

The Visibility of Disabled Cross-Border Migrant Workers in Thailand in Migration Research

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Abstract

Migrant workers contribute significantly to Thai economic growth. Their importance attracts the attention of scholars around the world. Many researchers have investigated their lives before and while living in Thailand and when they return home. However, it is still questionable to what extent disabled migrants are included in these studies. This paper intends to answer this question by reviewing works conducted in Thailand related to migration and disabilities that appear in Thai and international journal citation databases. The results show that disabled migrant workers in Thailand are not yet clearly visible in migration research or migration data collection. This investigation suggests that the government, scholars, migration research institutes, and non-profit organizations should put disabled migrant workers on their research agendas. This can make them visible and raise society's awareness of them, as with other groups of disabled people. The information can be used to support disabled migrants throughout the migration process to give them a better quality of life and prevent them from suffering human rights violations.

Keywords: Migrant worker, Migration, Disabled migrant worker, Thailand, Migration research

Introduction

Thailand has a long history as a receiving country for cross-border migrant workers from neighbouring countries, namely Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), and Myanmar (Kunpeuk et al., 2022). Currently, there are approximately 3.9 million documented and undocumented migrant workers from these countries and Vietnam working in Thailand (Smith, Lim, & Harkins, 2019). The major factors that forced them to leave their homelands to seek better financial opportunities include their countries' economic situation and political conflict (Sricharoen, 2019). While migrant workers are struggling to achieve better living conditions in their home

countries, Thailand's economic growth and social and demographic changes create many job opportunities that attract them to migrate (Khalid & Urbański, 2021; Rukumnuaykit, 2009). When labor demand in Thailand and labor supply at the origin countries were met, migration flows to Thailand from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam; were established.

The labor of migrant workers from neighboring countries to Thailand continues to flow because Thailand is becoming an aging society (United Nations Thailand, 2020). In 2024, The number of Thai people aged 60 and above was 13.4 million, or approximately 19.6 per cent of their total population (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2022). While the number of older persons has continued to rocket, the birth rate is going in a different direction: in 2021, the number of births for the whole country was 526,469, while deaths numbered 550,042 (Ministry of Public Health, 2022). If this pattern of population growth continues, the Thai population will eventually decline. Therefore, the mixture of demographic factors, economic development, and social change has meant that Thailand cannot avoid depending on migrant workers from neighboring countries to fill the gap in its labor force.

As noted above, we cannot deny that migrant workers have contributed significantly to the growth of the Thai economy (Pholphirul, 2012). Their importance calls for attention from Thai and international scholars interested in migration research to investigate the consequences of their movement throughout the migration circle. Research topics considered approximately 20 years ago when migration research was still young in this country comprised the impact of migration on border economics, migration-related law, human rights, the impact of remittances, HIV/AIDS, and gender and migration (Iredale et al., 2004). Disabled migrants were not mentioned anywhere among these themes. Currently, Thailand is witnessing significant progress in migration research. There are government agencies and universities that intensively study cross-border migration in Thailand. Publications in both Thai and English are disseminated on their websites and international abstract and citation databases. However, the extent to which disabled migrants are included in these studies is still questionable. This paper intends to answer this question by reviewing studies conducted in Thailand related to migration and disabilities that appear in Thai and international journal citation databases. The results can be used to provide suggestions to scholars and concerned parties on the potential to conduct research related to migration and disabilities. These future works will hopefully help to protect disabled migrants from any form of human rights violation.

Disability in migrant workers and its consequences

Disability in migrant workers can occur before they enter Thailand. Documented migrant workers must pass a health screening process. Those allowed to work must not have leprosy, active tuberculosis, elephantiasis, or latent-stage syphilis and must not be an alcoholic or a drug user (Vittaporn & Boonmongkon, 2016). Apart from these health conditions, opportunities are still available for disabled migrants to find a job because

impairment may not be a barrier to work for some positions, such as manual work on production lines, which requires no intensive movement and is suitable for mobility-impaired migrants. In the case of undocumented migrants, they will not undergo a health screening process like their documented colleagues. Therefore, the opportunity to attain employment is based on the nature of the job and the employer.

Migrant workers with fewer skills and lower educational attainment are always offered manual tasks by their employers, which may expose them to an accident that can cause a disability (United Nations, n.d.). Migrant workers in Thailand are prevalent in construction, agriculture, husbandry, and food and beverage manufacturing (Foreign Worker Administration Office, 2023). Most of them are laborers and manual workers. Sometimes, the nature of the job or their habits have the potential to damage their health. Their employers require many to work long hours to earn higher payments to send home. Some must come into contact with dangerous substances without personal protection equipment. These unsafe working conditions and practices make them prone to injuries, which may cause them to develop a disability or even lead to their death (Meyer et al., 2016). Based on a 2021 Social Security Office (SSO) report, construction had the highest number of work-related accidents. In 2021, there were accidents involving Thai and migrant workers in this industry was 6,066. Even though this number did not distinguish between accidents happening to migrant workers and those suffered by Thai workers, the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2021) reported that 11 migrants requested compensation from the SSO for a work-related disability.

Disabled people may not have the same employment opportunities as people without disabilities. In addition, they often face additional challenges in the workplace, such as negative attitudes from their employer, supervisor, or colleagues. Stress deriving from unfair treatment, the nature of job, and their health conditions may force them to quit the job (Coleman et al., 2013). Barriers commonly faced by migrant workers in Thailand include the language barrier, negativity from local people, working conditions, exploitation, and difficulties accessing healthcare and legal services (Chalamwong et al., 2010). Therefore, being disabled before or after migration can make migrant workers twice as vulnerable as their unimpaired counterparts (Tataranni, 2022).

The visibility of disabled migrant workers in research around the world

Approximately 15 per cent of the global population has some form of disability (World Health Organization, 2011). However, the number of people with disabilities on the move or disabled during the migration process has not been systematically recorded (Migration Data Portal, 2022). Although there is recognition at the national or international level of the rights of disabled people, they are consistently overlooked in the context of migration (United Nations, n.d.). This means appropriate social support, such as healthcare and assistive technology, must be provided. Thus, confirmation of the existence of disabled migrants by providing robust evidence to policymakers can help

them become visible in support plans like other groups of vulnerable people like children, women, and older persons.

Disabled migrants may face many challenges when living in another country. Burns (2017) concluded that citizenship is the core problem limiting disabled migrants' access to healthcare. This situation may worsen if a migrant enters the country illegally. Kim's (2011) study of disabled migrants in South Korea supported Burns' conclusion. Kim employed a qualitative research methodology to interview 11 migrant workers in South Korea who were disabled due to work-related accidents. The results found that migrants encountered difficulties in treatment and poor employment assistance. Most importantly, undocumented migrant workers were afraid to register for disability compensation. Thus, they would not receive support like other disabled people in that country. On the other side of the world, female Mexican migrants working in a crab processing factory in Maryland, USA, also endured difficult situations. Many had invisible injuries or disabilities from the harmful working conditions, like contact with chemicals and long working hours. They had problems accessing healthcare and had to pay for treatment themselves (Sangaramoorthy, 2019).

Research on disabled migrant workers focuses not only on physical disabilities, but also those related to mental health. Mazzoni, Boiko, Katon, and Russo (2007) investigated the relationship between depression and disabilities in migrant Hispanic farm workers in the northwestern part of the USA. They found that depression was significantly associated with unintentional injury, which could lead to disability in migrant workers. When migrant workers become the victims of traffickers, they often suffer mental disabilities caused by violations in the trafficking process (Hasan et al., 2021). Mental health rehabilitation processes are very important to help them to achieve better mental well-being.

The visibility of disabled migrant workers in data released by Thai government agencies

The NSO of the Ministry of Economy and Society has to conduct censuses and surveys and manage the utilization of the data at national levels (for more details, please visit www.nso.go.th/sites/2014en/Pages/aboutus/Vision.aspx). The NSO conducts yearly migration surveys. Demographic characteristics of migrant workers have been collected, but these do not include their impairments or disabilities. Furthermore, this survey focuses only on the internal and outmigration of the Thai population, although the immigrant population is included in the national census, which is conducted every ten years. In the 2010 census, information about types of disability was collected, but this was categorized only by sex and area. Therefore, investigation into disability in the immigrant population can be accomplished by examining raw data stored at the NSO.

The Foreign Workers Administration Office, Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour, is a Thai government agency that manages, registers, and disseminates information about international migrant workers in Thailand (for more

details, please visit www.doe.go.th/prd/alien?page=home). Each month, a report on the migrant worker's situation is released on their website. The report mainly presents the number of migrant workers by registration type and industry. In addition, a monthly report on migrant worker statistics has been established. This report includes information about migrant workers in Thailand separated by registration type, nationality, industry and position, and geographic distribution. At the end of the year, statistics on migrant workers are summarized and published as a yearly report. Although the reports provide some demographic information, like the gender of migrant workers, no information about health status is provided.

The SSO of the Ministry of Labour has to manage social security and the Workmen's Compensation Fund. Information from their workers' compensation fund annual report for 2021 (SSO, 2022) summarized the number of claims and causes from 2012 to 2021 (Table 1). However, this report only records workers registered with the fund, and nationalities are not mentioned. Therefore, work-related injuries and disabled undocumented migrant workers are automatically underreported.

Table 1. Number of work-related injuries or sickness classified by severity, 2012–2021

Year	No. of employees	Severity			Total
		Deaths	Disabilities	Partial loss of organs	
2012	8,575,398	717	19	1,818	2,554
2013	8,901,624	635	28	3,036	3,699
2014	9,132,756	603	11	1,463	2,050
2015	9,336,317	575	6	1,324	1,905
2016	9,449,984	584	12	1,290	1,886
2017	9,777,751	570	17	1,200	1,787
2018	10,537,238	568	13	1,226	1,807
2019	11,710,823	639	13	1,211	1,863
2020	11,153,697	588	14	1,005	707
2021	11,172,844	602	9	797	1,408

Source: Adapted from Workers' Compensation Fund Annual Report 2021 (SSO, 2022)

The visibility of disabled migrant workers in the Thai journal database

The Thai Citation Index Centre (TCI) database contains academic journals published in Thailand (for more details, please visit <https://tci-thailand.org/eng/>). Although many journals publish articles in both Thai and English, almost all are written in Thai or include a Thai language abstract. When entering the keywords “migration” and “disability” or “migrant worker” and “disability” into the search box and looking at the article title, abstract, and keywords, no related articles were found. In order to investigate

the issue more deeply, the keyword “migrant worker” was entered utilizing the same search conditions. There were 215 articles published between 2003 and 2022. The research themes can be summarized as follows:

1. Migrants’ physical and mental health
2. Migrant labor management in the business sector
3. Migrant labor management in government, law and policy
4. Social issues
5. Welfare of migrant labourers
6. Quality of life of migrant labourers
7. Research Methodology

None of the above articles specifically discussed disabled migrant workers. However, research themes related to welfare mentioned benefits from social security and the Workmen’s Compensation Fund, which covers compensation for migrant workers for injury or death due to work-related causes (Ruankham, 2020; Tongsamsi et al., 2020).

The visibility of disabled migrant workers in Thailand in the Scopus database

Migration research in Thailand attracts interest among Thai scholars and people in academic settings from other countries. Both international scholars and Thai ones disseminate their study results in journals on well-known the databases like Scopus. Using this database and entering the keywords “migration,” “Myanmar,” “Cambodia,” “Lao PDR,” “Vietnam,” “Thailand,” “Disability,” and “Impairment,” I found three articles mentioning disabilities or impairments of migrant workers. When investigated more deeply, only the study by Pocock et al. (2018) directly discusses disability in migrant workers. His team used mixed methods to research male survivors of trafficking in commercial fishing in Thailand. The victims were migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam. The investigation found that the survivors were exposed to multiple work hazards, which caused them to develop disabilities, such as spending long hours in the sun, cold, or wet without breaks. Many of them worked along rocky coasts or in remote offshore locations. Interestingly, about half of the survivors had no safety or survival equipment. Aside from the physical disabilities suffered by the victims, mental health problems occurred after they returned home.

Discussion

Physical and mental disability among migrant workers can occur because of accidents arising from a bad working environment (Meyer et al., 2016; Sangaramoorthy, 2019), job pressure or physical punishment from an employer or supervisor (Hasan et al., 2021; Mazzoni et al., 2007), and inaccessibility of healthcare (Kim, 2011). Besides barriers that migrant workers typically face, such as language or a negative attitude from local people, disability may add another obstacle to make migrants struggle more to maintain their employment (Chalamwong et al., 2010; Coleman et al., 2013). Disability among migrants affects not only them when they are living in the destination country, but

also when they return home. Evidence provided in the study by Pocock et al. (2018) showed that mental disability among migrant fishermen still occurred after returning to their country of origin.

Data and information are an essential part of the process underlying policymakers' decision to establish mechanisms to promote livelihood or prevent disabled migrant workers from any form of exploitation. However, data related to disabled migrants often lacks systematic recording or is under-recorded (Migration Data Portal, 2022). In the case of Thailand, data collection by government agencies seems not to prioritize information related to disabled migrants in their country. In addition, academic studies related to disabled migrants are rare in both international and Thai citation databases. Moreover, these studies only represent disabled migrants in a specific industry or are conducted by employing a methodology that may not represent all disabled migrant workers in the country, such as the study by Kim (2011), which employed qualitative methodology to interview only 11 participants.

Since Thailand is a hub of migrant workers from neighboring countries, namely Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Kunpeuk et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2019), these people contribute significantly to the country's wealth. The Thai government should, therefore, pay attention to all groups of migrant workers, especially disabled migrants, who are often invisible in migration policy and research (United Nations, n.d.). To bring them out of the shade, Thailand needs to include them specifically in all disability and migration policies. However, the picture of disabled migrant workers in Thailand remains blurred because of a lack of data and information, as discussed above. Therefore, systematic data collection and research should be conducted.

Thai government agencies such as the NSO, the Foreign Workers Administration Office, and the SSO of the Ministry of Labour routinely conduct surveys and collect data related to migrant workers. It is strongly recommended that these organizations merge disabled migrants into their data collection and research agenda. The data can be used for administrative purposes and to investigate social issues related to disabled migrants. When the government has a specific issue related to disabled migrant workers to investigate, it can support migration scholars working in many universities and other organizations in Thailand to research on its behalf. Most importantly, this information should be disseminated to the public. It can make disabled migrant workers visible in the academic sphere and in the wider society.

Conclusion

Migrant workers contribute significantly to Thai economic growth. Their importance attracts attention from scholars around the world. However, disabled migrant workers are not yet clearly visible in migration research or data collection, especially in Thailand. This study suggests that the Thai government should act as a focal point to coordinate with migration scholars, migration research institutes, and non-profit organizations to collect data or conduct migration research. The results should be

disseminated to the public and used for policy implementation. This can make disabled migrants visible and raise society's awareness of them, as with other disabled people. In addition, a protection mechanism design based on robust data and information will help disabled migrants get support and have a better livelihood while living in Thailand.

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