

The Social Relationship of Myanmar Migrant Workers In Malaysia: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

Migration for employment has been a global challenge in today's world along with the rising figure of world migration population. For that reason, the drawbacks of labour migration need to be managed effectively based on understanding the real context of migrant workers in the country in which they work. Based on the pursuit of this interest, an ethnographic study has been conducted to explore the social relationship among Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia since November 2014. The formulated research questions is: what does the social relationship mean among Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia? More specifically, what difficulties do they face and how do they seek from their social networks in case of difficulties in Malaysia; and what social organizations contribute to meet the needs and difficulties of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia?

Selangor state and Kuala Lumpur of Malaysia were chosen as field sites. In order to understand the phenomena of interest, three Myanmar social organizations which are currently running in Malaysia and one Buddhist monastery were chosen for study. From the chosen key informants, two workers; one female and one male, were selected for this report. Data was collected through participant observations, in-depth interviews, and informal group chats. Obtained data was organized and reduced into key aspects of the issues in question and then categorized into three themes.

1) Difficulties of a migrant worker's life on arrival (2) Service hardships of a migrant worker's life (3) Being a member or having contact with social or religious organizations.

Key Words: *Myanmar migrants, social relationship, social network, ethnographic study*

Introduction

Migration has been a long-standing phenomenon for thousands of years ago and also been a multifaceted challenging process; accordingly, migration for employment has been regarded as a global challenge in today's world. Generally, labour migration has been beneficial for the economic and social position of migrant workers and their families (ILO, 2014). Unfortunately, many of them have experienced abuse and exploitations at their workplaces, and more importantly difficulties in attaining their well-being in terms of health, happiness, and security. Despite the acceleration of multinational organizations and global integration of markets, improved travel and communication pattern are encouraging more people to travel outside of their home countries (ILO, 2007).

According to estimates of the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2014), in 2013, there was a 231.5 million people who lived outside of their home countries, a rise from 194.5 million in 2000. Asia migration alone occupied 70.8 million of international migration stock in 2013, accounting for 30 per cent of global migration figures (United Nations 2013 as cited in UNDESA & OECD, 2013). In the Asian region, the migrant flows to Malaysia and Thailand from nearby Asian countries have been unauthorized in spite of their periodic legalizations (Martin, 2009). As stated in Malaysian Digest (Feb 10 2015), Malaysia has hired the highest number of foreign workers in Southeast Asia and 10 to 11% of the national economy is contributed by foreign workforce. Because of rapid economic growth and a tight labour market in Malaysia, the figure of foreign workers in Malaysia has increased up to 2,250,322 in 2013 from 1,817,871 in 2010 (MEF, 2014). Of which, 7.2 per cent of total foreign workforce was Myanmar workers which became the fourth highest foreign labourer in Malaysia (MEF, 2014). The minimum daily wages of US\$ 9.81 (MYR 900 per month) in Malaysia has been a major pull factor for Myanmar workers to migrate (Runckel, 2013; ASEAN Briefing, April 16 2013).

On the other hand, foreign workers in Malaysia have faced many hardships in their lives including labour exploitation, forced labour and trafficking, verbal and physical abuse, sexual harassment among female workers, and working long hours (Amnesty International, 2010). In these cases, Myanmar workers are no exception in Malaysia. According to Myanmar Eleven News Media (12 July, 2014), more than 700,000 migrants workers were working in Malaysia and only 330,000 of them have work permits. Because of their lack of documentation status, they are more vulnerable to face labour exploitations and hardships in their lives in Malaysia. Besides, their social wellbeing are frequently undermined in terms of accessibility to health and social services. As a result, Myanmar social organizations and ethnic-based organizations in Malaysia are giving support to Myanmar migrant workers in comforting their needs and problems. Although officially not recognized, approximately 70 social organizations and social groups are currently running in Malaysia. It is therefore interesting to study how they interact within their social networks and how social organizations help in meeting the needs of migrants in Malaysia. Based on this inspiration, this study aimed to explore the hardships of Myanmar migrant workers and their support networks which revolve around their living and working environments.

Rationale and Background of the Study

Over previous decades, there has been growing concern over issues of migration and many of scholarly works have been trying to explore the migrant workers' lives from various perspectives. A study on social context of migrant health conducted in the United States highlights structural racism and anti-migrant practices which determine the poor working and living conditions and health of migrant workers (Holmes, 2006). Regarding migrant networks of irregular Nanyu workers in Malaysia, Bunmak (2011) concluded that newly arrived migrants were initially settled by the pioneer migrants through migrant networks. Their networks were important source of information about their job entry and migration. It was evident that social networking and social relationship plays a significant role in comforting the migrant workers' lives especially in the cases of irregular or undocumented workers.

In Malaysia, a considerable number of migration research has been conducted; however, most have focused on the effects of foreign labour on the host country in terms of both economic and social aspects. Little research has been conducted to explore the difficulties of migrant workers lives and their social practices and supporting networks, and where and how they seek assistance from their networks has been understudied.

It is generally true to say that the lives of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia face many hardships. However, there is still a need to have more information regarding the difficulties in their lives based on evidence-based inquiry. In addition, there is little evidence to understand how Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia are often excluded from the protection of workers' rights and enjoyment from the decent work.

In protecting the migrant workers' lives, the formulation of an appropriate, mutually agreed migration policy between host and home countries is crucial. However, there is no appropriate migration policy in Myanmar, and consequently the needs and difficulties of Myanmar migrant workers overseas remains a neglected issue. Only with evidence-based information can we begin to formulate holistic migration programs in Myanmar.

Based on the above reflections, this study was conducted to explore the social relationship and social networking practices of Myanmar migrants in Malaysia. Furthermore, I wanted to better understand how social and religious organizations have contributed to meet their needs and difficulties. In order to understand and capture the true nature of their social behaviour, an ethnographic approach was used in the study. Through deeper and better understanding of their social realities and social context as well as their experiences in social relationship and network, rich data was able to be obtained. This in turn is hoped to be useful in developing a comprehensive and mutually agreed migration policy and programs for Myanmar migrants so as to mitigate the disadvantages and difficulties faced by Myanmar migrant workers not only in Malaysia but also in other destination countries.

Research Questions

The overall research question is: what does the social relationship mean among the Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia?

Specific research questions are:

1. What are the difficulties of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia?
2. How do migrant workers seek support from social organizations when they are trouble?
3. How do social organizations contribute to meet the needs and difficulties of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia?

Research methodology

In order to grasp the natural and real context of the social world of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia, an ethnographic study was conducted between October 2014 to July 2015 at Selangor State and Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. In order to understand the phenomena of interest, three Myanmar social organizations which are currently running in Malaysia and one Buddhist monastery

were chosen to study. From the chosen key informants, two workers; one female and one male, were selected for this report. While choosing the informants, those with high-skilled or skilled workers were not considered as informants since they have more bargaining power and enjoy proper compensation and right's protection.

Participant observation and taped-recorded semi-structured in-depth interview, field notes taking, audiovisual recording, mapping out the time and places of social occasions were utilized for data collection. Formal interviews and informal group chats were held at the convenient time and places for informants. Subsequent interview sessions were done until the saturated data were obtained. Using participant observation, the researcher also engaged in social and religious occasions of migrant workers in order to understand how they interact and participate within their social networks.

Data analysis was done with three processes; firstly, interview data were organized manually and scrutinized carefully. The obtained data were reduced into key aspects of the issue in question. Then, data was coded and categorized into similar characteristics in terms of themes. Finally data interpretation and making conclusions was completed

Before conducting the research, approval was obtained from the Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD). To ensure adherence to ethical principles, the informants were informed about the study objectives and process. They were explained that they have rights to withdraw from participation during the data collection period. In addition, they were informed that their anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained and if the descriptions were published, the pseudonyms will be used to protect the anonymity of the individuals. Then their signed informed consents were taken.

Description of the Field Sites; Selangor and Kuala Lumpur

In this study, Selangor State and Kuala Lumpur were chosen as the study areas, of which, Selangor is one of the 13 states of Malaysia and Kuala Lumpur is one of the three federal territories in Malaysia.

Selangor is situated on the west coast of Malaysia and is surrounded by the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya. Its' populous with good infrastructure has contributed to being the richest state in the country in terms of GDP per capita, creating jobs and attracting overseas migrants including Myanmar workers (Centre for IMT-GT Sub-regional Cooperation (CIMT), 2009). According to the Malaysia Migration Report (2013), Selangor has the highest rate of migrant population and the second highest rate of international migrant population in Malaysia (Department of Statistics, 2014). My field areas under Selangor are Petaling Jaya (PJ) industrial areas, a Buddhist monastery at PJ and the Blood Bank at University Malaya Medical Centre.

Kuala Lumpur (KL), one of the three federal territories in Malaysia, is the most industrialized and the fastest growing of economic region in Malaysia (The World Capital Institute, 2013). It has 11 districts including Kepong and Cheras districts where most of my field sites were located. Offices of social

organizations near Chinatown, Kepong Buddhist monastery, Cheras cemetery, and Kepong industrial zone were located.

I interviewed key informants who were living or working under Selangor and KL and did participant observations in those areas whenever they had the social and religious activities. I also did informal group chats with other migrant workers too.

Context of Social Organizations in Malaysia

During the first and second phases of the project, from December 2014 to May 2015, I met some of my key informants and interviewed them, specifically, three Myanmar migrants who are running social organizations in Malaysia and two Buddhist monks who also giving support to migrant workers.

In Malaysia, there are several social organizations depending on the specific concerns, ethnics, or religions. All these organizations are giving supports to Myanmar migrant workers who are in need of help from others. Some organizations support funeral services, some work for overstay migrant workers (undocumented migrant workers), while others focus on the healthcare needs of migrant workers and so on. At first, I made informal conversations with leaders of three organizations, namely, the Kepong Free Funeral Service Society (FFSS), the Myanmar Social Welfare Foundation (Overstay foundation), and the Lovely Heart Philanthropic- *Hna-Lone-Hla* Youth Blood Donation Organization.

After I built up a rapport with them, they invited me to participate in their activities. As part of their activities, I went to their events; namely, funeral ceremony, blood donation events, literacy talks. They also had religious events like *Ka-Htain* Robe donation, Myanmar New year celebration, and ceremony for ordination to be monks and nuns, and opening of meditation centre, and Dhamma talks by the venerable Sayadaw from Myanmar.

Firstly I interviewed U Su, a 50-year old man, who was the founder of the Free Funeral Service Society. Formerly, he was a migrant worker and had experiences of working in factories and construction sites in Malaysia. He migrated to Malaysia in 1990 and has been in Malaysia for 25 years. He lived with his wife and a niece; both of them were currently working in factories. He discussed with me about why and how they developed the organization. Before that time, there had been no free funeral service for Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia. When a migrant worker died, they asked the help from the Burma Refugee Organization (BRO) if they could afford to pay for the funeral service.

...We set up the free funeral service society in 2011, we do not have any imitation idea of other organizations. The reason for developing this organization was based on the real experiences of a Myanmar couple. Both of them were Mon ethnic and they migrated to Malaysia through the Thailand border illegally. Crossing border areas took 5 to 10 days and they had to run in somewhere. Because of the dreadful experience, the woman was scared and got a heart

disease. When they arrived at our place, they had only RM 500 that they all saved in Thailand. Shortly after they arrived, the woman got illness and needed to go hospital or clinic. At that time, there were intensive crackdown operations in KL and they had been difficult to go out to hospital. The UNHCR opened a clinic for refugees, however that couple did not have a refugee card. In order to go the refugee clinic, we firstly need to do membership in BRO..."

"...On that day, I followed them with a taxi to go to BRO. After the taxi fare was paid, they only had 300 RM left on their hands. After they paid for membership, all the money was gone. I also had 100 RM as I thought that they had enough money. Meanwhile, the woman had difficulty breathing. On the way to the UNHCR clinic by taxi, unfortunately, we were arrested by police. I explained and apologized to the police but they asked me to give RM 50. When we arrived at the clinic, they immediately referred the patient to hospital. After admission to the Emergency Department of the hospital, the woman was unconscious. She died the next morning after admission..."

"... After she died, we informed to BRO and requested them to help for the funeral. It took 6 hours after we informed and the time they arrived. He (who is from BRO) arrived after 1 pm and asked for RM 900. It was more than one month salary of a basic worker. At that time, I did not know about the funeral at all. I was a general worker and all Myanmar people living near my place did not know as well. The old man, as you know from our organization, U Soe, sit at the floor by holding the legs of the guy from BRO and apologized for his help. But the way he replied made me so sad, he said "Come to Mahar-Nan (the name of Myanmar shop at Kota Raya) and bring RM 900 for funeral, otherwise I cannot do it..."

"...I had been in Malaysia for 25 years and earlier than he had. Once a time, that BRO had 40 to 50 thousand memberships and we can imagine how strong their funding was, with membership fee of 150 RM per head. That president can ride BMW motor car. Even we do not care for that amount of money, he was so cruel even though he is from Myanmar. At that time, we did not have money, we borrowed that money from Myanmar grocery shops and arranged for the funeral. After the funeral event, we had a meeting including young workers; they suggested for me to develop an association for free service for funeral of Myanmar migrant workers without regard to their religions or ethnics. As I was able to speak the Malay language and knew well about the Malaysian situation, I became the president of the association. Since then, a total of 400 people have had free funerals in accordance with their religions and faiths. Apart from free funeral services, we are also helping to support Myanmar people who are having troubles in Malaysia..." (U Su)

I also interviewed the founder (U Win, 50 years old) and co-founder (U Toe, 49 years old man) of the *Hna-Lone-Hla* Blood Donation Organization and the president of the Overstay foundation (U Lin, 35 years old man). As a co-founder, U Toe usually spent most of his time doing social works for Myanmar workers. He and his colleague, U Win set up the organization in January 2012. He firstly migrated to Thailand and then came to Malaysia in 1989 at the age of 24. After he arrived at KL, the

agent sent him to a welding factory. He could not withstand the work and thus he asked the agent to change to another job. So he was then sent to a bakery where he worked for 13 years. As he was interested in social activities, he actively participated in all youth associations in his student life in Myanmar. Based on these interests, he became a co-founder of this blood donation organization. Up to January 2015, they have 889 members and a total of 2,621 blood donations have been arranged. Besides this, arrangements and financial support had been made for 37 migrants who were in need for their ailments during their hospitalizations in Malaysia. U Toe's expression was;

"... we started this organization in 2012. One day, a tha-htay (a person rich and run an own a business) who is a Malaysian citizen required the blood transfusion and called us to donate blood. Later, we consulted with Sayama (Sayama means teacher). She is a well-known writer in Myanmar and currently running a center for homeless elderly in Yangon) and considered to set up a blood donation organization. At the next step, we considered to give support for healthcare needs for migrant workers. We do not have any problem in blood donation; the problem here is in giving healthcare support for workers who do not have any documents for their employment and stay. Most of them do not have a stable job and employers. Most of our Myanmar people use cycle or foot to go for work. When they have a motor vehicle accident on the way, the drivers usually escape and run away. For those without documents, they could not get any compensation from their employers. At that time, there was no police or government to advocate for them. So they usually contact us and we go there and help them. We have to help them. We ask our members for membership fee of 30 RM per month but it is not a compulsory. With this money, we help our Myanmar workers..."

(U Toe)

The founder of the Overstay foundation, U Lin was a 35-year old migrant. He has been in Malaysia for 17 years and he worked in various jobs at construction sites, factories, and food shops. Before running the foundation, he had been an agent of migrant workers too. But he was fed up with doing business and he realized the important of good merit after he had experienced a severe car accident. He was the only a person alive from this accident. Subsequently he developed and runs a foundation to help overstay migrant workers. He said that he could help Myanmar workers' difficulties as efficiently as the Embassy. Difficulties and problems of overstay migrant workers could not be solved by the Embassy because of their illegal immigration status. In the case of their difficulties regarding their health and illnesses, only social organizations are able to support them, as he said. Even without any profit for him, he is able to arrange and support for overstay migrants who would like to return back to Myanmar. His foundation helped them by getting CI (Certification of Identity- issued as a travel document for undocumented Myanmar workers to return back to Myanmar) from the Myanmar Embassy in Malaysia.

As per their expressions, it can be concluded that the initiation of social organizations in Malaysia was based on the real experiences of those who developed these organization. Since they had been in Malaysia for a long time, all founders could be able to speak the local languages. As they were former migrant workers, they knew well about the situation and lives of migrants living in Malaysia.

Description about a Buddhist monk: *Sayadaw Ashin Thunanda*

On 29th of March, I interviewed Sayadaw Ashin Thunanda, who is the principal monk of the Buddhist monastery at PJ. With the help of local people, Sayadaw hired a house in a quiet place of KL. On that day, I met 15 Myanmar migrant workers; all of them came from different places during their free time. They usually came to the monastery every weekend and days of special significance for Buddhist people. In the monastery, they chatted, cooked, and ate together. He had been in Malaysia since 2008 after he finished a Master in Buddhism and Philosophy degree from Sri Lanka. He set up a Buddhist monastery and supports those Myanmar people who are living and working in Malaysia. He also run the Sunday school at the monastery and teaches children of Myanmar families to learn the ways of living according to the Buddha's teachings. In addition, arrangements for mobile clinics have been periodically made by collaborating with local charity organizations and he also accepts migrant workers to stay temporarily in his monastery during the major crises, such as in the 2013 murder cases. The networking environment of the Sayadaw encompasses local media, social organizations, local Buddhist monks, and local devotees as well.

Description of the selected key informants: One male migrant worker and one female migrant worker

As part of my project, one documented and one undocumented migrant worker were selected for this paper. It was found that the female migrant worker firstly came to Malaysia illegally and she reentered Malaysia legally. On the other hand, the male informant entered to Malaysia with an official work permit and passport but two years later he became an overstay migrant worker.

Ma Mi, a-40-year old female migrant worker, worked for a factory. Before her first arrival to Malaysia, she worked in Thailand as a worker at construction sites, factories and also worked as a domestic worker. In 2000, she came to Malaysia illegally through the border area. As soon as she arrived at Penang (the border area of Malaysia), she worked at a restaurant. Although she did not have documents and could not communicate with local languages, she could survive in those days as her employer was really good to her. Within a year, she could speak the local language. But every day she cried. Two years later, she came back to Myanmar through the border because of more and more rigid controls for illegal immigrants, but she was seized on the way back to Myanmar because of her undocumented status. In 2003, she came again to Malaysia with an official passport and work permit. Because of her language skills, the current employer (*tha-htay*) offered a good position to facilitate Myanmar migrant workers' affairs in the factory.

Ko Moe, 26 years, was a male migrant worker in Malaysia. He came to Malaysia in 2010. He was born and grew up in a village near the *Ye-Nan-Chaung* Township, which is in the centre of Myanmar. He lived with his mother and younger sister and used to be a farmer before he came to Malaysia. Firstly he came with a calling visa (official work permit). After he arrived at Malaysia's airport, he faced several difficulties. The type of job that he worked the first time in a factory was totally different from the job that was described by the Myanmar agent. The salary was also lower than the basic salary, 900 Ringgits per month. But he got only 24 Ringgits per day. And also he was not paid

for overtime fees. One year later, he needed to pay 600 Ringgits for renewal of work permit. After two years and one month, he decided to quit from this job since he could not send money back to his mother and by that time he could speak the Malay language. Since then, he became an illegal overstay migrant worker. He moved to KL and worked in a cold drink shop. Because of his undocumented status in Malaysia, he said he was afraid every time of being arrested by the Malaysian police. Although he was afraid, he still needed to work in Malaysia.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Difficulties of a migrant worker's life on arrival

Difficulties of a migrant's life begin as soon as they land in Malaysia. Some migrant workers came legally while others migrate through border areas of Myanmar to Thailand and then cross to Malaysia's border. Even for legal entry, many have feelings of uncertainty and are scared in the strange environment and culture as soon as they arrive at airport. Regarding these experiences, Ko Moe expressed:

...Even I came to Malaysia legally, I had trouble as soon as I arrived at the Kuala Lumpur airport. We had waited for three days as the agent did not come to pick us up. We had 5 RM which was given by the agent from Myanmar (5 RM is enough to buy one liter of mineral water only). During which, we ate bread and water only...

It is highlighted that those who would come to Malaysia are required to get enough pre-departure training. Pre-departure training is currently running in Myanmar, but only a few workers completed their training. In this regard, the Myanmar Ministry of Labour needs to put more effort into organizing this training so that the physical and psychological difficulties of migrant workers on arrival can be minimized.

On the other hand, the experiences of illegal migrants to Malaysia are often worse than that of legal entrants. The recent discovery of mass graves, over 100 dead bodies, and jungle camps in Malaysia bordering Thailand have alarmed the authorities of both countries to emphasise the issue of illegal migration (ABC News 25 May 2015).

A female migrant worker, Ma Mi (40 years old) who came to Malaysia illegally in 2000 through the Malaysian border, expressed the dangerous way to Malaysia. She said that she suffered so much and until now, she felt so sad whenever she recalled it.

... we rode on a boat during the night time, when tide reduced, we had to pull the boat to prevent immersing in marsh. Terrible insect bites compounded with hindering under bushes for whole night made me unforgettable experiences in my life. When we arrived at Penang (which is the border area of Malaysia and Thailand; mostly migrants from Thailand and Myanmar usually entered through the route) in early morning, the broker left us in a dormitory of workers and never came back again..."
(Ma Mi)

They (Ma Mi and other boat riders) stayed in the workers' dormitory for three days; meanwhile, they requested foods from the formerly arrived workers. For men, they picked up the tree leaves around the dormitory and cooked them to eat. Since her brother had already been working in Kuala Lumpur as a worker, he picked her up on the 3rd day of her arrival. She had already made contact with her younger brother since she was in Thailand.

Based on the expressions of the informants, it can be highlighted that migrant workers' hardships begin as soon as they land in Malaysia. For those coming to Malaysia, they need to make sure that the employment agency they contacted are reliable. In addition, those with relatives or friends who formerly stayed and worked in Malaysia are able to cope with their difficulties to some extent.

Theme 2: In service hardships of a migrant worker's life

Exploitations and abuses in the workplace

During my fieldwork it is evident that labour migration has benefited migrant workers in general, however, exploitation and abuses in the workplace continue to be a problem among migrant workers. According to Amnesty International (2010), labour exploitation, forced labour and trafficking, verbal and physical abuse, working long hours are common among foreign workers in Malaysia.

One of the founders, U Su, experienced being a worker for more than 20 years, openly expressed about exploitation and abuses to foreign workers as:

...Even workers are guaranteed by agents for accommodation arrangement before they left Myanmar, salaries of them were deducted for their accommodations, water, and electricity supplies. After deduction, only a little amount of money was left in their hands. Although international labor law enacted eight hours of labor hours per day, Myanmar workers had to work for 10 to 12 hours a day. No law was developed for that (In reality, the Labour Law was enacted in Malaysia; it is possibility that it was violated by some employers or brokers)...

A migrant worker, Ko Moe also shared his experiences at work. At that time, he was a documented worker.

... In the factory where I worked as soon as I got here, I didn't have any right. Three days' wages were cut if I took one day's leave. I was paid the same amount of 24 RM on Sunday, too. It (the salary) was also cut for off-days. Then I had a dislocation of knee joint that happened in the workplace and so I had to rest for one month and 28 days. Although I was provided with the treatment, RM 400 was cut. Only medical charges were helped paid. I had to settle myself for other expenses like meals. It was considerate of me not to tell my family about it. They would only feel sad, and so I had to solve problems all by myself..." (Ko Moe)

According to Ko Moe's experience, even documented migrant worker are being cheated by their employers or agents. One of the solutions to tackle these problems is empowering the workers by

giving pre-departure information about the workers' rights and labour policy in the host country. Besides, the information regarding about the precautionary measures and possible complaints mechanism so that they can protect themselves in case of abuses and exploitation during their service in Malaysia.

Cheating of brokers

There are a lot of stories in Malaysia about Myanmar migrant workers who have been cheated by their employers and or brokers. The brokers, mostly are local citizens, however, some of them are Myanmar and they also take advantage of workers as well. They did not even excuse the Buddhist monk to be cheated.

"...I have been in Malaysia since 2008 after I finished my master in arts (Philosophy) from Sri Lanka. It took a year for me to get a permit. I paid 8000 RM to a Chinese agent but after one year, I did not get a permit and lost 4000 RM. Again, a Myanmar woman, who has opened a restaurant in KL, also cheated 3500 RM from me by asking me to get the student visa. At that time, she is working in a receptionist in a Malaysia private University..." (Sayadaw)

Ko Moe said that when they arrived at Malaysia, the agent took all their documents and since then the workers have lost all of their rights. They are required to pay 600 RM for one copy of a document. He decided to take the risk of becoming an illegal overstay migrant worker after two years as he thought it was not a difference in the situation. He expressed that...

...the agents are the main people cheating the migrants. There are only 10 out of 100 people who had convenient lives in Malaysia..." (Ko Moe, migrant worker)

Unsafe and dangerous lives of migrant workers in Malaysia

In 2011, Malaysia introduced the 6P program which aimed to crackdown the number of illegal migrants by a comprehensive legalization program for illegal migrants. Since 2014, the authorities of Malaysia have conducted crackdown operations on undocumented foreign workers. If an undocumented foreign worker is arrested by police during an operation, the worker will be arrested in the police station for a few weeks and have to face the law. After that they will be imprisoned and/or caned and/or deported (Garces-Mascarenas, 2012). During crackdown operations, it is difficult for illegal migrant workers to go out and work. According to informal group chats with migrant workers at a café sometimes they were arrested by police and sentenced. However, sometimes they could escape by negotiating. Informant, Ko Moe, an undocumented migrant worker, recalled his experiences of having a miserable life in Malaysia;

.... our life is full of miseries in Malaysia ...we had to run as we saw the police. We had to hide in the bush for three hours. Once we had to climb up a tree praying to God. Luckily I could escape. About 7 out of 10 didn't have enough documentation and so they had little chance of escape...I think we are here bearing the consequences of our past sins ... We want to go home as soon as possible ...

This was supported by the expression of Ma Mi, while she was working as an undocumented migrant in KL. One day she went out to remit money that she saved from her two months' salary. When she arrived at Kota Raya, which is the central part of KL, two men wearing muftis got close to her and asked her to show her passport. Then they asked for money and took all her money. She cried and asked them to give back some money for her return trip to her workplace. Since then, she was afraid and never went out.

Moreover, the recent clash between Myanmar local ethnic and Bengalis in the coastal area of Myanmar has impacted the lives of Myanmar's migrant workers in Malaysia, and there has been several murder cases during 2013 and 2014. This threatening situation made a total of 67,225 Myanmar migrant workers return to Myanmar in 2013 (Myanmar Immigration Department as cited in Eleven Newsmedia in Myanmar, 12 July 2014). According to informal group chats with migrant workers on 12 Feb 2015 at a café, workers had to stay and work with their companions and they were afraid to go out alone for work or buying things during those days. Some workers requested to temporarily stay in the Buddhist temples and some went back to Myanmar. At that time, some companies from Myanmar sponsored the flight ticket for Myanmar workers to return back to their home country.

During these days, Ko Moe was working in KL and expressed his experiences of insecure life.

....We felt unsafe and afraid due to the murder cases in 'Salarang'. We were so scared. At nights we only dared to go home in groups. When we got home and everyone was in, we kept the door fitted with two locks each both inside and outside of it. Whoever knocked the door, we dared not open it.

....I'd like to forbid those coming here. I'd just take trouble myself but wouldn't encourage others. People live here in fear -- they daren't go out when it gets dark.

....I think we are here bearing the consequences of our past sins ... I want to go home as soon as possible ...

Based on the aforementioned stories, migrant workers' lives in Malaysia are risky, which is particularly true for undocumented migrant workers and female workers. For the time being, their social networking practice is contributing to have the safe and secure lives in Malaysia. It was, therefore, worthy to understand on how they are getting support from their social networks and various social organizations.

Theme 3: Being a member or having contact with social or religious organizations

The social organizations and their networks play a crucial role in saving the lives of migrant workers, and in easing their difficulties both physically or mentally. All the founders of social organization have been in Malaysia for at least two decades, and have been able to help workers in finding jobs, sharing their experiences, coaching in the ways of living, and in supporting migrants in trouble. Traditionally, Buddhist monks usually have voices and power in Myanmar culture. Accordingly, Myanmar Buddhist monks in Malaysia play a significant role in protecting and supporting migrant

workers. Moreover, workers' friends, colleagues, and partners are significantly involved in easing of their hardships.

One undocumented migrant, Ko Moe, stayed at the office of *Hna-Lone-Hla* during his period of unemployment for two months; meanwhile, he was fed by his friends and seniors from the organization:

...For the meals they brought parcels to this place, and sometimes I ate in the house of the uncle (the elder) from the organization ... there was no day when I couldn't eat during the days of unemployment. They even bought me a phone card. I'd be living on the roadside pavement if I hadn't had such companions ...

With the support of a social organization, two months later, he got a job at a restaurant. And also, he was able to learn a lot from his seniors. He shared his experiences on getting support from seniors of the social organization:

...There is no one who can offer help here. We can stay here as long as we have contact with social welfare organizations. Although there has been oppression, now it is better. I've been unemployed for two months, and the present job was also sought by the uncles (the elders) here in this "Blood Donation Organization... I can also feel a warm affection to the leaders of the organization...

...We learn and take lessons from our uncles (referring to senior migrants from the social organization) on how to escape from Malaysian police when they have a project (operasi) in KL... (Ko Moe)

As a founder of FFSS, U Su managed the donated money for the funerals of migrant workers in Malaysia. Recently, with the supports of donors from Myanmar, they could arrange return flight tickets, food and clothes for 45 Myanmar migrants who had recently been released from jail for imitations of employment visa in immigration to Malaysia. These fake visas were arranged by agents from Myanmar and Malaysia.

.... As for us overstay foundation, we help the difficulties of Myanmar migrants in Malaysia as much as we can. In this regard, most of the cases are related with overstay migrants. They have been cheated in obtaining work permit. Besides, occasionally their employers do not give the salary. There have also been cases of having to take medical treatments in hospitals and clinics due to being physically assaulted. In such cases, they asked us to help them since the officials from Myanmar embassy find it difficult to handle such cases.... (U Lin, Overstay foundation)

Based on the specific interests of social organizations, migrant workers could seek help from those organizations if facing any troubles. Those who run social organizations are also often willing to accept their members for their temporary stay.

...We allow all members to come to us if they don't have anything to eat, if they are kicked out by their boss, or if they have any other inconveniences. They can stay here as long as they like. There are now those going to work from here..."
(U Win)

Helping migrant workers is not limited to their members, they are ready to help in giving support to those who need to come to KL for documentation purpose or those who are returnees.

...those working in other districts of Malaysia (such as Johore Paru, and so on) who want to extend their stay have to pay 50 or 60 RM to stay in an inn in KL but we give free of charge if they stay in the office of our organization. We have rooms for the groups of 10 or 20 for both male and female. They stay here and in the morning they can go to the Embassy, and go back the next day. It is difficult for handicapped persons to stay in the quarters/ wards. We allow those with wheelchairs to stay together with the person who looks after them to stay here ..."
(U Win)

All these organizations resemble self-help groups and they have not received any support from INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations). Since they are not registered and recognized by authorities of home and host countries, there have been some difficulties in helping migrant workers.

According to Malaysia immigration law, when a foreign worker cannot show their official documents during crackdown operations, they can claim that their employers are keeping their documents. Those who could not show the relevant documents or did not have employers will be deported, according to the Malaysia Home Minister (Bernama Media, Jan 25, 2014). According to informal chats with migrant workers, they can be released if they have good friends; otherwise they have to stay in the camps for a long time. In such cases, they ask for help from the social organizations through their friends.

...Since overstay migrants are here unofficially, they are arrested by Immigration and sent to camps and prisons. There are those who have been in custody in the prison-cells for four, five, seven, ten, or eleven months.... Those who could not afford to go back home despite having CI-Certification of Identity. They are charged \$650 for an air-ticket but the actual price is just over \$300 and so about \$300 is overcharged. Those in prisons are not rich enough, and how can they get that amount of money ...

...There are a lot of people in prison who contact us for help. They ring us whenever there is Oprasi. We cannot fully help them.
(Founder of the Overstay foundation)

It was explored that those running the social organizations in Malaysia were struggling too much to help the migrant workers. Some of them were expecting to get more support and recognition from Myanmar officials. A guy who worked for undocumented migrant workers expressed his concern as:

...There's no official documentation by the government. If the government gives us chances, we don't need anything. I'm also an overstay migrant, but I'm now doing

for others. I myself is here unofficially – without holding any official documentation. We never do anything that can diminish the dignity of our country. We just help our people of the same nationality when they are in trouble. For this the government should issue some kind of certificate. When we deal with the Malaysia officials, asked if we are from agent and we say no but from a foundation, then we are asked again if we have any approval from Embassy. Eventually we can do nothing even though we want to help the workers of our nationality ... (U Lin)

His expression was well supported by the founder of the blood donation organization. On behalf of his organization, he shared the experiences of helping migrant workers from a detention centre.

...What they usually ask for to help is that they are in custody in the prison, and that they want us to inform the Embassy so that they can be released. In that case it is mainly important to know the personal number of that person, where his family is, his NRC and Form – 10 (Household list) to check whether he is really a Myanmar national. Then we help contact his family and bring these documents to the Embassy. If he has the old passport we hand it over to the Embassy together with air ticket fees. It takes longer for those who don't have original passports since copies of identification is not enough. Those who don't have friends who can meet them there are in big trouble. Some of them have to stay in there for over a year. Some don't know the contact numbers. Some gave us numbers of others which can't get through. They are in really big trouble in the prison. We help if we are directly contacted telling us how they would like to be helped and in which camp they are. There is a group (Ko Mg and group) doing this. We hand it over to them and to the Embassy... (U Win)

U Toe, he was interested in social works and he used to be an outstanding member of the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) and participated in every organization in his student life at university. As a co-founder, he stated his way of support as:

... whenever I hear that the young ones (those working here) are in trouble, I go there to help them as much as I can. One reason why this organization was established is that they can spend their time here in (this) office rather than going somewhere out. If those who don't have enough evident documentation want to remit the money to their family, we help them do it upon request. Fake police sometimes snatch (the bag) if they know there is money inside. So I help them do it for their safety. Later when the police around here have caught a Myanmar person, they inform me. Then I have to tell them that they are my people, and help them get released by giving some amount of money... (U Toe)

All three social organizations are giving supports to Myanmar workers in Malaysia; however, there are some limitations for them in running the social welfare functions. Nevertheless, Myanmar workers, who have been trouble in Malaysia, are able to seek help from these networks and they can also participate in helping other migrant works in trouble.

In Myanmar, Buddhist monks traditionally have voices and power over the affairs of people in Myanmar. Whenever and whoever needs assistance, Myanmar people can go and request help from Buddhist monks. Sayadaw from Carriyayama monastery has been supporting Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia. Every weekend, some migrant workers from different places congregate at his temple. He stated his view:

... since we religious people are staying here, workers can congregate during traditional events and they can meet and make friendships, as well as change their phone numbers and communicate with each other later. They can help each other whenever they need helps. And thus it is convenient for them if they have occasions of joy or grief... (Sayadaw)

In terms of health support, the Sayadaw also runs activities to meet healthcare needs among migrants. He arranges a free mobile clinic every two months in collaboration with *Yayasan Maha-Karuna* mobile free clinic (a charitable organization for economy, education, and medical for the public welfare in Malaysia). With supports from them, arrangements have been made for eye checkups, supporting with eye glasses and eye treatment for Myanmar migrants. Each time, he spends at least RM 3000-4000 for eye glasses. And also those having severe eye problems are able to receive proper treatments (like eye laser therapy).

The Sayadaw also has contact with local media and local religious organizations. On one occasion, he arranged for the healthcare cost of cardiac operations for a child with congenital heart disease:

...this family came and requested me to help. One of my devotees was working for the UN (United Nations Organization), so I asked her to help them. And also I contacted with the editor of Sin-Chew daily which is one of the local Chinese Newspaper in Malaysia. That editor asked for help from one of organizations (Yayasan Taiwan Buddhist Tzu-Chi Malaysia) for the donation. Finally we could arrange the expenses for operation with the supports from UN and that Buddhist Association, which cost RM 70,000 (Nearly US\$ 18,900)...

The Sayadaw always participates in the funeral events of Myanmar migrants. According to Buddhism, when people die, Buddhist monks are invited to offer the five precepts and recite the scripture for the departed person. The Sayadaw is always willing to help the migrant's funeral in such a situation.

...After 2013, more and more funerals have occurred in Malaysia and those arranging the funeral services have a bit of difficulty in inviting Buddhist monks. Not all funerals have been running smoothly. As you know, some of our people are holding the fake permits and some don't have any permit. We face a bit of trouble in that situation...

...One day, we got information that three people died in a van while they crossed the border. As nobody knew them, the dead bodies were put in the hospital mortuary for nearly two months. We went there and carried the dead bodies to do conduct the ritual funeral rites. By that time all of the bodies were spoiled and rotten. After we arrived at the cemetery, they did not allow us to burn them, as

they said, the bodies did not have the official specific names. We put back the bodies in the van and tried to contact with Guy Star (a groups of people who are doing all unofficial things) and they asked RM 2100 for burning. Nobody had that amount of money. Finally, myself and a Chinese local devotee who drove us in the motorcar, donated the money for that. We have tried to get that links. It was not easy. But whatever and whenever the situations, I told them to request me to do the ritual things for the departed one...

Apart from the affairs of health and ritual things, the Sayadaw also opened the Sunday School Class for Myanmar refugee children and taught Lawkaniti and Buddhist culture. He guided the Myanmar migrant workers too regarding how they ought to live in Malaysia:

...there are very very rare cases of committing major crimes amongst Myanmar workers, but sometimes they use their physical strength in solving the problems in their working lives. I told them to control their mind in tackling the problems. Sometimes they want to fight and run away when they were oppressed too much. I read the newspapers and always share to them regarding the situation in Malaysia..."

It was explored that the Myanmar Buddhist monks in Malaysia are quite supportive for Myanmar migrant workers in handling their difficulties and problems. Based on the data I observed and interviewed, it can be concluded that the development of Buddhist centers in host countries should be encouraged and supported by authorities of home countries. In doing so, the physical and psychological sufferings of migrant workers could be mitigated to some extent.

Conclusion

Labour migration has been continually blooming in the globalized today, for that reason, its drawbacks need to be managed effectively while maintaining their benefits. Understanding the real context of migrant workers' lives is imperative to manage effectively the hardships of migrant workers and to formulate appropriate migration policies for protection of migrant workers. With this in mind, this report has presented research about understanding social relationship and social networks among Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia.

Understanding the natural and real context of the social world of migrant workers through an ethnographic approach, three themes emerged from the obtained field data. From the research, it was concluded that *"hardships of migrants' lives begins at the time they land in Malaysia"*. For those entering illegally, they are more vulnerable to suffering from the negative consequences of labour migration. The second theme of this paper highlighted the *"in-service hardships of migrant workers"* ranging from exploitations and abuse, to being cheated and threatened. Based on the first and second themes, the third one was developed as *"being a member or having contact with social or religious organizations would release their hardships to large extent"*.

It is recommended that migrant workers should be encouraged to build networks with social and religious organizations and the government of home country had better support these organizations

so that the hardships of migrant workers can be managed more effectively and efficiently. It is hoped that the results of this study can provide supportive information to formulate better migration policies and programs in both the home and host countries.

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