

Ethnic minorities and cross-border migration, gender and human rights: Case studies from Northern Thailand¹

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ABSTRACT

The following research paper is based on a number of case studies and interviews with ethnic minority women from Burma who have crossed into Thailand over the last 20 years. The study was carried out in Pang Ma Pha District, Mae Hong Son Province, Northern Thailand – a remote north-western corner bordering Burma.

The social history of this area is inseparably interwoven with in-migration of different ethnic groups from neighbouring Burma. All the District's 38 villages are inhabited by various ethnic minorities (mainly Shan, Lahu, Lawa, Lisu, and Karen), who in their majority have migrated into Thailand over the last 20-30 years. They crossed the border in search of new arable land, practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, grew opium as their major cash crop and lead a non-sedentary life. With the Thai state gradually extending its administrative control over border areas, they were later resettled in permanent villages, and slash-and-burn agriculture and opium poppy production were banned.

Attracted by Thailand's open economy, its relative prosperity and political stability, while at the same time fleeing increased economic hardship and military despotism, migration from Burma into Thailand has peaked again in recent years. However, this time there is no agricultural land to be given away, and new migrants usually find employments in low-skilled and undocumented sectors, where many of them face a situation of extreme vulnerability and often suffer different forms of exploitation and abuses.

The research paper's major goal is to examine how the characteristics, patterns, flows and processes underlying cross-border migration have changed over the last 20 years, and what its impact has been on the District's social fabric. In addition, it looks into work-related, socio-cultural, gender and legal issues illegal Burmese migrants are facing. Some emphasis is given to the situation of Shan women, who, particularly in the authors' research area, have crossed into Thailand in great numbers in recent years fleeing from both increased economic hardship and gross human rights abuses.

¹ For more information or to get a copy of the full paper, contact Hans-Dieter Bechstedt at hdbe@cm.ksc.co.th

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