

Precarity and Opportunity: Rural Livelihoods, Migration and Change in Myanmar

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Scope of the research

- Migration, livelihoods, and life trajectories in rural areas.
- Focus on migrants from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds who are engaged in low-paid, precarious work at destination.
- Brokerage widespread
- Outcomes of precarious migratory work are poorly understood.
- Migration important for repaying debt, smoothing incomes and investing in housing, education and health in rural areas.
- But new risks that can set the family back.
- Analytical framework draws on concepts of precarity, constrained agency and the spatiality and temporality of agency.

Precariousness and Constrained agency

We identify the nature of precariousness at different points in a migrant's life and journey and provide empirical evidence on experiences of precariousness in a southern context

We deploy concepts related to labour agency here to explore whether and to what extent workers are able to reshape structures of power inequalities to their own advantage.

First we adhere to a broader concept of labour agency as articulated in the labour geography literature by Rogaly and others where individual acts of resistance and reshaping are considered and not just collective action as agency.

More specifically Coe and Jordhus-Lier's concept of constrained agency resonates with the situation that we have observed in rural Myanmar and we use this as a key guiding principle in our analytical framework.

Why constrained agency?

1. Takes a socially embedded approach which considers the positionality of the migrant in relation to structures in the community or family including patriarchal norms and class structures. While an organised labour perspective on work would highlight the powerlessness of the worker vis-à-vis capital, a socially embedded examination shows why how they might view work in the city as an escape from these.
2. Goes beyond labour-capital relations as the primary arena for analysing and framing labour agency to also include community, the state and brokers
3. Recognises the importance of spatiality in agency – workers live and work in a variety of places with different relational dynamics and expressions of agency. Migrating can be a strategy to escape feudal relations and attempts by capital to spatially fix labour.

Methods

In-depth qualitative research in four agro-ecologically and culturally diverse regions of Myanmar – Rakhine, Ayeyarwady, Mandalay, Shan

Two rounds of data collection February - July of 2017: 132 IDIs in rural areas and 60 in the urban destinations of Yangon, Mandalay and Tachileik.

Numbers of men and women interviewed:

Location/ Gender	Men	Women	Total
Rural EAs	61	71	132
Urban Destinations	30	30	60
Total	91	101	192

Site selection

Selection criteria of EAs (Enumeration Areas):

- Agro-ecological and climatic conditions;
- Accessibility (especially during the rainy season)
- A relatively high level of migration out of villages

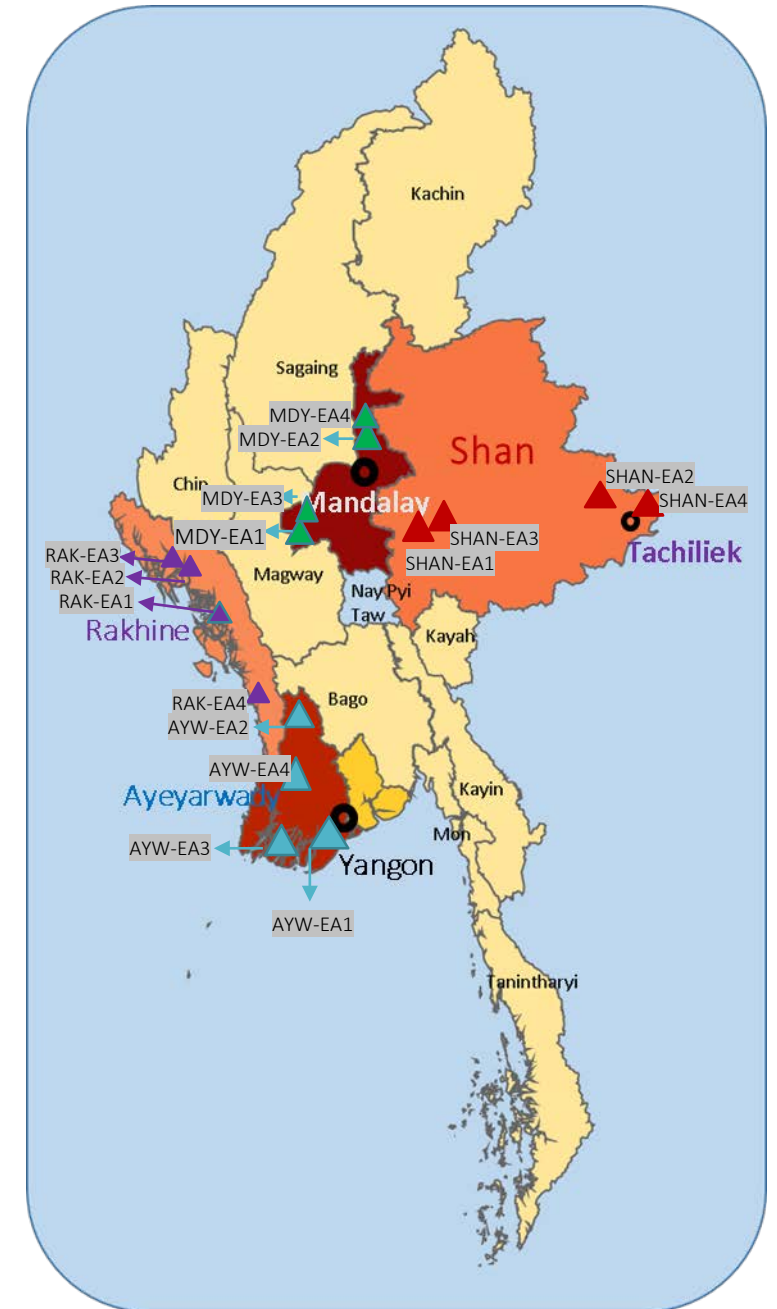
In each state/region: Two contrasting rural EAs per round

16 rural EAs for 2 rounds of data collection.

Urban destinations

1st round: Yangon and Mandalay

2nd round: Yangon and Tachiliek



Mandalay Illustrative case study

- Village with 300 households, traditional cropping pattern - green beans, green gram, sesame and peanuts. Animal Husbandry - goats, cows, pigs and poultry.
- Nearly all hhs have at least one migrant; Well-established migration to Yangon tea shops; more recently young female migration to Yangon factories
- More than 80 tea shops established in Yangon by migrants from this village
- Workers recruited through social networks. Those who can invest in a shop usually always do well. Elevate their social standing in the village by donating to community development activities, educational projects, religious and social affairs. Recruit others from poorer families – child labour controversial

Gender and generation dynamics

- Traditionally, women would undertake low-paid casual farm work locally or in nearby villages. Now it is mainly older women who do this kind of work. Wages in the region of 3000 kyats a day
- Recent trend of younger women migrating to work in Yangon garment factories, some in teashops. Those with a high school education can get more skilled jobs in garment factories as tailors or supervisors
- Gender norms related to women's work and mobility are changing due to migration and wider changes in society
- But migration of younger women involves negotiations within the household and transgressing gender norms and patriarchal roles
- Younger women are able to migrate if there are older women in the family who can take on care responsibilities

Case study 1

Mandalay Division

Older women work as farm labour in nearby villages

Source: fieldwork



Men and boys in Yangon tea shop

Source:
https://insideotherplaces.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/wpimg_1840_1.jpg



Young Women In Yangon Garment Factories

Source: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/business-owners-object-to-proposed-minimum-wage-increase-07172015141514.html>

Rakhine Illustrative Case Study

- Small town with 2,000 households, 70% landless. Roughly 20% households have migrants and more from landless class;
- 60% international migrants.
- Men were traditionally engaged in fishing and bamboo cutting while women collected wild vegetables and fish from streams to sell in local markets
- Now many Chinese owned prawn and crab export businesses where local men and women are employed as workers.
- Men work as fishermen and sometimes catch crabs from small streams while women tie the crabs or collect wild vegetables and sell them in local markets.
- The village has a migration history but longer for men than women. More men and boys migrate than girls and women and female migration is relatively recent.
- Men work in fish processing and water bottling factories in China; in construction sites and a steel factories in Thailand; restaurant waiters in Malaysia.

Gender and generation dynamics

Relatively recent trend of female migration to Yangon; some to Thailand and also China.

Migrant women are working in garment and wig factories in Yangon; as helpers in construction in Thailand; and fish processing factories or purified drinking water factories in China.

In the Rakhine context, sharp culturally determined gender differences related to women's work and mobility. Marked gendered inequalities in the labour market with women regularly earning less than men for comparable work.

Negative discourses and stereotypes about women's migration. Young and single women migrating are often stigmatised although this is slowly changing. Women continue to be constructed as being vulnerable and requiring male protection – migration is a process of negotiation within the household

Xx is a 41- year-old woman with five children. Her 18-year-old daughter migrated to China with others in the village with a broker. The broker cheated them and they had to change jobs. During that time xx didn't hear from the daughter. Villagers were quick to conclude that she had been sold for nefarious activities. The daughter eventually called and said she was fine.

Case Study 2: Rakhine



Labour On Crab Processing Units

Source: fieldwork



Source: <http://thailandchatter.com/>

Chicken and seafood processing factories in Thailand China



Source: <http://www.dw.com/en/report-spotlights-modern-day-slavery-in-thailand/a-17728852>

Conclusions

Socially embedded and spatial analysis of the decision to migrate into precarious conditions, the links with material and social aspirations, and outcomes in the village.

Attention to change over time and how degrading working conditions can be accepted in the present to rework class position and social status in the future

Go beyond the household as the unit of analysis to understanding gender differentiated dynamics in agency and outcomes



THANK YOU