SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA:

An Ethnographic Study

Khin Soe Kyi

Understanding Myanmar's Development
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Foreword

Myanmar is undergoing an exciting and often unpredictable time of transformation on many fronts after decades of isolation. Outsiders have a only limited understanding of the complexities, dynamics and the depth of change taking place—affecting the social, environmental, economic, and governmental spheres, and directly impacting the livelihoods and practiced culture of the peoples of Myanmar. How are they actively taking part in their country's developmental process, and in the face of what obstacles? In this pivotal moment, Myanmar's need for both mind- and man-power to help fill the gaps of data and research on critical development issues has never been greater.

RCSD has established the Understanding Myanmar's Development (UMD) Fellowship program, supported by the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, to enhance the knowledge of Myanmar's development, strengthen the research capacity of Burmese researchers, and encourage them to become actively engaged in the study of development policy and practice. The fellowship seeks to promote sustainable academic exchange and dialogue among researchers from Myanmar, Thailand, and other GMS countries. Under this program, 30 fellowships have been awarded to mid-career researchers in their respective areas of social and economic change, agriculture, environment and climate change, health and health care systems, and social media and innovations.

In this multi-sited ethnography, Khin Soe Kyi explores how social networks shape the lives of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia. How do these relationships help individuals meet their needs and mitigate the difficulties of life abroad? By speaking with workers themselves—both documented and undocumented—the researcher has illustrated both the challenges they face and how such troubles can be alleviated through connections to social and religious organizations.

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, PhD
Director, RCSD

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Last but not least, thanks must go to the key informants in this study, for their time and patience during our lengthy interviews, and for their overall willingness to participate.

Abstract

Migration for employment is a challenging global issue compounded by rising numbers of migrants worldwide. The downsides of labor migration need to be understood through the context experienced by migrants in the countries where they work. A multi-site ethnographic approach has been used to explore the social relationships among Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia from October 2014 until October 2015. The following under-studied questions are explored in this work: How do social relationships contribute to meeting the needs and addressing the difficulties of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia? More specifically, what difficulties are migrant workers facing, and how do they seek help from social networks? When in trouble, how do social and religious organizations meet the needs of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia?

Four Myanmar social organizations and two Buddhist monasteries currently operating in Selangor State and Kuala Lumpur were chosen as field sites for this study. Four migrant workers—two women and two men—were selected as key informants. Data was collected through participant observations, in-depth interviews, and informal group chats, and then organized around key themes.

The five cultural themes include: (1) the difficulties of life in Malaysia, (2) assistance for one another in migrant life, (3) interactional support with the local community, (4) the role of modern communication technology, and (5) the salient attributes of social and religious organizations.

Even with work permits, migrants face trouble as soon as they land in Malaysia. Many are cheated by brokers and employers—their safety and security frequently threatened. It was found that being a member of, or having contact with, social or religious organizations alleviated migrants' difficulties to a large extent. It is the recommendation of this study that migrant workers be encouraged to join such groups, and that the government of Myanmar support these organizations so that migrant workers' hardships can be managed effectively and efficiently.

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List of Abbreviations

BRO	Burma Refugee Organization
CI	Certificate of Identity
FFSS	Free Funeral Services Society
GST	Goods and Services Tax
ILO	International Labor Organization
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JUNIMA	Joint United Nations Initiative on Migration, Health and HIV in Asia
KFFSS	Kepong Free Funeral Service Society
LFS	Labor Force Survey
MEF	Malaysian Employer's Federation
MGMA	Myanmar Garment Manufacturer's Association
MOEAF	Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Federation
MOL_MODiNS	Ministry of Labor Myanmar Online Data Information Network Solutions
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRC	Migrant Resource Center
MYR	Malaysian Ringgit
PJ	Petaling Jaya
RFA	Radio Free Asia
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN	United Nations
USD	United States Dollar
VDR	Visa with Reference (Visa Dengan Rujukan)

1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Migration is a long-standing global phenomenon as well as a multifaceted, challenging process, particularly migration for the purpose of employment. Generally, labor migration has been beneficial for the economic and social positions of migrant workers and their families (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2014). Unfortunately, many migrants experience abuse and exploitation within their workplaces, as well as difficulties in maintaining health, happiness, and security. Despite accelerated growth of multinational organizations and the global integration of markets, improved travel and communication patterns are encouraging more people to leave their home countries (ILO, 2007).

According to 2014 ILO estimates, in 2013 there were 231.5 million people globally who lived outside of their home countries—a figure which rose from 194.5 million in 2000. Asian migration alone accounted for 70.8 million people who had migrated internationally in 2013, as well as 30 percent of total global migration figures (United Nations, as cited in UNDESA & OECD, 2013). According to the Malaysian Digest (2015), Malaysia has hired the highest number of foreign workers in Southeast Asia: they make up 20 percent of the labor force. Because of rapid economic growth and tight labor markets, the foreign workforce increased to 2,250,322 in 2013 from 1,817,871 in 2010 (Malaysian

Employers' Federation [MEF], 2014). Of those, 7.2 percent of the total foreign workforce was from Myanmar, the fourth largest source country for foreign workers in Malaysia (MEF, 2014). Malaysia's minimum daily wage of 9.81 USD (MYR 900 per month) has attracted Myanmar workers, while the recently announced minimum daily wage in Myanmar is 3,600 kyat, or around 3 USD (Runckel, 2013; ASEAN Briefing, 2013). The comparison of minimum daily wages in selected countries in Asia is shown in Appendix 3, Table (1).

Despite having access to a higher daily wage, foreign workers in Malaysia face many hardships, to which Myanmar workers experience no exception.

Documented abuses include labor exploitation, forced labor and trafficking, verbal and physical abuse, sexual harassment of women workers, and long working hours (Amnesty International, 2010). According to a report by Zaw Zaw Htwe in the *Myanmar Times* (2016), approximately 500,000 to 700,000 Myanmar migrant workers were employed in Malaysia, but most had no legal documents giving them permission to work. Their lack of documentation translates to a lack of protection for their basic rights; many work long hours in dangerous environments with few opportunities for better working conditions or pay (McLaughlin and Thwe, 2013).

Migrant workers' social wellbeing has been largely neglected in terms of accessibility to health and social services. In these cases, Myanmar social organizations and ethnic-based organizations in Malaysia provide support to migrant workers by addressing their needs and problems. Religious organizations and leaders also play a key role in this regard. Although not officially recognized, approximately 30 social organizations and 40 Buddhist monasteries are estimated to be currently operating in Malaysia (U San Win, Personal communication, February 5, 2015). This study aims to explore the hardships of Myanmar migrant workers in this context, and the support networks that function around them.

Rationale for the Study

In recent decades, concern over migration has grown, contributing to the development of a body of scholarly work exploring migrant workers' lives from various perspectives. A study on the social context of migrant health conducted in the United States highlighted structural racism and anti-immigrant practices, as well as poor working and living conditions (Holmes, 2006). Regarding migrant networks of irregular Nayu workers in Malaysia, Bunmak (2011) concluded that newly arrived migrants are initially settled by "pioneer" migrants through existing networks. These networks are an important source of information for entry into jobs in the host country, suggesting that social networking and relationships play a significant role in assisting migrant workers.

In Malaysia, a considerable amount of research has been conducted on migration: most has focused on the economic and social effects of foreign labor on the host country. Yet few studies have been conducted on the difficulties faced by the migrant workers themselves. Furthermore, there is a gap in research which explores migrant workers' social practices or their support networks: where and how they seek help from such networks remains understudied.

Generally, the lives of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia are marked by a range of challenges. An evidence-based inquiry into these difficulties would be an important avenue for further research, particularly since there is a lack of documentation supporting the general notion that Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia are frequently excluded from workers' rights and protections.

In order to protect migrant workers, the formulation of an appropriate, mutually agreed-upon labor migration policy between host and home countries is crucial. According to an interview conducted with an official from the Myanmar Embassy in Malaysia, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Myanmar and Malaysian governments is still under negotiation (U Win, Personal communication, December 21, 2014). The acknowledgment of the needs and difficulties of this migrant population stands to be valuable for policymakers in developing a

holistic migration program for Myanmar workers.

In order to understand and capture the way social and religious organizations have contributed to meeting the needs of Myanmar migrants in Malaysia, a multi-sited ethnographic approach was used in the study. It is hoped that the data obtained will be useful in developing a comprehensive migration policy and program for Myanmar migrants in Malaysia, as well as from other countries, to mitigate the disadvantages and difficulties they face.

Research Questions

- How do the social relationships among Myanmar migrant workers contribute to meeting their needs and addressing the difficulties in Malaysia?

Additional questions:

- How do Myanmar migrant workers live and support themselves while they are in Malaysia?
- What are the difficulties faced by Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia?
- How do they interact with each other in their social networks?
- How do migrant workers interact with the local Malaysian communities?
- How do they seek support from social and Buddhist organizations?
- How do social and religious organizations contribute to meeting the needs and addressing the difficulties of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia?

Research Methodology

A multi-sited ethnographic study was conducted between October 2014 and October 2015 in Selangor State and Kuala Lumpur (KL). During these 12 months of fieldwork, direct observation and

participation in the life of migrant workers was carried out multiple times at various field sites. According to Macus (1995), single-sited ethnographic research is no longer useful in understanding contemporary local changes in culture and society from a global perspective. Multi-sited ethnography can enhance insights through the examination of culture-based macro-constructions of a larger social order. Multiple ethnography sites are therefore cross-cutting, from the local "lifeworld" to the global "system," resulting in both in- and out- of the world systems (Macus, 1995).

Data collection for the study of migrant workers' social culture involved compiling tape-recorded semi-structured in-depth interviews, field notes, and time- and place-mapping of social and religious occasions. Formal interviews with key informants and informal interviews and group chats with Myanmar workers were carried out within areas of Selangor and KL during social and religious occasions, and subsequent interviews were held until the data was deemed sufficient. As a participant observer in this study, I, the researcher, visited dormitories and workplaces of the migrant workers and engaged in their social and religious events in order to understand how they interacted with and supported one another through their social networks.

Before beginning fieldwork, on December 21, 2014, initial contact was made with the labor attaché of the Myanmar Embassy in Malaysia in order to obtain information regarding the social activities of Myanmar workers. Gradually, a trusting relationship was established with the founders of relevant social organizations in Malaysia, who recommended speaking to specific migrant workers who met the selection criteria of the research initiative. Those key informants in turn suggested appropriate candidates to be interviewed.

In selecting social organizations for the study, consideration was carefully made to ensure that those chosen were free from apparent ethnic, cultural, and religious biases. According to key informant U San Win, in Malaysia there are approximately 30 social associations serving Myanmar migrants and 40 Buddhist monasteries. Some are associations focused on helping migrants

from one specific Myanmar ethnic group, others are focused on preparing for resettlement in third countries. Of those 30 social organizations, few fit my criteria; therefore, I carefully chose four associations which stated it was their mission to support all Myanmar nationals regardless of migrants' race, religion, or culture. Likewise, I visited two Buddhist monasteries, since Myanmar migrant workers typically meet in these places during religious occasions, and the affiliated monks are known to also offer support to Myanmar migrants, even if they are not Buddhist.

When choosing key informants from among the migrants—two women and two men—highly skilled workers were not considered, due to their unique bargaining power, higher levels of compensation and greater access to rights protection mechanisms that experienced by unskilled migrants. Those workers holding an identity card[1] issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were excluded from this study as well, since they are registered as refugees and are not permitted to work in the formal sector while their cases are processed for resettlement (MEF, 2014).

Data analysis involved three steps: first, transcript interview data was translated and organized manually and scrutinized. The data obtained was condensed to key aspects. That data was then coded and categorized according to similar characteristics in terms of themes. Finally, the data was interpreted and conclusions were drawn.

Before conducting the research, official approval was obtained from RCSD at Chiang Mai University. To ensure adherence to ethical principles, informants were told about the research objectives and processes, and their anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed. If descriptions were published, they were promised that pseudonyms would to be used to protect their identities. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from participation during the data collection period.

1. Those holding UNHCR cards in Malaysia are registered officially as refugees and are awaiting resettlement in a third country. At the end of March 2014, there were 143,435 refugees and asylum seekers registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia (MEF, 2014).

Description of Field Sites

Selangor State and Kuala Lumpur were selected as the areas of study for this research. Selangor is one of 13 states in Malaysia, and Kuala Lumpur is one of the three federal territories (Maps are shown in Figure (4) and (5), Appendix 3).

Selangor is situated on the west coast and is surrounded by the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya. The area is 7,931 square kilometers and had 6.18 million people in 2015, making it the most populous state in Malaysia (Department of Statisics Malaysia, 2016a). This, along with its strong infrastructure, has contributed to making Selangor the richest state in the country in terms of GDP per capita, and has created numerous jobs and attracted large numbers of overseas migrants, including Myanmar workers (Center for IMT-GT Sub-regional Cooperation [CIMT], 2009). According to the Malaysia Migration Report (2013), Selangor is also home to the highest domestic migrant population and the second highest international migrant population in the country (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2014). The state is home to a range of factories which produce electronic goods, chemicals, and automotive vehicles, and where a considerable number of migrant workers are employed as unskilled and semiskilled laborers. The industrial cities in Selangor include Petaling Jaya, Shah Alam, Klang, Kajang, Subang Jaya, Kajang, Rawang and Ampang Jaya, Selayang.

This study included the interview of informants living or working in the Shah Alam and Petaling Jaya—called "PJ" by locals—industrial areas. One of my key informants was working in a factory in Shah Alam, while another was working in one in PJ. My field sites in Selangor included a Buddhist monastery in PJ, the PJ industrial area, the blood bank at the University Malaya Medical Center, Cheras cemetery, and Sekinchan town.

Another study site was KL, the most industrialized and fastest growing economic region in the country. It covers 243 square kilometers with an estimated population of 1.78 million, as of 2015 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016b). It has 11 districts, including Kepong and Cheras, where most of the field sites for this study were located.

On December 21, 2014, I made contact with a labor officer from the Myanmar Embassy in Malaysia. We met and chatted for approximately one hour at a café at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Center (KLCC). He provided me contact information for Myanmar social organizations operating in KL. Although they were not officially recognized by the governments of Myanmar and Malaysia, he acknowledged the strength of these associations in dealing with issues facing undocumented workers. He stated, "They are in a position for us to rely on them."

From December 2014 to July 2015, I met key informants and conducted interviews, engaged in multi-site participant observation and carried out informal group chats with informants. My key informants included the presidents of four social associations, two Buddhist monks, and four migrant workers—two men and two women.

At first, I carried out informal conversations with leaders of social organizations, namely, the Kepong Free Funeral Service Society (KFFSS), the Myanmar Social Welfare Foundation (Overstay Foundation), the Lovely Heart Philanthropic Youth Blood Donor Organization (Hna-Lone-Hla), Myittar Mon Philanthropic Organization, and two Buddhist monasteries. After I connected with them, they invited me to participate in their associations' activities, and I took on the role of participant observer during this time.

Figure 1 Kota Raya shopping center

Source: malaysiakini.com

Except for the Buddhist monasteries, most of the organizations were located in the vicinity of the Kota Raya shopping complex, which is near Petaling Street (Chinatown) in KL. Myanmar restaurants, hair salons, grocery stores, and dental clinics are located there. A lot of Myanmar migrants congregated there to socialize during their leisure time, as well as to make purchases, such as flight tickets for return trips to Myanmar, foods, medical remedies, and to send remittances home. Businesses around Kota Raya were typically crowded with foreign workers, including those from Indonesia, Nepal, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. The area remains a hotbed of law enforcement activity, with accusations that Malaysian police organize operations intended to crack down on and garner unofficial payoffs from undocumented foreign workers. I interviewed informants at the offices of social organizations, Buddhist monasteries, Myanmar food shops in Chinatown, and a workers' dormitory in the Kepong industrial area. These locations were selected with the safety and security of interviewees in mind.

The workers' dormitory was located in the Kepong industrial area, 19 km from central KL. On January 11, 2015, I met five workers here. Two were living in the dormitory with other foreign workers, and the other three were workers in nearby factories. The dormitory was on the second floor of the factory—an engineering plant doing welding and milling—and was provided by the employer. Each living space appeared adequate for five workers, with two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, and two bathrooms, all of which were well-maintained. I carried out an informal group chat with the five workers there—two of whom were undocumented—and also interviewed one documented worker (Informant Ko Kyaw).

Figure 2 Myanmar worker dormitory

During the second phase of the research project, I continued my fieldwork both within and outside of KL. In February 2015 I visited a small town, Sekinchan, located in Selangor State but 100 km from KL. It is situated along the Malaysian coast and is home to people working in fishing and rice production. Most of the Myanmar migrants there depended on fishing: men typically work as fishermen and women work for fish processing factories.

Many came from the same village in Myanmar: Ah-Sin, in Mon State's Ye Township. They explained that they had migrated to Malaysia by first crossing the Thai border, and that the majority of them did not have official work permits or passports. In the case of families, the men had typically migrated first, later calling their relatives to join them after they had settled. Sometimes, they said that they had to flee the area during police crackdowns, or negotiate fees so that they could continue to stay and work. Male workers spent the majority of their time on fishing boats, without much time for leisure. Because of their undocumented status, it was risky for them to leave the area and travel around the city. As a result, some passed the time with alcohol use.

The Kepong FFSS celebrates a monks' ordination ceremony every year. For the ceremony, which lasts ten days, they hire a hotel at a cost of MYR 10,000 (2,700 USD, based on USD 1 = MYR 3.5 in 2015) per day, to host the temporary monks, nuns, and visitors from KL. They invite a venerable Sayadaw[2] from their home village in Mon State and cover the travel costs and expenditures for the Sayadaw and visitors. In chatting with migrants working in this town, they revealed that they prepared and donated food for all such visitors, including the Sayadaw, monks, nuns, and devotees. Despite the difficulties of their lives in Malaysia, they continued to fulfill this obligation enthusiastically, seen as a meritorious act in Buddhist tradition.

Figure 3 Ordination ceremony organized by Kepong FFSS

2 Sayadaw is a venerable Buddhist monk—it is a Burmese honorific title meaning a "respected and royal teacher."

2

LABOR SITUATION IN HOME AND HOST COUNTRIES

Labor Migration in Malaysia

Foreign labor migration to Malaysia started during colonial times, particularly in the early 1900s. Cheap foreign labor was imported mainly from India and China. By the early 1940s, these workers had settled in Malaysia and were granted citizenship. The Immigration Act was introduced in 1953 to restrict the free flow of migrants into Malaysia (Nayagam, 1992). During the 1960s and 1970s, the local labor supply was able to meet the market demand; however, the demand for foreign workers in certain sectors of the economy re-emerged in the early 1980s (ibid). From 1992 onwards, the influx of foreign workers to Malaysia grew steadily because of the rapid expansion of the economic sector and multi-sectoral developmental activities (Karim, Abdullah, & Bakar, 1999). Due to a limited population and a booming economy, there has been an influx of both regular and irregular foreign workers[3] from nearby developing countries.

Impressive and sustained economic growth and rapid expansion

3 A foreign worker is defined as a non-Malaysian citizen or Permanent Resident (PR), but is allowed to engage in employment and stay temorarily on a Visit Pass VP (Temporary Employment—TE) or Pas Lawatan (Kerja Sementara – KS) (MEF, 2014)

of industrial sectors along with a shortage in the domestic labor market have made Malaysia a popular destination for foreign workers. Circumstances in neighboring countries, such as low wages, limited job opportunities, conflicts and natural disasters, have also pushed immigrants to enter Malaysia both legally and illegally as laborers and as asylum seekers.

In order to prevent the collapse of economic growth, the Government of Malaysia allowed the recruiting of foreign labor in five formal sectors: construction, services, manufacturing, plantation agriculture, and domestic work (MEF, 2014). Consequently, Malaysia has become home to one of Asia's largest foreign labor pools (Pillai, 1998) and the number of registered foreign workers reached 2.47 million in 2013 (MEF, 2014). The highest portion—35 percent of the total foreign workforce—is employed in the manufacturing sector, followed by agriculture at 26 percent, and construction at 20 percent (Central Bank Report, 2013, as cited in MEF, 2014).

Immigration of foreign laborers to Malaysia was formally regulated in 1982 with the formation of a committee for the recruitment of such workers. Permission was given for employers to recruit workers from Bangladesh and Thailand for the plantation and construction sectors in 1985 to 1986. The Immigration Act was amended in 1998 by introducing corporal punishment, such as whipping, for illegal entry and irregular employment. From 2000 to 2010, the recruitment of foreign workers from Cambodia was initiated and memorandums of understanding (MoUs) were signed with China, Vietnam, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

In 2006, outsourcing was introduced to recruit workers from South East Asian countries; it did not attach workers' permits to a particular employer and enabled migrant workers to change their employment in cases of abuse, for example. Normally, foreign workers' positions are dependent upon staying with the employer who sponsored their permits through the immigration department; to leave the position would be to lose permission to work in the host country. In such cases, when workers change jobs and leave their primary employers, they become irregular migrant workers. However, those who came to Malaysia with outsourcing companies

were able to more easily move from one job to another. Unfortunately, the outsourcing of licenses by the Malaysian authorities was discontinued in 2009. The currently registered 277 outsourcing companies are responsible for the recruitment of foreign workers for employers hiring less than 50 foreign workers (MEF, 2014).

According to the Section 60L(2) of the Employment Act and Labour Laws of Malaysia, foreign workers can complain of workplace discrimination having been committed by his or her employer, and the employer may be required to resolve that conflict under the direction of the Director-General of Labour, or the employer could also be considered as having committed a criminal offense (Goh Chen Chuan, 2013). In reality, however, foreign workers still face difficulties in accessing formal complaint mechanisms because of language barriers, a lack of familiarity with the system, and limited knowledge regarding their legal rights. Furthermore, they face the fear of being fired by their employers for making such a complaint as per their rights.

Based on the Employment Act of Malaysia (1968), a foreign worker who is unskilled or semi-skilled cannot be employed in Malaysia without a valid temporary employment pass, which is needs to be renewed yearly after the first two years (Goh Chen Chuan, 2013). In 1992, an annual levy for work permits was introduced, depending on differing work sectors and skill categories of migrant workers (Pillai, 1998). The monthly fee for an employment permit for technical work was MYR 100, and for temporary employment for unskilled and semi-skilled workers in manufacturing sector, it ranges from MYR 35 to MYR 50 (Goh Chen Chuan, 2013). Starting from March 18, 2016, the annual levy rate for foreign workers in Malaysia has increased to 1,850 MYR from 1,250 in 2015 for manufacturing, service, and construction sectors (As shown in Appendix 3, Table 2). The levies were revised periodically to reduce dependency on labor intensive industries, according to the Home Ministry (Anis, 2016). In 2009, the Malaysian government issued a regulation that required such fees to be borne by employers instead of workers; unfortunately this policy was reversed on January 31, 2013. In 2015, Malaysia increased the Goods and Services Tax (GST) to six percent, and

the burden of annual levies pushes foreign workers to consider returning to their home country, or to work as overstay migrant workers. According to an informal group chat with migrant workers at a café on July 7, 2015, those who participated in this research expressed that they were being burdened by agents who overcharge the annual levies.

The hiring of irregular foreign workers is regarded as an unlawful act for both employers and the workers themselves. It remains a problem in the Malaysian labor market since irregular foreign workers cannot make demands for their salary and overtime fees because of their lack of legal status (Karim et al., 1999). Social security contributions and other benefits stated in the labor laws are typically not considered by employers who hire irregular workers (Nayagam, 1992). Undocumented foreign workers, therefore, are vulnerable to abuse and labor exploitation (MEF, 2014). Consequently, the employers and brokers have arguably profited by such hiring practices, and undocumented workers frequently express that they are neglected by their employers when they suffer accidents or injuries in the workplace.

An amnesty program initiated by the government registered 240,804 foreign workers from August to December 1996 (Karim et al., 1999). Now, the number of undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia is nearly 50 percent of the total foreign workforce, with some entering illegally through porous borders and others entering through legal channels, but changing employers, rendering their permits invalid, or not renewing their permits and thereby becoming "irregular." (Piper, 2006). The Malaysian government has enforced increasingly rigid controls to combat illegal entry of foreign workers. In July 2011, the government launched the 6Ps program: each 'P' stands for the beginning of six Malay words; Pendaftaran (registration), Pemutihan (legalization), Pengampunan (amnesty), Pemantauan (supervision), Penguatkuasaan (enforcement) and Pengusiran (deportation). Its aim was to reduce the number of irregular migrant workers through a comprehensive legalization program. Through the 6Ps program, the total legal foreign labor workforce dramatically increased as once-undocumented workers became registered: the number of legal workers rose to 2.47 million in 2013, up from 1.57 million in 2012 (MEF, 2014).

Since Malaysia is trying to flush out irregular migrant workers, police raids and crackdown operations known as 'Ops 6P' or *operasi* have been periodically conducted to round up undocumented migrants, mostly without warning. Employers who hire irregular migrants can be charged under the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrant Act 2007 (Amendment 2010) (*The Malaysian Times*, 2013). According to the Malaysia Immigration Act 1959/63, employers who hired irregular migrant workers were liable to be fined no less than MYR 10,000 but no more than MYR 50,000 for each worker illegally hired, and/or face imprisonment for a period of no more than 12 months for each employee hired. If there were more than five illegal workers, the employer shall be imprisoned for not less than six months and not more than five years, and be liable to a sentence of whipping of not more than six strokes. The penalty for irregular foreign workers under the same act is a fine of no more than MYR 10,000 and/or imprisonment for less than five years or to both, and they are liable to be punished by a whipping of not more than six strokes (MEF, 2014). If foreign workers cannot show a valid passport and work permit, they will be arrested and detained in a police station for up to three weeks under immigration law. After that, they will be imprisoned and/or caned (whipped), and finally deported. Before deportation, they will be sent to detention centers (also known as "camps") where they have to wait for a verification of citizenship from their home country. With approval from their embassy, they are deported directly from detention centers to the airport.

However, during crackdown operations, those who were arrested reportedly have at times been able to negotiate their release with the assistance of their employers, but the employers of undocumented migrant workers rarely come to the police station to help. Employers are described as less likely to be arrested, even though they are subject to the aforementioned penalties for hiring irregular foreign workers according to Malaysian immigration law—fines and imprisonment, based on each irregular worker hired.

In a nationwide operation conducted from April 2012 until 2013, the irregular status of 89,278 migrant workers was verified, of

whom 13,492 were arrested and processed through the legal system (Human Development, Social Protection and Labor Unit; East Asia and Pacific Region, 2013). The Labor Force Survey (LFS) estimated the foreign labor force in Malaysia to be 1,817,871 in 2010, up from 807,096 in 2000 and 380,000 in 1990. The number of foreign workers in Malaysia further increased to a total of 2,250,322 in 2013 (MEF, 2014). This figure is shown in Appendix 3, Figure 2. The ratio of foreign workers to the total workforce in Malaysia in 1990 was 3.5 percent, which increased to 9.5 percent in 2010. According to a Malaysian Digest interview with MEF Executive Director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan, 2.8 to 2.9 million total migrant workers are currently working in Malaysia, which is nearly 20 percent of the labor force (Malaysian Digest, 2015). According to the Malaysia Immigration Department, in 2013, Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia numbered 161,447, or 7.2 percent of the total foreign workforce and the fourth highest foreign labor group in Malaysia (MEF, 2014) (As shown in Appendix 3, Figure 1).

On the other hand, the perception held by Malaysians of migrant workers has verged on negative, even though there is a general acknowledgement of the positive contribution of foreign workers, according to Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan. He emphasized that crime involving migrant workers comprised less than 10 per cent of total criminal cases in Malaysia, noting that the flow of foreign workers had not been proven to be a primary factor contributing to increasing crime rates nationally (Malaysian Digest, 2015).

Local organizations working with the ILO, MEF, MTUC-Malaysian Trade Union Congress, and other stakeholders launched the "Migration Campaign" to strengthen the role of employers in protecting migrant workers' rights in Malaysia (Teh Wei Soon, 2015). Even as NGOs (non-governmental organizations) advocate for improved migrant worker welfare and a reduction in negative and hostile public perceptions of foreign workers, there are still cases of mistreatment.

A 2010 Amnesty International report documented the exploitation of migrant workers in Malaysia, encompassing issues of trafficking, forced labor, verbal and physical abuse, sexual harassment of

women workers, and long working hours. It was noted that common problems among migrant workers in Malaysia also included the denial of promised wages, charges for work permit renewals, deductions from wages for "mistakes," and charges for food and accommodation on site; these complications often made workers unable to remit money back to their families in their home countries (Amnesty International, 2010). Migrant workers are also described as frequent victims of crime, including robbery and petty theft. For irregular migrant workers, when stricken by life threatening illnesses or injuries—or even death—it is not uncommon to be neglected by their employers and be left with no channel for complaint or appeal for their rights. In such cases, Myanmar migrant workers in trouble typically ask for support and help from their colleagues or from social, ethnic, and religious organizations serving Myanmar nationals in Malaysia.

Moreover, clashes in 2012 between Rakhine Buddhists and Muslims[4] in Myanmar's western coastal areas went on to affect Myanmar migrants' lives in Malaysia. A total of 67,225 Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia—of various backgrounds—went back to Myanmar in 2013, with many citing fears of attacks while they were abroad (Myanmar Immigration Department, as cited in Eleven News Media, 2014). In 2013 and 2014, one to two Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia were being killed every month; however, no arrests of perpetrators had been made (Eleven News Media, 2014). Radio Free Asia (RFA) quoted the Malaysian police as saying that they were trying to arrest those responsible (RFA, 2014). The discovery of mutilated corpses and severed body parts of at least 18 Myanmar workers and 10 unidentified dead bodies in Penang in 2014 were assumed to belong to Myanmar nationals, and proceeded to terrify migrant workers; the deaths were believed to be linked to tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine State in 2012 (Chaurley, 2014; Agence France-Presse, 2014). Malaya Mail Online quoted Penang police chief

4 The terms by which to refer to this particular Muslim community in Rakhine State are contested. The majority of the Myanmar public calls them "Bengali," inferring that their origins are in Bangladesh; the group rejects this label and identifies themselves as "Rohingya."

Abdul Rahim Hanati as saying, "We can tell from the way the victims died….it was revenge they brought here from their country" (Chaurley, 2014). Following such events, Myanmar workers became more insular within their communities, and made contact with social and religious organizations active in the areas in which they worked.

Labor Migration in Myanmar

International labor migration is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar; however, outward migration for overseas employment of Myanmar workers has become particularly common in the past two decades. According to the Ministry of Labor's Myanmar Online Data Information Network Solutions (MOL_MODiNS), the Department of Labor has arranged for overseas employment since 1990: officially, just 784 migrant workers were sent to seven countries between April 1995 and November 1997.

Because of slow economic growth during the 50 years of rule by Myanmar's military regime, limited job opportunities, and market imperfections—involving labor, insurance, and credit—working-age people have long been forced to engage in outward migration for work. In addition, prolonged armed conflict and natural disasters have also pushed workers to move out of the country. Currently 235 foreign employment agencies are legally registered as Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies (Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Federation [MOEAF], 2015). From 1990 to March of 2015, these agencies have arranged official overseas employment for 277,115 Myanmar workers in Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, and Singapore. A total of 136,401 workers have been sent to Malaysia this way, and 126,576 to Thailand (MOEAF, 2015). However, an accurate total of all migrant workers overseas is difficult to obtain because of high levels of unofficial cross-border migration to Thailand.

According to Myanmar's 2014 population and housing census, approximately 2 million nationals are living abroad, and of those, more than 80 percent are between the ages of 15 and 39 (Department of Population, 2015). It was also found that Thailand

was the most popular destination, followed by Malaysia. A substantial number of Myanmar migrants are from Mon, Kayin, and Shan states, as well as Tanintharyi Region, because of these areas' close proximity to Thailand.

Under the Overseas Employment Law of 1999, the Ministry of Labor in Myanmar mandates the nature of outward migration training and recruitment; a MoU on labor migration was signed with Thailand in 2003. A mutual agreement between the governments of Thailand and Myanmar has been forged in order to encourage formal migration mechanisms by establishing nationality verification centers in three towns in Myanmar near the Thai border (JUNIMA, 2014). Under the MoU with Thailand, Myanmar migrant workers are entitled to basic rights including health insurance and a minimum wage. Similar MoUs were signed with South Korea in 2010 and Japan in 2013. However, an MoU with the Malaysian government is still under negotiation. The appointment of labor attachés in Myanmar embassies started in 2012, and these attachés handle migrant worker issues in Thailand, South Korea, and Malaysia.

Regarding outward migration, the Overseas Employment Supervisory Committee was formed by the Ministry of Labor to review, coordinate, and supervise existing procedures on overseas workers' issues. Myanmar became a member of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in May 1948, and has ratified 19 ILO Conventions. In 2012, Myanmar also joined the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to highlight migrant worker affairs (Saw Naing, n.d). Three Migrant Resource Centers (MRCs) have been launched by the Myanmar government with the support of the IOM to promote safe and legal migration. The planned services of the MRCs are to offer individual counseling and employment advice to potential migrants, as well as to register complaints from returning migrants and their families regarding overcharging, unfair treatment or exploitation by job brokers, recruitment agencies or employers (IOM, 2014). Yet, despite these policies and program interventions, the majority of Myanmar migrant workers and potential migrants are still underprotected in terms of labor rights and general safety, undercompensated in situations of injury, and therefore cannot enjoy the full benefits of their migration.

In Myanmar, a lack of job opportunities is the primary concern limiting sustainable national growth and development. As Myanmar is an agricultural country, 70 per cent of the population resides in rural areas and largely depends on agriculture and fishing for their livelihoods. However, obsolete agricultural technology and frequent natural disasters, along with a lack of access to credit markets, have pushed the rural poor to migrate—internally, to cities, or internationally. Those who cannot afford to pay high recruitment fees for outward migration have been known to move to urban areas within Myanmar for employment. Even in cases of internal migration, they are often not able to earn enough money due to limited technical and vocational skills. Youth are generally still underserved by vocational training schools and technical training courses in Myanmar.

In 1951, Myanmar enacted the Factory Act, since which amendments have been periodically made concerning working hours, overtime wages, workplace safety and health measures, welfare, and subsequent penalties for violations by employers and workers. However, until recently there was no standard minimum wage for workers in Myanmar, and thus, there were frequent strikes by workers demanding better pay. A minimum wage law was therefore promulgated by Parliament in March 2013, and minimum wage rules were announced in July 2013. A daily wage of 3,600 kyat was specified on August 28, 2015 (Notification of the National Committee for Minimum Wage, 2015). However, this new wage is still lower than what is offered in neighboring countries and is considered insufficient in allowing workers to provide for the the basic needs of their families. This in turn pushes thousands of young workers to to leave the country, either legally or as irregular migrants, typically to Thailand or Malaysia.

During the 6Ps program by the Malaysian government, the Embassy of Myanmar issued official passports for 100,374 Myanmar workers who had been staying and working in Malaysia unofficially. As a result, a total of 48,855 workers received official work permits from the Malaysian government in 2012 (Embassy of Myanmar in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2016a). However, 2,850 workers are still awaiting their official work permits. In January

2016, Myanmar's ambassador made a request to the Malaysian Ministry of Home Affairs for special consideration for these Myanmar passport holders still waiting for work permits (Announcement of the Embassy of Myanmar, Jan. 22, 2016, No. 80/47 11). In March 2016, the Myanmar Embassy in Malaysia announced a rehiring program for Myanmar irregular workers in Malaysia after negotiations with the Malaysian ministries of Home Affairs, Immigration, and Labor. Under this program, Myanmar migrant workers who entered Malaysia with a visit pass (TE or Social Visit Pass) but had overstayed and were working unofficially could apply for an official work permit, but would have to cover the service charges, fines, and annual levy cost.

Officials from the Myanmar Embassy are reviving their identification process for Myanmar detainees in Malaysian immigration detention camps. From August 2009 to March 2016, a total of 27,267 Myanmar detainees in 11 camps were released and deportation was arranged for Myanmar (Myanmar Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2016b). Authorities in Myanmar have expressed concern over the well-being of Myanmar migrant workers; however resource limitations are a major factor keeping them from providing wide-ranging services for the welfare and protection of those in Malaysia.

3

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS

Social Organizations in Malaysia

Of 30 social organizations and groups in Malaysia serving Myanmar nationals, three were chosen for this study: the Kepong Free Funeral Services Society (FFSS), the Myanmar Social Welfare Foundation (Overstay Foundation), and the Lovely Heart Philanthropic Youth Blood Donor Organization (Hna-Lone-Hla), and Myittar Mon Philanthropic Organization. After more than 20 years of experience in Malaysia, the founders of these organizations—who I informally interviewed—emerged organically, and are able to help workers find jobs, coach them in ways of living, and assist them in returning to Myanmar if need be.

I interviewed U San Win, a 49-year-old man and the founder of the Free Funeral Services Society (FFSS) for Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia. He migrated to Malaysia himself in 1994, where he has remained. He first went to work as a seaman in Thailand, but he reported that his passport has been forged, and the ship he went to work on was not the same one that he had agreed to in Yangon. So he went to Malaysia by way of *aut lan* (*aut lan* means "lower road," which is understood as an illegal crossing of the border). He first worked in a pipe factory but said that all the workers quit, due to an abusive employer. Soon after that, he overstayed his permit, and sought employment doing various

kinds of jobs. In 2000, he was arrested by the Malaysian police for his irregular migrant status, and released after one year's imprisonment. After that, he received a UNHCR refugee card. With this card, he was told he would have the chance to move to a third country, but he said that he had no idea to go there, and that he was instead inspired to do parahita, or work in social welfare. Currently, he lives with his wife and a niece, both of whom still work in factories.

He explained why and how his organization—the FFSS—was set up in April 2011. Before then, there was no funereal assistance for Myanmar migrants in Malaysia. When a worker died, they asked for help from the Burma Refugee Organization (BRO), but they had to pay for arrangements regarding funeral rites. As of January 2015, a total of 400 deceased individuals have been cremated in accordance with their religious practices, with the support of U San Win's organization. Apart from funeral services, FFSS also supports Myanmar workers facing legal trouble in Malaysia, and those wishing to return to Myanmar, particularly due to health reasons.

Figure 4 FFSS members at a funeral

The founder of the FFSS, U San Win reflected on the work and development of the organization:

> The reason for developing this organization is based on the real experience of one Myanmar couple. Both of them were of Mon ethnicity and migrated to Malaysia through Thailand *aut lan*. Crossing the border areas took five to 10 days…the woman got heart disease. When they arrived [in Malaysia], they had only MYR 500 from all they had saved in Thailand. Shortly after they arrived, the woman became ill and needed to go to the hospital. At that time, there were intensive crackdown operations [on migrants] in KL and it was very difficult to get to a hospital. The UNHCR opened a clinic for refugees, but the couple did not have refugee status. In order to go to a refugee clinic, we first needed to get them membership in BRO.
>
> I followed them in a taxi to BRO. After the taxi fare was paid, they had only MYR 300 left—after paying for membership, all the money was gone. I only had MYR 100 as I thought that they had brought enough money. The woman started having difficulty breathing. On the way to the UNHCR clinic by taxi we were arrested by the police. I explained and apologized to them but they asked me for MYR 50. When we arrived at the clinic, they immediately referred the patient to the hospital. After admission to the Emergency Room, she went unconscious. She died the next morning.
>
> After she died, we informed BRO and requested their help with the funeral. It took six hours for them to arrive. [A BRO representative] asked for MYR 900. It was more than one month's salary for a basic worker at that time. At that time, I did not know how to manage funerals at all. I was a general worker, and none of the Burmese living near me knew either. The

> oldest worker in our group, U Thaung (now a member of Kepong FFSS), sat on the floor holding the legs[5] of the BRO representative, apologizing as none of us had enough money. But the way he replied made me so sad. He said, 'Come to Mahar-Nan [the name of a Burmese shop in Kota Raya] and bring MYR 900, otherwise I cannot help you.' As you know, workers in Malaysia cannot save money for illness or funerals since they have to remit money to families left behind.
>
> I had been in Malaysia for more than 20 years—longer than [the BRO representative] had. Once, BRO had 40,000-50,000 members, and we can imagine how strong their funding was, with a membership fee of MYR 150. Their president drove a BMW. We did not even care about the amount of money—he was so cruel, even though he was a fellow Burmese. At that time, we did not have money; we borrowed from Myanmar grocery shops and arranged for the funeral. After the funeral, we had a meeting and included young workers; they suggested we develop an association for free funeral services for Myanmar migrant workers, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. As I was able to speak Malay and knew the Malaysia situation well, I became president of the association.

Funeral expenses are covered by the donations of well-wishers, but U San Win said that challenges remain:

> The expenses for a funeral cannot be estimated since some deaths are police cases, while others have documentation problems. In such cases, we need to negotiate with the Malaysian police and hospitals. Normally, a funeral costs at least MYR 1,000. Last

5 Holding another person's legs is a sign of prostration, putting oneself in the "lowest" physical position.

> month, we helped with 15 funerals. So far our budget is not running well and we are in debt. We do not get any funding support from the government or from NGOs. There is not enough money for funerals; nobody can donate [enough to meet] the full expenses of the organization. It will be difficult to stand in the long term.

According to Malaysian rules and regulations, a foreign company needs some level of Malaysian ownership. Of the Myanmar organizations, only Kepong FFSS is licensed to provide funeral services in Malaysia. According to U San Win, there are four to five other free funeral service associations in Malaysia set up by Myanmar people.

> We collaborate with a local Chinese man who is a friend of one of our members. This man allowed us to use his name in the company. We need to have five local people to set up a company in Malaysia, and we are under those people's [names], but they never influence our activities. But we are still waiting for [official] approval.

In Malaysia, there are some local companies licensed to provide funeral services, and they usually charge MYR 3,000-4,000 per funeral. Searching for a quick solution, employers use these companies for their workers' funerals, and then deduct the cost from the worker's compensation. Having free funeral services for Myanmar workers eases the financial burden on the surviving family members, U San Win said.

> If we do the funeral, the family in Myanmar will receive the full compensation of the deceased worker. This only applies to those with official work permits. Under the current [Myanmar] ambassador, the certification process [proving that the deceased person is a Myanmar citizen] is easier than under the previous ambassador.

The help of Kepong FFSS is not restricted by the ethnicity or religion of Myanmar migrants, or by whether they are workers or

UNHCR cardholders. In this regard, U San Win expressed:

> We give funeral services for all Myanmar nationals free of charge, regardless of their race or religion. We helped organize funerals for Myanmar Muslims and Myanmar Hindus. In those cases, we carried it out according to their religion and their traditions. For Muslim funerals, they have a separate Muslim cemetery. Up until now, we have helped organize seven funerals for Myanmar Muslims.

Recently, U San Win was also able to fund return flight tickets, food, and clothing for 45 Myanmar migrants who had been released from detention for entering Malaysia with fake visas, provided by agents without the migrants' knowledge. With the sponsorship of a company from Myanmar, he has arranged free tickets for a total of 500 returnees facing health, social or security problems.

> We arrange free flights only for overstay returnees in cases of illness, injury, or those released from detention. Now that 500 airline tickets have been donated, we are looking for further donors. Our organization does not have any contracts with any other organizations. Our members are volunteers and they have their own jobs in Malaysia. All are doing parahita [social welfare work] without any salary or payment. They usually come to the office during their free time, to do things like clean corpses, help with the deceased's certification process, or provide transportation.

The office also hosts free classes in English and basic computer skills for migrant workers.

> Anyone can attend the classes every Sunday. We run them because we sympathize with our people. I went to Penang in 2012 for funeral services. At that time, [the authorities] were doing verification under the 6Ps and I found that many workers were being cheated by

> brokers because they could not read Burmese or even sign their name. Whatever the brokers said, the workers paid for their 6P verification forms.

As part of my participant observation, I attended the funeral rituals for workers in Cheras cemetery in Selangor. With the exception of those belonging to the Islamic faith, the bodies of deceased workers—if they are Buddhist or Christian—are cremated at Cheras cemetery. For funerals of Muslim migrant workers, Kepong FFSS arranges for the bodies to be interred at the appropriate cemetery. Kepong FFSS members are tasked with bringing documents from the Malaysian police and Myanmar Embassy in order to take the body out of the hospital. At the mortuary, they also certify, prepare, and transport the body of the deceased to the cemetery. The process is not always smooth, especially if workers themselves do not hold official documents. At the cemetery, relatives and friends of the deceased recite the five precepts and scriptures with Buddhist monks for the departed before cremation takes place.

On December 28, 2014, I contacted the president of Kepong FFSS and accompanied him to the funeral of a deceased migrant worker. Approximately 50 working age men and women—all FFSS members—were in attendance, even though some might not have known the deceased. They wore white shirts with their organization's logo. After the event, the president had an informal chat with the young attendees regarding life in Malaysia in terms of avoiding quarrels, drinking alcohol, and gambling. On the way back from the funeral, I joined them for lunch at a small café run by a Myanmar migrant in the Markota Cheras, a food court within the Cheras area. They chatted for an hour and a half. Meanwhile, I interviewed the founders of Kepong FFSS and the Overstay Foundation.

On January 4, 2015, I paid a second visit to the offices of Kepong FFSS and the Hna-Lone-Hla Blood Donation Organization, both on the same street. During my visit, a woman requested a funeral for her deceased husband, recently murdered by unknown assailants. She expressed her wish to bury her husband according to Buddhist tradition. The president and FFSS members promised to fulfill her request.

At Hna-Lone-Hla, there was a rented an apartment paid for by contributions from members to use as an office and short stay shelter for Myanmar workers who had come to get a Certificate of Identity (CI) from the Myanmar Embassy in KL. I interviewed a male migrant (Key informant, Ko Myo) who did not have an official employment pass, but had gotten a passport after the 6Ps operation in Malaysia. He and his friends, also migrant workers, came to the office whenever they were free, usually on weekends. They regarded the place with a sense of safety and belonging.

On March 27, 2015, I went to another migrant worker funeral event for three deceased individuals being cremated at Cheras cemetery. One succumbed to an illness, another was reportedly killed by companions during a drinking session, and the third had died in a motorcycle accident. On that day, the president of the Free Funeral Services Society Yangon, U Kyaw Thu—a famous actor and pioneer of free funeral services—was in Malaysia with the invitation of the Kepong FFSS. In 2015, U Kyaw Thu became a chairperson of the Kepong FFSS in order to provide guidance and suggestions to Myanmar social organizations throughout Malaysia.

Another social event among Myanmar migrant workers is blood donation ceremonies, which are regularly organized by the Hna-Lone-Hla and the Myittar Mon philanthropic organizations. Hna-Lone-Hla holds activities once every four months at the University of Malaya Medical Center, which is just over seven kilometers from central KL and is a government-funded teaching hospital. Hna-Lone-Hla was set up in 2012. I interviewed the two men behind the blood donor organization: its 50-year-old founder, Ko Thet, and co-founder U Ko Ko Aung, 49, as well as the female co-founder of Myittar Mon Philanthropic Organization, Ma Nway Nway Hlaing, 50.

As a blood donor organization, Hna-Lone-Hla focuses on supporting the healthcare of undocumented migrant workers during hospitalizations. They also organize blood donation ceremonies every four months as a social activity among Myanmar workers and local citizens, to build solidarity among the migrant community and friendship across community lines.

U Ko Ko Aung, of Hna-Lone-Hla, is a graduate of the University

of Yangon. He has been in Malaysia since 1989 and can speak both Chinese and Malay. However, he first migrated to Thailand before coming to Malaysia at age 24. After he arrived in Kuala Lumpur, an agent sent him to a welding factory. He could not tolerate the work and asked the agent for a change of jobs. He was then sent to a bakery where he worked for 13 years. With an established interest in social welfare activities, U Ko had participated in youth associations during his student days. He sees the organization he founded in Malaysia as an extension of this commitment: it carries out blood donation services, provides support for sick and hospitalized migrants, and occasionally free funeral services, per request. Until January 2015 they operated with 889 members and a total of 2,621 blood donations. They also arranged financial support for 37 Myanmar migrants who were in need of hospitalization in Malaysia.

U Ko Ko Aung spoke on the establishment and development of Hna-Lone-Hla:

> We started this organization in 2012. One day, a *tha-htay* [a successful entrepreneur] who was a Malaysian citizen required a blood transfusion and called us for blood. Later, we consulted with Sayama [Note: Sayama means 'teacher' and refers to a well-known writer in Myanmar who is currently running a center for the elderly homeless in Yangon] and we considered setting up a blood donation organization. Then, we thought we should give support for the healthcare needs of migrant workers.

Those who are officially working in Malaysia have health insurance which typically covers expenses for illness or injury. Those without documentation cannot afford such costs—hospital charges for foreigners are generally higher than for citizens, and a passport is required for admission to a hospital. For that reason, overstay workers who experience life-threatening illness or injury often avoid hospitals, regardless of the crisis. Furthermore, they may be neglected by their employers if they get injured. U Ko Ko Aung explained:

> We do not have any problem with blood donation; the problem is in giving healthcare support to workers who do not have any documentation for their employment and stay [in Malaysia]. Most of them do not have a stable job or employers. Most Myanmar workers use bicycles, or go to work on foot. If they have an accident with a motor vehicle, the driver usually drives away.
>
> For those without documents, they cannot get any compensation from their employers. The police or government do not advocate for them. The workers usually contact us, and we go and help them—we have to. We ask our members for a membership fee of MYR 30 per month, but it is not compulsory. With this money, we help our fellow Myanmar workers.

On January 1, 2015, I went to a funeral which was led by Hna-Lone-Hla and interviewed the two Buddhist monks from Myanmar who prayed the five precepts and recited scripture for the departed worker. Being the New Year, they congregated at the house of U Ko Ko Aung for a lunch prepared by his wife—I attended this gathering as well.

Figure 5 Blood drive conducted by Hna-Lone-Hla

I participated in the third anniversary commemoration of Hna-Lone-Hla, which fell on January 18, 2015 and also marked their 11th blood drive. The Myanmar doctors working in the University Malaya Medical Center were also chairpersons of Hna-Lone-Hla. During the event, transportation to and from Kota Raya and the hospital was arranged with the support of donors who were also Myanmar migrants, but now running small businesses in Malaysia after living there for decades. I met many Myanmar workers, most of whom came to donate blood, and some simply to socialize; many donated money to the organization. They said that they enjoyed attending such events, as long as they felt they were safe from arrest by the police. Migrant workers typically have only one or two days off per month, but despite that, the attendance at the blood drive was high: nearly 500 migrants came, and more than 300 donated blood.

At this event, I met Ma Nway Nway Hlaing, a woman around 50 years old, who is the co-founder of another social organization, Myittar Mon. She had worked as a midwife in the public health sector in Myanmar for more than 20 years, and had been in Malaysia for six, where she focused on the health issues of Myanmar workers. She was in Malaysia on a dependent visa through her husband, who has worked in Malaysia for decades. With the support of the organization's founder, U Soe Win, a former physiotherapist from Yangon General Hospital, she set up Myittar Mon in 2014. Every day there are many accidents and injuries among Myanmar workers, she noted. When they are admitted to the hospital, some need blood transfusions and have to find matching donors. Being foreigners, Myanmar workers are considered a second priority after local Malays, Ma Nway Nway Hlaing said.

> After we got the idea to develop a social organization focusing on blood donation and healthcare support, we consulted with Myanmar doctors working in Malaysia hospitals. They encouraged us, since blood is always needed. Local people were surprised that foreigners were willing to donate blood in their country. Initially, we were criticized by some Myanmar people who said that what we are doing is

> nonsense in a foreign country. They thought that Muslims [the majority in Malaysia] may not want to receive the blood of people of different religions who eat pork. […] Later, there was less and less criticism, and only extremists continued such misunderstandings. We accept all kinds of migrant workers who would like to donate blood, whether they stay here officially or unofficially. One of the benefits of blood donation is that [the donor] will instantly learn whether they have any infection or disease in their blood. In such cases, doctors will consult and offer them advice on how to take care of their health without affecting their working lives.

Like Hna-Lone-Hla, the Myittar Mon organization also arranges blood donation events four times monthly, while also helping workers with health problems. They collaborate with other social organizations, particularly Kepong FFSS. Ma Nway Nway Hlaing went on to say that blood donors experienced better treatment in hospitals because of their charitable acts:

> When our people have to go to hospital, we usually accompany them, as I tell them to call us [first]. By doing so, they are cared for and treated well in the hospitals that we have supported. We contact Myanmar doctors working there, and they inform hospital staff that those workers are blood donors. So they will be treated well in the hospitals.

I also met the founder of an overstay foundation, U Chit, who focuses on undocumented Myanmar workers' affairs. His foundation is not as developed as Kepong FFSS and Hna-Lone-Hla; while his focus is on this particularly vulnerable and group, he explained that he is not able to help them as freely as he wishes.

U Chit is a 35-year-old migrant, and was once an overstay worker in Malaysia himself. He has been in the country for 17 years, and worked on construction sites, in factories, and in food shops. Immediately before he began running the overstay foundation, he also worked as migrant workers' agent, but became frustrated with

the business and, as he said, decided to do work that would bring him merit after he experienced a severe car accident in KL in which he was the sole survivor. He has established and now runs a social group to help overstay migrant workers. His foundation helps overstay workers get Certificates of Identity (CIs)[6] from the Myanmar Embassy.

U Chit describes the overstay foundation's contributions:

> We help with the difficulties of Myanmar migrants in Malaysia as much as we can. Most cases involve overstay migrants. They have been cheated in obtaining work permits. Occasionally their employers do not pay their salary. There have also been cases of needing medical treatment in hospitals and clinics due to being physically assaulted. In such cases, they ask us to help, since it is difficult for officials of the Myanmar Embassy to handle. Only we parahita associations [charity organizations] can help [ease] overstayers' difficulties.

The overstay foundation also helps workers who ask for help from detention centers and are awaiting citizenship verification after being imprisoned for their unlawful status in Malaysia.

> We try to provide 100 percent support for members and 50 percent for non-members. In supporting them, we use money donated by Myanmar workers. Some members contribute monthly, while others contribute according to their goodwill—on their birthdays, when their parents die, and so on—in different ways.

U Chit said he makes no profit personally from the foundation, and arranges for and supports overstay migrants who would like

6 A CI is a temporary travel document issued by the Myanmar Embassy in Malaysia for overstay workers for the purpose of repatriation, so that they are able to officially travel back to Myanmar. After that, returnees are prohibited from entering Malaysia for five years.

to return to Myanmar.

> I am not doing this for fame: I'm doing it for our people in trouble. I know how to earn money and run a business. But I was fed up with doing business after I got into a car accident and nearly died. After that, I […] realized that death is not far from us. I want to make a legacy for my life, and I decided to help people in trouble as much as I can. I entered into parahita work. I collaborate with the Kepong FFSS whenever possible. We are like brothers. [U San Win] always encourages me and gives me suggestions.

In their interviews for this research, the founders of Myanmar social organizations in Malaysia highlighted the challenges migrant workers face in their host country, and how the leaders themselves draw upon their own personal experiences of and struggles with migration to address these difficulties in their social welfare work.

Buddhist Monks in Malaysia

In Myanmar culture, Buddhist monks traditionally have strong public influence. It is not uncommon for Myanmar people to request aid from Buddhist monks; those with no money can go eat at Buddhist monasteries. Anywhere where Myanmar people are, there are Buddhist temples or monasteries. According to U San Win of Kepong FFSS, there were once 50 monasteries in Malaysia; however, approximately 40 monasteries remain. Some were officially licensed while others were not. U San Win thought that only about 10 monasteries were licensed to set up Buddhist temples in Malaysia. In order to get a license, collaboration with local Buddhist associations is required, as is the presence of local worshippers (mostly Chinese-Malaysian Buddhists). As U San Win explained:

> When I arrived here in 1994, there were only three monasteries; Kepong, Chan-Myae-Yeik-Thar, and Penang. As more and more Myanmar people arrived, we invited Buddhist Sayadaws from Myanmar. Some

> Sayadaws opened branches of their temples and asked junior monks from Myanmar to reside there. The monasteries which did not have a license set themselves up and paid kickback money regularly to the police, while others lived here with work permits.

On March 29, 2015, I interviewed Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri, who was an abbot of the Buddhist monastery Cariyarama Kyaung in Petaling Jaya (PJ) Selangor. He had been in Malaysia since 2008 after finishing his Master's degree in Buddhism and Philosophy in Sri Lanka, and came to Malaysia at the invitation of devotees. With the help of local followers, he rented a house in an area of KL amongst the local Muslim community. He explained how he had struggled to attain a better education and grow as a monk:

> As I didn't finish high school, I learnt English at the age of 28 after I finished the Dhamma Cariya[7] level. I wanted to continue my education in a foreign country. For this purpose, I stayed in a meditation center so that I could practice Dhamma talks. I gave Dhamma talks with the invitation of the Bago Market Rice Donation Society in Myanmar. I received 5,000 kyat (about 4 USD) for each Dhamma talk. I saved money and used it to attend English and computer classes in Yangon. After I had saved about 1,500 USD, I went to Sri Lanka to do a master's degree in Buddhism. One of my friends donated 100 USD [to me] every month while I was in the course. I stayed at a hostel and cooked for myself.

He described the conditions at the residence as difficult.

> When it rained, everything was wet. I had to sit on the bed with an umbrella. It was not easy for monks to finish a degree in a foreign country. We had to try

7 *Dhamma Cariya* (Pali language): Buddhist scriptural teachership in which monks must pass the advanced level of the *Pathamapyan* examination held by the government, with three primary sets of treatises to be mastered (Aung Thein Nyunt, 2007).

hard.

The day I interviewed Sayadaw, I met 15 Myanmar workers at his temple and we chatted informally. They said they came every weekend and on days of special significance for Buddhism. In the monastery, they chatted, cooked, and ate together. Sayadaw stated:

> Since we religious people are staying here, workers can congregate during traditional events, they can meet and make friendships, and they can exchange phone numbers and communicate with each other later. They can help each other whenever they need to. It is convenient for them if they have occasions of either joy or grief.

After setting up a Buddhist monastery, the Sayadaw opened a Sunday school for children of Myanmar families to learn the Buddha's teachings. There is a local composer who teaches Dhamma music at the school, and a university teacher also teaches English.

> After I finished my Master of Arts [in Philosophy] from Sri Lanka, I visited Malaysia. The Myanmar devotees here requested me to settle here, otherwise their children would be far from their religion. However, they have all moved to third countries now. In order to get permission to stay here, I paid MYR 8,000 to a Chinese agent. After a year I still had not gotten a permit. I got MYR 4,000 of my money back, but my passport had expired and was useless. I applied for a new passport and tried to get a student visa in Malaysia. Again, a Myanmar woman, currently running a restaurant in KL, also cheated me of MYR 3,500 [when she said she would] get the student visa for me. At that time, she was working as a receptionist in a Malaysian private university. She used my money without paying for my university enrollment. I got back only MYR 1,000 from her, but it was taken as a fine for the overdue payment of the student fees.

Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri said that other Buddhist monks had been conned by the same woman, and that she had since become a shopkeeper.

Developing a Buddhist center in Malaysia has not been easy for him, he explained:

> Previously I intended to set up a Buddhist center in Malaysia. Now it is impossible, I think, due to the reflection of the religious conflicts in Myanmar. The [Malaysian] nationals here think that Muslims from Myanmar are being oppressed and killed by Buddhists.

Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri allowed migrant workers to stay in his monastery temporarily during the major crisis of the 2013 murders, in which more than 20 Myanmar migrants were killed. The Sayadaw's network encompassed Malaysian media, social organizations, Buddhist monks, and devotees. In terms of his support for workers in trouble, he said:

> If we stay here according to their law, there will be no disturbances. There were murders in Selayang, and some workers stayed here temporarily. Local devotees also came. We cannot stand like this without the help of local people [Malaysians].

According to Buddhist tradition, when people die, monks are invited to offer the five precepts and recite scripture for the departed. Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri helped in such situations.

> After 2013, more and more funerals have occurred in Malaysia and those arranging the funeral services had difficulty inviting Buddhist monks. Not all funerals ran smoothly. As you know, some of our people hold fake permits, and some don't have any permits. We have a bit of trouble in those situations.

One day, we got information that five people died in a van while crossing the Thai border. Two bodies were taken by an ethnic Chin association here in Malaysia, but they left the three other bodies and did not inform us. As nobody knew, the bodies were put in the hospital mortuary for nearly two months. [Finally] we went there and took the bodies to perform funeral rites. The bodies were spoiled and rotten. After we arrived at the cemetery,

they did not allow us to perform the cremation, as the police said the bodies did not have official names [because they lacked legal identity papers]. We put the bodies back into a van and tried to contact local gangsters who demanded MYR 2,100 to perform the cremation [unofficially, in a different location]. Nobody had that amount of money and it became dark. Finally, I and a Chinese local devotee donated the money. We have tried to secure that link with these gangsters so that they will perform the cremation of the bodies [of undocumented workers]. It was not easy. But whatever the situation is, I have told [Myanmar workers] to contact me to perform rituals for the deceased."

Apart from issues involving health and rituals, the Sayadaw has also opened a Sunday school for Myanmar children where they are taught Lawkaniti, or Buddhist principles to live by, and Buddhist culture. He offers guidance to Myanmar migrant adults, as well.

> There are very rare cases of [Myanmar migrant workers] committing major crimes; sometimes they use their physical strength to solve problems in their working lives. I told them to control their minds in tackling problems. Sometimes they want to fight or run away when they are oppressed by their employers. I read the newspapers and always share information with them regarding the situation in Malaysia.

Helping and supporting migrant workers in a foreign country is not easy, especially when his faith is different from that of the majority, the Sayadaw suggested, describing his own perception of how his community is viewed by the Malay majority.

> We cannot stand like this without the help of local people [Malaysians]. You see, we cannot rent a house to use as a [Buddhist] monastery amidst the local Islamic community. We have been examined two times by the city council. [Muslim] Malays dislike us. So we have to restrain ourselves. There have been murders, and *operasi* projects in Selayang. Previously, I intended to establish a Buddhist school but I can't because of the religious conflict.

I also went to Kepong Kyaung (monastery) in Desa Jaya, Kepong, KL—a temple also known as Samnak Sambodhi—which once had a Thai monk in residence. After that monk returned to Thailand, local Chinese devotees invited a Myanmar monk to reside in the monastery. Since then, Myanmar migrant workers have congregated there and it has become a gathering place for Myanmar social organizations in Malaysia (Ko Kyaw, Personal interview, March 30, 2015).

Dr. Ashin Indaka is the Buddhist monk who helped develop Samnak Sambodhi temple. He has been in Malaysia for nine years. Myanmar workers call him Kepong Sayadaw and his monastery Kepong Kyaung[8]. Most Myanmar migrant workers and local devotees come to the kyaung to pray, donate, and meditate. The Sayadaw also participates in the activities of the local Buddhist committee, which supports migrant workers in trouble. Sometimes, local devotees ask the Sayadaw to visit their homes to recite scriptures. Every year, he organizes Vesak Day celebrations (The Lord Buddha's birthday), which usually falls on the day of the full moon of the sixth lunar month. During the days-long event, migrant workers and local devotees congregate and offer oil lamps, flowers, incense, candles, and fruit in memory of the Lord Buddha. In doing so, Myanmar migrant workers release tension and build friendships with local Malaysian Buddhists. On occasion, Myanmar devotees and the Sayadaw have invited venerable monks from Myanmar to give Dhamma talks. In April 2015, Sayadaw Dr. Ashin Nyanissara (Sitagu Sayadaw) came and gave Dhamma talks around Malaysia, including at Kepong Kyaung.

According to the Sayadaw, Kepong Kyaung is officially recognized by the Malaysian government and has been registered since 1989. It was initially developed by the Chinese Buddhist Committee and was overseen by a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk, and then a Thai monk, before a Myanmar monk arrived. For registration, it is required to meet certain criteria—for example, sizeable land requirements and a recommendation letter from the local Buddhist association, among other criteria. In Malaysia, there are more than

8 *Kyaung* is the Myanmar language term for a Buddhist monastery.

40 monasteries which are not officially recognized and are set up in apartments. Only Subang Kyaung, Penang Kyaung, and Kepong Kyaung are officially registered to operate as Buddhist temples.

Sayadaw Dr. Indaka is able to stay in Malaysia with a visa as a Dhamma teacher. Before coming to Malaysia in 2006 he moved around Sri Lanka and India, where he finished his studies. Of Kepong Kyaung, he said:

> It was first developed by a Chinese Buddhist Association and a monk from Kelantan. Only after [the year] 2000 did Myanmar Buddhist monks come stay here—the first two were Mon Buddhist monks, and I was the third. After I arrived, I looked after Myanmar workers in trouble, either with money or temporary shelter. I have to inform the local police when we have religious events. When local devotees invite me to recite at their donation [ceremony] or funeral event, I usually give Dhamma talks and scriptures according to Theravada Buddhism—Malaysian Buddhists are Mahayana Buddhists. In order to get a professional visa, we have to show the activities that we have done, the religious events we have held or the religion we are teaching for local Buddhist associations. Malaysian Buddhist associations and organizations have also invited me to attend their meetings and conferences as well.

He explained further the process of developing a Buddhist monastery in a foreign country:

> For my visa application, the Chinese Buddhist Devotees Committee had to recommend me. There is a Malaysia Buddhist Association; the headquarters are in Penang. A recommendation letter from this association is also required. These two letters, together with a certification of my age as over 40 years old, plus photos of this Kyaung, had to be submitted to the government. Only after that did we get registration for the Kyaung and a professional visa for me. With this registration, we can communicate

> with Malaysian-Chinese Buddhist associations, can teach Chinese Buddhists, and can celebrate Myanmar religious events at our Kyaung. No one can disturb us. We are of the same status as other religious buildings—mosques and churches.

Now officially registered, Kepong Sayadaw Dr. Indaka said he was able to perform religious activities more broadly. Social organizations asked him to be their chairperson; however, he said he wouldn't get involved in their affairs, especially financial matters. He focused his assistance on Myanmar migrant workers, enlisting help from other local Buddhists. In the wake of the 2013 murder cases, the Buddhist Association (Malaysia) donated MYR 10,000 to those migrant workers affected, so as to cover their food and transportation costs. The Sayadaw also supported the costs of funeral services.

> I helped Myanmar social organizations with whatever they needed. I gave back donated money that I received during funerals to the Kepong FFSS. During the Selarang murders of 2013, I looked after Myanmar workers—70 of them stayed here and over 100 workers were fed every day. I advised the local Chinese Buddhist Committee and they also supported Myanmar workers with cash and food.

The presence of Myanmar monks and Buddhist monasteries remains an important aspect of the physical and psychosocial wellbeing of Buddhist Myanmar migrants in Malaysia. Based on data from my observations and interviews, it is recommended that the development of Buddhist centers in the host country be encouraged and supported by authorities of the migrants' home country, Myanmar. In doing so, the physical and psychosocial difficulties of migrant workers can be mitigated to a large extent.

On March 29, 2015, I had an appointment with Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri, the abbot of Cariyarama Monastery in Petaling Jaya (PJ), about three kilometers from central KL. On that day, I met 15 Myanmar migrants who regularly come to the monastery to socialize on weekends and Buddhist holidays; some of them were

working in shops and factories near PJ, while others came from Cheras, about 15 kilometers away. I interviewed the Sayadaw about the support he offers to Myanmar workers. On that day, he treated migrants to lunch and invited us to celebrate the Myanmar New Year on April 12.

On April 5, I went to the office of Kepong FFSS in Kota Raya to meet and interview migrants. I met one undocumented migrant who said he had been assaulted by an Indonesian worker in his dormitory. He had been admitted to the hospital and discharged after two days, but could not return to his workplace as he feared further attacks. The Kepong FFSS allowed him to stay in their office and arranged for him to get a CI from the Myanmar Embassy in Malaysia. After he received the CI, they promised to arrange an air ticket for his return to Myanmar.

I also participated in religious activities—the Myanmar New Year Celebration, Vesak Day, Ka-Htian robe offering ceremonies (in which new robes are presented by devotees to monks as acts of merit), and Dhamma talks organized by the Cariyarama monastery of PJ and Samnak Sambodhi temple of Kepong. During a Dhamma talk by a venerable Sayadaw from Myanmar, several thousand migrant workers came to the Kepong monastery.

Figure 6 Samnak Sambodhi temple and event at Cariyarama Monastery

The Myanmar Embassy Labor Attaché in Malaysia

U Win, 35, has been working as the Assistant Director of a government ministry dealing specifically with Myanmar migrant affairs in Malaysia. He has been working as a labor official in Malaysia for a year, and deals particularly with Myanmar workers' complaints, receiving up to 100 calls a day. As labor attaché, he is responsible for approving Malaysian employers' hiring of Myanmar workers. Before he can grant approval, he must check that workplaces meet minimum requirements in terms of adequate safety. After this, agents and employers can officially submit requests for Myanmar workers through the Malaysian immigration department. U Win also liaises with Malaysian officials and negotiates with employers on issues concerning Myanmar workers. However, such issues involving irregular or undocumented migrants are difficult to handle officially, and in such cases, he communicates with social organizations and often asks for their assistance.

He added that he typically negotiates with Malaysian officials and employers to get compensation for workers if possible. On issues involving irregular migrants, he said:

> Malaysian electronics factories usually run well for six months and not well for the other six months. During good times, workers get MYR 2,000-3,000 per month. But they cannot make a living during the other six months with a lower salary. Because of that, most of [the workers] change job sites, and once they leave their primary workplace, they become overstay or illegal workers. But they do not care too much as they can go back via '*aut lan*' [crossing the border unofficially]. Malaysian employers prefer overstay migrants since they can cheat them if they do not have official documents. Our people [Myanmar migrant workers] need to be educated to change their mindset regarding overstay.

As a Myanmar government official, he explained his role in dealing with overstay workers' affairs:

> It is difficult to manage and solve the problems of overstay migrants—I am afraid to do so. If one of them asks for my help, I need to consider it carefully. If I get involved too much in such a case, I will be gone (Editor's Note: this is a suggestion that he would need to provide an explanation to a superior). We check their documentation at the Myanmar Embassy. If they can thoroughly explain their documentation status, I can do something. Otherwise, in suspicious cases, I have to consider whether I should do anything for them.

U Win explained that most detained workers are arrested during *operasi* by the Malaysian police. Before being sent to prison, they are often kept at the police station for two weeks. Within these two weeks, workers have the chance to get released if they can make a deal with police "unofficially." As an official from the Myanmar Embassy, he often goes to police stations when a group of undocumented migrants are picked up. After they are released from prison, they are sent to camps where they wait for certification of their Myanmar citizenship. When the verification process is completed, they are deported to Myanmar and not allowed to enter Malaysia for five years. As a government official, U Win's first priority is assisting documented workers in this process, followed by undocumented migrants. He said that the the labor attaché at the Myanmar Embassy would never consider the affairs of refugees (those holding UNHCR cards).

In legal cases among migrants, the labor officer and officials from the Myanmar Embassy have to go to the areas of the reported incidents so as to manage the workers' problems. The Malaysian Bar Council provides legal consultation free of charge for migrant workers—even to those with no documents.

Interviews with Selected Key Informants

Four Myanmar migrant workers were chosen for this study as key informants: two men and two women. One of the men and one woman had passports and work permits, while the other two did

not have documents. I interviewed them during social and religious activities, such as ordination ceremonies and blood donation events.

Ma Mi, a 40-year-old female worker, was working for an electronics factory in Shah Alam, 25 kilometers west of KL. She came from Mawlamyine, Mon State, where she grew seasonal food. She got married at 19. After she became pregnant, her husband went to work in Dawei, located in Tanintharyi Region—the coastal part of lower Myanmar. One year and eight months later, she followed him, but could not get a job there and also said that she was abused by her husband. Three years later, her mother called them both to work in Thailand. They were employed at a construction site, but she said that her husband could not stand the tiresome work. With the help of a friend, Ma Mi got a job as a domestic worker in Bangkok, where she worked for three years. Her husband did not want to work in Bangkok and went back to their daughter, being cared for by relatives in Mon State. Since that time, Ma Mi has not heard from him. In 2000, she came to Malaysia illegally, where her younger brother was already working. With his help, she entered the country through the Thai-Malaysia border illegally. She described the experience as dangerous and became visibly upset recalling it.

> I entered Malaysia through the border area on a small boat, which carried a total of 20 passengers; all were Myanmar people sent by a broker. We rode the boat at night as we were afraid of police. When the tide was low, we had to pull the boat like buffalos, or we would have been stuck in a marsh. The terrible insect bites and hiding under bushes for the whole night were unforgettable experiences. When we arrived in Penang9 in the early morning, the broker left us in a workers' dormitory and never came back. We stayed in that dormitory for three days; while there, we

9 Penang is near the border of Malaysia and Thailand; irregular migrant workers from Thailand and Myanmar often enter the country through this route.

> asked for food from workers who had arrived before us. Men gathered up tree leaves around the dormitory and cooked them to eat. Luckily, my younger brother had already been working in KL—he picked me up on the third day after my arrival.

One month later, Ma Mi's brother found her a job and she started working at a Chinese restaurant. Although she did not have any documents and could not communicate in any of the local languages, she managed to to survive. However, she said that she cried every day. Two years later, she decided to return to Myanmar because of increasingly rigid controls imposed on irregular migrant workers in Malaysia, but she was arrested on her way to Myanmar because of her undocumented status.

> We—altogether 40 people—were sent to a detention center in Mae Sot [on the Thai-Myanmar border] where we were interviewed by the media and our photos were taken. Then they sent us to Myawaddy detention center [in Myanmar] where we were later released. In 2003, I came to Malaysia again with an official passport and work permit. At that time, I already had connected with a Malaysian employer.

Because of her language skills, the current employer (*tha-htay*) offered her a position facilitating Myanmar female workers' affairs in his factory. She acted as a translator in the factory for 70 female workers from Myanmar. When they were required to renew their passports or to go to the hospital, she accompanied and helped them. Her salary was enough to support her family back in Mawlamyine. Apart from this, she looked for jobs for workers when the factory had employment redundancies. Since the workers came to Malaysia with an outsourcing company, they were allowed to change jobs in case of being fired, laid off, or exploited by employers. When I interviewed Ma Mi, she was living with workers in a dormitory. She encouraged the workers to help each other, and to participate in religious and charitable activities.

I interviewed Ma Ei, a 30-year-old woman, on the way back to KL at a migrant workers' ordination ceremony. She came to Malaysia in 2007 with a Visa Dengan Rujukan (VDR), or a Visa With

Reference, which is obtained before travel for those seeking employment. By this time, her younger brothers and uncle were already in Malaysia. She was the only daughter in her family. Although her parents discouraged her from emigrating, she went anyway, as her brothers said that women could find work in Malaysia. In Myanmar, she had opened a tailor shop in Insein Township, Yangon. She paid 1,250,000 kyat to a Myanmar agent. The Malaysian agent sent four young women to Kuantan, the capital of Pahang State, located halfway between Singapore and Kota Bharu. They got jobs at a Navy Cadet hostel and a shopping mall as sanitary workers. This job was different from the one they had pre-agreed to in Myanmar, which was doing sales in a shopping mall. They had to work from 7 am to 7 pm. They called their agent in Yangon and requested that their *tha-htay* to change jobs. However, there was no response five months after Ma Ei's arrival. They searched for a way to escape:

> One night, the brother of the girl whom I worked with picked us up and we ran away. We drove the whole night and reached KL in the morning. I stayed in my younger brother's room. The next morning, the agent called us to come see him. When we went there, we understood that he had sold us to a *tha-htay* for MYR 3,000 each. He asked for MYR 6,000 [Editor's Note: Nearly seven months' salary] to get my passport back. He said that the amount included my annual fee [annual fees are about MYR 1,300 to 1,500]. As I could not afford to pay, I went back to Myanmar.

After Ma Ei arrived back in Myanmar in 2008, she reopened the tailor shop at her parents' house. In 2012, she came back to Malaysia, aged 28. This time, she came with a woman whose uncle later became her husband. The woman set Ma Ei up with her uncle who had been in Malaysia for 20 years.

> I don't understand why I wanted to come to Malaysia again. I made contact with an agent from Yangon. I met a girl at the agency. We came together [to Malaysia] with the same agent, worked together at the same factory, and slept together in the same bed. She wanted

> me to fall in love with her uncle. At first, I was not interested him, but he rang me many times. Finally we got married in Malaysia. It was not long. It took only seven months for us to get to know each other. We bought a wedding contract and signed in KL, near Kota Raya. My parents were informed after that.

As Ma Ei's husband had already gotten a UNHCR card, she did not renew her passport and stayed in Malaysia as the spouse of a UNHCR cardholder. She opened a grocery shop in their house and sewed Myanmar traditional dresses. They were also selling betel nut to Myanmar workers around their shop. Although they were given a chance to move to a third country, they decided not to go. Their plan was to return to Myanmar after they had saved enough money to set up a small business. Both of them participated often in the social activities of the Kepong FFSS, of which they were members. She spoke of their future plans:

> We are okay here, but my husband wants to go back to Myanmar. Since both of his parents have already died, he will live with my family. I also want to go back. We are saving money to set up a small business in Yangon. We never spend extra money in Malaysia. You know, many of the UN cardholders are Myanmar ethnic people, mostly Christians. They see these third countries as their second God. When I hear their perception, I get upset. For us it is the opposite. We will definitely return to Myanmar. However much money we can earn here, we cannot get a sense of freedom. Nowhere is better than our country.

The third informant was a 26-year-old male worker, Ko Myo, whom I met at the 11th blood donation event of Hna-Lone-Hla. At that time, Ko Myo was an undocumented migrant worker with no official work permit, but he had come to Malaysia in 2010 with an official work permit and passport. He was born and grew up with his mother and younger sister in a village near Yenan Chaung Township, in Myanmar's Magway Region, where he had worked as a farmer. Due to crop failure and a lack of job opportunities, many of the people of working age from Ko Myo's community had migrated to neighboring countries—Thailand or Malaysia. He

made contact with brokers and tried to come to Malaysia.

> My village is too far from the town, so we had no school. In order to attend school, we had to travel there in three steps: first from the village to the stream by ox-drawn cart, then across the stream by boat, then walking or traveling by horse cart to reach the school. So it is really difficult to get an education. We cannot get enough income for our families. All of the men work in cities or in foreign countries. Whenever I watch videos of our village activities, I cry. Our village girls are getting married to people from other villages, as only the elderly, disabled, and children are left.

First he came with an official work permit and a pre-arranged VDR (Visa With Reference). After arriving at the airport in Malaysia, he faced several difficulties. The type of factory job that he worked was totally different from that promised by the broker, who had originally shown him a picture of clean, new motorbike factory—in reality, the factory made textiles, and was very dirty. The salary was very low: MYR 24 per day, with no overtime pay. One year later, Ko Myo was told he needed to pay MYR 600 for the renewal of his work permit. After he paid for accommodation and meals, only a small amount of money was left. After two years and one month, he decided to quit his job since he could not make enough to send money back to his mother, and by that time he could speak Malay. Since then, he has become an overstay migrant worker.

> It was totally different from what they had promised in Myanmar. The Myanmar agent was from North Okkalapa, Yangon. I paid him 1,400,000 kyat (roughly 1000 USD). I wanted to be a motorbike mechanic, and I waited patiently. But we did not see a single motorbike. The broker cheated us.

After he arrived in Malaysia, Ko Myo said he had to work in unclean conditions. His legs became swollen and he got abrasions on his hands from the work. Additionally, he had only 100,000

kyats (80 USD) left each month after paying for his daily needs.

> It was little benefit for us coming to Malaysia. Here everything is expensive. I did not waste money, but could not save or send it back. And now, prices in Myanmar are also increasing. I was so surprised when I heard the price of food in Myanmar. I thought that 200,000 kyats (USD 155) would be enough for a family, but it is not. I was so sad.

After he became an overstay worker, Ko Myo moved to KL and worked in a cold drinks shop. Because of his undocumented status, he feared being arrested by the Malaysian police.

> I was afraid of the police; we are always in a state of alarm. Even now, at 26, I cannot save or remit enough money to my family. My salary was not good and the job was really inconvenient. Now I have been jobless for two months. Meanwhile, I help in parahita and live at the office of the association.

During the 6Ps campaign, he applied for an official passport but he still has not gotten a work permit, and a passport alone is not sufficient documentation for a Myanmar worker to stay in Malaysia. Ko Myo spoke of his struggle to survive:

> No one can help us in Malaysia if we do not have friends or contacts with social organizations. We are always oppressed in the workplace. Even if we are very upset, we cannot say anything. We have to control ourselves. We are always on the losing side. If we respond, we will be in trouble as we are working in a foreign country.

Although he was afraid, he felt he needed to stay in Malaysia, rather than return home. At the time I interviewed him, he had just gotten a job at a Japanese restaurant.

> In my current job, I wash plates in a restaurant. I was looked after by the uncle here [the co-founder of Hna-Lone-Hla association]. If I could speak English,

> I could get a good salary. I cannot return to Myanmar as I cannot get the amount of money there that I can earn in Malaysia. In my village, we have nothing to do after harvest time. It is really difficult to earn even 100,000 kyat (80 USD) per month in my home village.

To some extent, labor migration has economically benefited migrant workers and their lives, however, it also is accompanied by a negative effect on them psychosocially. Ko Myo experienced troubles in Malaysia; however, expressing his suffering to his family remains an inner dilemma. He explained his conflicting thoughts:

> I could not share my troubles with my family even if I got sick or lost my job. If they knew, they would be inconsolably sad. They are all women. So I solve my problems here by myself. I will never let them know even if I am in trouble here.

Much like Ko Myo, young, other uneducated people rural Myanmar have problems getting a stable income and pursuing livelihoods in their home communities because of natural disasters, crop failures, and little economic opportunity. Consequently, working aged rural people are migrating—internally and internationally. People from urban areas—especially from slums—are also choosing migration as an escape from the difficulties of their lives in the cities. In Myanmar, steps to retain human resources could range from the encouragement of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) and local enterprises to the implementation of effective income generating strategies for the rural poor.

I also interviewed another migrant worker, Ko Kyaw, at his dormitory in Taman Sri Ehsan, in the Kepong industrial area, on the upper floor of the factory where he worked. He is 44 years old. He left Yangon in 1988, when he was nineteen and had graduated from high school. At that time, there were nationwide political protests and all formal schools were shut down, remaining so for years. That is why Ko Kyaw decided to go abroad. He has now been in Malaysia for 25 years. Ko Kyaw initially came to Malaysia with his first cousins with the intention to go to Japan together. He got into a bit of trouble at the time, as he explained:

> I had only 6 USD in my pocket. I came with a visiting visa, first to Thailand, and then I illegally entered Malaysia. They [the brokers] then dropped us off, me and a boy, at a petrol station. Neither of us knew where to go. Luckily we remembered the address of a guy which we had gotten in Bangkok. We walked around the whole night and found the apartment early morning—3 am. He asked us to pay MYR 3 for a night's stay and MYR 2 for food. That uncle also found jobs for us.

Ko Kyaw explained that worked very hard and tried to improve his educational qualifications, and read voraciously. It is because of this, he said, that he was never been cheated by employers.

> The first *tha-htay* I met was very clever. My first working day was the day that all workers in the factory went on strike against this *tha-htay*. Later I found out that he wanted to exploit foreign workers who had weaknesses regarding their legal status. He did not pay workers their salaries. When they complained, he called the police to get the workers in trouble. I searched for another job to prepare to leave, and one day I told him to pay me my salary. He threatened me, but I threatened him back—'You can call the police, but both of us will be punished by the law. For my illegal status, they will punish me with three months imprisonment [according to the law at the time], however, they will give you five years imprisonment and a caning for hiring illegal foreign workers.' He could not say anything and gave me a cheque, but I asked him to pay me in cash as it is difficult to go to a bank without a passport. Most Myanmar workers don't have such knowledge, so that is why I was the only worker who received salary from him. Most employers were like that. In 1992, the official work permit system was initiated in Malaysia, but they prioritized Bangladeshi workers, who are Muslims. By that time, I got an official work permit and a passport as I was

> favored by my employer because of the factory requirements [to have a translator on site] and my qualifications. With the 1997 program, many Myanmar workers got work permits.

Ko Kyaw told me about Malaysia's foreign employment system, which he said favors employers.

> Employers here exploit overstay workers. They give MYR 50 for work that is worth MYR 100. Myanmar workers do not have any knowledge of this. In Myanmar 80 out of 100 are living in very poor conditions.

He wants young migrants to work hard and try to improve themselves, and he said he encourages the youth around him. Currently, Ko Kyaw is working as an expert in a factory repairing big machines, including cranes. His salary is more than three times the amount of a general worker's basic salary (MYR 3,000). He discussed how he reached this level:

> What I have perceived is that I have to improve myself if I want to stay here, whether short or long term. So I always read English newspapers. I always watch English movies. I observe what has happened in this country and try to know their laws. As most of our employers are Chinese, I learned Chinese languages—Cantonese and Mandarin—so that I could communicate with them. I also learned the behavior and style of their nationals, and whenever I go out, I have never been harassed by police. Most Myanmar workers here are oppressed and exploited because of language difficulties. I urge younger workers to read books, but most of them do not. They just work, eat, and sleep. Even though they do not have time to read, they do have time to drink and play cards.

The factory where Ko Kyaw works is a two-story building with a ground floor workshop and workers living on the first floor. Because of Ko Kyaw's demands to the employer, they were given

free Wi-Fi in their dormitory. As a senior migrant worker, he has helped Myanmar workers sent to detention centers for overstaying their visas.

> I moved to this place only a few years ago. I often meet Myanmar workers from this area at a nearby tea shop. We chat. I want them to try as hard as me. Some are interested in self-improvement. For those people, I encourage them to read. I go to the city center and buy Burmese books and distribute them. But some cannot be persuaded. Some senior migrants treat the younger workers in improper ways. They rarely teach them how to survive, but take advantage of the innocence of young workers. In 1995-96, I took days off from my work and helped those in the detention centers by driving my own car. In such cases, I had to connect with basic staff like the cooks or security guards in the detention centers. I was nearly fired by my *Tha-htay* because of my off-duty activities.

Regarding social and religious organizations, Ko Kyaw said that they became sigificant in migrant workers' lives particularly after 2004. Buddhist temples like the Penang and Kepong monasteries were set up became places for Myanmar workers to organize and initiate such social organizations in Malaysia.

> In medium sized factories, 80 percent of the mechanical experts are Myanmar people. If we can organize these experts, we can have a voice for workers' affairs. However, nobody has tried to do so, not even me.

Ko Kyaw also explained that foreign workers are scapegoats for social ills in Malaysia, ranging from rising crime rates to HIV infections, but that they are not the actual source of such problems.

Based on my four key informants' experiences, the legal status of migrant laborers is not straightforward. Those who have legally entered Malaysia might yet become irregular migrants. While other migrants have different reasons for staying illegally in

Malaysia, my informants cited exploitative agents and employers as influencing their changeover to legal status. Ma Mi and Ko Kyaw were irregular migrant workers who changed their legal status and thereby improved their lives as migrants. On the other hand, Ko Myo came to Malaysia legally, but became a irregular migrant worker within a few years because of unfavorable working conditions. Ma Ei also came to Malaysia with an official work permit, which she later converted to a UNHCR card after marrying a migrant worker. Therefore, a uniform understanding of migration processes is not easily accomplished, as it depends greatly on the subjective experiences of workers and their employers, as well as the context and situations around them.

4

MISERY IN MALAYSIA

Difficulties upon Arrival

Challenges for new Myanmar migrants begin as soon as they arrive in Malaysia. Some migrant workers come legally, while others cross the Thai-Malaysia border unofficially.

Ko Myo, a key informant in the study, expressed feelings of uncertainty upon his arrival:

> Even though I came to Malaysia legally, I was in trouble as soon as I arrived at KL airport. We waited there for three days as the agent did not come to pick us up. We had MYR 5, which the agent gave us in Myanmar [Editor's Note: MYR 5 is enough to buy one liter of mineral water at KL airport]. We ate only bread and water, and could not shower for three days. Some workers were worse off than us. They had been waiting for their agents for seven to 10 days.

Myanmar workers who come to Malaysia are required to undergo training by the Myanmar Ministry of Labor, typically held in Yangon, but few complete it—the migrants I spoke to were no exception. During this session, they are given information in terms of labor rights, Malaysian culture, and even the contact phone numbers and Facebook account of the Myanmar Embassy in case they are in trouble. Further effort directed toward the

organizing of this training and orientation could potentially reduce physical and psychological difficulties experienced by migrant workers upon arrival in Malaysia.

The experience of undocumented migrants coming to Malaysia is objectively worse than those who come legally. Human trafficking between Malaysia and Thailand has become a major issue; the 2015 discovery of mass graves with more than 100 bodies in jungle camps in Malaysia, near the Thai border, alarmed the authorities of both countries to the crisis of illegal migration (ABC News, 2015).

Those coming from Myanmar to Malaysia should be advised to ensure the employment agency they contract with is reliable. Having relatives or friends staying and working in Malaysia can relieve difficulties of new migrants to a large extent. This is consistent with migration network theory, where interpersonal relationships between migrants and former migrants at home and in host countries are perpetuated through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, & Taylor, 1993). This was apparent in key informant Ma Mi's experience, cited earlier: the risks of migration movement and access to employment were lessened for her because her younger brother was already in Malaysia.

In this regard, governments of the home and host countries have to promote best practices for safe international labor migration. In reality, not all people who wish to migrate are able to afford the the high recruitment fees in Myanmar and, consequently, many consider illegal migration. It is therefore suggested that collateral-free bank loans be made available to cover the costs of migration and recruitment fees in Myanmar. Moreover, a pre-departure training and orientation program prior to migration could more effectively assure safe migration for potential workers. Most migrant workers come from rural areas, with limited knowledge of their new context, so they are more likely to be cheated by agents or brokers. Through safer migration practice, the difficulties faced by new migrants could be reduced; therefore, promoting such a program in the country of origin could mitigate risks to a further extent.

Exploitation and Abuse in the Workplace

While labor migration generally is undertaken to improve migrant workers' lives, workplace exploitation and abuse continue to be serious concerns. According to Amnesty International (2010), labor exploitation, forced labor and trafficking, verbal and physical abuse, and long working hours are common among foreign workers in Malaysia.

U San Win, one of the founders of the Kepong FFSS, who has 20 years of experience working in Malaysia, talked about the exploitation and abuse of foreign workers:

> Although workers are guaranteed accommodation arrangements by agents before they leave Myanmar, fees for accommodation, water, and electricity are deducted from their salaries. After these deductions, only a small amount of money is left in their hands. Although international labor law stipulates an eight hour day, in reality Myanmar workers work 10 to 12 hours a day. No law has been developed for this [Editor's Note: In reality, a labor law exists in Malaysia, but it is violated by some employers and brokers].

U San Win added that there was no governmental organization to handle these affairs or hold violators responsible, explaining that Myanmar social organizations had no power to effectively deal with workers' rights. None of these organizations are officially recognized by the Myanmar government, even though they have contact with the Myanmar Embassy.

Ko Myo—who held documents—shared his experience of documented migrant workers also being cheated by their employers and agents.

> In the factory where I worked, as soon as I got there, I didn't have any rights. Three days' wages were cut if I took one day's leave. I was paid the same amount, MYR 24, [if I worked] on Sunday, too. […] When I dislocated my knee in the workplace, I had to rest for one month and 28 days. Although I was provided

> with treatment, MYR 400 was cut. They helped only with medical charges. I had to settle other expenses, like meals, myself. I didn't tell my family about it. They would only feel sad, and so I had to solve the problems all by myself.

It is possible that workers could be empowered to confront these circumstances through pre-departure training and orientation. Information regarding precautionary measures and possible complaint mechanisms needs to be distributed to workers so that they can protect themselves from abuse and exploitation during their time in Malaysia.

Preyed upon by Brokers

There are several stories about Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia being cheated by their employers and/or brokers. Employment brokers are typically Malaysian citizens, although some are Myanmar citizens—they also are known to take advantage of migrant workers and Buddhist monks.

Ko Myo said that when they arrived in Malaysia, the agent took all of their documents, after which the workers effectively had no rights. They were required to pay MYR 600 for a single copy of a document. He decided to illegally overstay after two years, as he thought it would make no difference in such a situation.

"The agents are the main people cheating migrants. Only maybe 10 out of 100 people have good lives in Malaysia." Regarding this, Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri described being himself cheated by a broker when he applied for a student visa; others are scammed when trying to get an official work permit. In Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri's case, he said he was the victim of two brokers, one a Malaysian citizen and the other from Myanmar. They stuck fake permits into the workers' passports, because of which the passports were no longer valid, and needed to be replaced—a costly expense.

During an informal group chat during the 11th Blood Donation Event of Hna-Lone-Hla, one female worker said, "Women's lives in Malaysia are not secure. There have been cases of sexual assault

against Myanmar girls, especially in Johor Bahru. The agents [brokers] didn't support us at all."

At any time during the migration process, migrant workers are vulnerable to being cheated by brokers: from the initial stages of moving to Malaysia, to the return journey for those who overstay. Per informant Ma Ei's story, she was cheated by a broker—also known as an "agent"—when she first migrated to Malaysia. Initially, an agent in Myanmar guaranteed her work as a salesperson in a shopping mall—in reality, she had to work as a cleaner. Her passport was taken by the agent. Several complaints to the agent were ignored. After she ran away from the job, the broker demanded she pay MYR 6,000 to get her passport back—nearly seven times her salary. She could not file a complaint, and went back to Myanmar.

Migrants must be vigilant concerning which recruitment agencies they work with in Myanmar before they migrate, and must also be wary of the possibility of exploitation by employers and agents while working. In this regard, it is recommended that migrants survey agents thoroughly to determine which ones are reliable, and to identify possible complaint mechanisms if they are cheated or mistreated in the host country.

Lives Endangered

Apart from brokers and employers, undocumented workers are also often victimized by police. Informant Ma Mi said she faced such issues while she was undocumented in Malaysia. On one occasion, she came to KL Central to remit money that she had saved for two months. Two plainclothed Malaysian policemen approached her and asked her to show her passport. Then they demanded and took her money. She cried and begged them to give her some money for her return trip to her workplace. She has since been scared and now and never goes out to remit money.

Malaysia introduced the 6Ps program in 2011 to crack down on irregular migrant workers. In an informal group chat with migrant workers at a café, they spoke of the danger of arrest by the police during *operasi* crackdowns by police, during which it is very difficult

for migrant workers venture out of their homes or workplaces; if caught, they could be sentenced and deported back to Myanmar after verification of their citizenship by the Myanmar Embassy.

Informant Ko Myo, an undocumented migrant worker, recalled his experience fleeing from the police in Malaysia:

> There are many miseries in Malaysia. We had to run as soon 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 escaped. About seven out of 10 didn't have enough documentation and they had little chance of escape. We were panicked, afraid of the police. So I obtained a passport through the 6Ps program. I was unemployed for two months, and now I just got a job in a Japanese restaurant. The working hours are from 11:00 am to 11:00 pm. It's scary on the way home after work.

Increased violence against Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia in 2013 contributed to a total of 67,225 migrant workers returning to Myanmar (Myanmar Immigration Department as cited in Eleven News Media, 2014). While chatting with migrant workers on February 12, 2015 at a café, they said that at that time, they were afraid to go out alone for work or to run errands. Some workers requested temporary stay in Buddhist temples. At that time, some of Myanmar's leading businessmen sponsored return flight tickets for undocumented workers who had been injured or detained, so that they might be able to come back to their home country (McLaughlin and Thwe, 2013).

During those days, Ko Myo was working in KL. He recalled the insecurity of that time:

> We felt unsafe due to the murder cases in Selarang. We were so scared. At night, we only dared to go home in a group. When we got home and everyone was in, we kept the door fitted with two locks each, both inside and outside. Whoever knocked on the door, we dared not open it. People live here in fear—they don't go out when it gets dark. I think we are

> bearing the consequences of our past sins. I want to go home as soon as possible.

U San Win of the Kepong FFSS told similar stories:

> 2013 was an unlucky year for us in Malaysia. As I heard, nine workers were murdered in four places, and altogether 20 workers were killed. Another 30 workers died of alcohol poisoning. [The attackers reportedly] put poison in alcoholic drinks, and Myanmar workers who drank it died on the pavements and in food shops. They did not get any compensation at all. Regarding migrant workers' affairs, today the government of Myanmar says they will arrange permits for migrants, and passports too. They also have said that cases of rape in Johor Bahru would be put to an end, but we have seen no action. I think they want information from us. We do not want to be their scapegoat. We were called to meet with the Director General of the Ministry of Labour, Myanmar four times. We reported our difficulties in dealing with the Myanmar Embassy. Only one request was successful—previously we had to pay MYR 10 for death certificates—per my request, we no longer need to pay for this.

Based on the abovementioned stories, migrant workers' lives in Malaysia are risky, particularly for females and the undocumented. Social networks play a role in keeping migrants safe and providing them with support during especially tense periods.

5

HELP AND ASSISTANCE IN MIGRANT LIFE

Practices

Organizations, social groups, and supportive networks play a key role in the social culture of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia. Moreover, friends, colleagues, and partners are also significantly involved in easing workers' hardships.

As an undocumented migrant worker, Ko Myo discussed the practices of migrants helping one another in times of need.

> Now I have to support a friend as he is currently unemployed. We have to look after each other when one is in trouble. So I can't send money back to my family. It's also because I have to give help in return to the one who once helped me.

Migrant workers who arrived earlier assist younger, newer arrivals by providing information to help them adjust to life in Malaysia. Ko Myo talked about what he's learned from his seniors:

> We learn and take lessons from our uncles [referring to senior migrants from the social organization] about how to escape from Malaysian police when they have *operasi* in KL.

A female migrant worker, Ma Mi, talked about how she helps support colleagues:

> Previously, I did not have any companions and had to live with my younger brother. One day, a *tha-htay* offered a place in his company to work as a translator for Myanmar workers. When I arrived there, a total of 60 Myanmar girls were working in that factory. Whenever there was redundancy, the workers were in trouble. If they came [to Malaysia] with an outsourcing company,[10] I would find jobs for them in such cases. I know well that I cannot stand alone, so I donate money and things to Buddhist monks with the help of other Myanmar workers in the factory. In cases of hospitalization in Malaysia, or the death of close relatives in Myanmar, I persuade workers to contribute money as they wish to support the person in trouble.

In my workplace, some Myanmar workers are quite naive. In such cases, I usually do the money remittances and keep their credit card for them, since there have been cases of workers stealing bank cards among themselves."

As a former migrant and the co-founder of a social organization, U Ko currently runs a grocery store with a betel nut shop. He invites young workers who are currently unemployed to come and work with his family. He treats them as his children and also persuades them to participate in social occasions of joy or grief.

Coming and staying in Malaysia as a migrant worker without any Myanmar companions is a dangerous act, according to the informants I spoke to. One of my key informants described how she maintained her sense of community in her host country. She had heard about Myanmar social organizations in Malaysia, but she did not know much about them.

> All of us who are working in the factory are relatives.

10 Outsourcing companies are companies that supply and manage foreign workers for employers. Malaysian companies need to hire foreign workers through outsourcing companies if they employ fewer than 50 foreigners (MEF, 2014).

> We lived in the same village in Myanmar and arrived together as a group. Now we live in the same room, so I have many relatives here. In our village, young people move out and work overseas and few youth remain in the village. Because of changing weather, our crops were disrupted and the economic condition of villagers is not good.

As an experienced migrant worker, U Thet, of the Hna-Lone-Hla association, helps junior migrants with the issues they face while living in a foreign country:

> What we mainly teach the children (Editor's Note: here, 'children' means younger adult workers, not necessarily children) here is, when they are free, they can come to our office, and when they get together, to keep in touch. If one is fired and has five friends, they help find a job for him. 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 inconveniences. They can stay here as long as they like. There are now those going to work from here. Previously, we used to go to the pub for beers whenever we were free. Now whatever it may be, we meet here. Occasionally we get together and cook meals. The more frequently we meet, the friendlier we become. Now we are like real brothers.

Ko Thet went on about friendship:

> The longer I've stayed here, the less eager I am to chase money. I have witnessed through my experience how difficult it is to borrow money when [we are] in trouble. A deposit [pre-payment to hospital for expected treatment] needs to be considered when someone is sick and has to go to the hospital. Now that there are welfare organizations, those organizations can help the members. In our time we had no such things. We had to organize ourselves. When we encountered problems, we had to go that

> night and contact each other and organize what to do and where to do it. Whenever we grouped together, we did not do so as an organization, but kept in contact. We needed to be in a group—four, five, 10—as being alone is different from being in five, and this may be a deterrent to others, making them think 'these guys have their own group.' In Malaysia you don't need 'dollars,' you just need 'boarders' [friends or companions] staying in a group. Only then is it safe in Malaysia.

Even if they are jobless for months, migrants spoke of being able to survive in a foreign country if they are assisted by their peers. Those coming with relatives are safer than those arriving alone. The basic lesson is: migrants have better lives if they make connections with social networks.

Emerging Ties in Migrant Life

Ma Ei is a female migrant worker who got married with another Myanmar migrant worker. She married her husband relatively soon after meeting him, and informed her family back home on the day they married in Malaysia. She addressed coupledom and migration from the perspective of being a woman:

> It is really not a good idea to come and work in Malaysia without having someone [that you know]. It is ok to some extent if you have relatives or friends. We have to be strong minded, otherwise we can't stand it and are ruined […] The experience of losing money can make young guys become the kind of people who deceive girls. Most [couples] in Malaysia live together without getting married—marriage is a rare thing.

Again, she said of Myanmar migrant women:

> [Some women] say looking for someone who can be relied on. Some of them are already in debt and have been paying interest since before leaving Myanmar. When they work in the factories, they are not paid

> enough, but want to send money back home. So, such girls find someone outside the factory [to provide for them] as they can earn much more compared to their salaries. A large percentage of [such romantic relationships] are due to money only—not true love, since it is easy to love and to leave here in Malaysia.

Men become emotionally frustrated as well. Ko Myo, a male migrant from Myanmar, said:

> We can't go out with girls since we are not paid enough. On holidays mostly we get together here in the office. If there is a funeral service, we join the procession, and if there is blood donation, we go. We have work and such occasions, that's all.

It can be concluded that the psychological and emotional needs of migrant workers are difficult to fulfill in Malaysia, for those who are single, and for those who left families behind in their home country.

Migrants' Dreams

After I heard workers' stories of hardship, I probed into whether they would like to stay in Malaysia or return home. I asked about their hopes for the future. Ko Myo's future expectations were still far off:

> Of course I really want to go home, everyday. In the four years since I came here, I haven't gotten anything. I don't want to lose twice if I go back home empty-handed. I haven't got any investments, and there's no job for me there [in Myanmar]. So, although I want to go back home, I can't. The rest of my friends are now well-settled. But I'm still nothing. Even though I'm not wasting money on drinking and eating, I can't save anything as everything is expensive here.

U San Win, president of Kepong FFSS, left Myanmar 25 years ago and feels he cannot consider going back. Before he left, he was a

vendor in his hometown; now he is settled with a regular income and a small business. He said that the current inflation in Myanmar and his income in Malaysia do not allow him to consider returning. He thinks that the money remitted by Myanmar workers in Malaysia today is enough only to support their children's tuition fees. That is why they have to struggle in Malaysia for years.

There have been several cases in Malaysia of those who could not return, even though they had worked for decades. Some would like to earn more money, while others could not save at all, because their income was sent to their families back home. There are also cases of those deciding to return after decades, but finding the money they had remitted to their families already gone. Consequently, they have to continue working in Malaysia, some totally cut off from their families.

Ko Myo, a young male Myanmar migrant, expressed his feelings on return:

> I want to go back home if we have improvements in our home country. Anyway, I have a lot of difficulties; there are many differences in living, job opportunities. It is easy to get a new job when we would like to change jobs. Although not everything here is fine for us, it is better than our place [in Myanmar] since is it very difficult to earn even 100,000 kyat (about 80 USD) there.

It is evident that creating job opportunities at home should be strongly considered by Myanmar officials in order to keep workers at home; such opportunities should be realistic and sustainable for young people. Vocational schools could be developed as part of a comprehensive approach to furthering employment, so that Myanmar youth can find easier ways to fulfill their dreams.

6

INTERACTIONAL SUPPORT WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Supporting migrant workers is not easy in a foreign country, especially when the migrants are of different religious faiths than the majority of the host population. However, having a good relationship with local people makes it possible for social and religious organizations in Malaysia to run their services smoothly.

I interviewed two Buddhist abbots who are supporting Myanmar workers in KL. In terms of health support, Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri in Petaling Jaya engages in activities to support the healthcare needs of Myanmar migrants. He arranges a free mobile clinic every two months in collaboration with the Yayasan Maha-Karuna mobile free clinic—a charitable organization for economic, education, and medical welfare in Malaysia. With them, he arranges eye checkups, and covers the cost of eyeglasses and treatment for Myanmar workers, which is at least MYR 3,000-4,000 at every event. Those with severe eye problems can have access to more sophisticated treatments, including laser therapy.

Currently, the Malaysian government has Satu Malaysia (literally "One Malaysia") clinics where migrants can access medical services; the national program focuses on national unity and ethnic tolerance in Malaysia. As part of the program, 50 clinics providing basic medical services for illness and injury charge MYR 1 for Malaysian citizens and MYR 15 for non-citizens.

Apart from health care coverage, Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri tries to support Myanmar workers in other ways, relying on links and

connections with various United Nations organizations, as well as with the editor of Sin-Chew daily newspaper, a leading Chinese-language newspaper in Malaysia. Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri explained how he arranged for the costs to be covered for an operation on a child with congenital heart disease.

> This family came and requested that I help. One of my devotees was working in the UN (United Nations), so I asked her to help them. And also I contacted the editor of Sin-Chew daily, a local Chinese newspaper in Malaysia. The editor asked for help from another organization [Taiwan Buddhist Tzu-Chi Malaysia] for a donation. Finally, we were able to arrange the expenses for the operation with the support of the UN and the Buddhist association, which cost MYR 70,000 [nearly 18,900 USD].

Even with the support of social organizations, people from those organizations need to communicate better with local people—including local officials—to provide social services for Myanmar workers. Stressing the need for positive communications and interactions with locals, Ma Nway Nway Hlaing, co-founder of the Myittar Mon organization, explained why her organization provides services not only to Myanmar workers but also to Malaysians in need. Apart from blood donation events, they have given aid and support to flood victims in their host country. She spoke of the motivation behind this:

> We are doing this kind of Parahita based on humanitarian merit, not only to have a good image among local people. They were also suprised that Myanmar [people] are this kind of people. When our country was hit by natural disasters, those from foreign countries gave help and support. I know how difficult and troubling it is when we have natural disasters. So we help them regardless of their race and religion. Even though we do not expect anything in return, the local police are willing to help us when we ask.

Therefore, it can be concluded that social and religious organizations see it as their duty to maintain a smooth relationship with the local community. In so doing, they are able to help Myanmar workers more fully and effectively.

7

ROLE OF MODERN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Along with advanced information and communication technology, migrant workers' hardships are eased to a large extent. In comparison to previous decades, they are able to more easily contact their families in Myanmar, which greatly reduces the pain of being away from their homes and relatives. According to informal conversations with migrant workers, they typically use the Viber mobile application to make online calls to their families in Myanmar. Some said that they have several Viber calls a day—up to 20—asking about what those back home are doing, eating, and even cooking.

Even migrants who earned a base salary of MYR 900 (300 USD) per month used Android smartphones and were familiar with applications for free calls, namely Viber, Whatsapp, MyChat, and so on. Social media sites like also Facebook play a key role within their networks. Through social media, news about upcoming *operasi* by Malaysian police, as well as information on social and religious activities, is uploaded in a timely manner by migrant groups and associations.

U Chit, founder of the Overstay Foundation spoke about how he uses social media within the migrant community:

> On Facebook we update news everyday on how we help those who are in trouble, so that Myanmar people will know later in the future how they can

> contact the foundation through the contact numbers. We also upload news about seizures and other updates in Malaysia. The overstay migrant workers join [our Facebook group] and we accept them as members.

In this regard, social media plays a key role in helping ease the difficulties of migrant workers in Malaysia. These links help to foster ties within the migrant community as well, and can contribute to their safety while in the host country.

8

THE SALIENT ATTRIBUTES OF SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

The Impact of Contact with Social and Buddhist Organizations

Labor migration has led to the transformation of workers' lives. This is especially true in Malaysia, where the safety and security of Myanmar migrant workers is difficult to achieve without nurtured, well-formed social networking practices in the context of the places where they work and stay. Being away from their families and homes, their sense of belonging is often lost, and is frequently undermined. In such situations, social networking practices can serve as a supportive outlet in easing their hardships and fulfilling their physical, mental and emotional needs.

One undocumented migrant, Ko Myo, resided in the office of a blood donor organization during a two-month period of joblessness; meanwhile, he described how he was fed by friends and seniors within 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 not a single day during my unemployment in which I was not able to eat. They even bought me a phone card. I'd be living on the roadside pavement if I hadn't had such companions.

With support from a social organization, two months later, Ko

Myo was able to get a job in a restaurant. He reflected on his experience of support from the seniors of the social organization:

> "There is no one who can offer help here. We can stay here only if we get contact with social welfare organizations. Although there has been oppression, now it is better. I was unemployed for two months, and the present job was also sought by the uncles [the elders] here in this blood donation organization. [...] Besides, I can feel the warm affection of 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 Malaysia police when they have projects [*operasi*] in KL."

Those running these social organizations are often willing to accept their members for a temporary stay, as did those who took in Ko Myo. Ko Thet, a founder of a blood donor organization, said:

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

Helping migrant workers is not only limited to organizations' membership; they also give support to those who need to come to KL for documentation purposes and for those who are returnees.

> …those working in other districts of Malaysia who want to extend their stay have to pay MYR 50 or 60 to stay in an inn in KL, but we give it free of charge if they stay in the office of our organization. There are rooms for groups of 10 or 20, for both males and females. 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."

According to Malaysian immigration law, when a foreign worker cannot present official documentation during a police operation, they can reveal if their employers have withheld these identity papers. Those who are unable to show the relevant documents or who do not have employers are immediately deported, according to the Malaysia Home Minister (Bernama Media, 2014). Migrant workers revealed through informal chats that they can sometimes be released through the help of friends or social organizations, otherwise they remain in detainments camps for a lengthy period, until they are deported. U Chit, head of the Overstay Foundation, described the procedures surrounding detainment:

> Since overstay migrants are here unofficially, they are arrested by Immigration and sent to prisons and camps. There are those who have been in custody in the prison cells for four, five, seven, 10, or 11 months—those who could not afford to go back home despite having a CI [Certificate of Identity]. They are charged 650 USD for an air ticket [back to Myanmar] but the actual price is just over 300 USD, so about 300 USD is overcharged. Those in prisons are not rich—how can they get that amount of money?
>
> There are a lot of people in the prison who contact us for help. They ring us whenever there are *operasi* seizures. We cannot fully help them.

Many of the Myanmar migrant workers in the detention centers and camps are waiting for verification to depart from Malaysia. In those cases, they need to contact someone who can help with the verification process. Ko Thet, the founder of the blood donor organization, expressed how they help workers in detention:

> They usually ask for help when they are in prison custody and they want us to inform the [Myanmar] Embassy so that they can be released. In that case it is mainly important to know the personal [identification]

> number of that person, where his family is, his NRC [National Registration Card] 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 an old passport, we hand it over to the Embassy along with the air ticket fees. It takes longer for those who don't have an original passport, since identification cannot be done through a copy of it. Those who don't have friends who can meet them there are in big trouble. Some of them have to stay there for over a year. Some don't know the contact numbers. Some gave us five numbers, four of which we can't get through to. They are really in big trouble in prison. We help if we are directly contacted telling us how they would like to be helped and which camp they are in.

In order to most effectively provide assistance, some organizations expected that they would receive more support and recognition from Myanmar officials. The Overstay Foundation's U Chit expressed his concern in this regard:

> There's no official documentation by the government. If the government gave us a chance, we wouldn't need anything. I'm also an overstay migrant, but I'm now working for others. I myself am 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 Malaysian officials, they ask if we are from an agent, and we say, 'no, we are from a foundation,' and then we are asked again if we have any approval from the Embassy. Eventually we can do nothing, even though we want to help the workers of our nationality.

Migrant workers in Malaysia should be encouraged to participate in or join these associations, and information about social

organizations should be disseminated among them; the government of Myanmar should also provide recognition of and support for their efforts.

Role of Social and Buddhist Organizations in Serving Myanmar Nationals in Malaysia

The organizations featured in this research resemble self-help groups, and are not supported by INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations). While they provide support to Myanmar workers in Malaysia, there have been limitations enforced in the running of social welfare functions, as the organizations remain unregistered and therefore unrecognized by the authorities of the home and host countries. Nevertheless, Myanmar workers are able to seek help from these networks, and through them, also help other migrants in trouble.

According to Buddhist tradition, when someone passes away, the surviving family members or friends have to invite monks to offer and recite scripture for the soul of the departed. Buddhist monks are often invited to such ceremonies, as well as other special occasions observed by Myanmar people. That is the main reason why Buddhist monks are typically found in Myanmar communities. By having Sayadaws in closer proximity to Myanmar workers, the emotional well-being of Myanmar Buddhists can be assured to a greater extent.

Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri expressed his enthusiasm for enhancing Myanmar workers' lives not only by performing rituals but also by giving advice and guidance to current and future migrant workers. For those who would like to come to Malaysia, he said:

> Those who are thinking of coming to Malaysia need to inquire thoroughly beforehand. Contact those who have already been in Malaysia. They need to inquire whether what the agent said is correct or not. All Myanmar [people] have the habit of easily signing on if agents say they can get a good salary in Malaysia. Then, when they arrive, the work is different from

> what was agreed upon in Myanmar. A nurse I know was coming to Malaysia to work as a nurse, but after she arrived, she was serving food in a restaurant as a waitress. She was cheated by an agent and they did not try to get a work permit for her. She could not send any money to her family. […] I think, 60 out of 100 migrant workers get in trouble after they arrive. Most are having trouble—only a few find things to be convenient in Malaysia. So I would like to suggest that they inquire thoroughly before coming to Malaysia."

Narrative descriptions like the one above indicate that having social organizations and religious contacts in Malaysia serve as a crucial component in meeting the needs of the Myanmar workers. By encouraging and supporting the development of those people and organizations, migrant workers are better able to embrace their working lives without severe psychosocial consequences.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Due to the complex and diverse phenomenon of migration, it is difficult to explain or understand the complete migration process with a single theory. Over the previous century, several migration scholars have tried to explain the causes and consequences of migration from various perspectives. Some theorists focus on migration and development with a functionalist approach and take an optimistic view, while others emphasize a structuralist and more pessimistic view. From the 1990s onwards, migration theories and development research underpin a pluralistic view, and generally are more positive, particularly after 2001 (de Haas, 2007).

Regarding labor migration, economic reasons are the main determinant of labor migration; however, it also includes the possibility of other reasons, including the role of nation states, geographical proximity, institutions, social networks, and cultural and historical factors. The perception of greater choices and opportunities in destination countries also often attracts young people looking to migrate to foreign countries.

The pursuit of interest in the present study is the phenomenon of social relationships among Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia. Therefore, the network theory of migration has been chosen to consider whether social networking positively contributed to the reduction of difficulties faced by Myanmar workers in Malaysia.

Based on the social network theory, after a certain number of migrants have settled in the host countries, subsequent migrations are likely to occur by facilitating the passage for later migrants (de Haas, 2007). Sending information back through pioneer migrants or labor recruiting employers to their country of origin can reduce the risks and costs of labor migration for new migrants. Similarly, the experiences of key informants included in the (present) study disclosed that the difficulties associated with labor migration could be reduced if they had connections with former or senior migrant workers. According to Massey et al. (1993), "network" can be defined as social capital and it can help migrants in gaining access to employment in destination countries. This is particularly true for this study, since nearly all informants described their experiences getting jobs as having involved the support of relatives and friends. It was evident that social networking plays an important role in establishing a smooth and safe migration journey for Myanmar workers, especially when they crossed the border areas illegally.

In reality, the culture and religion of host countries like Malaysia is markedly different from that of Myanmar migrant workers who are Buddhists. The social and religious organizations set up by the senior migrant workers and Buddhist monks were able to remain amidst the local Islamic community in Malaysia by adapting to the local people, organizations, and authorities. It is therefore evident that the networking practices of Myanmar migrants has been unrestricted to their own realm within the Myanmar community.

Interpersonal relationships between new migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in host and home countries could enhance feelings of involvement in social networks (Massey et al., 1993). As critiqued by de Haas (2007), later migration can be facilitated by the assistance of friends and relatives who had arrived earlier in the destination countries. Newcomers may more

easily find jobs with the assistance of these "pioneer migrants." The notions of social network theory were particularly reflected in the voice of a key informant (Ko Myo) who expressed feelings of security by being part of a social organization.

However, the networks of family and friends also have contributed to difficulties for the government in controlling migration. In Myanmar, irregular migration has continuously occurred across the long, porous border with Thailand, and there are high recruitment fees associated with regular migration. Therefore, the officially registered out-migration figures have been considerably lower than actual figures provided by host and home countries. Given current mobile phone technology, it is not very difficult for former and prospective migrants to communicate, which also has been encouraging irregular migration.

The explorations of this study could well support the network theory of migration, however, there may be possibilities of unfavorable networking conditions. Those former or pioneer migrants might be supportive of newcomers, while there are some cases of those migrants being hesitant or unwilling to assist new arrivals (de Haas, 2007). Also stated is the possibility of weakening ties between migrant and non-migrant kin. It is partly true for exceptional cases in this study, such as the experience of a Buddhist monk Sayadaw U Sanda Thiri, who said he was cheated by a Myanmar broker who had been in Malaysia for years.

Based on the abovementioned conceptions and understanding the phenomenon featured in the present study, the theoretical framework was developed, and is outlined in Appendix 3, Figure 6.

9

CONCLUSION

Labor migration has been continually blooming in the current globalized world; for that reason, its drawbacks need to be managed effectively and its benefits maintained. Understanding the context of migrant workers' lives is imperative to mitigating their hardships and formulating an appropriate migration policy to protect them. With this in mind, this study was conducted to explore the social relationships and social networking practices among Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia.

Immersed in the social world of migrant workers through the adoption of a multi-sited ethnographic approach, five major themes were extracted. The first was "Misery in Malaysia," which looked into abuses in the workplace, as well as sub-themes including endangerment and exploitation by brokers. It is also concluded that hardships for migrants began at the very time they arrived in Malaysia, particularly for those who entered the country illegally and were therefore more vulnerable to suffering the negative consequences of labor migration.

"Help and assistance within migrant life" and "Interactional support with the local community" are themes exploring the social culture among Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia. Being away from homes and families, feelings of loneliness were addressed, and it was revealed that those who had established friends and relatives residing in Malaysia could reduce migration risks and costs to a large extent.

The notion of mobile phone communication was explored as an important part of migrants' lives and ties to home, as well as the

fostering of new networks in Malaysia. This was highlighted in the "Role of modern communication technology." Finally, "Salient attributes of social and religious organizations" demonstrated how interactions with and support from such organizations made a positive difference in migrants lives.

It is recommended that migrant workers be encouraged to involve themselves in social and religious organizations in their destination countries. The government of their home country, in this case Myanmar, should better support such social and religious organizations so as to more effectively mitigate the hardships faced by migrant workers. Myanmar also must promote the safe migration programs for potential migrant workers heading abroad. For instance, arrangements should be made to empower workers through a pre-departure training covering workers' rights and labor policies in the host country. The information should include precautionary measures and familiarity with possible complaint mechanisms so that they can protect themselves from abusive and exploitative situations once they reach their destination.

Policy revision and implementation in Myanmar is also necessary regarding international labor migration. A comprehensive labor migration policy needs to be developed in Myanmar, and it should be consistent and compatible with ILO standards and national contexts. In developing policy guidelines and procedures, considerations should also be put toward the social security and welfare of Myanmar workers overseas.

These labor migration policies need to be integrated with national policies concerning employment and the labor market. Since international labor migration is typically mediated by employment agencies, the government should have firm control and management over recruitment agencies in Myanmar so that safe migration for Myanmar workers overseas is promoted. A greater availability of low-interest bank loans should also be ensured by the government to cover the costs of recruitment fees concurrent to the arrangement of appropriate pre-departure training programs in Myanmar. Lastly, negotiations should be accelerated to develop a mutually agreed-upon labor migration policy, and an MoU with the Malaysian government signed, thereby protecting the rights of migrant workers. In summary, the Government of Myanmar

should be required to consider the improvement of recruitment systems and the facilitation of labor migration through safe and legal channels.

Apart from developing an appropriate migration policy and programs in Myanmar, the Myanmar government must urgently consider creating better job opportunities for working-aged people within the country, especially for the rural poor and those in urban slums. From the perspective of human resource management, an investment in education is required so that rural children are able to get better jobs: per return benefits from investment in education are generally significant. Additionally, such individuals are more likely to speak out further about their rights even as semi-skilled or unskilled workers in foreign countries. Another option is to promote the accessibility of vocational training schools for young people so that they are able to find jobs more easily, domestically or internationally.

Myanmar is a country supported largely by agriculture, and 70 percent of the population resides in rural areas. However, much of the land is no longer used for cultivation because of crop failure, devastating climate conditions and land ownership issues. Because of that, several thousand village dwellers have been and continue to migrate to urban areas or to foreign countries to adopt new livelihoods. Long-term development plans by policymakers must take this into consideration. The government needs to invite foreign direct investment and encourage the growth of small and medium enterprises so that employment opportunities are created for young people. Income generation programs, along with appropriate insurance and credit programs for rural farmers, should be considered so as to retain the nation's human resources. By doing so, the people of Myanmar would be able to spend their lives working alongside their families in their homeland.

It is hoped that the aforementioned suggestions will be met with support by policymakers and development professionals in my nation. I am certain that conducting this ethnographic study, and thereby gaining an understanding of the social context of migrant workers, will provide information crucial to the development of migration management programs that prioritize inclusive growth and poverty alleviation in Myanmar.

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APPENDIX (1)

Statement Form

Topic: The social relationships among Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia

I have been conducting research regarding Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia. This study aims to explore the significance of social relationships among these workers. This study was funded by the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada and administered by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) in the Faculty of Social Science at Chiang Mai University, Thailand. The proposal of this study has been approved by RCSD, Chiang Mai University. When the study is finished, the results may support the development of programs and activities that could improve the lives of Myanmar migrant workers.

I will study social relationships and social networking practices by means of participant observation, interviewing, tape-recording, and reviewing archival data and documents. Interviews will be held until data obtained is sufficient, and each will last about 45 minutes. Photographic recordings will be made if the participant is in agreement. The participants' names will not be revealed in order to maintain their anonymity. Any participant will be free to withdraw from the study, if they wish, during data collection period or before the writing of the report. Further questions are welcome. Please feel free to contact me by phone at +60 _____.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Khin Soe Kyi

APPENDIX (2)

Interview Questions

1. How did you come to Malaysia? How did you get a job in Malaysia?
2. How did you feel when you arrived at Malaysia? Tell me more about your experience as a migrant in Malaysia.
3. How have you been experiencing difficulties in your life in Malaysia? Can you tell me, please?
4. How do you deal with and solve the problems and difficulties you have encountered in Malaysia? (For example: safety and security, financial issues, illness, living arrangements, family problems, personal affairs)
5. How do you seek help from others when you have problems?
6. How do you help and support other migrants who ask for your help?
7. How do you spend your free time? How do you communicate with others?
8. Tell me more about the social relationships you have made with others.

APPENDIX (3)

Table 1 Minimum daily wages of selected countries in Asia

Country	USD
Cambodia	2.03-2.05
China (Shanghai)	4.00-7.90
Indonesia (Jakarta)	will increase 44% this year from 2.95 to 5.38
Hong Kong	28.87
Japan	65.78-85.36
Malaysia (KL) Jan 1, 2013	9.81
Myanmar	0.58 (Official wage: 2.8 in September 1, 2015)
South Korea	31.8
Philippines (Manila)	9.72-10.60
Singapore (No official minimum wage)	52-58.40
Thailand (Jan 1, 2013)	9.45-10.00
Vietnam (Jan 1, 2013)	3.20 (3.76 in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City)
Laos	3.33-4.08

Source: Runckel, 2013

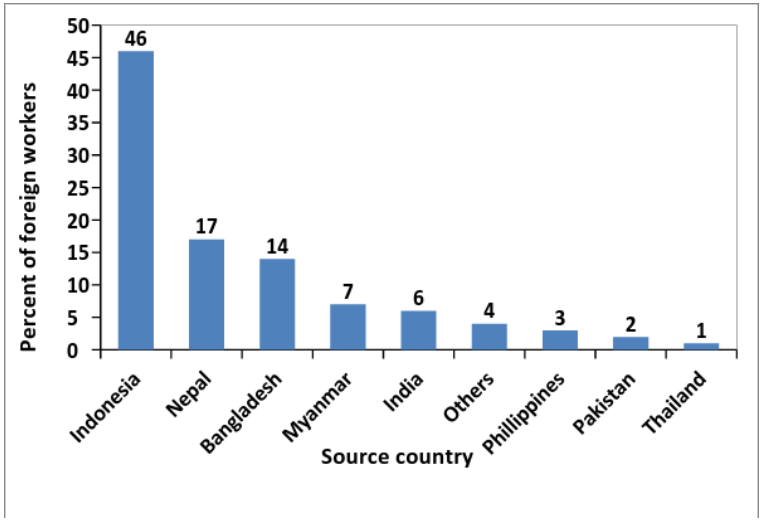
Table 2 Payments to immigration department for foreign workers

Sector	Levy (RM)		Difference (RM)	VP (TE) (RM)	Processing (RM)
	Current	***New Rate**			
Manufacturing and construction	1,250	1,850	+600	60	125
Plantation	590	640	+50	60	125
Agriculture	410	640	+230	60	125
Service	1,850	1,850	Unchanged	60	125

Source: Home Ministry (as cited in Star Online, 2016, March 19); MEF (2014)
**New rates effective March 18, 2016, for peninsular Malaysia only*

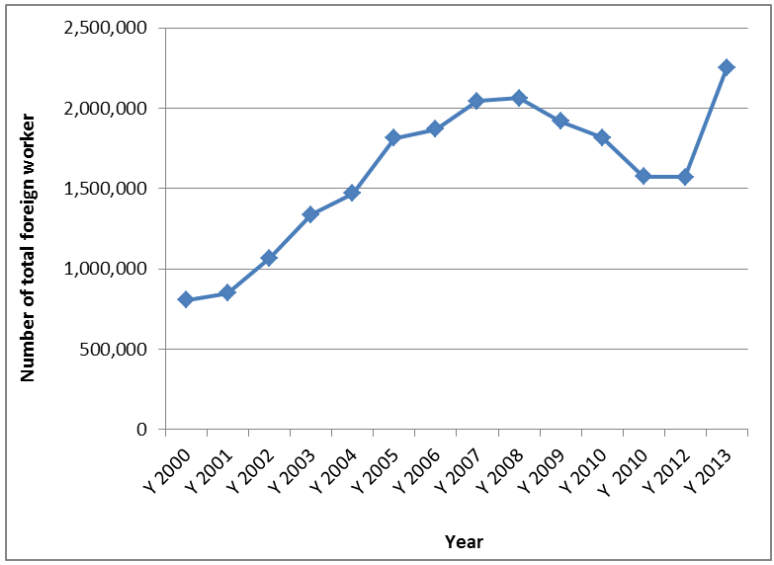
Additional figures

Figure 7 Percentage of foreign labor in Malaysia, by source country (2013)



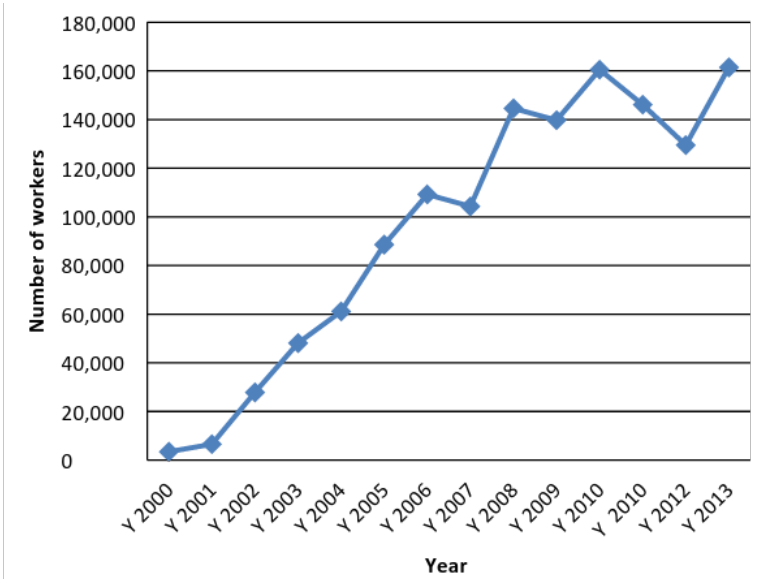
Source: Temporary Work Visit Pass (PLKS), Immigration Department (Ministry of Home Affairs) as cited in MEF 2014. Others include: Cambodia, China, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Laos

Figure 8 Number of foreign workers in Malaysia (2000-2013)



Source: Temporary Work Visit Pass (PLKS), Immigration Department (Ministry of Home Affairs) as cited in MEF (2014).

Figure 9 Number of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia (2000-2013)



Source: Temporary Work Visit Pass (PLKS), Immigration Department Ministry of Home Affairs) as cited in MEF (2014)

Figure 10 Map of Malaysia: Selangor and Kuala Lumpur

Source: http://himaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Malaysia-Map1.jpg

Figure 11 Boundaries of KL and Selangor

Source: Google Maps

Figure 12 Network model of social relationships among Myanmar migrant workers

About the Author

Khin Soe Kyi is a trained nurse, a university lecturer and a native of Myanmar. She is currently a doctoral researcher in Malaysia, at Asia e University's faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. During the 2016-1017 academic year, she was awarded a fellowship as a visiting PhD scholar at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research in India.

Prior to undertaking her PhD, Khin Soe Kyi taught nursing for two years at USCI University in Kuala Lumpur. In Myanmar, Khin Soe Kyi was employed as a nurse in the Defence Services General Hospitals for nearly a decade, and worked as a tutor and an assistant lecturer at her alma mater, the Military Institute of Nursing and Paramedical Sciences.

In 2012, Khin Soe Kyi earned a Master's qualification in Development Studies from Myanmar's University of Economics, marking a foray into the social sciences. This later prepared her for a 2014-2015 fellowship to carry out research on Myanmar's development through the Faculty of Social Science at Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA:

An Ethnographic Study

Migration for employment is a challenging global issue compounded by rising numbers of migrants worldwide. For this reason, the downsides of labor migration need to be understood through the context experienced by migrants in the countries where they work. A multi-sited ethnographic approach has been used in this study to explore social relationships among Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia from October 2014 until October 2015.

How do social relationships contribute to meeting the needs and addressing the difficulties of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia? More specifically, what difficulties are migrant workers facing, and how do they seek help from social networks? When in trouble, how do social and religious organizations meet the needs and address the difficulties of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia?

The Understanding Myanmar's Development series is an exploration of the transformation taking place in Myanmar on multiple levels: social, economic, and political. In this series, RCSD hopes to realize the dual goals of both building up the body of knowledge on Myanmar and strengthening the research capacity of Burmese scholars in their study of development policy and practice. This volume is just one piece of the puzzle of development practice, as felt by the people and communities of Myanmar.

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