

The Impact of Thailand’s Migrant Worker Law on Literacy and Social Media among Ethnic Shan Female Migrants from Myanmar¹

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Abstract

This article studies the social and technological barriers that prevent documented and undocumented female migrants in Thailand’s Chiang Mai Province from improving their literacy skills and using social media such as Facebook. In July 2019, our team conducted nine focus-group discussions (FGD) with 38 participants using a picture sorting activity. Using graphics in the FGDs helped us to better engage with migrant populations with low literacy skills. Demographic information of each FGD participant was also collected. Findings show that Thailand’s current laws for migrant workers are the barrier that have negative impacts on literacy improvement and social media usage among both documented and undocumented ethnic Shan female migrants from Myanmar. As Thailand’s law only permits migrants to work in labor-intensive jobs with minimum wage and no benefits, they do not have time and energy to spend on learning the Thai language and other skills. This reduces the migrants’ abilities to interact with Facebook. Additionally, undocumented migrants could not buy a SIM card with the cellular data plan to use their Facebook account directly from their cellphones because Thailand’s laws require all network providers to officially register all SIM card purchases and only sell to documented persons.

Keywords: Migrant worker law, Thailand, literacy, social media

¹ The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the organizations and funders with which the authors are affiliated.

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INTRODUCTION

Migrants around the world are facing enormous social and economic barriers that prevent them from accessing technologies, including the Web and social media.^{8 9 10 11} We are living in the time of mass influxes of migrants resulting in a challenge facing many countries around the world including Thailand. Documented and undocumented migrants from lower-income neighboring countries such as Myanmar,¹² Laos, and Cambodia, can easily be found all over Thailand. According to the Thai government's Foreign Workers Administration Office's March 2018 report, Thailand has 2,189,868 registered migrants, 924,923 of them (42 percent) women,¹³ and there is an estimated additional total of 1.6 million undocumented migrants.¹⁴

Migrants in Thailand are working mostly in physically demanding jobs and unfortunately many of them have limited literacy skills. It is a real challenge for them to adopt technologies and take part in online social communications that social media has to offer. However, many migrants in Thailand use mobile phones for verbal communication with their families and friends living in Thailand and their home countries. This basic use helps to reduce stress and maintain close ties to their cultures and communities, and could be augmented by the use of social communication platforms.¹⁵ This research aims to understand the social and technology barriers that prevent documented and undocumented female migrants with low literacy skills in the Thai province of Chiang Mai from improving literacy skills and using social media. Our hypothesis was that female migrants face barriers in accessing formal education to improve their literacy skills, given that they have to work to support themselves and their families. The overarching research project also investigated smart phone ownership among female migrants in Chiang Mai.

Chiang Mai is situated in the northern region of Thailand¹⁶ and is the second largest province in Thailand after Bangkok with a population of nearly two million.¹⁷ Chiang Mai reports having 93,317 documented migrants, 47,480 of which are female,¹⁸ and an unknown exact number of undocumented migrants. The latest 2015 Ministry of Social Development and Human Security report indicates that Chiang Mai has 12,334 undocumented migrants.¹⁹ The number is expected to be much higher now. This research project could be used as a case study for how to improve literacy skills and technological accessibility among documented and undocumented female migrants in Thailand. Lessons from this research will be relevant to other countries, especially in North America and Europe, areas which are now facing a serious migration crisis.

⁸ Khorshed Alam and Sophia Imran, "The Digital Divide and Social Inclusion among Refugee Migrants: A Case in Regional Australia," *Information Technology & People* 28, no.2 (2015): 344–365.

⁹ Carrie Demmans Epp, "Migrants and Mobile Technology Use: Gaps in the Support Provided by Current Tools," *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* 1, no.2 (2017): 1–13.

¹⁰ Bryce C. Newell and Ricardo Gomez, "Informal Networks, Phones and Facebook: Information Seeking and Technology Use by Undocumented Migrants at the US-Mexico Border," *iConference 2015 Proceedings*, (2015): 1–10.

¹¹ Jenny Hsin-Chun Tsai, "Use of Computer Technology to Enhance Immigrant Families' Adaptation," *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 38, no. 1 (2006): 87–93.

¹² The country's current official name is the Republic of the Union of Myanmar since 1989, previously known as "Burma". This article uses the country name "Myanmar" throughout.

¹³ Thailand Foreign Workers Administration Office, "Statistics of the Numbers of Foreigners Permitted to Work throughout the Kingdom in March 2018," last modified August 11, 2020, <https://www.doe.go.th/prd/assets/upload/files/alien>.

¹⁴ Thailand Business News, "Thailand Rushes to Register 1.6 Million Undocumented Migrants," last modified August 11, 2020, <https://www.thailand-business-news.com/visa/68498-thailand-rushes-to-register-1-6-million-undocumented-migrants.html>.

¹⁵ Tanaradee Khumya, "Sense of Place and Power Geometry of Female Myanmar Migrant Workers in Bangkok, Thailand," *Journal of Mekong Societies* 14, no. 1 (2018): 17–40.

¹⁶ See the red star on [Map 1](#), *infra*.

¹⁷ Chiang Mai Provincial Statistical Office, "Population and Demography Statistics," last modified August 7, 2020, http://chiangmai.old.nso.go.th/nso/project/search/index.jsp?province_id=48&fid=3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Thailand Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, "2015 report," last modified August 11, 2020, https://www.m-society.go.th/article_attach/18712/20429.pdf

RELATED WORK

Studies discuss the role of social media in facilitating and building transcultural communication and connections for migrants in today's contexts of resettlement.²⁰ For migrants and refugees, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly social media and mobile technologies, can help with relocation, provide them with the means to stay connected to family and friends, and to learn about their new cultural environment.

However, migrants are still facing digital divide challenges that prevent them from fully adopting ICTs. Alam and Imran²¹ explain that refugees and migrants face digital divide and technology adoption barriers to access technology tools like the Internet. Migrants often only have access to free Internet at public libraries because they cannot afford home internet. The affordability of technology and its associated service costs among migrant populations is a serious constraint. In addition, many migrants also have poor literacy skills which prevent them from taking full advantage of the technology. The language barrier prevents them from integrating into their new country's society and it leads them into both social and digital exclusion.

Peromingo and Pieteron²² argue that migrants need "digital empowerment" to access aid and services, and to compete for jobs that increasingly demand digital skills. In general, digital skills are increasingly correlated with people's level of education. In practice, this means that substantial sections of the population lack the skills to successfully use the internet, despite having access to it. Lower-skilled migrants and refugees, or those whose long migration journeys have had a negative impact on their access to further education, are in danger of falling behind in terms of literacy and socioeconomic status. Inclusion programs for migrants should therefore consider focusing on digital skills training at all levels.

Gender is also reported to be a contributing factor to the digital divide for women including female migrants in developing countries because many of them are illiterate due to lack of educational and employment opportunities, have limited free time due to family responsibilities, or financial constraints.²³ Building digital media literacy skills could empower women to overcome the gender-based digital divide and subsequently improve their quality of life.²⁴

METHOD: SETTING

During the month of July 2019, our team conducted FGDs with 38 female migrants living in Chiang Mai, Thailand. We recruited participants by word of mouth with help from our research assistants, who are female Shan migrants themselves. This explains why all of our FGD participants recruited in this research project are female Shan migrants from Shan State in Myanmar who were living in Chiang Mai at the time of the research. Myanmar has many other ethnic groups in addition to the Shan, including the Karen, Mon, Chin, Kachin, Rakhine, and Kareni.²⁵

Geographically the Shan State²⁶ covers about one-third of Myanmar. Since the Shan State shares a border with Thailand and is in close proximity to the province of Chiang Mai, the Shan people are the most populous migrant group in Chiang Mai with an estimated 200,000 who live in the city.²⁷ A long political conflict between

²⁰ For examples, see, Luisa Veronis, Zac Tabler, and Rukhsana Ahmed, "Syrian Refugee Youth Use Social Media: Building Transcultural Spaces and Connections for Resettlement in Ottawa, Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 79–99; Lee Komito, "Social Media and Migration: Virtual Community 2.0.," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 62, no. 6 (2011): 1075–1086; Elena Damian and Erik Van Ingen, "Social Network Site Usage and Personal Relations of Migrants," *Societies* 4, no. 4 (2014): 640–653.

²¹ *Supra*, note 7.

²² Miguel Peromingo and Willem Pieteron, "The New World of Work and the Need for Digital Empowerment," *Forced Migration Review* 58 (2018): 32–33.

²³ Amy Antonio and David Tuffley, "The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries," *Future Internet* 6, no. 4 (2014): 673–687.

²⁴ Fiona Suwana, "Empowering Indonesian Women through Building Digital Media Literacy," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 38, no. 3 (2017): 212–217.

²⁵ Matthew J. Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (2008): 889–910.

²⁶ Colored in blue on [Map 1](#), *infra*.

²⁷ Amporn Jirattikorn, "The Radio and the Non-Citizen Public Sphere: Exploring the Shan Migrant Public Sphere in the City of Chiang Mai, Thailand," *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 1 (2016): 99–117.



Map 1. Chiang Mai, Thailand and States of MyanmarSource: World of Maps (<https://www.worldofmaps.net/maps.htm>) under open access licensing, retrieved January 29, 2020)

Shan people and the Myanmar central government has created economic pressures for ordinary Shan people. The Shan independence movement still exists nowadays.²⁸ Therefore, many Shan people have decided to migrate and find work in Thailand. The similarity of spoken dialects between Shan people and Thai populations in northern Thailand makes migrating to Thailand easier than migrating and finding work in China even though Shan State also shares a border with China on its northeastern side.²⁹

DATA COLLECTION

We began by asking participants for general demographic data including age, place of birth, employment, income, marital status, legal status, number of children, education, duration of living in Thailand, and Thai language proficiency. This was followed by a focus-group discussion with a picture sorting activity. FGD participants were asked to draw some pictures related to the social and technology issues that prevent them from improving literacy

²⁸ Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict*. (London: Routledge, 2008).

²⁹ See Map 1, *infra*.

skills and accessing technology, particularly social media. At the same time, researchers presented some pictures which contain a brief description in Thai and English and the URLs of the picture source with a note of educational purposes, to FGD participants depicting concepts of language barrier, lack of time, housework, husband and children, age, income, disability, legal status, employer, high cost of computers, electricity cost, and Internet access. We pre-selected these images since they are reported to be common factors of the digital divide among migrants and women in developing countries.³⁰ After the participants finished their drawings, our team asked them to choose the pictures from those we provided and their own drawings which represented the factors that prevented them personally from improving literacy skills and access to technologies. We subsequently asked participants to explain how and why these factors influenced literacy and technology use. Using graphics in the FGDs helped us to better engage with migrant populations with low literacy skills and have been used in studies with similar populations.³¹ All FGD discussions were audio-recorded. Each participant received 300 Thai Baht in local currency for their time, which is equivalent to Thailand's daily minimum wage.

DATA ANALYSIS

Discussions between our team and FGD participants were conducted in Southwestern Tai, a language also known as “*Kam Mueang*”, which is similar to some of the dialects in Myanmar, Laos, and China's southwestern Yunnan province, including the Shan language.³² FGD Participants contributed in both Southwestern Tai and Shan. The data generated from the FGDs was manually translated and transcribed verbatim from Southwestern Tai into English and then coded based on patterns identified through thematic analysis.³³ Based on our research questions and discussion guidelines, we developed predetermined codes and then created additional codes to capture specific emergent themes as we became more familiar with the data. We were able to make comparisons between each discussion to find the similarities and differences as a means of further improving our data analysis with special attention to the participants' age and the duration of their residence in Thailand.³⁴ Data saturation for this project, referred to the study of Guest, Bunce, Johnson,³⁵ was reached at the sixth FGD. However, we continued to conduct three more FGDs to confirm thematic saturation. The additional three FGDs (numbers 7, 8, and 9) did not result in the emergence of a new theme. To determine the participants' monthly incomes, we used the July 2019 exchange rate of 1 Thai Bath for 0.03 US dollar.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Researchers asked participants to provide verbal consent (not recorded) before the FGD began. We explained that participants did not have to answer questions that they did not want to answer and could decide to

³⁰ See, e.g., supra, note 22; Kallol Bagchi, “Factors Contributing to Global Digital Divide: Some Empirical Results,” *Journal of Global Information Technology Management* 8, no. 3 (2005): 47–65; and Michael Haight, Anabel Quan-Haase, and Bradley A. Corbett, “Revisiting the Digital Divide in Canada: The Impact of Demographic Factors on Access to the Internet, Level of Online Activity, and Social Networking Site Usage,” *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 4 (2014): 503–519.

³¹ Naomi Tschirhart, Wichuda Jiraporncharoen, Chaisiri Angkurawaranon, Ahmar Hashmi, Suphak Nosten, Rose McGready, and Trygve Ottersen, “Choosing Where to Give Birth: Factors Influencing Migrant Women's Decision Making in Two Regions of Thailand,” *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 4 (2020): e0230407. See also, Erminia Colucci, “Focus Groups Can be Fun”: The Use of Activity-Oriented Questions in Focus Group Discussions,” *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 10 (2007): 1422–1433.

³² The use of an interpreter was not necessary because one of the authors is a native of Chiang Mai who also speaks Southwestern Tai.

³³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

³⁴ Co-author Channarong Intahchomphoo created the codebook for the themes and was the principal coder for all the FGD data. Co-authors André Vellino and Odd Erik Gundersen guided the overall analysis and discussion. Co-author Naomi Tschirhart provided guidance on the research methodology and assisted with data interpretation.

³⁵ Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, “How Many Interviews are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability,” *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (2006): 59–82.

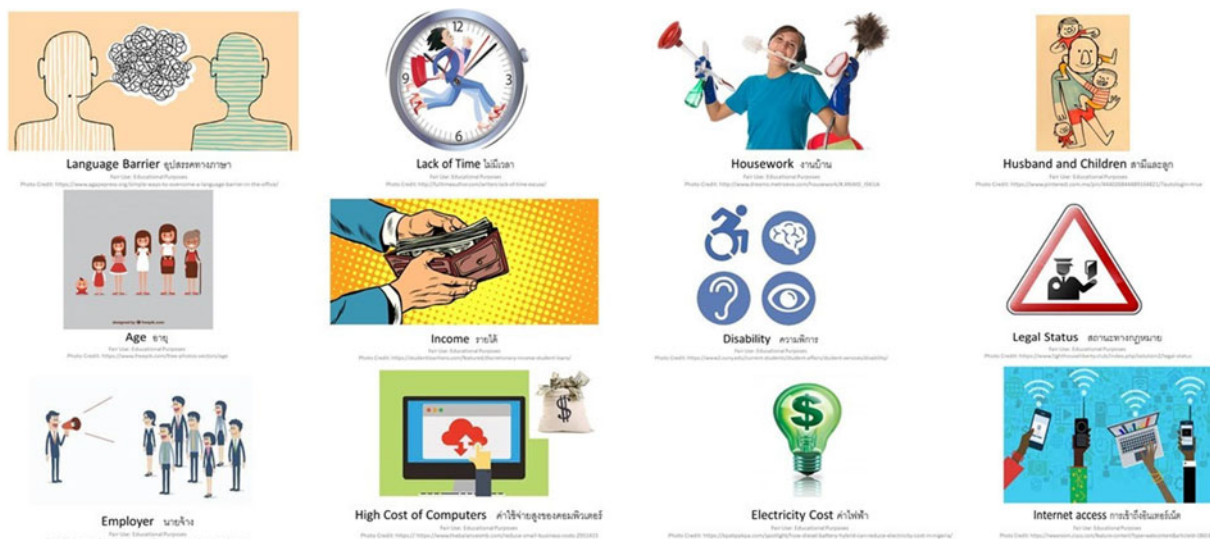


Image 1. Pictures Presented to FGDs Participants

end or withdraw from the FGD at any time they wished. Their participation in this study was thus completely voluntary. This project obtained local research ethics approval. We did not seek any written evidence of their research participation to allow us to further safeguard participants' identities and our team would not carry physical research documentation with the names of our FGD participants and their legal status in Thailand. They also had limited reading and writing skills. In the results section, we omitted all personally identifiable information including participants' names, residential areas, and physical traits. We use pseudonyms for our participants' names in this article.

FINDINGS: PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Our nine FGDs included 38 documented Shan female migrants who had permission to live in Chiang Mai, who ranged in age from 14–50. Almost all participants (37) were documented migrants who had permission from the Thai government to live and work in Thailand. One participant was a dual citizen of both Myanmar and Thailand. This person self-identified as a migrant. Each discussion lasted between 16 and 30 minutes. The demographic characteristic of FGD participants' information is provided below in [Table 1](#). Our FGD participants were mostly young adults with very low literacy skills and education level. Out of 38 FGD, 17 participants had never been to school. Almost three quarters (74%) of them worked as minimum wage cleaners. A majority of FGD participants were originally from the southern region of Shan State around the city of Taunggyi³⁶ near the Thailand border. Overall, the income, literacy, and education of our FGD participants are much lower than that of the Thai majority population.

IDENTIFIED BARRIERS

No FGD participant wanted to draw pictures on the papers we provided. All participants preferred to sort the pictures we prepared about what might be the barriers that prevent participants from improving their literacy skills and access to technologies, including the Internet, the Web, social media, and cellphones. All FGD participants did not think the following were barriers: lack of time, housework, husband and children, age, disability, and employer. They expressed concern over legal status, income, high cost of computers, electricity cost, and Internet access. In this article, we only report on our FGD participants' concern about the legal status under the Thailand's current migrant worker law. All 38 FGD participants strongly agreed that the migrant worker law prevents them from improving their literacy skills and technological accessibility as follows:

³⁶ Taunggyi is circled in red on [Map 1](#), above.

TABLE 1.

Demographic characteristic of FGD participants ($N = 38$). Thailand's migrant worker law only permits migrants to work in labor-intensive jobs with almost no chance to improve literacy skills while at work or during limited personal time.

		(n = 38) n (%)
Age	14–24	17 (45%)
	25–34	14 (37%)
	35–44	6 (16%)
	45–50	1 (2%)
Place of Birth	North Shan State, Myanmar	11 (29%)
	East Shan State, Myanmar	2 (5%)
	South Shan State, Myanmar	24 (64%)
	Thailand	1 (2%)
Employment	Private residence, office, hospital, hotel, shop cleaner	28 (74%)
	Kitchen helper	6 (17%)
	Self-employed, immigration representative	1 (2%)
	Seamstress	1 (2%)
	Unemployed, student and look after grandchildren	2 (5%)
Monthly Income	No income	2 (5%)
	Less than 5,000 Thai Baht, work part-time (156 USD)	1 (3%)
	5,001 to 10,000 Thai Baht (313 USD)	28 (73%)
	10,001 to 15,000 Thai Baht (469 USD)	6 (16%)
	15,001 to 20,000 Thai Baht (625 USD)	1 (3%)
Legal Status in Thailand	Documented with migrant worker visa	37 (97%)
	Dual citizen both Thailand and Myanmar	1 (3%)
Marital Status	Single	8 (21%)
	Married with a child or children	28 (74%)
	Married with no child	2 (5%)
	Widowed	0 (0%)
Education	Never went to school	17 (44%)
	1 st - 9 th grade	19 (50%)
	High School	1 (3%)
	Some university, no degree	1 (3%)
Duration of living in Thailand	0–5 years	18 (47%)
	6–10 years	10 (26%)
	11–15 years	4 (11%)
	16–20 years	1 (3%)
	More than 21 years	5 (13%)
Thai Language Proficiency	Basic, only speaking but could not read and write Thai	23 (60%)
	Basic, in speaking, reading, and writing Thai	6 (16%)
	Intermediate, in speaking, reading, and writing Thai	5 (13%)
	Advanced, in speaking, reading, and writing Thai	4 (11%)

Thailand amended its migrant worker law in June 2018.³⁷ The new law prevents our FGD participants from improving their literacy skills because migrant workers are now only permitted to work in labor-intensive jobs. This means that they would not have the opportunity to learn how to read and write Thai or to develop a new set of advanced professional skills during their workday. The low paying nature of labor-intensive jobs and associated long work hours also limits the additional time and energy participants have for improving their literacy during their free time. The law also impacts the migrants' abilities to have a meaningful online interaction with Facebook.

FG4.5 (27 years old and living in Thailand for 11 years) expressed her frustration that *“Most of our Shan people are facing difficulty in finding jobs that Thailand government allows us to do. They [Thai government] said this is the kind of jobs that is allowed and then later not allowed. We [migrant workers] are not allowed to be smarter than Thai people. In the construction jobs, migrant workers are only permitted to work on carrying heavy items. We are not allowed to be the bricklayer and plasterer. If you [migrant workers] got caught [in doing the prohibited jobs listed in the migrant worker law], they [the Thai police forces] will jail us. But Thai people do not want to do those*

³⁷ Thailand Foreign Workers Administration Office, “Laws on Foreign Workers Administration,” last modified August 11, 2020, <https://www.doe.go.th/prd/alien/law/param/site/152/cat/6/sub/0/pull/category/view/list-label>

labor-intensive jobs anymore. Only Shan migrants will do those kinds of jobs. This includes the job of selling and handing fresh produces in the markets, which was previously being done mostly by the Shan people. Thai people do not want those jobs. They are going abroad for works. No Thai people wants to be a maid, only us [female Shan migrants]. Many migrant workers have been caught by the police. This law is too extreme. It is unacceptable for me... Migrant workers [who performed prohibited jobs listed the migrant worker law] were fined a lot of money around 20,000–40,000 Thai Baht [625 –1,250 USD]. It is a lot. When will they find that much money to pay the fines when they only make 300 Thai Bath [9 USD] a day?"

FG4.1 (32 years old and living in Thailand for 10 years) shared her thoughts that *"We [migrant workers] are not permitted to work on the jobs that use our brain in this current migrant worker law. We only have to work in labor-intensive jobs. They [Thailand law makers] are afraid that migrant workers will steal jobs from Thai people. Thai people invest a lot in their education. When they graduated, they do not want to do this kind of work. The previous migrant worker law allowed us to be able to make a living, unlike the new law"*.

Then, FG4.6 (23 years old and living in Thailand for 5 years) contributed to the discussion from her experience that *"Among female migrant workers who work in restaurants, we are only allowed to clean tables and dishes. We are not even allowed to serve the food or become a cashier for the restaurant"*. All of our FGD participants told us that they do not have much time and energy left after working to learn how to read and write Thai or even their own Shan language as 17 of our 38 FGD participants have never gone to school at all. FG8.4 (30 years old and living in Thailand for 4 years) told us that *"I do not have a day off. I work 7 days a week from 6 AM to 4 PM...My work allows me to have days off. I have just to request it, but I would not get paid for my day off. So, I would not take any day off"*.

Moreover, social media, particularly Facebook, is very important for our FGD participants' community. Facebook is referred as the online community in which Shan migrants can learn and share information about Thailand's migrant worker law as explained by FG1.1 (32 years old and living in Thailand for 10 months) that *"I read news on Facebook about the Thailand's migrant worker visa to know when my visa will be expired and when I have to renew my work visa"*.

The information for Shan migrants on Facebook was generated and shared by Shan people who are living in different provinces all over Thailand and Thailand's migrant worker law news presented to our FGD participants' Facebook pages is only written in the Shan language. This means our FGD participants and other Shan migrants would miss the news or announcement posts generated and shared on Facebook by the Thailand government agencies related to the migrant worker law which are only written in Thai, since Thailand only has one official language. Because migrants in Thailand are only allowed to perform manual labor, they do not have much opportunity to improve their Thai language literacy skills. They would not be able to read the government news posts written in Thai that are disseminated on Facebook. Also, Facebook currently does not have a Shan language interface and auto-translation function.

UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS ARE NOT ABLE TO BUY SIM CARDS FOR THEIR CELLPHONES AND IT PREVENTS THEM USING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS.

Due to their legal status, undocumented migrants in Thailand cannot buy a SIM card with a cellular data plan for their cellphones. Thailand's laws require all network carriers to register all SIM card purchases with the government issued documents including the national identity cards for Thai citizens and passports or work permits for foreigners. However, buying cellphones does not require documentation or government registration. Our FGD participants told us that legal status prevents their friends, who are undocumented Shan migrants, from accessing technologies, including social media, and limits their ability to log into their Facebook personal accounts to communicate with family and friends in Thailand and Myanmar. FG2.1 (26 years old and living in Thailand for 3 years) describes that *"No one [undocumented migrants] would be able to buy a SIM card. No one would sell the SIM cards to us [migrants]. We [migrants] need an ID card [work permit] to register for SIM cards"*. FG.6.1 (41 years old and living in Thailand for 30 years) confirmed with us that *"undocumented migrants are challenged because when you buy a cellphone with data plan, you need to do the registration."*

Furthermore, FG4.5 (27 years old and living in Thailand for 11 years), FG4.6 (23 years old and living in Thailand for 5 years), and FG3.2 (16 years old and living in Thailand for 2 years) explained how undocumented Shan female migrants solved the SIM card registration problem by asking their migrant friends who are documented to go to buy a SIM card for them and register in their friend's name. FG4.5 and FG4.6 were very worried about this

practice and explained that “*If there is a problem happening, the authorities will contact us [documented migrants who bought the SIM card for undocumented migrants], then we are in trouble*”. Interestingly, FG.7.4 (30 years old and living in Thailand for 4 years) shared with us that “*the owner of independent cellphone retail stores could also register SIM card accounts in their names [for the undocumented migrants]*”. Thailand’s SIM card regulation allows one person to buy SIM cards as many as they want as long as the person has a government issued document to register.

Additionally, FG2.1 reflected on the heightened need for documentation in Thailand told us that “*Legal status is a problem for undocumented people. When we [migrants] have to go to buy goods, we need some sort of documentations to register and open an account before you [migrants] will be allowed to buy goods. In the Shan State in Myanmar, you do not need to register for an account before buying a SIM card. Even we (Shan people) have the local identification card. You do not need an ID card to register for a SIM card in Myanmar. It is complicated only here in Thailand.*”

In conclusion, undocumented Shan migrants often will ask other documented migrants to obtain a SIM card for them. This means that although they may own a cellphone, they face great difficulty gaining access to data necessary to use Facebook to communicate with family in the Shan State, Myanmar, and in Thailand. Participants told us that restricted access to cell phone data plans forces undocumented migrants to seek out free public Wi-Fi to use Facebook.

DISCUSSION

This chapter demonstrates that the migrant worker law, literacy skills, and social media are truly interconnected. The findings in this article identify how Thailand’s current migrant worker law prevents documented and undocumented migrants from improving their literacy skills and effectively using social media. The law also has effects on the digital divide and the literacy and wellbeing of migrants. Migrants who are granted permission to live and work in a new country including Thailand should have the right to work in the jobs that they want and to improve their quality of life. Literacy and access to cellular data or Wi-Fi are key for bridging the digital divide among migrants. Migrants contribute enormously to the Thai national economy and would benefit from supportive policies that help to improve literacy and enable greater social mobility and flexibility in the types of work that migrant workers are permitted to do.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study shows that the current migrant worker law in Thailand creates a digital divide that prevents Shan female migrants in Chiang Mai Province from improving their literacy skills and effectively using social media, particularly Facebook. The law only permits migrants to work in labor-intensive jobs with almost no chance for them to improve literacy skills while at work or during their limited personal time. Additionally, undocumented migrants in Thailand are not able to buy SIM cards for their cellphones which prevents them from using Facebook, the main online community platform for documented and undocumented migrants in Thailand.