

14 Gender, Technology and Migration in Export-Production of Shrimps: Identity Formation and Labour Practices in Surat Thani Province, Thailand

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14.1 Introduction¹

Biotechnology applications in the shrimp industry fall in line with Thailand's strategy to become 'Kitchen of the World' which assigns an export-oriented role to the food and agriculture sectors.² Surat Thani Province is one of the biggest shrimp producer areas in the south of the country with a labour force comprised mainly of migrants from Northeast Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. The competitiveness of the shrimp industry in Thailand appears to be associated with low wages, facilitated by the use of migrant workers.³ This chapter analyzes the relationship between gender, technology and migration, particularly focusing on the manner in which the concept of 'place' defines 'work' and how the identities of 'gender', 'migrant' and 'worker' interact to produce specific labour control practices affecting wage levels and migrant workers' social well-being.

Our choice of focus is derived from an awareness of the main shortcomings of gender analyses of migration that draw on political-economic and neoclassical approaches and use the concept of 'gender' as a fixed social construct. Women and men as central subjects in migration are conceptualized as being in static opposition; and, *a priori*, women are regarded as being in a disadvantaged position in comparison to men when they move in search of work. Our research uses a post-structuralist approach to show how, under

the competitive conditions of shrimp farming, the legal and social conditions are such that migrant men and women as actors constantly create and re-create gender meanings for adaptation. This creates diverse patterns of subordination which cannot easily be reduced to women being always in a subordinated position. Inter-ethnic differences do exist, and men who are members of a marginalized ethnic group may well find themselves worse off than women belonging to the dominant ethnic group.

We begin with a brief discussion on the theoretical premises of the study, followed by a description of the research site and methodology and analysis of our empirical findings. The conclusion highlights the main cultural and discursive practices that are steered towards profit-making objectives, and how they have created diverse identities on the basis of an interaction between notions of 'gender', 'place' and 'work'. Our findings and reflections are connected with the growing trove of ethnographic and feminist geography studies that dwell on the constitution of work and place through the production of 'gender' (Hanson/Pratt 1995; Nagar/Lawson/McDowell/Hanson 2002; Secor 2003; Boyer 2006; Harris 2006; Nightingale 2006). Beyond this, we also see the necessity to situate gendered micro actions at different scales within a broader chain of production governed by different systems of rights and entitlements.

14.2 Intersecting Subjectivities in the Constitution of Work: A Conceptual Pathway

Gender studies that follow the conventional political economy approach often make linkages between gender and globalization, calling attention to the effects of globalization on women in developing regions.

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published in: *International Migration*, 48,5 (2010).

2 According to Flegel (2006) Thailand has been the world's leading producer of cultivated shrimps since 1992 with its export earnings alone reaching more than 1 billion US dollars per year.

3 See at: <<http://www.econ.nida.ac.th/people/faculty/Piriya/publications/Piriya-Migration-Journal-format.pdf>> (10 April 2010).

This perspective usually adopts a structuralist outlook that views globalization as a process driven by 'global capitalism', propelled by neoliberal logic, which inevitably influences and determines international governments, households and families in ways that disfavour women (Connelly/Li/MacDonald/Parpart 1995; Peterson 1996). Themes such as the effects and impacts of the internationalization of labour markets, global production regimes, and the position of women within the global economy often project a dismal picture, depicting the harsh effects of globalization on women as inevitable due to persisting gender inequality (Sen 1996; Shiva 2000⁴; Ghosh 2001; Chow 2002; Beneria 2003). Scholars and practitioners in the field of gender and development refer to this as "the economic turn" (Davids/van Driel 2001). Variants of the structuralist perspective also underpin discussions on gender, globalization and migration. For example the debate on the growing 'care deficit' in developed regions of the North emphasizes how attempts to cover this gap through importing migrant female labour from the labour-abundant South have created care chains in global and regional political economies.⁵ This perspective views labour demand and supply as principal determinants of the movement patterns of women, from rural areas and less developing countries as unskilled, semi-skilled, or low-skilled workers, and gradually to economically vibrant regions. Many attribute global economic restructuring as the principal driver of the mobility of women into cities and across borders. Adopting a one-dimensional view, that reduces explanations of women's decision-making concerning migration, and its outcomes at the destinations, to economic considerations, can bypass significant interactions between economic, legal and cultural forces that shape their identities and experiences at the work place. These can in turn reinforce hierarchical relations within the local political economy and beyond.

Feminist studies today posit that women's undervalued work has buttressed and given shape to economic globalization. For instance, Nagar/Lawson/McDowell/Hanson (2002) and Harstock (2001) argue that different sets of relationships - those be-

tween high-skill and low-skill work, formal and casualized economies, productive and caring work, globalized and marginalized places (in the South and the North) - have allowed global capitalism to assume its contemporary forms. Bonds' work (2006) on call centres in the rural American West has unpacked the ways they are linked to processes of transnational capitalism and rural restructuring, underscoring the role of the 'new information economy' that relies on women in occupations clustered at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. From Pratt's (1997) work, we learn how three discursive constructions of Filipina⁶ have shaped Filipinas' labour market experiences in Vancouver as well as the flows of female migrant aspirants to the nursing profession. Pratt's (1997) analysis demonstrates that theories of subject formation can contribute more textured understandings of labour market dynamics and segmentation. Secor (2003) also shows that in Turkey, the discourse of a deferential femininity, or what makes 'a good woman', is a significant part of restructuring local economies and the growth of low-wage, low-status and often casual jobs, for which women are seen as ideal recruits.

Taking this line of reasoning further, we employ a number of key theoretical steps that countervail the view of gender as a fixed structure of power. First, we recognize the contingent link between (a) the production of 'gender' and 'migrant' identities and (b) the constitution of the notions of 'work' and 'place'. By examining migration processes and practices at work places, we discern the production of place, gender and migrant-differentiated identities through iteration. Being a 'woman worker', 'male employer', or 'male migrant' are products of practices, and concrete cultural and historical circumstances, and thus cannot be treated in a pre-determined way. What it means to be a migrant woman or man is context-dependent; and to discover this, we focus on how identities are created, differentially and fluidly, through daily interactions and discourses on work and in the creation of distinct places where migrants are allocated according to their status and employers' preferences.

Second, premised on current theorizing on gender subjectivity (particularly instructive in understanding the production of identities and positions) we underscore the view that women and men as subjects enter into social relationships that are fluid and most often provisional. Rather than viewing the 'subject' as fixed and stable, it is more insightful to understand 'subject

4 See Vandana Shiva, 2000: "Lecture 5: Poverty and Globalization", Reith Lectures, BBC; at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2000/lecture5.shtml>> (21 May 2008).

5 A care chain is an arrangement through which care responsibilities (for the young and old) are transferred from one socio-economic class in one country to another (see Ehrenreich/Hochschild 2002).

6 As 'suppliant' pre-immigrant; as inferior 'housekeeper'; and, within the Filipino community, as 'husband stealer'.

formation' as a process of becoming (McDowell 1999). This view cautions against *a priori* and reified perceptions on women's roles and redirects attention to the diverse ways women and men enter into, and engage in, social relationships (Rao 1991) and how identities are formed through interaction. Strathern (1988: 128) emphasizes this point as follows: "It is the interactions of women and men that make men, men." Additionally, Butler's (1990, 1994) treatment of 'gender identity' as instantiated by discourses and practices that contribute to cementing ontological differences between women and men urges attentiveness to the iteration of certain practices that makes sex difference appear as natural and stable, therefore turning gender into "the factness of difference" (Butler 1994: 9). Cornwall's (2007) advice regarding the need to take cognizance of the relations of inequality and uneven power that the iteration of practices maintain and co-produce is crucial to analyse the intersection between gender and differentiated migrant identities. Male and female identities as workers can be self-defined as a result of concrete discursive practices which buttress the actual organization of labour in shrimp farms. Reflecting on the links between different scales of production (local, national and global) and connecting gender practices at local sites, we suggest that the creation and re-creation of identities occupy a significant place in the formation and sustaining of social hierarchies within global capitalism.

14.3 Methodology

This study is part of a wider research project on policymaking processes in biotechnology, where a much earlier random survey of 214 shrimp farms in Surat Thani Province was conducted in 2006. The results of that survey are presented in figures 14.2 and table 14.2 to provide additional information on the context. The research for this chapter employed a mixed-methods approach with three sets of qualitative interviews and a survey conducted between October 2006 and May 2007 in 120 shrimp farms in this province. The first set of interviews involved 11 farm owners and focussed on issues of production and labour employment. The second set of interviews involved 30 Lao and Burmese male and female migrant workers,⁷ and focussed on migration processes, brokerage networks and the general working conditions in Surat Thani.

7 9 Lao men, 6 Laotian women, 12 Burmese men, and 3 Burmese women.

The key findings from these two sets of interviews informed the selection of items in a survey designed to test the pervasiveness of these initial findings among a wider population. The survey later used a purposive sample of 147 Thai, Burmese and Lao female migrant workers. Tables 14.3, 14.4, 14.5 and 14.6 present findings from this survey.

The third set of interviews, involving 41 female migrant workers selected from participants in the survey⁸ aimed at a deeper investigation of labour and employment conditions in shrimp farms by gender. These 41 female migrants were part of the survey and we now purposively interviewed them since their narratives could shed light on their social positioning as labour migrants and as women in paid work on shrimp farms. Questions in this last set of interviews explored historical shifts in livelihoods, marriage and social status, spatial mobility and gendered conditions of the migrants' present employment. The researchers along with Thai graduate students, who translated the conversations from Thai to English, conducted and recorded all three sets of interviews on-site. Later, researchers clustered all interview notes into different themes to enable accessibility of reference.

14.4 Thai Migration Policy, Surat Thani's Shrimp Farms, and the Production of Gender Identities and Work

The uneven spread of economic opportunities and political conditions in Myanmar and Laos, and in the Mekong region as a whole, have prompted people from disadvantaged countries in this sub-region to seek better employment opportunities elsewhere, especially in neighbouring Thailand. Moreover, uneven stages of economic development in the Mekong region also create a differentiated sub-regional labour market: Thailand faces a labour shortage in certain low-skilled sectors, while Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar face an unskilled labour surplus due to rural poverty, underdeveloped infrastructure and low or poor-quality education. Disparities in income accompany these conditions, accounting for part of the cross-border migration flows between Thailand and these other countries.

Thailand's economic growth in the 1980's led to labour market expansion and an acute shortage of unskilled labour towards the 1990's. Local Thais were no

8 12 Northeast Thais, 13 Burmese and 16 Laotians.

longer interested in the unskilled labour market, but showed increasing preference for work in the services sectors, where incomes were relatively higher. As a result, the private sector pressured the government to allow them to employ migrant workers. Then, in 1992, Thailand started to adopt an immigration policy for unskilled foreign workers (Chantavanich 2007). Over time, the Thai government began to develop migration policies that implicitly recognized industries' growing need for low, semi-skilled and cheap labour that will enable them to carve a competitive niche within the export market, while simultaneously keeping migration flows in check through stringent legal monitoring systems.

Figure 14.1: Surat Thani Province, Thailand. Source: http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/ไฟล์:Thailand_Surat_Thani.png.



The shrimp industry in Surat Thani Province (figure 14.1) is the second biggest producer of shrimp in Thailand largely because of shrimp farming intensifi-

cation and upgraded technologies. The growth of the infrastructure-driven and technology-intensive shrimp industry in Surat Thani Province created an increasing demand for low- and semi-skilled migrant workers, many from neighbouring Myanmar and Laos.

In 2003, a new 'open door' policy to manage rather than reject migrant workers was proposed. This approach requires registration of employers who employ migrant workers, and for employers to issue public announcements of job vacancies first to the Thai labour force. This is completely new for Thailand given that previous policies aimed at registering workers to monitor their presence in the Kingdom, rather than registering employers. On 2 March 2004, a cabinet resolution directed the Ministry of the Interior to develop a database for aliens from Burma, Laos and Cambodia. All aliens living in Thailand were to report for registration, with fines and imprisonment for those who violated this order, including workers, employers, and those who provided accommodations for aliens.⁹ Employers were required to pay government fees to register their migrant employees.

Early assessments of the new approach to migration management revealed various challenges, such as when employers refused to pay the required registration fees because they were too expensive, thus slowing down the registration process (Chantanvanich 2007; Muntarbhorn 2005)¹⁰. Official records indicate that Burmese migrants form the largest proportion of workers with permits. Interviews with farm operators in Surat Thani revealed that many of them comply with the government requirements for registration. They in turn deduct the required fees from workers' wages. Table 14.1 shows the numbers of Laotian and

9 The new requirements are registration of both migrant workers and their employers; failure to come forward to register subjects the former to deportation and the latter to punishment; a medical test, which migrant workers have to pass, leading to a medical certificate; failure to undertake and pass the test subjects migrant workers to deportation, while passing the test leads to the granting of a work permit as well as medical and social welfare paralleling that of the local population (Muntarbhorn 2005: 5-7).

10 However, it was found that there were more migrant registrants than in the past. Whereas 568,249 alien workers registered in 2001, in 2004, 1,269,074 aliens were reported (702,351 men and 566,723 women). The majority (905,881) were from Burma (497,372 men and 408,509 women). In all, 181,614 of the registrants (80,981 men and 100,633 women) were from Laos (Ministry of Interior 2004, in Thongyou/Ayuwat 2005).

Burmese workers who have work permits, and of Thai employers who have permission to employ migrant workers in the Province.

Table 14.1: Number of Laotian and Burmese with work permits and Thai employers with permits to employ migrant workers, Surat Thani Province. Source: Migrant Labour Administrative Office, Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2006

Thai Employers (with permits to employ)	Burmese migrants (with work per- mits)	Laotian migrants (with work per- mits)
5,381	22,345	647

In-migration trends in Thailand indicate that the Thai economy is absorbing migrant labourers for low-skilled work that Thai citizens do not find desirable. Migrants from poorer labour-supplying neighbouring countries, like Laos and Myanmar, continue to seek work in Thailand because of the informal infrastructure made up of networks of brokers who charge relatively modest fees (5,000–7,000 baht) (Martin 2002). Employer dependence on migrant labour is likely to persist as industries in Thailand expand given the need to reduce production costs to become more competitive in the global market. Thai migration registration policy is therefore concessionary, ceding to the need to redress the scarcity of low- and semi-skilled labour for growing industries like technology-intensive shrimp farming on the one hand, and to the perceived need to control the flow of migrant workers through legal means that mete out stiff penalties to violators of existing requirements on the other.

Surat Thani Province is one of 14 provinces of Thailand's Southern Region. According to 2006 estimates, the province has 14 per cent of total registered immigrants in this region, estimated to include about 168,114 persons from Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia. In the same period, estimates show that the Southern Region had about 13 per cent of all registered immigrants in the country (Kingdom of Thailand 2006a).

Surat Thani's shrimp farm operators tap into the mobility flows of Northeast Thais, Laotians and Burmese, to address the demands for rapid, superior quality, high-volume production of shrimp for export, with minimum labour cost and maximum control of labour delivery. This pursues the track of export-oriented economic growth, framed specifically by the market niche Thailand defined for itself: the 'Kitchen of the World'. Surat Thani's shrimp production ac-

counted for ten per cent of Thailand's total shrimp export for 2004 (Kingdom of Thailand 2006). All farm operators – big, medium and small – strive to produce shrimp of standard size and quality suitable for the global market.

Shrimp farms vary according to the degree of capital, the volume of production and earnings, the types of technology, and the nature of labour investments. According to Smith (1999), systems of shrimp production are classified as extensive, semi-intensive and intensive, with reference to their stocking levels and pond size. The largest farms in Surat Thani stock as many as 400,000 broodstock per rai,¹¹ compared with the traditional practice of 5,000 broodstock per rai.¹² The shrimp harvest may be two or three times a year, depending on the degree of infrastructure and labour monitoring. Successful large farms in the province can generate a net profit of 600,000 baht to 1 million baht per shrimp pond. The research project's earlier random survey of 241 farm operators in 2006 showed that large individual or corporate farm operators usually operate more than 20 ponds, with an average annual operating capital of 32 million baht.

Large individual and corporate shrimp farm operators in Surat Thani are successful in super-intensive farming because of their capability to nurture superior broodstock through updated information and close connection with suppliers who use genetic engineering to improve seed and domestication techniques; good farm management practices; and the use of new shrimp farming technologies. An example of these updated farm technologies is the bio-secure system that uses polyethylene lining on the pond bed and walls, good roofing, water chlorination and intense water quality monitoring by a test kit specifically designed for the purpose. The large individual and corporate farm operators are able to harvest high yields in their ponds due to the good survival rate of the superior broodstock, and their use of upgraded technologies. Thus, large farm operators are able to produce huge quantities of large-sized and highly priced shrimp that are attractive to foreign buyers.

Our earlier random survey of 214 shrimp farm operators in 2006 revealed that small-scale farms usually operate one to five active ponds. They do not have a water storage pond, due to land limitations.

11 1 rai is approximately equivalent to 16,000 square metres; 1 hectare is equivalent to 6 rai.

12 Traditional, land-intensive shrimp farming used to be widely practiced in Surat Thani up to the mid-1980's but is no longer practiced.

Table 14.2: Technologies typically employed, by type of farm operator. **Source:** Based on the authors' random survey of 214 farmer operators in Surat Thani (2006). N=214 farm operators.

Type	Technologies	Specific Use	Annual Mean Capital Investment (Baht)
Small n=159	Boat (100%)	Feeding Check water quality	865,000
	Net (100%)	Animal protection	
	Aerator (100%)	Supply oxygen	
	Test kit (100%)	Check water quality	
Medium n=47	Boat (100%)	Feeding Check water quality	4,210,000
	Net (100%)	Animal protection	
	Aerator (100%)	Supply oxygen	
	Test kit (100%)	Check water quality	
	Water storage pond/Wastewater treatment pond (63.8%)	Water storage/ Water treatment	
	Polyethylene (PE) (58.1%)	Pond lining to prevent soil contamination	
Big n=8	Boat (100%)	Feeding Check water quality	32,000,000
	Net: (100%)	Animal protection	
	Aerator (100%)	Supply oxygen	
	Test kit (100%)	Water quality check	
	Water storage pond/Waste water treatment pond (100 %)	Water storage/ Water treatment	
	Polyethylene (PE 75%)	Pond lining to prevent soil contamination	
	Chlorination (75%)	Disinfection	
	In-house laboratory (50 %)	Water quality and disease check	

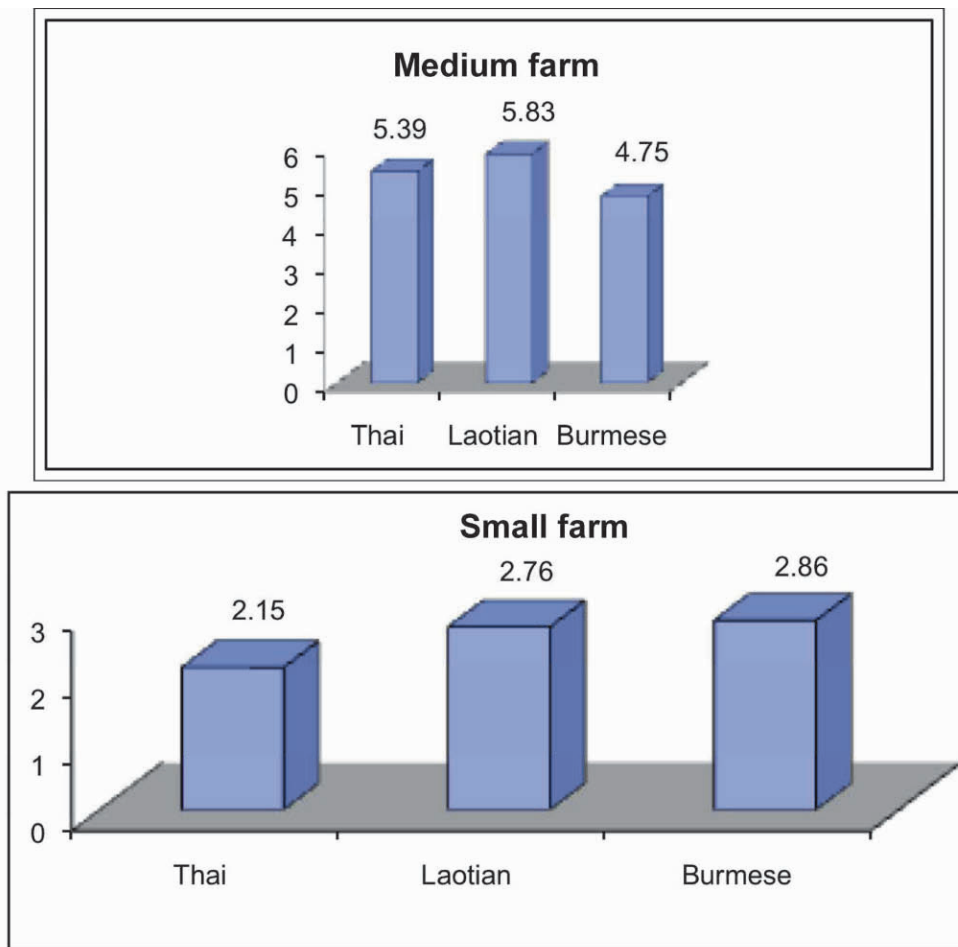
Medium-sized farms have 6 to 20 active ponds, and have separate water storage ponds. Large-scale farms have more than 20 active ponds for shrimp cultivation. They have water storage ponds, and each pond is generally 5–7 rai in size. For big farms, it is important to maintain a water storage pond to earn a *Certificate of (Good) Conduct* (CoC) from the government, which certifies good quality control standards required by shrimp export protocols. The 2006 survey also revealed that most shrimp farms in Surat Thani are small (74 per cent) and medium-size farms (22 per cent).

The range of technologies used differs widely between small, medium and large type farms. Large farm operators have their own laboratories that can thoroughly check water quality and diagnose shrimp diseases, according to our 2006 survey. They also

have basic equipment such as boats, nets and aerator test kits. In contrast, medium-size farms employ a more limited range of technology; while the small-scale operators use only the most basic equipment (see [table 14.2](#)).

The number of active shrimp ponds and the nature of farm technology usually determine the labour force on the farms. Usually, one worker takes care of one shrimp pond. Large farm operators hire many workers to apply chlorine, feed shrimp stock, replace polyethylene, operate aerators, regularly monitor water quality in both shrimp and storage ponds and treat wastewater. High-skilled workers work in in-house laboratories, machinery maintenance and financial management. Farms also hire security guards to prevent thefts of any kind. Small- and medium-sized farms, however, require a smaller work force as shown

Figure 14.2: Average number of hired migrant workers in small and medium farms, by nationality, Ganjanadit and Pulpin Districts, Surat Thani Province (N = 154). **Source:** Authors' Survey.



in table 14.2. Due to the lower number of ponds in small-scale farms, family and kin usually undertake hands-on management of the farms, but some migrant workers are also hired.

Interviews revealed that large farm operators hire mainly Thai men from the northeast of Thailand. Medium and small farm operators, on the other hand, hire Burmese and Laotian migrant workers, many of whom are couples. Mr Srisuban, an owner of a large farm, remarked:

Actually, a Burmese wage is cheaper. But if we hire Burmese workers, they should be legal, not smuggled. However, hiring Thais...hmm...can also be difficult. They return to the northeast during Songkran (Thai New Year) holidays, so we are left without workers. Some farm owners I know don't want to hire Thais, especially from the southern region, since this is the area of shrimp trade outlets. These workers can steal the shrimp from us and bring them there since they know their way around.

In the same interview, another farm owner added, "Some employers prefer to hire the Burmese. They are usually afraid of being arrested, so they don't roam about and this is good for the shrimp farm." A farm owner from Jaidee Farm also expressed his preference for Burmese workers, pointing out that if the employer is fair; the Burmese are generally grateful and diligent. "They do not drink like the Laotians or the Thais since they are a very religious people and pray a lot", he remarked.

From a survey of 154 small and medium type farms¹³ in Ganjanadit and Pulpin districts, by other researchers in the larger project, the number of migrant workers appears to be actually higher than

¹³ The total number of surveyed farms was 214 as mentioned in the methodology section. The number of medium and small-sized farms was 154.

the number of Thai workers in aggregate terms. Figure 14.2 show this pattern.

Most workers in these farms are migrant couples, and this is not a coincidence. Cultural and economic processes intersect as shrimp farms in Surat Thani evolve into an emerging migrant niche in South Thailand. Farm employers and migrant workers continue to produce and re-employ meanings around technology-intensive work that serve to sustain shrimp farming as a viable source of profit from global and domestic trade. Unlike others who have studied migrant identities with reference to an ethnic group, place of origin, or nationality that effects or pervades trans-local or trans-national identities, we will view the migrants under study through their worker identities produced by concrete social practices and discourses (Yeoh/Willis/Abdul Khader Fakhri. 2003; Toyota 2003).

14.4.1 The Production of Place

Surat Thani's shrimp farms have become migrant enclaves of a distinct type, exemplifying the notion that "place itself is a *process* that makes and is made by migration" [*italics added for emphasis*] (Silvey 2006). All Thai, Burmese and Laotian migrants in the Surat Thani farms under study are working couples. Most of these couples are at a stage in their life where there is motivation to 'start up', that is, generate savings for the future and secure a place to live albeit temporarily and away from places of origin. Many of these couples also have small children. Table 14.3 presents differences in civil status according to nationality among the sampled migrant workers.

Table 14.3: Civil status of migrant workers by nationality on small and medium shrimp farms, Surat Thani Province. **Source:** Authors' Survey (2007).

	Thai (%)	Laotians (%)	Burmese (%)	Total
Married	32 (30%)	28 (26%)	47 (44%)	107 (100%)
Living together	10 (25%)	17 (42%)	13 (33%)	40 (100%)
Single	0	0	0	0
Total	42 (29%)	45 (31%)	60 (40%)	147 (100%)

Migrant couples disclosed that many of them met, began to live together and/or married each other else-

where in Thailand, or in their places of origin. They then travelled south to settle and work on one of Surat Thani's shrimp farms. Almost unanimously, migrants acceded to the fact that living and working on a shrimp farm was comfortable, and allowed them to live together as a couple.

A Laotian couple from Mooring Ta Kag, close to the Thai border, have worked on a shrimp farm for two years. Mod said that she and her partner, Boontawee, arrived at Surat Thani, a month apart. "I came later so that he could first find us a home. He found work here on the shrimp farm, where we could also stay." During the slack season immediately after the harvest, their boss employs Boontawee in his factory. Boontawee prefers this arrangement instead of working for a construction firm like other Laotians he knows. "It is quite good to live and work here. I feel as though I am staying at home. Working for a construction firm is difficult since you need to move from place to place. It may be all right if you only have your wife with you. It will never work since we have a child."

Ta, a shrimp farm worker from Northeast Thailand, recalls that prior to settling in Surat Thani, she worked as a domestic in Bangkok for a year and a half. She left her workplace after she met her boyfriend: "so I moved here to live with him. We met in Cha-am (3 hours south of Bangkok) where he was working on a shrimp farm and we later married in Nakonpanom our hometown, just prior to coming to work in Surat Thani." As a domestic, Ta used to receive a monthly pay of 4,500 baht, a little less than what she is currently receiving as a shrimp farm worker (only 5,000 baht, which she has to share with her husband). She reasons: "If I didn't marry I wouldn't have quit my job in Bangkok. But living on this farm with my husband is not bad at all because the cost of living is low. We are given rice and gas, so I can still send some money home to my parents in Nakonpanom." In Surat Thani, she did not attempt to apply for a job as a domestic since, as she pointedly says, "It's not good because we are a couple."

Sorn is from Ubon Ratchathani, or the Isan region in Northeast Thailand. She also worked as a domestic in Bangkok, married her boyfriend, and moved to Don Suk, where he worked in commercial fishing. They later moved to Surat Thani, working on a shrimp farm for the last two years. She thinks Surat Thani is a better place for her: "Here we have a place to stay and we both earn, at the same time, we have a baby. I only help my husband so I have time to care for the baby. That would not have been possible in

Don Suk, since I was not earning – only my husband [was].”

Tai, a Burmese female worker says, “If a woman is single, she has no choice but to work in a rubber plantation, be a merchant, or work in a store, since she has no husband.” Her husband, Seng, adds, “Women cannot work on shrimp farms, only men can. But they can stay with their husbands and help with the housework.” His wife, Tai, informed us that she and her husband work on the shrimp farm “for the price of one worker.” In the same conversation, another Burmese female worker, Teem, counters that on the shrimp farm, “We are comfortable. We pray a lot, do the laundry and sweep our houses and the owner’s as well.”

Owners of small and medium type farms prefer to hire couples because they feel assured of a greater sense of responsibility from these worker-couples than from single women or men. In their view, couples work together to stay together. Interviews also revealed that due to the precariousness of shrimp farming – the risks of theft, and needs for regular feeding and close monitoring of shrimp health, water quality and temperature – farm owners are inclined to hire couples who can easily take turns to do the work and can flexibly share these tasks. These farms do not require a huge workforce but can afford to employ couples or small families to live within their farm compounds to keep round-the-clock watch over the ponds. One farm owner remarked, “I prefer to hire a good, reliable male worker who can watch and care for the ponds and have his wife with him to make sure that he is not lonely so that he does not go on drinking bouts with other workers.” Owners of large farms, on the other hand, prefer to hire individual male workers to operate and maintain the numerous pieces of equipment and infrastructure on their farms. They are provided individual living quarters on the farm compounds where they are subjected to a more corporate regimen of labour control and management. Women may not live on these premises.

A number of migrant couples on small and medium size farms have young children. This, however, is temporary as when the children reach school age, they are sent back home. Table 14.4 shows that most workers do not have their children living with them on the farm.

Farm owners restrain workers from keeping too many children in the compounds, to avoid crowding, disturbances at work, and accidents in ponds. Female workers are relatively freer to travel to visit their older, left-behind children, since husbands are responsible

Table 14.4: Number of children of migrant workers living on shrimp farms, Surat Thani. **Source:** Authors’ Survey.

Number of children living in the shrimp farm	Frequency	%
0	66	45
1	59	40
2	22	15
Total	147	100

for the farm work much more than their female partners who are largely considered secondary work hands (to be discussed later). As migrants, women also experience the ‘friction of distance’ from children differently than do men, thus they take principal responsibility for their children even from a distance (Hanson/Pratt 1995). For instance, they take it upon themselves to remit earnings to caretaker relatives at home for their children.¹⁴

Migrants and employers have created small and medium type shrimp farms collectively as a place where workers can lead their lives as couples, simultaneously residing and earning a living, yet mostly without their children. The absence of children is a stark reminder that the migrants continue to live in flux, as migrants-in-temporary-settlement, while the overriding concern of employers for acquiescing to the conjugal arrangement is primarily to employ a distinct, work- and-cost-efficient pool of workers who can provide high productivity for the markets. Studies of women workers and labour markets, notably by Hanson and Pratt (1995), demonstrate the spatial terms by which women select their jobs due to childcare obligations. The migrant workers in this study prefer locations where they can earn a living and keep their small children by them. Indeed, employers and migrant workers unwittingly coalesce behind a particular organization of conjugal labour, premised on the need for a couple’s intimacy and proximity for economic production, built into the constitution of shrimp farms as a distinct migrant niche and place for working couples.

¹⁴ Paying for a broker who can physically bring money to their families left behind is common especially for Burmese and Laotian women.

14.4.2 The Production of Identity: A Worker vs. 'Not a Real Worker'

Feminists in different disciplines have explored the ways gender inflects the meaning, representation, and experience of work (Hanson/Pratt 1995; Mohanty 1997; McDowell 1998; Phillips 1998; Elson 1999; Lawson/Silvey 1999; Pratt 1999). "Women do not do unskilled or low-skilled jobs because they are naturally bearers of inferior labour. Rather, the jobs they do are unskilled because women enter them already determined as inferior labourers compared with male labour" (Elson/Pearson 1981). As early as the 1980's, a consciousness of the socially constructed character of female labour had provided explanations (for cheap female labour, the occupational segregation of women and their slow career mobility) that challenged biologically determined explanations. Butler (1990) adds to the conundrum on women's work, drawing attention to the idea that female work identity does not precondition work, but is an effect of it. Butler's argument is thus substantially at odds with earlier deterministic notions of gender on labour, and the *a priori* gender-typing of jobs. Gendered work in our analysis is formed by particular conditions and practices that materialize 'gender', making it appear fixed, natural and common sense while actually it is iterative, negotiated and contingent (Nightingale 2006; Risseu 1989). A number of interviews with farm owners and workers reveal this aspect clearly. Below some of these interviews are presented in full to demonstrate the nature of the discursive and behavioural practices that materialize gender.

"Working on a shrimp farm is too laborious for a woman. A male worker is more agile. A female worker mostly works in the 'store' - meaning doing administrative work. On our farm, we have about 30 per cent female workers. But on small farms, the proportion of female to male workers is probably one to one," explains Mr Srisuban, owner of a large shrimp farm.

Interview 1 with Deam, a female Burmese worker on Mr Chai's shrimp farm:

- Interviewer: For how long have you been working on Mr Chai's farm?
- Deam: Three years.
- Interviewer: Did you come to Surat Thani directly from Myanmar?
- Deam: Yes, but I worked in the city first. I was in a factory that sorted out fish for export.
- Interviewer: Why did you leave your work in the city?

- Deam: I got married.
- Interviewer: How many ponds are you responsible for?
- Deam: Only one pond. I help my husband with his work on the pond.
- Interviewer: Do you get paid separately by Mr Chai?
- Deam: No, only my husband receives a salary. Wives are 'not real workers' (*ah lote tha marr a sit ma hote par*).

Interview 2 with Ae, a female Lao worker from Khun Thong:

- Interviewer: How much salary do you receive?
- Ae: 7,000 baht. My husband and I receive this amount.
- Interviewer: How many ponds are you responsible for?
- Ae: Two ponds.
- Interviewer: How much will you get if you take care of one pond?
- Ae: 4,000 baht. They used to give us 6,700 baht for two ponds.
- Interviewer: Are there single people working here?
- Ae: No, only people who have families or are married.
- Interviewer: If a family quits, will the owner hire a family again?
- Ae: Yes.
- Interviewer: What is your duty here?
- Ae: Feeding the shrimp. Helping my husband with the motor of the aerator. Cleaning the office of our boss.
- Interviewer: Does your husband also clean the office of your boss?
- Ae: No, only women here do that.

Couples who work on the shrimp farms often receive a 'couple wage', not the sum of two individual wages. Some owners pay the working couples for every pond they care for. For instance, Mu, a Burmese female worker, compares working on a palmsugar farm to working on a shrimp farm:

A family or a couple can also live on a palm farm together. But the wife is only paid when she does actual work on the palmsugar farm. Here on the shrimp farm, we are paid per pond. So even if I only help my husband, I still get paid. We get paid together.

Table 14.5 presents the responses of 143 female workers when asked whether they receive a separate wage from their husbands.

Table 14.5 indicates that most female Burmese workers do not receive a separate wage from their em-

Table 14.5: Female workers' receipt of a separate wage by nationality. **Source:** Authors' Interviews.

Do you receive a separate wage from your husband?	Thai (%)	Laotians (%)	Burmese (%)	Total (%)
Yes	26 (58%)	12 (27%)	7 (15%)	45 (100%)
No	16 (16%)	32 (33%)	50 (51%)	98 (100%)
Total	42 (29%)	44 (31%)	57 (40%)	143 (100%)

ployers, whereas most Thai female workers do. The data invites us to conclude that the nature of work performed on shrimp farms differentiates between women and men, and evidently, nationalities and legal status.¹⁵ Instituting a couple wage and public admissions of gender-specific work and capacities produce and reproduce coherent identities of women as 'not real workers'. These serve as discursive and material means by which differentiated identities and social places of workers come to cohere as fixed and indisputable, thus further cementing differences and inequalities between women and men.

Indeed, conscious of being 'not real workers', the women nonetheless both know and try to rework their social place, in order to negotiate and promote their own purposive goals (Brunt 1992; Villareal 1992; Williams 2005). It is in the interstices between accepting and resisting their identity as 'not real workers' that they are able to create latitude for exploring multiple livelihoods apart from their present one, and to perform social reproductive obligations, especially childcare.

Although paid a separate wage, trans-local female migrants from northeast Thailand are not considered 'real workers' (*mai chai khon ngan*) either. This identity provides them with room to manoeuvre to engage in multi-local livelihoods, as they are generally mobile and are able to juggle shrimp farming with other livelihoods. Twenty-two year-old Sorn, who has been working on a shrimp farm for the last three years, says that after the shrimp harvest, she joins work teams on nearby house construction sites. "They pay us a bit more than 100 baht per day", she said. However, Sorn admits that being a brick layer is not sufficient livelihood and so after the slack period of shrimp farming, she resumes her work on the farm with her husband, who earns a bit more from his work at the farm than she does. Sorn, then, is less dependent on shrimp farm work since she does not place her shrimp farm

worker status on equal terms as her husband, making it possible for her to explore multiple jobs.

Unlike Thais from the northeast, who explore supplementary sources of income, some Laotian female migrants prefer to stay with their husbands on the shrimp farms. A number of them bring their children. They capitalize on 'not being a real worker' (*bor man kam ma kone*) to attend to their childcare duties, although this is not the only reason why they have opted for singular jobs. The following conversation details a worker's experiences.

Interview 3 with Mod, Laotian female worker:

Interviewer: You've been working here for two years. Have you ever worked elsewhere in Surat Thani, or taken up other jobs while working here at the shrimp farm?

Mod: Never, only here.

Interviewer: Does the employer pay workers per person or per pond?

Mod: They pay per couple. Each couple receives 5,000 baht.

Interviewer: Is there anything else they provide?

Mod: Rice is free. But I have to pay for the fuel, water and electricity.

Interviewer: Would you be interested in being a domestic while working for the shrimp farm with your husband?

Mod: I cannot do other work since I have a child.

Interviewer: What is your work here?

Mod: Most of the time I do housework for the owner and take care of my child.

Interviewer: While your husband works on the pond?

Mod: Yes.

For Burmese female transnational migrants, "not being a 'real worker'" (*ah lote tha marr a sit ma hote par*) serves to tie them more firmly to their husbands who work as bonded labourers on shrimp farms, due to the mobility limitations posed by their legal statuses in Thailand. Compared with other types of mi-

15 This may be largely due to better platforms for negotiation by Thai workers - an altogether important yet separate issue that deserves discussion elsewhere.

Table 14.6: Supplementary jobs of female workers simultaneous with shrimp farming by nationality. **Source:** Authors' Survey (2007).

	Thai (%)	Laotians (%)	Burmese (%)	Total (%)
Had a second job/livelihood while being a shrimp farm worker	14 (47%)	9 (30%)	7 (23%)	30 (100%)
Never had a second job/livelihood while being a shrimp farm worker	27 (24%)	34 (30%)	53 (46%)	114 (100%)
Total	41 (28%)	43 (30%)	60 (42%)	144 (100%)

grant workers, Burmese migrants are highly dependent on their individual farm employers for their legal status and livelihood security. The new migration policy in Thailand that requires both employers and workers to jointly register and pay government fees has tied both workers and employers to each other. As Teem's husband says resentfully:

If we have a working license, it is usually kept by our boss. He is afraid that his employees will leave and go elsewhere. You see if any one of us is questioned or arrested by the police, our boss will be in trouble. Thai people are the headmen here, while the Burmese people are the workers.

When queried on whether they would seek second jobs, a number of Burmese female workers responded:

- Dao: The boss will not allow. The boss says that a good employee is hard to find.
- Tik: No, I must ask my husband first.
- Aye: The boss allows me to take up a job when I don't have work. But I don't go. I don't have a legal ID.
- Oma: I worked in a seafood factory when I was single. But now, I do not search for other work since my husband will not allow me. I concentrate on my work here, that is, washing, cooking and sometimes feeding the shrimp.

As shown in [table 14.6](#), among the three groups of migrants, Burmese female migrants do not usually take up supplementary jobs compared with Thais and Laotians.

'Not being a real worker' has translated into diverse practices and strategies by Thai, Laotian and Burmese female migrants. Circumstances have also enabled or constrained these practices. In particular, authorities usually overlook the presence of Lao migrants since they tend to blend well with the local population due to their ability to speak Lao-Thai, whereas the Burmese emerge more visibly as culturally

distinct and they have a record of being irregular migrants in Thailand. These practices differentiate them as migrant national subjects based on the extent of their 'bondedness' to their employers, often determined by legal immigration policies. Differentiated employment conditions, legal regulatory structures, and possibly, perceived marital norms circumscribe the latitude that migrant women have to secure their livelihoods and perform their reproductive obligations. Yet, as agents fully aware of their social place, they navigate their lives with dexterity, using their status to attain livelihood and reproductive security, albeit short-term and largely irregular.

14.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the experiences of people who migrate as couples to work in a major export industry in Thailand and illustrates how the diverse relationships with, and meanings within, the workplace have emerged through gender and identity practices. By placing social practices that produce gender subjects and their ontological differences at the centre of our analysis, the chapter has revealed the finer aspects of subject positions available to women through labour practices and migration processes.

For migrant couples from Northeast Thailand, Laos and Burma, the shrimp farms are a conjugal comfort zone – a temporary fix in the flux of their mobile migrant lives, where they can both reside and earn a living. For shrimp farm owners, especially those of small and medium size farms, employing migrant couples is preferable since by paying the lower cost of a couple's wages, they have a flexible work team of two persons attending to the delicate and round-the-clock monitoring of shrimp ponds. The creation of 'place' as niche for temporary migrant workers is layered with different rationalities, the conjugal requirements of couples to stay intimately together while earning a living and employers' labour efficiency target. Creation of the female worker subject, publicly

categorized as 'not a real worker' through the couple wage, further differentiates the conjugal workforce. By paying a 'couple wage' to migrants, employers recreate and solidify discourses on the work and labour capacities that differentiate women and men on shrimp farms. This discourse, however, does not face opposition as women workers themselves reproduce it. Female workers employ and invoke their status to achieve certain ends, such as exploring supplementary income sources as well as expanding latitude for the care of young children while still being virtually on the farm's payroll. Women workers' enactments of 'not being a real worker' create, reproduce and differentiate migrant national subjects and relations of inequality.

Düvell's (2004: 205) view on political economy, as being founded on the politics of differences that can be translated into different systems of rights, remains valid. Our case shows how immigration status, labour policies, attitudes of farm owners and migrants' behaviour do interact in ways that have consequences for practices of labour control, affecting wage levels and workers' well being. In addition, the production of place and, concurrently, of subject identities (gender and migrant) that occurs through the labour process plays a significant role in ensuring conformity. Indeed, the purported 'Kitchen of the World' is premised not only on huge investments of capital, science and infrastructure, but equally on cultural and discursive practices steered towards profit maximization to lend support to a coherent organization of largely cheap, bonded and gendered migrant labour.