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The Trade-Offs of Legal Status: Safe Migration, Documentation, and Debt in Southeast Asia. By Maryann Bylander. University of Hawai'i Press, 2024. xi+245 pp.

According to the Thailand Migration Report 2024, for more than two decades, Thailand has been a major destination country for migrant workers, especially from neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, to better their economic lot (International Organization for Migration 2024). *The Trade-Offs of Legal Status* tells the story of Cambodians who migrated illegally to work in Thailand for more than ten years, describing their work conditions and both their good and bad experiences in Thailand.

While all the Cambodian migrant workers mentioned in this book were illegal, in 2017, the Thai government announced “a regularization program” (p. 14), established through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Thai and Cambodian governments. The programme, referred to as the “MOU process” in this book, offered illegal Cambodian migrant workers the opportunity to gain legal status in Thailand. To obtain legal status under this programme, these workers would have to subject themselves to new forms of control, such as by providing their biometric data at a national verification site in Thailand. In 2017, the Thai government also announced a new migration law, with more serious penalties for both illegal migrant workers and their employers, which explains why most Cambodian migrant workers would like to legalize their status.

However, Cambodian migrant workers found out that there are two main problems in gaining legal status in Thailand. The first is the high costs: They must pay double or triple the official regularization fees because of broker charges and other expenses to “make documents” (p. 37). These costs strain their finances as they would have to borrow money from employers, who would then deduct the debt from their salaries. Families of Cambodian migrant workers tend to borrow money from Cambodian microfinance institutions for

their living expenses, while the migrant workers work in Thailand to earn and remit money to repay their families' loans. Therefore, if migrant workers must pay exceptionally high costs to gain legal status, they may not be able to send money home, leaving their families in Cambodia saddled with new debts.

The second problem is an increased dependency between employers and migrant workers. Under the 2017 Thai law, employers are obliged to regularly report on their migrant workers' status and immediately inform the government if the latter have ceased working for them. Therefore, migrant workers who are unhappy with their working conditions after acquiring legal status have less freedom to change employers than they did when they were undocumented. The book explains that Cambodian migrant workers consider freedom and the ability to change jobs as their priority because they had very bad experiences with employers who repeatedly mistreated them in various sectors in Thailand.

Because of these two reasons, many Cambodian migrant workers decided to go back to Cambodia or remain illegally in Thailand, even if they knew that legal status could provide more safety, protection and benefits. The cheapest way to return to Cambodia is by bus as they might be arrested by Thai police officers at one of the many Thai checkpoints and sent to the Migrant Assistance Centre (MAC), a government-run deportation centre in Poipet, which would help to send them back to Cambodia.

Chapter 1 introduces safe and legal migration for Cambodian workers who would like to work in countries like Thailand. "Safe migration" is a project in Cambodia funded by NGOs to educate and train Cambodian people who aspire to work outside the country, aiming to reduce their vulnerability, while upholding broader development goals of migration. Chapter 2 further explains and highlights the experiences of Cambodian migrant workers who go to work in Thailand through the MOU process and those who go through informal channels.

Chapter 3 explains the process of getting documents under the 2017 Thai laws to gain legal status for working in Thailand. Some

migrant workers are able to obtain all the documents, while others face the problem of invalid documents because of frequent unreported changes in work and employers. Chapter 4 discusses the financial situation of migrant workers, especially Cambodian migrant workers who travel to work in Thailand, where most of them struggle to earn and send money back to their families to avoid losing their lands owing to debt or incurring more debt when their families are compelled to borrow more money. Chapter 5 is devoted to an in-depth discussion of safe migration projects that train and educate migrant workers through a smartphone application in Cambodia. In the conclusion, Bylander explains that Cambodian migrant workers prefer to have lower-cost recruitment and documentation processes. She suggests a less rigid migration system such as used elsewhere in Southeast Asia, where highly skilled workers enjoy more freedom of movement.

Bylander's book is a valuable resource for understanding the experiences of migrant workers, especially Cambodian migrant workers who travel to Thailand for work. The book is clearly written, and it will benefit scholars of migration studies and students and readers who are interested in the experiences of Cambodian migrant workers in destination countries like Thailand.

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REFERENCE

United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand. 2024. "Thailand Migration Report 2024". 11 December 2024. <https://thailand.iom.int/resources/thailand-migration-report-2024>