to make sure that he is not lonely so that he does not seek drinking bouts with other workers.” Owners of big farms, on the other hand, prefer to hire male individual workers to operate and maintain the numerous equipment and infrastructure of their farms. They are provided individual living quarters in farm compounds wherein they are subjected to a more corporate regimen of labor control and management. Women are not allowed to live in these premises.

A number of couple-workers in small and medium farms have small children. This however is ephemeral since when the children reach school age, they are sent back home. Table 4 shows that most workers do not have their children living with them in the farm.

Table 4: Number of Children of Migrant Workers Living on Shrimp Farms, Surat Thani

Number of children living in the shrimp farm	Frequency	%
0	66	45
1	59	40
2	22	15
Total	147	100

Data source: Authors’ Survey

Farm owners restrain workers from keeping too many children in the compounds to avoid crowding, disturbance at work and accidents in ponds. Female workers are also relatively freer to travel to visit their older, left-behind children, since husbands are much more tied to farm work than them who are largely considered as secondary work hands (more on this later). As migrants, women also experience the 'friction of distance' from children differently from men, thus they principally take up responsibility for their children even from a distance (Hanson and Pratt 1995). For instance, they take it upon themselves to remit earnings to caretaker relatives at home for their children⁹.

Migrants and employers have therefore collectively come to co-create small and medium shrimp farms as a place where workers can indeed lead couple lives – simultaneously residing and earning a living – yet mostly without their children. The absence of children is a stark reminder that they continue to live in flux, remain to be migrants-in-temporary-settlement, and that the overriding concern of employers for acquiescing to the conjugal arrangement is foremost, to employ a distinct, work-and-cost-efficient pool of workers that could effect high productivity for the markets. Whereas the study of women workers and labor markets notably by Hanson and Pratt (1995) demonstrate the spatial terms with which women select their jobs due to childcare obligations, the migrant workers in this study prefer a place where their migrant lives can find a composite conjugal nesting and earning place. Indeed, shrimp farm employers and migrant workers unwittingly coalesce behind a particular organization of conjugal labor premised on the need for couple intimacy and proximity for gainful economic production outcomes that builds into the constitution of shrimp farms as a distinct migrant slot and place for couple workers.

B. '*Mai chai kon ngan*: Not a real worker'

Feminists in different disciplines have explored the ways in which gender inflects the meaning, representation, and experience of work (Hanson and Pratt, 1995; (Jackson 1996; Mohanty 1997; McDowell 1998; Phillips 1998; Elson 1999; Lawson 1999; McDowell 1999; Pratt 1999).

"Women do not do unskilled or low-skilled jobs because they are naturally bearers of inferior labour. Rather, the jobs they do are unskilled because women enter them already determined as inferior labourers compared with male labour" (Elson 1981). As early as the 1980s, a consciousness for the socially constructed character of female labor marshaled explanations for cheap female labor, occupational segregation of women and their slow career mobility that counter posed biologically determined ones. Way into the 1990s, Judith Butler adds to the conundrum on women's work, drawing attention to the idea that a female work identity does not pre-condition but actually is an effect of work (Butler 1990). Butler's argument is thus substantially at odds with earlier deterministic notions over gender on labor and the *a priori* gender

⁹ Paying for the services of the broker who can physically bring money to their families left behind. This is true especially for the Burmese, with the Laotian women coming in as second.

typing of jobs. Spinning off from Butler's ideas, our analysis of gendered work here aims to be attentive to the particular conditions and practices that materialize gender – making it appear that it is fixed, natural and 'common sense'; whereas in reality it is iterative, negotiated and contingent as opposed to being reified and *a priori* (Nightingale 2006; Risseuw 1989).

A number of interviews with farm owners and workers bear this out.

"Working in a shrimp farm is too laborious for a woman. A male worker is more agile. A female worker mostly works in the 'store' – meaning doing administrative work. In our farm, we have about 30% female workers. But in small farms, the proportion of female to male workers is probably one to one," explains Mr Srisuban, owner of a big shrimp farm.

Interview 1

Interview with Deam, a female Burmese worker in Mr Chai's shrimp farm:

Interviewer: For how long have you been working in Mr Chai's farm?

Deam: Three years.

Interviewer: Did you come to Surat Thani directly from Myanmar?

Deam: Yes, but I worked in the city first. I was in a factory that sorted out fish for export.

Interviewer: Why did you leave your work in the city?

Deam: I got married.

Interviewer: How many ponds are you responsible for?

Deam: Only one pond. I help my husband with his work on the pond.

Interviewer: Do you get paid separately by Mr Chai?

Deam: No, only my husband receives a salary. Wives are not real workers.

Interview 2:

Interview with Ae, a female Lao worker from Khun Thong:

Interviewer: How much salary do you receive?

Ae: 7,000 baht. My husband and I receive this amount.

Interviewer: How many ponds are you responsible for?

Ae: Two ponds.

Interviewer: How much will you get if you take care of 1 pond?

Ae: 4,000 baht. They used to give us 6,700 baht for two ponds.

Interviewer: Are there single people working here?

Ae: No only people who have families or are married.

Interviewer: If a family quits, will the owner hire a family again?

Ae: Yes.

Interviewer: What is your duty here?

Ae: Feeding the shrimps. Helping my husband with the motor of the aerator. Cleaning the office of our boss.

Interviewer: Does your husband also clean the office of your boss?

Ae: No, only women here do that.

Couples who work in the shrimp farms often receive a couple wage, not the sum of two individual wages. Some owners pay couples for each pond they care take. For instance, Mu, a Burmese female worker, compares working for

a palm farm and a shrimp farm: “A family or a couple can also live in a palm farm together. But the wife is only paid when she does actual work on the palm farm. Here in the shrimp farm, we are paid per pond. So even if I only help my husband, I still get paid. We get paid together.”

Table 5 presents the responses of 143 female workers when asked whether they receive a separate wage from their husbands.

Table 5: Female Workers Receipt of a Separate Wage by Nationality

Do you receive a separate wage from your husband?	Thai (%)	Lao (%)	Burmese (%)	Total (%)
Yes	26 (18%)	12 (8%)	7 (5%)	45 (31%)
No	16 (11%)	32 (22%)	50 (35%)	98 (69%)
Total	42	44	57	143 (100%)

Data Source: Authors’ Survey, 2007

Table 5 indicates that most Burmese female workers do not receive a separate wage from their employers, whereas most Thai female workers receive a separate wage. The preceding data invites us to conclude that the nature of work performed in shrimp farms differentiates between women and men, and evidently, between nationalities¹⁰. Instituting a couple wage and public admissions of gender-specific work and capacities produce and reproduce coherent identities of women as ‘not real workers.’ These serve as discursive and material means with which differentiated identities and social places of workers come to cohere as fixed and undisputable – serving to sediment ontological differences – and inequalities – between women and men in the specific context of shrimp farming in this locality.

Indeed conscious of not being ‘real workers,’ the women nonetheless know their social place and re-work this in order to negotiate their own purposive goals (Brunt 1992; Villareal 1992; Williams 2005). It is in the interstices between accepting and resisting their identity as being ‘not real workers,’ that they are able to create latitude for exploring multiple livelihoods apart from their present one, and to perform social reproductive obligations, especially childcare.

For translocal female migrants from Northeast Thailand, not being a ‘real worker’ provides them ‘room for maneuver’ to engage in multi-local livelihoods, since they are generally mobile and are able to juggle shrimp farming with other livelihoods. Twenty-two year old Sorn who has been working in a shrimp farm for the last three years says that after the shrimp harvest she joins work teams in nearby house construction sites. “They pay us a bit more than 100 baht per day,” she said. However, Sorn admits that being a brick layer is not sufficient to live by and so after the slack period of

¹⁰ This may be largely due to better platforms for negotiation by Thai workers – an altogether important yet separate issue that deserves discussion elsewhere.

shrimp farming, she resumes her work in the farm with her husband, who earns a bit more than her from his work at the farm. Sorn then is less tied to shrimp farm work since she does not place equal to her husband as a worker, making it possible for her to explore multiple jobs.

Some Lao female migrants, on the other hand, prefer to stay with their husbands in shrimp farms unlike northeast Thais who explore supplementary sources of income. A number of them bring their children to stay with them since their places of origins are geographically quite distant. They capitalize on not being 'a real worker' to attend to their childcare duties, although this is not the only reason they have for opting singular jobs. The following conversation details one worker's experiences.

Interview with Mod, Lao female worker:

Interviewer: You've been working here for two years. Have you ever worked elsewhere in Surat Thani, or take up other jobs while working here at the shrimp farm?

Mod: Never, only here.

Interviewer: Does the employer pay workers per person or per pond?

Mod: They pay per couple. Each couple receives 5,000 baht.

Interviewer: Is there anything else they provide?

Mod: Rice is free. But I have to pay for the fuel, water and electricity.

Interviewer: Would you be interested in being a housemaid while working for the shrimp farm with your husband?

Mod: I cannot do other work since I have a child.

Interviewer: What is your work here?

Mod: Most of the time I do housework for the owner and take care of my child.

Interviewer: While your husband works on the pond?

Mod: Yes.

For Burmese female transnational migrants, not being a 'real worker' serves to tie them more firmly to their husbands who work as bonded laborers in shrimp farms, due to the mobility limitations posed by their legal status in Thailand. Burmese migrants are bonded workers in shrimp farms compared with other types of migrant workers, highly dependent on their individual farm employers for their legal status and livelihood security. The new migration policy in Thailand that requires both employers and workers to jointly register and pay government fees has tied both workers and employers to each other.

"If we have a working license, it is usually kept by our boss. He is afraid that his employees will leave and go elsewhere. You see if any one of us is questioned or arrested by the police, our boss will be in trouble. Thai people are the head men here, while the Burmese people are workers," Teem's husband says resentfully.

When queried whether they would seek second jobs, a number of Burmese female workers responded as follows:

Dao: The boss will not allow. The boss says that a good employee is hard to

find.

Tik: No, I must ask my husband first.

Aye: The boss allows me to take up a job when I don't have work. But I don't go. I don't have a legal ID.

Oma: I worked in a seafood factory when I was single. But now, I do not search for other work since my husband will not allow me. I concentrate on my work here, that is, washing, cooking and sometimes feeding the shrimps.

Results from our survey (Table 6) also brought to fore the fact that among the three groups of migrants, Burmese female migrants do not usually take up supplementary jobs compared with Thais and Laotians.

Table 6: Supplementary Jobs of Female Workers Simultaneous with Shrimp Farming by Nationality

	Thai (%)	Lao (%)	Burmese (%)	Total (%)
Had a second job/livelihood while being a shrimp farm worker	14 (10%)	9 (6%)	7 (5%)	30(21%)
Never had a second job/livelihood while being a shrimp farm worker	27 (19%)	34(24%)	53 (37%)	114(79%)
Total	41	43	60	144(100%)

Data Source: Authors' Survey, 2007

'Not being a real worker' has translated into diverse practices and strategies by Burmese, Thai and Laotian female migrants. These practices have served to differentiate them as migrant national subjects based on the extent of their bondedness to their employers. The latitude with which migrant women are able to secure livelihoods and perform their reproductive obligations is circumscribed by differentiated employment conditions, legal regulatory structures and possibly, perceived marital norms. Yet, as agents fully aware of their social place, they navigate their lives with the dexterity of employing 'not being a real worker' to attain livelihood and reproductive security, albeit short-term and largely irregular.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has shown that Burmese, northeast Thai and Laotian migrants come as migrant couples to temporary settle in Surat Thani's shrimp farms after marriage. They consider the farm as a conjugal comfort zone – a temporary fix in the flux of their mobile migrant lives, where they can both reside and earn a living. For their part, shrimp farm owners (especially from small and medium farms) specifically prefer employing migrant couples since by paying the lower cost of a couple wage, they have a flexible workforce of

two persons to attend to the delicate and round the clock monitoring of shrimp ponds. The creation of 'place' and a 'migrant slot' by the migration of workers into Surat Thani is layered therefore by employers' efficiency targets and the conjugal requirements of couples to stay intimately together while earning a living.

The conjugal workforce however is further differentiated by the creation of the female worker subject, publicly categorized as 'not a real worker.' By this, women workers do not receive a full wage, only part of the couple wage. By paying a couple wage to migrants, employers re-create and solidify discourses on the work and labor capacities that differentiate women and men in shrimp farms. This discourse, however, does not face opposition as women workers themselves reproduce it. Female workers themselves employ and invoke 'not being a real worker' to achieve certain ends, such as exploring supplementary income sources as well as expanding latitude for care of young children while still being in the farm's payroll.

Not all women workers, however, are able to find supplementary sources of income. Mostly Thai women are able to do this, largely due to their mobility within their own homeland. Burmese and Laotian women, on the other hand, are tied to their husbands and employers in view of existing legal regulatory structures on migrant mobility in Thailand combined with perceived marital norms. Burmese workers appear even more bonded among all three migrant groups, due to more stringent cultural and legal restraints. This invites us to conclude that women workers' enactments of 'not being a real worker' in turn create, reproduce and differentiate migrant national subjects and relations of inequality.

This paper therefore demonstrates that labor practices and migration processes produce 'place' concurrently with gender and migrant subjects. This puts into question essentialist and reified assumptions about gender and gender differences. Instead, we have placed social practices that produce gender subjects and their ontological differences at the center of analysis, thereby earnestly attentive to the diversity of subject positions available to women in a single context.

The production of place, gender and migrant subjects through work and migration processes has therefore constituted an economic niche in the Thailand's global production of food. Indeed, the purported 'Kitchen of the World' is premised not only on huge investments of capital, science and infrastructure, but equally on investments by cultural and discursive practices that steer towards profit maximization through a coherent organization of largely cheap and bonded gendered migrant labor.

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