

RIGHTS AND THE RADIO

With many migrant workers in Thailand taken advantage of by their employers, a new radio show is helping workers to understand their rights.

HIGHLIGHTS

- > Two million people from Myanmar have moved to Thailand for work
- > A radio program in the country's north is teaching migrants about their rights
- > More than 70 per cent of listeners are women

It is hot and dusty work constructing and painting houses in the villages of Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. Earning 250-300 baht (\$7-\$8) per day, 30-year-old Suay doesn't complain about her weathered hands or the construction job she has held for the past five years. She is one of approximately two million people from Myanmar who have crossed the border into Thailand in search of work.

Suay's daily companion is a small radio. During and after work she listens to Migrant Action Program Radio—a community radio station. She is particularly interested in the program *Voices Without Borders*. The program is broadcast predominately in Shan and Burmese languages and encourages people to phone in with questions or comments about immigration laws and workers' rights.

The radio show is supported by Australia through the International Labour Organization and the Migrant Action Program Foundation. Thousands of migrant workers in Chiang Mai and nearby Mae Sot tune in to its live broadcasts each week or download the program if they have access to the internet.

"Sometimes I call in to ask advice on my work permit or to explain my experiences," says Suay. "The issues from the radio are talked about amongst my friends."

Through the radio program, Suay learnt how to register herself for work, what the opening hours of registration offices were and her rights regarding contract terms and conditions. "Now I can make my own time to renew papers. I don't need to rely on my employer to inform me and take me to do it."

11700000

NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO ARE VICTIMS OF FORCED LABOUR IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

International Labour Office, 2012

IN FOCUS: Protecting those in need

Millions of people in developing countries, especially in East Asia, leave their homes every year to look for work in other countries. Most are trying to escape poverty and insecurity and are lured by the possibility of better wages.

Once there, workers can fall prey to those who want to exploit their vulnerability, including human traffickers. Some are tricked into jobs they did not agree to do, are forced to pay excessive recruitment fees or are not paid correctly. Others might have their wages withheld or are prevented from leaving their workplace.

Australia is currently working with other partners to reduce and prevent human trafficking, labour exploitation of migrant workers, and sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism. These efforts include:

- > helping countries create stronger laws
- > making government officials and communities more aware of these problems
- > funding migrant resource centres.

Suay, a migrant worker from Myanmar, listens to the Migrant Action Program Radio on a daily basis. Photo: Jennifer Watson/AusAID

The presenters of *Voices Without Borders* are former or current migrant workers. Ying Horm is one of them. In the studio she introduces a song to her audience then grins and removes her headset. "I'm very happy to be a DJ here. I started as a volunteer," she says.

Also from Shan state, in Myanmar, the 27-year-old previously worked as a nanny for a Korean expat family in Thailand. "Many migrant workers call in to this radio program. They discuss the difficulties they face and they share a lot of information—they also ask a lot of questions."

The program receives dozens of calls each time it airs. Most of those who listen to Ying Horm each Monday morning are either labourers or domestic workers with stories to tell about contract violations or questions to ask about procedures for work permits. Those with serious grievances and contract violations are directed to a paralegal working with the program to review and pursue claims off the air. The program also helps migrant workers find other work.

Provincial labour officials in the Royal Thai Government find the radio program helpful. They are often invited into the station to tell listeners about new policies and help answer questions. It is a good way to get information to workers who are in places that labour protection officers find hard to reach or to people who live in hiding because their immigration status is in doubt.

Of all the garment factory workers, domestic and construction workers tuning in to the radio program each day, about 70 per cent are women.

Suay is now on a meal break. She takes a moment to share her dreams for the future. In addition to continuing to care for her two nephews and sending money to her family in Shan state, she has her own dreams. "One day I hope to have a house, money and a gold necklace," she says. 

JENNIFER WATSON

2.4m 
estimated number of
people across the globe
who are victims of
human trafficking at
any one time

UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012