

Migration, the Unrest, and Gender in the Three Southernmost Provinces of Thailand

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Background

Similar to other areas of Thailand, especially the northeast where most young people work outside their place of origin, migration has been a common lifestyle of Thai Muslims in the deep-south border provinces, Patani, Yala, and Narathiwat. The difference is, while people in other areas usually migrate to work in big cities of Thailand, especially Bangkok, people in the Southernmost provinces often cross the border and work in Malaysia, the neighboring country which is more economically developed. Many men and women have experienced working in Malaysia at least once in their lifetime. The historically close relationship between Thai Muslims in the southernmost provinces and the Malaysians sharing the same border, Islamic religion, as well as Malayu culture has underpinned the movement from Thailand to Malaysia.

Although migration of Muslims from the southernmost provinces of Thailand to Malaysia has long been a phenomenon, past research suggests that the intensity has increased in the past 10 years (Nuansanong, Klanarong, and Salaebin, 2009). In addition to economic expectation for a higher income, one of the underlying reasons heightening migration is the on-going unrest which escalated in 2004. Since then nearly 6,000 people have died and about 10,000 have been injured.

Though most of the migration is voluntary and related to the need for income, in the case of Southernmost Thailand, the unrest may also play a role. The on-going havoc that threatens people's well-being and gives them a sense of insecurity may drive them to move out. It has been found in other areas that long-term instability and violence often beget migration. Yet, in the case of the Southernmost of Thailand, it is still unclear the extent to which the experience of violence has affected movement out of their place of origin. Results from previous studies indicate that understanding the migration of Thai Muslims in these three border provinces and its association with the unrest remains inconclusive. As a common way of life which has been occurring for several decades, migration to Malaysia of Thai Muslims in this area would occur even in the absence of unrest. However, there are several potential explanations underlying the relationship between the unrest and migration to Malaysia. The stress resulting from the ongoing unrest may drive women and men to seek a safer environment. The reduced economic development with an associated decrease in job opportunities due to the unrest may also be a driving force for moving away. Thus, the need to migrate for economic well-being has increased. By contrast, migration may be suspected by the authorities or by villagers to be linked to the unrest, and this may lead to obstacles for migrants. In this way, the unrest may actually deter migration.

This study is an initial attempt to understand how difficulties due to the on-going unrest are associated with people's socio-economic well-being, especially with regards to migration and how this might be different across genders. We argue that understanding the relationship between migration and the unrest and its underlying reasons is crucial. The research-based understanding will help not only to understand and help migrants but also to avoid suspected association of

migrants with the unrest in the border areas. The suspicion may become a dangerous barrier for the government and the border communities and exacerbate the already-complicated situation in obtaining a peaceful solution to the Southern conflict.

Methodology

Our analysis is based on the baseline data set from an on-going, longitudinal project on Women Migration and the Unrest in the Three Southernmost Provinces (2014-2016). The overall objective of the project is to understand how migration in the three southernmost provinces is associated with the on-going unrest and the role of gender in this process. The theoretical framework behind the study is based on the concepts of gender, migration, and the roles of the conflict. The survey was designed to capture a representative sample of households in the three southernmost population using PPS sampling strategy. The data collection for the Round 1 quantitative survey was completed in May, 2014 and the collection of the associated qualitative data is now in the field. The Round II survey is scheduled for 2016. The study sample includes Muslim households with at least one woman aged 18-59 years old. For the baseline round, in total, 1,102 households were interviewed, covering 5,823 individuals of all ages listed as household rosters. The questionnaire included data on household characteristics, migration, and experience with the unrest, and gender roles.

Preliminary Results

About one fifth of the interviewed household has at least one household member a current migrant (19.3%). This percent decreases to 17.0% if we take into account only migration staying at the destination for at least one month. Rich households are more likely to have migrants; around one fourth of rich household have household member migrating, compared to 18% and 17% of the poor and the moderate. More migrants moved outside of Thailand than inside,

especially among women, where 61% moved abroad, while 27% moved to other provinces. Almost all of international migrants moved to Malaysia. Bivariate analysis shows that households reporting that the unrest has very much effect on their life has household member migrating in a higher proportion than other groups (28.6% VS less than 20%).

Multivariate analysis taking into account household characteristics (e.g. household characteristics, household structure, location, socioeconomic status, community experience of unrest) will be further explored to determine whether migration is associated with the unrest. Qualitative data on these topics will assist us in interpreting these results.