



**Housing choices for labor migrants in  
Talad Thai, Thailand: A Call for  
consideration for social reproduction and  
integration**

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## **Abstract**

The study explored the types of housing of migrant workers and the challenges that they face in access to housing. With 55 migrant workers were interviewed at Talad Thai near Bangkok, we have found that housing tenure or even the name under which the house is rented are not of importance to the housing security for migrants. Migrants feel safe by living near to each other, and this is the main reason why they select living in a particular area. Such housing choice also determines their place of work. By living in an enclave, migrants can be isolated and have more difficulty accessing social services such as education for children.

Key words: Migrant workers, Thailand, housing, security

## **Introduction**

Issue of housing for migrant workers have been discussed especially focusing on their tenure security. This is because earlier migrants were internal rural to urban migrants. However, for cross-border migrants especially for those who are considered temporary, the issue of tenure is not straight forward, and unlike internal migrants, addressing their housing problems through social housing is not suitable. At the same time, there are literature that discusses the issue of formation of enclaves of migrant workers and ethnic minorities. This paper explores the housing situation of cross-border migrant workers in Thailand. As in other countries in the above literature, cross-border migrants tend to live in enclaves near their workplaces. The study analyzed how they chose their housing and their place building (Castles and Davidson 2000) and assessed whether there are any gender difference in the challenges that they face in housing in Thailand. Although there are studies on housing of migrants, most are migrant settlers. There is little literature that discusses the issue faced by cross-border temporary migrants and this paper addresses this gap.

## **Housing for cross-border migrants**

There are largely two areas of concern for migrant housing: one is the living condition and tenure focusing more on the physical environment, and the other is on enclave focusing on social aspect. There are various studies that have described the bad living condition of rural to urban migrants (Marx et al. 2013). Magana and Hovey (2003) noted that poor housing condition was significantly related to anxiety among migrant workers in Mexico. They tend to squat on public land, and formed squatter areas. Owusu-Ansah and Addai (2013) noted the overcrowded, unprotected, insecure,

unsanitary environment, and that women are affected more from this. There have been various attempts on slum upgrading and also providing social housing to migrants in urban areas. Providing tenure to migrants is considered to be of importance, in order to encourage them to invest on the improvement of their housing. Migrants will move gradually to a better housing if possible, which Smith (2015) calls it housing career.

The situation is different for those who might consider themselves temporary or are seen by the place of destination as temporary as in the case of cross-border migrant workers in Thailand. As Boccagni (2013) pointed out, migrants inhabit “here” while they invest “there”, that is, their engagement can lie in the place of origin and they will put all money available to invest back home rather than to improve the housing in the place of destination (see also Listerborn 2013). Li et al. (2014 and 2015) also pointed out that for these migrant workers, investment back home and returning to their village of origin is much more important than obtaining tenure in the place of destination.

The other issue is on enclave. Various scholars studied the social network of migrant workers. Migrants and ethnic minorities live in enclaves to help each other and also because of their social network, these are the easier option to obtain housing. Living in enclave can have both negative and positive effect. It can serve as a transition to adjust to the place of destination and serve as a support network for the migrants. As Listerborn (2013) noted, migrants make and create space for themselves. At the same time, it can isolate them from the rest of the community and restrict the access to information, hence the employment opportunities (Boeri et al. 2015). Social network is closely linked to such creation of enclaves, and migrants’ network is often restricted by the place of residence, which leads to restriction in choice of place of work. Liu et al. (2014) noted the importance of enclave for migrant women’s security, but at the same time enclaves allow migrant men to have closer control over women. Pun Ngai (2012) pointed out that the residence type as well as the labor system shape migrant women’s lives in the place of destination and creates a control over their productive and reproductive work. Pun Ngai’s study was on the dorms of Chinese internal migrant women. She has analyzed how the isolated, gathered, visible and controlled setting of housing together with the controlled setting of work place create a suffocating labor regime that put women workers under constant surveillance.

Thailand currently has 2-3 million migrant workers from neighboring countries. IPSR (2015)’s study on migrant housing in Thailand showed that more than 70% rented housing, while 20% were employer provided, others are living with relatives. Affordable rent from migrant workers’

perspective was 1651 baht per month and on average 3.5 people occupied one unit. Migrant workers in the IPSR study showed dissatisfaction in rest area, insects and garbage problems. Noting the sub-standard housing that migrant workers are in, Labor office of Samut Sakorn province has made its own migrant housing guidelines. The guideline has two main components. One is to set a guideline for minimum size of the room and minimum facilities, including bathroom, ventilation, wastewater treatment and fire extinguishing device. The other aspect is to require landlords to inform the authorities of the residence of migrants within 24 hours to provincial immigration office or to the police station. The landlords need to be registered at the provincial migrant management committee as well. Although the implementation and enforcement of this guideline, it is an attempt to upgrade migrant housing, but at the same time, making the control over migrants stricter. Such policy to provide better infrastructure, but at the same time control the housing and mobility of migrants were also seen in the pilot project to provide living quarters for migrant workers by National Housing Authority (17 January 2017 Bangkok Post).

This study analyzes the housing condition and choice of housing of migrant workers through a case study of cross-border migrant workers working around Talad Thai - a major wholesale agriculture market in Thailand.

### **Study area: Talad Thai**

Talad Thai (Thai Market) has been established in 1996 as a hub of trading agricultural products, and is currently the largest agriculture market in Thailand. It not only serves as a wholesale market domestically, but also serves as an export hub to serve the whole ASEAN region. The Market is located in Rangsit district, Pathumthani Province, and occupies 550 rai (88 ha) of land, consisting of 23 small markets sorted according to the products sold. There are 3,000 regular stalls and 1,500 rotating vendors. Each day, approximately 10,000 people and 25,000 cars enter Talad Thai which operates 24 hours, 365 days a year.

Around 10 years ago, all the workers in Talad Thai were Thai workers. However, once the government introduced a temporary stay document that allowed migrant workers from neighboring country – Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia - to register and work in Thailand temporarily, the number of migrant workers in Talad Thai has increased drastically. There are currently around 5,000 migrant workers working in the market. There are more men migrant workers than women, since many migrants are hired as porters. It is getting more and more difficult to find Thai workers who are

willing to work long hours in the market, and more migrants are being employed. As the manager of Talad Thai noted:

*“[Employers prefer to employ migrant workers] However, it is not because their salaries are lower than Thais. Currently, the migrants’ salary here is higher than 300 baht-minimum wage because they are hard-working, can be called anytime, do not need to return home in harvesting season, and do not need to go back home so often which differ from Thais because they come here without any relatives and come here specifically for work.”*

Noting the importance of migrant workers for the market, Talad Thai administration organizes migrant registration process in collaboration with the government. The manager also noted the need to establish daycare centers for migrant workers, since they are living with their children. The housing of migrant workers are not provided by the Talad Thai administration, but solely provided by private entrepreneurs around the market, except for two dormitories that are built and managed by the market, which only Thais can rent.

## **Methodology**

This study interviewed 55 migrant workers living around Talad Thai using an interview guide, as well as key informant interviews with landlords, dormitory managers, Talad Thai management, and World Vision Foundation that organizes health campaigns in the area. Please see map for the location of the interviews. Interviews with migrant workers were done in Burmese for Burmese migrant workers, and in Thai for some Burmese and Cambodian as well as Laotian workers who can speak Thai language. Some interviews used translation from Khmer language to Thai. The study attempted to cover as various type of housing as possible around the market. A team of Thai and Burmese researchers visited the market in the late afternoon to interview workers mostly at their home, in order to interview at the place and time of their convenience. The team relied on some long time migrants to introduce the team to other migrants. The team also worked with World Vision staff to introduce to some of the migrants that they work with. The researchers interviewed until we felt that we saturated the type of housing available in this area. The respondents explained of the project and the interview, and only those who agreed were interviewed. Most were generally contacted at least twice in order to complete the interviews, but was not coerced to do so. All the respondents are kept anonymous.

The 55 migrant workers interviewed are from three neighboring countries including Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos - 30 respondents from Myanmar; 20 respondents from Cambodia and 5 respondents from Laos. Among the Burmese migrants, 8 are Burman (5 women), 7 are Mon (4 women), 14 are Karen (9 women) and one is Pa O (woman). Among the 20 Cambodians, 17 were women, and all Lao respondents were women. We have intentionally interviewed more women, since the objective of the study is to explore gender differences in housing challenges, but especially to analyze the social reproduction activities of women. The average age of respondents was 33.9 years – for women respondents 34.43 years and for men 32.36 years old. The youngest respondent was 18 years old, and the oldest was 58 years old. The major of respondents - 36 out of 55 – are married and lived together at the current residence. Two are married but one spouse live in the country of origin. Only 9 respondents were single, 5 female respondents were widowed, two are divorced and one unknown. The majority of respondents had, at least, some kind of legal document, such as temporary passport, temporary passport with work permit, and pink card (temporary stay and work card). Only 7 respondents did not have any legal document and two respondents had what they call “bribe card” which they paid about 500 Baht per month per person so that they will not be caught by police.

The occupation of the respondents could be categorized into 8 categories: (1) general labor in the market (9 men), (2) processing work including chilies, corns, garlics, onions, fruits and vegetables (13 women), (3) working at a flower shop (2 men and 2 women), (4) shopkeeper/stall keepers (1 man and 9 women), (5) domestic worker (1 woman), (5) butcher in the markets (2 women), (6) middle person in garlic processing (1 woman), (7) worker in a factory (2 men and 2 women) and (8) garbage cleaner within Talad Thai (3 women). There were 8 women respondents being unemployed.

Migrant workers were paid daily if they worked in shops and paid per piece or weight if they work in processing. In terms of income, out of 55 respondents, 33 respondents (14 men, 19 women) were on daily-pay basis, paid on average 376.7 baht per day. Those who work as processors in Talad Thai or in small manufacturing (4 women), they earn around 375 baht per day, but the income fluctuates depending on the work availability. There are processors who work around their houses (6 women), their income is lower. They are paid approximately 30 baht for processing 10 kg of garlic. Some respondents work as a semi-wholesaler herself, and she is able to earn 1 million baht per year. Two of the respondents are sick and was not able to earn regular income. Six of the respondents (all women) were unemployed at the time of the interview. They needed to rely on their husbands or their children’s incomes. For many of the respondents, they seem to earn above the minimum wage

of 300 baht per day, but they work long hours without social security and healthcare services. They do not receive overtime payment. They do not have holidays or receive extra payment for working on holidays.

Types of housing found in this research were (1) dormitories (21 respondents), (2) room in shophouse/ rental room (17 respondents), (3) townhouse (3 respondents), (4) rent land to construct house (6 respondents), (5) house of employer/employer provided (3 respondents), (6) rental room in divided house (5 respondents) —the details of each residence were elaborated in the following session.

## **Type of housing**

### *Dormitory*

Dormitories are multi-storied buildings commonly located around Talad Thai. It is normally a one room with en-suite bathroom and often a small place to cook. There is often no elevator even for a 6-story building. In the dormitories, the security appliances like CCTV and card keys are available. Apart from security appliances, some dormitories have other facilities such as coin laundering machine as well as the small convenient stores and even a pool bar. When signing the contract, legal documents from at least one of the dwellers are requested, and deposits need to be made. Visitors need to show their legal documents as well, and loud noise are normally not tolerated. Some dormitories segregate living quarters between Thais and migrants, reserving lower stories for Thais and higher stories for migrants. Rooms in lower stories are equipped with air conditioners and rent is higher, while for higher story quarters, there is no air conditioners. Landlord explained that this is to avoid unnecessary conflict between Thais and migrants. The rents for migrants in dormitories range between 2000 Baht and 3000 Baht per month. Addition to this, water and electricity can cost around 660 baht per month. An advantage of living in the dormitories is that there is rarely a police raid in dormitories. Most of the respondents living in the dormitories are from Myanmar.

### *Room in the shophouses/ rental room*

Shophouses are located at the fringe of Talad Thai. On the ground floor, different products such as foods, drinks and other daily merchandises are sold. The upper floor is converted into rented rooms. Each floor is divided into small rooms by plywood walls. Typically, one floor of shophouse is divided into three units, and each unit's rent ranges from 800 to 2,400 baht including utilities. Around two to four people share one unit. The residents share common bathroom. There is only one

bathroom per floor. Since the shophouses are located just a small street across the market, it is easy for migrants to commute to their workplace. This proximity is an advantage and even though the facilities are old and crowded and ventilations and lighting is bad, some migrants prefer to live in this place. Only migrants are found to live in these shophouses. There is no security facility in shophouses unlike in dormitories, and there is no need to show legal documents when renting rooms in shophouses.

### *Townhouse*

Townhouses are two story attached houses normally built in a housing estate. It has several bedrooms and a kitchen. Some townhouses only rents to Thai, and some employers provide the name so that the migrants can rent. Some townhouses rent to migrants, and at least one dweller needs to show his/her legal document. Normally, when migrants stay in this type of housing, they will stay with in family and relatives. The rent and the deposit of this type of housing is generally higher than the rest. The deposit for townhouse can reach 12,000 Baht, and rent and utility 6,000 Baht and 1,500 Baht respectively per month. We have seen only Mon migrant workers in this type of housing. They live close together by ethnic group. Compared to dormitories, townhouse has larger space and provides more freedom in arranging for childcare, cooking and communal activities, such as Mon language and culture classes.

### *Rent land to construct a house*

Since Talad Thai is constructed in the urban periphery, there are still open space around the market. Within a few kilometers from the market, there are places where migrants can rent land and construct houses. The land is owned by Thais. Earlier, Thai internal migrants who worked at Talad Thai used to rent land and construct house and lived there. Currently, there are less Thai workers, and migrants have come to replace them. The dwellers need to pay for the rent first, before constructing the house on a bare land. If there is already an existing house built on the land, the new tenant can buy the house from the outgoing tenant. The houses are built by themselves with available materials, so it looks more like a hut rather than a house. The tenant pays monthly land rent and utilities to the landlord. Since these houses are not subscribed as a separate unit for utilities, they do not have an independent meter, and hence utilities are paid lumpsum by the landlord, who in turn collects the fees from the tenants. Tenants do not need to show legal documents when renting the land. Most of the migrants who live in this type of housing live with families and relatives, and there are many children living in this area. There are empty open spaces around their residential area, and migrants sub-contract job from Talad Thai to glean garlic from residues of peeled garlic. This is a closed

community, where even migrant tenants are long timers and strangers are easily spotted and questioned. Only those who are referred to by existing tenants are able to live in the area. There are no Burmese migrants in these housing types and only Cambodians and Laotians are seen.

#### *Rental room in divided house*

Alongside the canal near the main gate of Talad Thai, many old wooden long houses have served as housing for migrants. These houses were earlier occupied by Thai workers from the Northeastern part of Thailand. Now the Thai owners have moved out and made these houses as rented houses for migrants. They are divided into many small rooms, and most do not have windows. Some migrants will drill the wall to make windows themselves, since the walls are thin and easy to drill. Landlord of this housing is a Thai. Monthly rent costs between 1,000-1,200 Baht. Electricity costs around 500 Baht and the cost of water is calculated based on the number of dwellers in a particular room. The bathrooms are shared by several units. There is no need to show legal documents to rent a room here. The security of this area is not good, with frequent police raids and thieves and robberies, not only in the residence, but also the way back to the residence, since the only way to come back home is to go through a path below a bridge, where it is prone to robbery.

#### *House of employer or provided by employers*

There are a few cases where migrants lived in housing provided by employers. These are domestic workers and factory workers, and not those who are working inside the market. Domestic workers live with the employer. Some Thai stall owners rented a room for their workers to stay. There are some small factories near the market, and some workers in the factory live at the factory in a employer provided housing. They need to pay for utilities to the employer.

## **Discussion**

We find that the choice of housing and the formation of enclave as two important aspects of housing of cross-border migrant workers in Talad Thai.

#### *Choice of housing*

The respondents' first place of residence is normally a room of their relatives or their friends. It is never the case that they come and stay alone from the first day. Social network is important, and most of our respondents replied that they have come to Talat Thai with the recommendation from relatives and friends. Once they get a job, they will try to move out of the relative or friend's house,

since most often these first space will be too crowded for them to stay. The woman below felt bad living with their relatives and making their living space crowded. She and her husband were living with the relatives for 3-4 days, but she moved hurriedly to a new dorm, although she thought it was too expensive. She is not moving out because of her links with her friends and relatives who are helping her settle down.

You know, at that time, I did not have any choice. Wherever there was a room available, we just took it. We tried to find another dorm, but could not find. We did not want to disturb people living with us. Even though we thought that was so expensive at that time, we need to choose it..... I do not want to change residence, because it is so hard to find a room and I do not want to be in an uncertain situation where I did not have a place to stay, like I did on my first day here. (#25, Lao woman living in a dormitory)

It is notable that women migrants, even when they are moving out from the first location, they will still live together with relatives and women siblings, and never with only friends or alone. There are more cases where men live with men friends.

I lived in my sister's room when first arrived at Talat Thai, before got this room and a job in 2013. Then I found a job and saved money to rent room. After saving enough money to rent room, I moved to this current resident in 2015..... Room price, being near workplace and being near family members are most important aspect to rent room for me. (#19, Burmese woman living in dormitory)

Even for their second residence, they will live close to their relatives. Being close to their relatives is the most important factor of choice when looking for residence. Since they look for job while they live with their relatives in the first place, their workplace will be near the residence of their relatives. Hence the second room will also not far from their workplace. These enclaves are created around Talad Thai. Housing determines the workplace, and workplace further determines housing choice, as was discussed by Pun Ngai (2012). The respondents said that they live “near” their workplace. By “near”, they will mean around 5-10 minutes – either on foot or by motorbike if they have one. Hence they live very close to workplace and close to relatives and other migrants.

Migrant workers in Talad Thai change their housing from time to time, normally to upgrade their housing but not necessarily paying higher price. While they live longer in the place, they start to know other options, and move on for better housing. There is a nationality differences here. As was discussed under different housing options, for Burmese migrants, they move around, normally among dormitories and rented rooms in shophouses or rent the whole townhouse for the family to

live together. They do have options among these rooms, since there are many Burmese living around Talad Thai. On the other hand, there are more Cambodians who rent house and build a shack. Since they build the house themselves, they tend to live in these places for longer period of time, and also get engaged in home-based work (garlic sorting) as was described earlier. The housing location and type determine the type of work that the migrants are engaged in.

There is little effort among the migrants to improve their living condition. Most migrants would rather invest on buying land and house in the place of origin if they are to invest in housing at all. They see themselves as temporary, even though some have been staying in Thailand for over 10 years. Some of the areas where migrants live are not secure, and they have had robbers coming into the house, or experienced robbery on the street coming back home from work.

The siblings of my husband used to be robbed there [under bridge across the canal]. Their ATM card and telephone were taken away. We didn't report to the police because, trust me, that they don't care. In my case, every time my husband goes to work, if he has a phone, I will check up with him if he reached his workplace. When he reaches, I would be able to sleep at ease. I always think that if my husband got robbed, please let them take whatever they want, but not shoot him to death. Because this situation used to happen. There were around 2-3 Cambodians who died due to robbers at the bridge. (#39, Cambodian woman living in rental room)

Even though they know that the security situation is not good, they do not know what to do:

I am worried of drugs in this area. I worry that my sons would get in trouble with drug. It can be easily found in that area. Recently, my husband got robbed nearby the canal. This scared me very much..... [asked whether she wants to change her room] I do not know where I can go to stay and where I can go. (#2, Cambodian woman living in rental room in divided house)

This same respondent, instead of improving her living and housing situation in Thailand, she has put all her money to be invested in her home town.

My sister helped me look after mom and manage my money I sent back home. I promised that I will look after her because she looked after mom. Yet she has now passed away due to liver cancer. It is tough for me because I have to go back home more often when my mom gets sick.... When [I go back home and] I see my home [that I built with my remittances], I want to stay there for a while but I cannot because I have to work.

The next issue is about enclaves. As said earlier, migrants live in enclaves. Our respondents pointed out several positive aspects in living clustered together. They find it more comfortable to live with people who can speak their language. They also find that police will not come to question them if they are together.

[after I visit my hometown, I will come back and] I will stay in this dorm again because here I have a lot of friends and I already get used to this dorm, so I do not want to find the new dorm. For me, I like to stay in the dorm with my friends around me. I mean having my friends staying in the same dorm that I can talk, cook and eat together. This is important when choosing the residence for me. Also, this dorm is not far from the market and my workplace, so I can take my bike for around 15 minutes from this dorm to the factory. (#26, Burmese woman living in dormitory)

Although I do not have any document, I am not worried about living in this area because police will not disrupt us if there is no one reporting. In my neighborhood, most people are Thai and Cambodians with equal proportion. I feel I am closer to Thais than to Cambodians. (#41, Cambodian woman living in a rented land where she built a house)

Although others have different experience:

In this area, the police patrol around quite often. I have never been caught by the police, but they used to check my house once. I decided to jump out [from my house] to the canal in order to run away. I was cut by a broken glass. (#53, Cambodian woman living in rental room in divided house)

Being caught by police for questioning is one of the largest threats that migrants pointed out. Most of these questioning happens on the road, in an isolated place rather than in residential area where there are a lot of migrants. Many of the respondents said that they feel safe in their residential area, since there are many of their same nationality people. Especially in the area where Cambodians are living, many of them live in families and have children there. They feel at home since they say that the atmosphere reminds them of their home village, unlike living in Bangkok where they are squeezed into small rooms.

I chose this house because of the environment. I am a child of a rural people. My family was a farmer. Here, it is quite similar to my house in my hometown, especially the environment, and it is not crowded like in Bangkok. (#47, Lao woman, living on a rented land where she built her house)

The area where the migrants rent land and build house is like a village, and there are many children. However, since the housing areas are far from Thai school, the migrant children do not go to school. Parents also feel that they are temporary in Thailand, and do not feel the need to send children to Thai schools, although in reality, they do stay for an extended period of time.

Although the migrants would like to live together, they do not seem to form a community as such. Some feel that the community is not as warm and strong as back home.

In my hometown, my neighbors and I are farmers. We always talk to each other, and did activities together. When I am sick, my neighbors in my hometown will come to my house and look after me. In contrast, my neighbors in this current house do not care whether I am sick or not nor did they look after me when I am sick. They just looked at me [and did nothing]. I think, my current neighbors do not come to look after me because everyone has own job and there is no special relationship between us. (#45, Lao woman, living on a rented land where she built her house)

Most of our respondents said that they only talk to people nearby or at the workplace. There is no community activity within the housing area nor at the workplace, nor do the migrants participate in community activities with local Thai people. Hence, their information sources are quite limited to people that they have direct contact with.

## **Conclusion**

There are varieties of housing types that migrants can access around Talad Thai in Thailand. Finding a housing is not difficult regardless of the legal status that the migrants would have, and tenure is not an issue. Hence, it is not important under whose name the rooms are rented. The same nationality migrants tend to live in the similar place. And the place where they live also determine what kind of jobs they will do. Even though some housing conditions are not good and the security of some places are not good, migrants tend to tolerate and they to save as much as possible. They also feel that complaining or reporting to others including the police is no use, feeling isolated and unsupported in the place of destination.

The study has shown that for migrant workers in Talad Thai, housing shapes the work and work further shapes housing choices. No respondent have mentioned that they select their housing location for the ease of childcare (such as moving to larger area in anticipation of a new baby) or for better access to school or childcare. The priority for migrant workers as well as the employers is purely economic and earning money is considered to be the highest and only objective. However, since they are in Thailand for a long period of time, they do have children, and they do live with families and start to form families. They bring their parents and families from their place of origin to look after children as well.

It is not the case that employers and workers themselves do not recognize such changes and the need to address their social reproduction. Talad Thai management itself sees the need to establish daycare centers. Migrants are concerned of their children, and those living in townhouses do mention that one of the reasons why townhouses are a good choice is because they have place for children to play. However, there is little effort from anyone to provide such support and migrant community remain isolated. It is important that social reproduction and migrants' integration in the local community is taken more serious thoughts in policy discussion on labor migration.

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