



International
Labour
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Paths to Dreams

*Five migrants tell echoing stories
of working abroad*



Regional Office for Asia
and the Pacific

**Economic and Social Empowerment of Migrants, Including Victims of Trafficking
Returned from the European Union and Neighbouring Countries**

Paths to Dreams

Five migrants tell echoing stories of working abroad

Stories told by

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First published 2012

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Paths to dreams : stories of five Thai migrant workers returned from Europe / ILO Country Office for the Philippines.
- Manila: ILO, 2012

1 v.

ISBN: 9789221262015; 9789221262022 (web pdf)

ILO Country Office for the Philippines

migrant worker / Thai / trafficking in persons / return migration / workers' rights / Poland / Spain / Sweden

14.09.2

ILO Cataloguing in Publication Data

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Printed in the Philippines

Foreword

The International Labour Organization and the European Union project Going Back–Moving On: Economic and Social Empowerment of Migrants, Including Victims of Trafficking, Returned from European Union and Neighbouring Countries (2009–2012) was initiated to assist Thai migrant workers returning home from abusive migration experiences in Europe. The project extended technical support to government and non-government service providers and to returning migrant workers.

The returnees in the project largely worked in Poland, Spain and Sweden; through the project, they received livelihood training and seed money to start up a small business.

Also through the project, many have opened up about their migrating experience and learned to see how their journey meant to take them to a better life went wrong. Five of them in particular, Chutima, Ounjai, Saranya, Pirom and Pramuan – three women and two men – found that in the retelling of their stories they could possibly help other workers with similar backgrounds who, like them once, see a road out of Thailand as the one to make their worlds an easier, if not better, place. These five storytellers know that that road might indeed lead somewhere productive just as easily as it might not. As part of a campaign to promote safer migration, these storytellers want others to know what they now know and what they went through.

The five stories in *No Dream Come True...Only More Debt* narrate the deceit and abuse the migrants experienced. The stories also tell of how these five migrants fought back for some justice. The stories reflect not only what they learned about migrating but a singular wisdom that only survivors can share.

The book was originally written in the Thai language and later translated into English to reach more hopeful migrants. The five storytellers want to help better inform potential migrant workers of what to be aware and how to prepare for going abroad or even to make a more clear decision on whether this path would actually fulfil their dreams.

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Chutima

A long time ago I watched my husband's sister leave home to work as a housemaid in Saudi Arabia. She sent huge sums of money back home, and her children lived off it luxuriously. The woman inspired me to take this same path. At the time I was working as a maid in Bangkok, and I knew how difficult it was for someone with little education like me to earn good income in Thailand.

Forty years later, my 29-year-old son came home after four years in Israel with his arms swollen from long hours lifting heavy loads. He used to work as a chief of the auto parts manufacturing department in a factory in Chonburi province and he told me that the work in Israel was ten times harder. The swelling has left him with chronic pain.

He earned more in Israel, it's true. It was tens of thousands baht more each month. As I looked at the swelling of his arms and his pain, I couldn't help but wonder, was it really worth it?

Those of us who went abroad to work think we earned a significant amount of money. But in fact, the money was ours – we hired ourselves to work. We borrowed hundreds of thousands of baht to pay for the broker fees and then we worked just to pay off the debt. Is that not spending our own money to hire ourselves to work?

Unfortunately, I let myself be deceived again and again before I realized the deception. If I could turn back the clock to 1997, when I took my first trip to work abroad, I would not choose to go.

My mother became afraid that there would be no one to take good care of me, so she made me marry.

I was born in a village in Ban Fang district of Khon Kaen province. I was in school only until grade 5 and then dropped out. My family was very poor.

My father had passed away when I was too young to remember him. I had 15 siblings at one time. Eight have died though. It was a hard life. My mother had to beg for rice from the neighbours to fill our stomachs. As each sibling grew old enough, they married and never looked back to help the family.

When I entered puberty, my mother became afraid that there would be no one to take good care of me, so she made me marry. At that time I had no idea about love or family life. I only wanted to play and have fun. But I have lived my life with my husband until now, and we have three children together.

Our family had never been in debt.

My husband was the first to go abroad. In 1994 he went to seek fortune in Singapore. To do so, we had to sell five or six buffalo to pay the broker fees. That was our family's first experience of working abroad.

Then in 1997, while my husband and I were working in paddy fields in Muang district as daily labourers, an "agent" came to persuade me to go work in Taiwan. She said it was a well-paid job and that I did not need cash in my hands to go. Actually, this agent was the owner of the field we were working. At first I did not pay much attention to her. But during the month or so that we worked there, she regularly visited me to convince me to go. I thought she would not lie to me because we had known each other for several months. As well, all her relatives worked abroad. I had no idea then that a person who succeeds in persuading another person to apply for a job with a broker company receives a commission for that.

Both my husband and I decided to go seek our fortune in Taiwan. We applied for the jobs at the company the paddy field owner suggested. She even paid for our travel costs to the company in town. We then agreed to pay the 150,000 baht recruitment fee

for my maid's job and 200,000 baht for my husband's position in a factory.

I was 34 years old. My children were teenagers then. Our family had never been in debt.

We again sold buffalo and took a loan on our 16 rai of paddy field. We made 70,000–80,000 baht from selling the buffalo and 370,000 baht with the loan, which was guaranteed by the title to the land I and my siblings owned together. After that, I had to take a three-month Chinese class in Bangkok. The class cost 7,500 baht, but I thought it was not very helpful.

Then I was ready to fly to Taiwan. My husband joined me three months later, after the harvesting season.

There was no savings.

In Taiwan I stayed in the Ping Tong area. I had two jobs: as a maid and in a factory. I was paid for both jobs but my work was twice harder than for many other migrant workers. The employer allowed me to go to bed around 6 or 8 in the evening. But I had to wake at 1 in the morning to go work in the fishmeal factory. My job there was to carry fish out of the frozen room and deliver it to other workers. I could take a break for breakfast at around 9 or 10 a.m. Then I went to work as a maid in the factory owner's house until the evening. If I could finish cleaning the house early, then I had more time to rest or could go to bed earlier. At the time, I did not feel there was a problem. I thought I only had to be patient with the hard work and everything would be okay.

That job only lasted eight months because actually I was filling in the contract of another person who was there before me. My combined salary in that time was a bit over 20,000 baht a month and I sent part of it back to my three children. When I came back to Thailand, the money I had earned was just enough to pay off the debt from the recruitment fee. It was the same for my husband. There was no savings.

Picking berries was hard work, but I felt free and had fun.

After the trip to Taiwan in 1997, I went back to farming as I used to do. Then I had a chance to go abroad again after my niece, who had married a Swedish man, visited home and persuaded her relatives to go pick berries in Sweden. That was in the rainy season of 1998.

That time, I had to invest only 40,000 baht for the job. My niece arranged the plane tickets and visas for all of us. We went there once every two years – each time, about five or six of us together. Picking berries was hard work, but I felt free and had fun. My niece had bought a house in the area where there were lots of berries and she drove us to the forest to work. There were plenty of berries; the Swedes only picked them for family consumption, and there were no crowds of migrant workers like nowadays. We worked with no rules or pressure from anyone. We could go to pick the berries any time we wanted and took a rest as we needed. My niece drove the men to sell the berries in town. We sold them ourselves and received the money directly and we earned quite well.

On the day we left for Thailand, each of us gave my niece about 20,000 baht as remuneration for her assistance. I thought that was fair because both sides helped each other. Both gained, and no one lost. The berry season was only three months and we earned a bit less than 100,000 baht. In a good year, my husband and I could earn as much as 150,000 baht. After deducting the expenses, we still thought the earnings were quite good for a three-month job.

The earnings from picking berries in Sweden in 1998 and in 2000 allowed me to buy more plots of land.

It was not possible to earn enough to pay off our debts, and I started to feel discouraged.

In 2002, my niece stopped taking us to work in Sweden. So after the harvesting season in Thailand, my husband decided to pay a broker company to go work in Malaysia with other friends.

That was one of his worst experiences.

In the first two months, my husband sent money back to the family. I received 5,000 baht in the first month and 3,000 baht in the second. But after that, there was no news from him and no money transferred from Malaysia. I was so worried that I called the company. They told me that all the Thai workers were fine and that my husband might probably like to keep the money for daily expenses. I did not really believe it, but I had no idea what else I could do.

In the fifth month, I received a phone call from my husband. He told me that he and the others had been cheated. The workers were not paid their wages and had decided to run away from the labour camp, spending three days walking in the forest with no food.

On the third day they walked into a highway and then hitchhiked to the Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur where they were given help to return to Thailand.

My husband and the other workers filed a complaint at the Ministry of Labour. The broker company compensated them only 20,000 baht each, even though the broker fee for each worker had been as high as 100,000 baht.

My husband still had debt from his trip to Taiwan and now to Malaysia. We also needed some money for our children's education. During the dry season we worked in a few construction sites in Bangkok. My husband earned 200 baht a day. I initially earned 120 baht a day but after I learned the skills, the daily wage rose to 170 baht. The construction work was hard and often times the subcontractor just ran away with our wages. We often had to look for vegetables from the roadside to boil and eat with rice while waiting for the wages. It was not possible to earn enough to pay off our debts, and I started to feel discouraged.

One day while we were working in a construction site in the Prem Pracha canal area, the broker company for my husband's Malaysia trip called to ask whether we wanted our land title back. If so, we should go there to apply for work in Taiwan. Taiwan was still a popular country for Thai fortune seekers. The country's economy was good. I thought that if I went there again for longer, I should be able to earn more than from the three-month job in Sweden, which was only enough to live on for a few months.

Although I was aware of the traps I could fall in, I decided to apply to work in Taiwan with the same company that sent my husband to Malaysia.

So in 2003 I went to Taiwan for the second time. All the arrangements took only seven days but unfortunately, the trip lasted only one month.

The disappointments came one after the other.

In Taiwan that time, I worked so hard that I became sick and was sent home.

The employers were rich. The husband was probably a businessman. The wife was a ballet teacher. She owned a big ballet school. I woke at 1 in the morning to clean their house. Then at around 8 or 9 a.m., I went to clean the house of the husband's parents and his brothers. In the afternoon to night I looked after the employers' children and then at 10 p.m., when the

ballet school closed, I cleaned there before cleaning the house of the employer's sister. My contract said my employers were only the couple. It also said my position was for child care or in elder care centre. But I became a servant of many people.

For all this work, I was to be paid the equivalent of 15,840 baht a month salary. Realizing I was being cheated, I called the company to explain that the work was not as stated in the contract. I asked them to change the job for me. But the company said that if I wanted to do so, I had to go back to Thailand and restart the whole process. That also meant I had to spend more money. At the time, I did not know where I could file a complaint. I was also afraid to have an endless problem. So I just continued working until I finally became so sick from the lack of rest and sleep. I would go to bed only around 11 p.m. and then started working again at 1 a.m.

I began coughing and coughed harder and harder until the employer was afraid that I might be infected with the SARS, which was spreading at the time. They sent me back to the agent. I had to spend seven nights in the Chinese agent's office during the quarantined period. There, more trouble came. The male agent started to act suspiciously. He called me to give him a massage every day. One day when his wife was not around, he held me from the back and said he would give me a massage. He tried to rape me. I fought hard. I kicked and kicked at him, shouting, "I didn't come to sell my body. I come to sell my labour."

I narrowly escaped.

The agent was quite infamous. Rumours were that he usually tried to molest or rape migrant female workers – Thais, Vietnamese, Indonesian or Filipinos. Once, a crying Vietnamese worker told me how she agreed to sleep with the man out of fear she would be deported if she didn't.

I was sent back to Thailand with pains both in my body and in my heart. I had worked hard for a month for nothing. I came home with only 200 baht or so. All the money I carried from Thailand was gone. How could I explain how I felt? It was sad. The disappointments came one after the other. I felt angry with myself at how unfortunate I was. Why couldn't I be successful? Why was my employer like that? Why had I failed this time although I had experience working in this country?

Arriving in Bangkok, I did not know how to face people at home. It seemed everybody there was waiting to add up my shame. So I decided to stay in Bangkok.

I got a job as a maid with a Taiwanese man who was a friend with the broker company's owner. His name was Yang. I cooked, cleaned the house and served the gambling tables where Yang and his friends stayed from dusk to dawn. The good thing was that I regularly was given a thousand baht tip from the lucky gamblers.

After my second trip to Taiwan, my relations with my siblings, which had been bad, became even worse. One of my brothers was very angry that my husband and I took the family land to guarantee the loan. In my opinion, my brother was not fair. When my father died, my brother received all the assets, including those my father planned to give to me. He said he would take care of the properties until I had grown up. But he never did.

After a month working in Bangkok, I went back home to visit my ill mother and stayed with her until she died. I thought I somehow had caused her death. My mother must have been full of stress because my husband and I created debt from working abroad. Our family had never been in debt before and she could not live with it.

My mother died without a chance to see my success.

They said if I did not go, I would not be able to pay off the debt and my land would be confiscated.

At the end of 2004, I still had about 150,000 baht debt with the broker company. Consequently, they pressured me to go back to Taiwan. They said if I did not go, I would not be able to pay off the debt and my land would be confiscated.

Who knew it was going to be worse?

That time I only worked for seven days. The job was to take care of the elderly parents at home. They were an old and sick couple who lived with their daughter, who was in her forties. I took them to see a doctor every Sunday and take care of them at home the other days. It sounded like an easy job, didn't it? But the company did not tell me that the old man was mentally sick, while his wife, who was in a wheelchair, had some nervous problem and she cried and laughed all day. The daughter worked at a hospital and didn't have much time to be with her parents. She came home only after 10 at night.

I realized the problem on the first day I arrived. A Thai woman who was in charge of the Thai migrants in Taiwan told me that an Indonesian maid had just quit

the job because she could no longer bear the elderly couple's tempers. The woman asked me, "Don't you know that these people are mentally sick?" She told me the whole story and said, "Just try to be patient, sister! I can't help pitying you."

The daughter told me to try avoiding trouble from her parents' unstable tempers. She said that if I saw a bad sign, I should try to escape. Thus, although the work was not so tiring, I lived in fear. The old woman might burn a pile of newspapers in the house for fun at any time. I dared to clean the old man's room only when the daughter was there to tie him up because he might physically attack me.

One morning when the daughter was still in bed, the old man appeared with a knife. He started chasing after me furiously, trying to stab me. I was so scared that I ran into my room and locked myself there. Then I telephoned my agent and said I could not risk my life being there any longer. I asked the agent if he expected me to live like that and who would be responsible if I was stabbed to death. Then I told him, "I'd like to go home."

I was sent back to Thailand after working for only seven days. I could not demand anything from the company because they said it was my fault I left the job before the contract ended. They did not have to find me another job.

My husband and I then went back to Bangkok seeking jobs in construction sites. By then, I had a 200,000 baht debt with the broker company. So when a person asked to buy our house for 200,000 baht, I was glad and agreed. I thought from that I would spare 150,000 baht for the debt payment and spend the other 50,000 to build a small house on another small piece of land I still owned. But my brother said he wanted to keep the family house, and he would pay only 150,000 baht for it. I had no choice because although the house was mine, legally it was my brother's. My father had asked him to take care of it when I was young. I then sold it to him and could pay back only 100,000 baht of my debt while my land and house fully became my brother's.

Before this I had never thought of helping others. I only thought I had to help myself survive and be successful.

In 2003 after the second trip to Taiwan, I met Pi Lek – Chanya Yimprasert, the coordinator of the Thai Labour Campaign Project at the Ministry of Labour.

I had gone there to file a complaint. I realized that she was there to help workers, including me, to demand justice for unfair treatment abroad.

In 2006, Pi Lek encouraged me to work as a volunteer in her organization. From my work there I could see the many problems that other Thai migrant workers experienced. I became a coordinator of the Network of Affected Migrant Thai Workers and my role was to visit returned workers to survey the needs of those in trouble and to see how to help them. There was a case of a worker who died of a work-related disease after returning from Israel and cases of workers forced to return from Taiwan because their contracts were illegal. Once I visited a worker who fell down a platform in a CP factory here in Thailand, in Nakorn Phnom province. I documented these people's experiences and coordinated with related agencies to provide assistance and to help demand justice for them.

From 2006 to 2009, I received a 5,000 baht monthly allowance from that volunteer position. But I took from it a great experience. I was proud for the chance to help others. Before this I had never thought of helping others. I only thought I had to help myself survive and be successful. After I encountered the endless problems, I started to think that I wanted to help other people so that they don't fall into the bad experiences like I did. When I picked up workers who were sent back from Poland at the Suvarnabhumi Airport, I started crying too when I saw the female workers crying. It was so painful, as if my wounds were cut again.

The job made me understand the happiness of giving and helping. It also made me feel that as long as I could fight for others, I could still fight for myself.

I decided to go to Sweden again because I thought they would not fool me.

Despite the knowledge I acquired about the many types of problems that migrant workers experienced, I still fell back into the role of migrant worker again.

I was working as a volunteer at the Thai Labour Campaign Project. Some people who were considering a trip to pick berries in Sweden asked me to join the company's training to help them decide whether they should go. Instead of me helping them make a careful decision, I decided to take the risk myself.

During the company's training in Nakhon Rachasima province, I started to believe that such a

short-time job would bring much income. The company seemed to be quite well organized. They gave examples of successful cases, including those from my home town. I also had had good experiences picking berries in Sweden before. So I thought, "Well, they won't fool me."

My husband decided to go with me. We borrowed 90,000 baht each from a money lender to pay the broker fees.

That foolishness was the most painful.

We couldn't find berries anywhere. There were none.

We left for Sweden in July 2009 with other workers and were scheduled to return around the end of September – less than three months.

On the day we arrived, someone at the labour camp drove us to an area about 20 km away to survey the forest. We saw berries and felt relieved. We were told to go back and rest and come back to pick the berries the next day.

The next morning, our group of about ten people went back to the same place. But shockingly, the berries we saw the day before were all gone. We couldn't find berries anywhere. There were none. I had no idea there were so many Thai workers who went to Sweden that year for the same reason. I felt disappointed.

The next day we were still in good spirits enough to drive as far as 100 km, and then 200 km. But we could only find a few berries. We saw workers' trucks running back and forth. That day my husband and I picked about 10 kilos of berries each. Those with no experience only had about 5 kilos each.

After that, we woke earlier and earlier and drove farther and farther to look for berries. Some days we drove as far as 500 km, which was the same distance between my home town to Bangkok. Then we had very short time to pick the fruit because we had to hurry back to the labour camp before the weigh-scale counter closed. The women were very tired and discouraged. I painfully lost my toenails from walking up the high mountains. A younger woman spoke to me in tears, "I am too tired. I can't go on." She had lost almost 30 kilos of weight.

The berries seemed to be fewer and fewer. Some days I picked only a kilo. Picking berries through the company was very different from going with my niece.

When I went there with my niece, I was not pressured by the huge debt of a broker fee. I also did not have to compete with other workers. I could work and rest whenever I liked.

After a while, we heard that the Thai Labour Minister was going to visit Sweden, not far from our worksite. We did not know what his trip was about, but we wanted to meet him. We hoped to present to him our demands to the company. At the least, they should give us a better price for our berries. We were asking for an increase from 9 kronor a kilo to 10 kronor. At the meeting we discovered that the Minister was not there to help Thai workers; he had come to negotiate with the Swedish authorities to increase the quota for Thai workers picking berries. The negotiation between us and the Thai authorities failed, and we saw the guards escort the Minister back amid the workers' disappointment. We were cursed and verbally abused by people accompanying the minister. They told us things like, "You were fool enough to come yourself" or "Be careful when you arrive in Thailand." It made some of us furious, and we decided to stay there and to organize a protest.

Other Thai workers from all regions of Sweden joined the protest. Talking with them, I realized there were no berries left anywhere. I decided then to go home, together with about a thousand workers who had gone to Sweden through the arrangement of three broker companies.

I had to admit that the dignity would not fill my stomach.

From my experiences as a volunteer assisting workers seeking justice when they were cheated, I knew that the fight for compensation was almost impossible. I could barely see how the company would return the broker fee to all workers, which we were demanding. There were too many of us.

People with the NGO network that supported the workers during that time asked us whether we wanted to take the case to court. I thought that it was too difficult and impossible to get all the workers from Sweden to fight together. So my husband and I hurriedly entered into a negotiation with the company before the next group of Thai workers returned. We wanted the company to return the broker fees, which we had taken as a loan from them by leaving a land title as a guarantee. The company finally offered to return the title and clear the debts. This meant we

worked in Sweden for nothing but at least there was no debt from it. We agreed, and I decided not to sue the company for more compensation. It would take too long. The land title we gave to the company was actually borrowed from others for the cost of 20,000 baht a year plus interest. We could not leave it there for too long because our debt would just keep increasing. Although the NGO network that I used to work with wanted me to take legal action, I had to admit that the dignity would not fill my stomach.

I probably made the right decision. A group of workers who decided to sue the company found that they had to go back and forth between Bangkok and their homes to fight their case for two years, and the case ended with reconciliation. The workers received only 20,000 baht compensation along with the return of their land titles. That was not much different from what I received and my story ended a lot quicker. It seemed to go to court or not, the result was not much different.

My three years' experience helping Thai migrant workers was very beneficial. If I had never assisted other workers to deal with government agencies before, I would not have any idea how to negotiate with the company and to take back our land title with the debts cleared.

The next step for me was to continue trying paying off the 150,000 baht debt from my Taiwan trip. But deep inside, I still felt so pained by my endless foolishness.

I try to be satisfied with what I am capable of doing.

Not long after I returned from Sweden, the Thai Labour Campaign Project had to close due to the shortage of funding. My hope for the future then was very dim.

My eldest son has married and has his own family now to take care of. My daughter works in Bangkok, but she has left her baby for us to take care of and sends 4,000 baht a month. She is not happy in Bangkok, though and wants to come back to stay home in the next year.

My heart is heavy. I do not know how to deal with the burdens. My second son is studying in a university in Khon Kaen. He works part-time to pay for his living expenses, but the university fees are still my responsibility. I want him have a higher education so that he will get a good job and eventually we parents

will live a comfortable life. I tell myself I have to be patient for only another two years and find a way to support him until he graduates. This is my hope.

My husband and I moved out from the big house we sold to my brother. Our new house is a small place on a small plot of land close to a monastery at the edge of the village. It is a quiet place. In front of our house there is a big pond and a public land. We grow vegetables there. I started the garden after I had a chance to see the work of subsistence farmers in Kudchum district. The trip inspired me and gave me lots of knowledge, such as how to produce fertilizer that we could sell for 30 baht a bag.

Actually, it is nice to live in this part of the village. I don't have to listen to the gossip and mocking from the villagers where we used to live. Many of them enjoyed shaming me by saying how I have nothing from going abroad. One of the most painful comments came from a neighbour who said to me, "How stupid you were to go there and you didn't sell your body. That way you could carry loads of money back, couldn't you?"

I try to be satisfied with what I am capable of doing, with the vegetables in the garden that can be sold and with the happiness of giving when the neighbours ask for a chilli or eggplant from the garden.

No matter what other people have, we should not want to have just like them. It is impossible.

I have stopped thinking about going abroad to work because I don't want to be fooled again. Working abroad is a risk. It was as if my life was hanging on a thin thread that could be torn at any time.

When I was young, I heard propaganda about how good it is to go working abroad. I used to envy my husband's sister who was successful working in Saudi Arabia.

Of course I thought she was successful. I heard she earned up to 20,000 baht a month from working as a maid there. I believed it until not long ago when I learned she too had suffered. She was no different from the women who were lured to sell their bodies. It was true that she worked as a maid, but she was also forced to sleep with all the guests and relatives of the house owner also. And then when she came home, she found her husband had taken a new wife and they had a child together.

For women like us, I guess no one dares to talk

about the prostitution they are forced or lured into. Certainly in the old days, no one dared to demand their rights or justice, as some do today. The fact is, if someone spoke out with the truth, the villagers would look down on her. They would look at her with disgust and refuse to associate with her.

It is a pity that I learned such a tragic truth about my husband's sister only after a long time had passed.

At this point, I have come to the conclusion that it is not worth going abroad to work. The money we earn from the hard work in fact is our own money. We pay ourselves to work for others! If we stay home, we do not have to look for money to hire ourselves to work. We will not have to work too hard just to earn enough to eat. And we do not have to be in debt.

No matter what other people have, we should not want to have just like them. It is impossible.

Ounjai

Ten years ago I first came to Bangkok looking for a job after graduating from grade 9. I had never thought about working abroad because I had read newspaper articles about cases of women working overseas who became involved in human trafficking and prostitution. They were subjected to physical and mental abuse. It seemed to me that working overseas was not safe for women.

The day I was born, my father was working in Saudi Arabia.

I was born and grew up in Pakwang village in Tak province. I am the eldest daughter. I have one brother and one sister, and there is not much age difference between us. The day I was born, my father was working in Saudi Arabia. My father worked overseas through my whole childhood. He started working in Saudi Arabia and then in different countries, which I cannot remember. The last country where he worked was Libya. He worked there for five years before he stopped being a migrant worker.

My mother raised us alone mostly. Once in a while my father came home to visit. But he was always sending money home. It was really helpful for my mother, and she did not need to work hard on the farm like other people. Sometimes I longed for some care and attention from my father like what other children had. But my mother reminded me all the time that everything that my father did was for the family. I once asked my father why he had to work so far from home. He answered, "I could make a lot more money than working in Thailand. The wages in Thailand are too low to cover all the expenses."

When I was 16, I was studying in grade nine. That was the time my father returned home to stay. He never shared stories of what happened or what he learned as a migrant worker. Perhaps at that time the situation of deception of workers was not as serious

and widespread as it is now. The only story that he told was how the family owned 5 rai of land and one old car. He was really proud of that because he had started from nothing and all of this property was from his hard work as a migrant worker.

My father was a role model for me. He made our family happy. I did not want my father and mother to go out to the farm and work very hard. I hoped I could be just like him, earning more money to renovate our house and improve its condition.

People who work in Bangkok have a difficult life, how can they survive financially?

I only graduated from the ninth grade. Deep down, I would have liked to continue my studies because I dreamed of becoming a civil servant. It did not matter what type of work in the civil service. I just did not want to work in the strong sun.

Because I was the eldest, I gave up my studies for my younger brother and sister. If all three children studied at the same time, it would cost too much. Alas, though, both my brother and sister did not manage to continue their education after they graduated from the ninth grade.

The fact that I did not have much education made me feel really bad about myself. Many of my friends grew up to be teachers, doctors, nurses or working in the civil service. So when I met them at the market, I was too ashamed to say hello. How could I dare? I was just an uneducated worker. I did not dress well like they did.

After I graduated, my aunt who lived in Bangkok helped me to get a job as a clerk in a helmet factory. At that time I took a non-formal education class at the Muang district of Tak until I graduated from the twelfth grade. Working in Bangkok, I earned 4,500

baht a month. My monthly expenses include apartment rental, water and electric bills totalling 1,000 baht. I sent 1,000 or 2,000 baht to my parents, saved another 1,000 baht and use what remained for food. So I hardly had any money left for myself. Sometimes I ate rice but most of the time I had instant noodles. Factory workers like me had such a difficult life. Even though I tried to save money, I only managed to collect a small amount. Sometimes I wondered how other people survived.

I went to work abroad to get my father's land title back.

Around 2000 or 2001, my brother applied to work in Korea through an agency in our district. At that time, working in Korea was very popular among Thai migrant workers. My brother had the same purpose as me – to earn money to support our parents. The recruitment company got a tourist visa for my brother. The plan was that the agency would pick him up at the airport. Unfortunately, the immigration officer deported him. He was not even able to get into the country.

All the costs, agency fees, passport fees and other expenses were around 170,000 baht. My parents had taken the money from a loan shark. The interest rate was 5 baht per month so all together my family was in debt for about 200,000 baht. We had never been in debt before. This was why I had to go abroad to earn enough income, to pay off this debt. I went to work abroad to get my father's land title back.

So I began my journey as an outbound migrant worker even though I always believed that working abroad was highly risky for women. My father did not support me on this, but there was a turning point that made me leave my job at the factory, return home and begin to prepare to work in Taiwan.

I worked in Taiwan twice and earned more than 10 baht weight of gold.

I paid 150,000 baht [in recruitment fee] for a job in a factory in Taiwan. That was in 2001. I was 21 years old. I worked at an electronic parts manufacturer for three years without going back home even once. Before I made the decision to go to Taiwan, I did all the background research to make sure that that I would not be deceived by a fraudulent agency. I even went to the Department of Employment to check if the agency that recruited me was legal.

The first time that I went to Taiwan my parents went into debt again so that we could pay the agency. The total debt, including the recruitment fees for my

brother and myself with interest was 400,000 baht. This was a very large amount. After I worked in Taiwan for two months, my brother raised another 200,000 baht loan to pay for the agency fee to follow me to work in Taiwan as well. At this stage, all together my family was in debt for approximately 600,000 baht.

It was a booming economic period during the time I was in Taiwan. If I worked overtime I could earn 30,000 to 40,000 baht a month. I had to work 10 to 12 hours a day and could only sleep for four or five hours. No matter how much I earned, I never touched the money because the company transferred my salary directly to my Thai bank account – after the cost of my food and other expenses were deducted. When I received my salary slip, I called my family to withdraw money from the bank.

I considered this a successful experience. My brother and I managed to pay off the debt within three years. The Taiwanese company treated employees fairly and organized a retreat trip twice a year for the staff. The staff who did not take leave could get a bonus at the end of the year and received a voucher to shop at the Carrefour mall for their birthday. After I completed three years of working the contract, I had some money saved at home, a bit more than 100,000 baht. It was the biggest amount of money that I had ever possessed.

After I returned from Taiwan, I went back to work in Bangkok. The working conditions had not changed. As always, the cost of living was too high. There was little chance to work overtime. If I had a chance to work over time, I could earn 6,000 baht a month. This could not compare to what I earned in Taiwan – which was at least 25,000 baht.

After some time, my savings from Taiwan disappeared. So I thought of going abroad again. And again I took a loan to pay a recruitment agency. That second time I went to replace another person who had worked there only four months and returned home before the contract ended. I was there for two years and eight months. The salary was not as good as my first job because there was limited amount of overtime work. Still, I earned between 18,000 and 25,000 baht each month.

The second workplace was similar to the first factory I worked in. But the dormitory was very strict with curfew and closed at a certain hour. They would deport anyone who came back after the door closed more than three times. I did not experience any abuse or exploitation. It was, however, very difficult to take

sick leave because the factory would rather have staff work sick than take a break. The factory paid a salary to me without deducting any costs. I had to withdraw money from an ATM machine and send money home through a “Thai shop”.

Most of the time I worked the night shift. Around 5 p.m. the factory shuttle bus picked up workers for the 7.30 p.m. shift. The break time was around midnight, and I would prepare fried rice to eat at that time. The work ended around 8 a.m. By the time I returned to the dormitory, I was very tired and sleepy. The best I could do was to go out to buy sandwiches and soy milk for breakfast. Then I took a long sleep and woke again at 4 p.m. This was my daily routine.

The factory employees took turns for a day off once a week. When I had a day off, I rested in my room, ironed clothes and cooked some food. During the working days, I hardly found time to cook at all. This second time in Taiwan, I started to learn some Chinese. This was helpful to communicate and laugh with others.

After the completion of the contract, I managed to pay off the debt to the agency again, and still had saved about 200,000 baht. I worked in Taiwan twice and earned more than 10 baht¹ weight of gold.

I was unprepared to be scammed partly because I had never experienced a scam before.

I came to realize that most of those who worked outside Thailand always wanted to go back abroad once they came home. Only a few of them were satisfied with the income they made in the country. I came back to work in Bangkok again. And everything was as it was before. It wasn't long before I did not have much savings left. Even though I was really careful on my spending, I did not have enough to cover all our expenses. So again I started to look for another job opportunity abroad.

Every day I dreamed of leaving Thailand. During those days in Bangkok, I applied for jobs through agencies that supplied Thai workers to different countries, including Switzerland and Spain. I paid the deposit to recruitment agencies three times, each time it cost around 20,000 or 30,000 baht. But then every time the company went silent. All together I wasted about

100,000 baht for nothing because I did not manage to get work anywhere.

Then my brother applied to work in Poland. At that time, the company in Poland did not have a position open for men. My brother passed the details of the job to me and I decided to fill in the application form. After that I did a background check on the recruitment agency.

I always did background checks on any company by calling the Department of Labour to find out if the company had a license. I also contacted the Department of Consular Affairs [in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] to check if the job abroad that was advertised really existed. I thought I had done a thorough job checking the information to ensure there was nothing fraudulent. But I still blundered. This turned out to be an expensive lesson. I have now learned that even a recruitment agency that is legally registered can still deceive and take advantage of jobseekers.

In March 2008, I paid the 30,000 baht deposit for the recruitment fee to the agency. I was working in Bangkok while waiting to be recruited. Finally, in September 2009 I received a phone call from the agency telling me that I should be ready to go to Poland by early October.

When I arrived at the company, I had to pay an additional 220,000 baht to cover all the costs. My aunt agreed to help me with the money. The company only wanted cash or else they would not send me to Poland. My aunt and I kept resisting paying cash and wanted to transfer money to a bank account. The negotiations took a long time. My aunt would not pay cash no matter what. In the end, the agency company had to agree to take the money by bank transfer.

I thought that the agency company was reluctant about the bank transfer because they did not want to leave any trace behind in case of any trouble. I knew that the transaction record should be kept as evidence if any problem occurred. My aunt transferred the first instalment in the amount of 50,000 baht for the plane ticket, then another instalment in the amount of 170,000 baht at the departure date. I was very happy for this day to come. At the same time I was quite worried because I knew that I was back in debt.

The company guaranteed that I would be paid 50,000 to 60,000 baht per month. This was quite a good figure. I told myself no matter how hard the work was, I would not give up the job until I paid off my

¹ one baht equals 15.244 gram

debt. My mission was that I would pay off all the debt. Then I would give to my parents 20,000 baht per month and keep 40,000 baht for myself. Even though it was a yearly contract, I would continue to work there for ten years. I started to calculate how much I would earn if I could save 40,000 baht a month – in ten months I would earn 400,000 baht. What if I worked two years or three years, how much would I earn?

I was unprepared to be scammed partly because I had never experienced a scam before. My experiences working overseas for six years went as well as I expected. I did background checks before I left Thailand. Until now, I still cannot believe that I was deceived. I had so much hope and was not prepared for any disappointment.

It was a five- to six-hour round trip to go to the supermarket.

In the beginning of November, I flew to Poland with 17 jobseekers who shared the same dream. There were four males and the rest were female. The weather was fiercely cold over there. I only had one thin jacket that I brought from Thailand. My friends and I had the same thought of not giving up and working very hard to pay off our debt.

When we got to Poland, a Polish man came to pick us up in a small bus. The bus ride took five to six hours. I had no idea where we were heading. No one told us and I could not read the Polish signs. It was dark by the time we arrived. My new work place was isolated, surrounded by pine trees, and there was a small gas station located in front of the factory.

The man took us to the accommodations room. At that moment, I felt terrible. It was very cold, some minus degrees Celsius and there was not a single heater. They only provided a hot water machine. All 13 girls needed to share a room together. The four guys stayed in another room. The only thing we had was an air mattress and a sleeping bag for each person. Of all the places that I had gone to work, this place was the worst.

The factory produced something that looked like noodles and also animal food. I arrived there on 6 November and had to start work right away. My job was packaging dog food, putting it into bags and tying up bird food into a mistletoe. I had to work every day until the job was finished. I could take a day off only on the days that they had no work assignments. The salary would be deducted on the days that I did not work. Most of my days off were spent in my room because I

could not go out anywhere.

On the first few days of work, all of us had only boiled potatoes to eat, provided by the agent. We told the agency representative that we would like to eat some rice because if we ate only potatoes, we would not have any energy to work. The agency said that rice was expensive over there and it was hard to find.

Luckily, there was a group of Thais who went to work in Poland before me. They were transferred to work at the same place. They introduced me to a grocery shop and took me to buy food. It was a good thing that we had brought some money from Thailand so that we could buy food that we liked. My friends and I borrowed a rice cooker from those Thai friends.

It was a five- to six-hour round trip to go to the supermarket. Each way took two hours and I had to walk through the snow amid the fiercely cold weather to get there. We had to wear very thick clothes – four or five layers of socks and hats until we could hardly see our faces. I thought that my friends and I were no different from the Laotian or Burmese migrant workers who came to Thailand. We could not communicate with anyone and felt isolated and discriminated against by the locals.

In the first month, I earned 750 euros, which included overtime. That was about 25,000 baht in Thai currency. This was not very much given all the expenses. And it was nowhere near the 50,000 to 60,000 baht the agency had guaranteed I would earn. The payment for overtime work was always less than it was supposed to be. The worst thing was that I was paid only for the first month. The agent did not pay us any more after that.

According to the contract, I would be paid on the 20th of each month. The agent did not show up for a week or two and later he didn't appear for months. When the workers asked the employer for our salary, he always said that he already had paid us through the agent. At this stage, no one knew whether the employer had paid the agency or not, or if the agency took the money and never paid us.

Life in Poland?

I never had one single day of happiness.

Because everyone was experiencing many difficulties, some people called their families to warn others not to come to Poland. They warned their siblings about exploitive conditions at the workplace

and the bad wages. Even though those families had been warned, no one listened, and Thai workers kept coming to Poland, just like moths flying into a flame. One day when I was working at the factory, the agent arrived and told me and three other workers to pack our bags and move to work at a flower farm. I was very frightened because I did not want to be separated from my friends. But the others were transferred to work at a mushroom farm. The relocation of our work always took place at night and without warning. I did not know why.

The salaries of the two places were not much different. At the flower farm, the employer still paid our wage to our agent. The new task at the flower farm was seed propagation. When the plants were ready to go, the workers had to separate the seeds into different sizes and do the seed propagation. Everyone worked days and nights without any days off, even when it rained and snowed. I had to get a rain coat. There were no amenities or special benefits for workers like there was in my work in Taiwan.

Later on, I was transferred from the flower farm to a strawberry farm, again, without any notice. I worked at the flower farm only a month before I was told to move my stuff at night again.

One day I received a phone call from a friend who told me that one of the Thai migrant workers was arrested at the mushroom farm by the police and was being held in jail. I was very frightened and kept asking myself why this could happen? When would it be my turn? My friend was in jail for a month without any help at all. She became sick from a bad appendix and had to have an operation in Poland and later had it fixed in Thailand because the operation in Poland was not done properly.

I was afraid of being arrested. I had no idea whether my work permit was valid or not. Not long after that, 12 Thai migrant workers were arrested and deported back to Thailand for the charge of invalid work permit. Although I had also been questioned by the police, fortunately I had the right type of work permit.

By that time, I had lost hope. For the past two months, no one had been paid by the agent, although we kept asking.

Then the agency told us to take a break from work for 20 days. I spent most of that time in my room and was really stressed because there was no work and I did

not get paid. I could not return to Thailand unless there was someone who could help me. We were living in bad conditions, with no money left and we had to share money to buy food. Everyone was very depressed. When my sister or my parents called, I always cried. We were all scared of getting arrested by the police when we went out to buy food. Sometimes we wished that the police would just arrest us and deport us back to Thailand so we could finally go home.

Around March 2010, while I was working in the flower farm, the agency dragged me and two friends out and said that we had to return to Thailand immediately. I was in the middle of the seedling nursery and my body was covered with mud and soil. The agency did not even let me change clothes and left me and my friends at the airport with air tickets. I did not question the agency about anything because I wanted to go home so badly.

When I kept asking the agent about the wages, all he said was, "I have no money to give you!"

Why was I sent home? I thought at that time that Thai migrant workers were starting to work on jobs that did not match our work permits. The agency must have given us one type of work permit and might have run out of those jobs, so they kept reassigning us to work in different places. I thought that the time I worked at the flower farm, it was the right job type but my job at the flower farm was about to finish, so the agency must have been afraid that if they moved me to work somewhere else, they might get arrested. So that was why the agency sent me home.

At the airport in Warsaw, my friends and I called the Thai Embassy in Poland for help. One of the senior officers came out to meet us at the airport and helped us sort out the documents for returning back to Thailand. And then my five months working in Poland was considered over. Life in Poland? I never had one single day of happiness.

**I did not want any compensation money;
all I needed was my deposit money back
from the agent to pay off my debt.**

All of Thai migrant workers said that without the help of Lek – Chanya Yimprasert, the coordinator of the Thai Labour Campaign Organization, we would not have been able to return home.

When all 13 of us were back in Thailand, we stayed together in Bangkok and did not return to our

homes. We were planning to seek justice and Lek was our advisor.

My friends and I went to the job agency. The agency was really shocked when we turned up. The agency in Poland must not have told them about sending my friends and me back. The agency did not pay anything and did not help sort out the problems.

The agency was trying to negotiate a pay out of around 80,000 to 90,000 baht for compensation. I thought that it was not enough to cover my debt. I paid the agency 250,000 baht and I needed it all back. I still had the bank transfer slip as evidence. I did not want any compensation money or anything. All I wanted was the agency fee that I had paid and I wanted it back to pay off my debt. I did not accept the amount of money that the agency offered. The company gave 5,000 baht for the travel fee to everyone. But no one went home at that time.

My friends and I got together with another group of migrant workers who had been in Poland and we went to Lek's office. We started the process to fight for our justice. I had to go to many government offices in Bangkok. I could not remember which ones because there were so many. In the early stage, friends joined me, but as time wore on they started to give up one by one. They must have heard from somebody that it would be useless to fight and that they should take the offer from the agency. Later on, they did not join the fight anymore.

We still fought to get back our compensation money. The Minister of Labour managed to get the company pay us with the 5 million baht it put as a damage guarantee when it started the business as required by the law. At first there were only 37 migrant workers who were fighting together. Then when the Ministry of Labour issued that order, there were 73 migrant workers who were entitled to a share. In the end I received 80,000 baht from and used it all to pay my debt.

From this experience, I learned that finding justice is very difficult. I had to go through so much to get only a portion of my money back. The others and I had to get together to pressure the Minister of Labour, lobby through the media and travel to Bangkok many times. The money that we received was little compared with all the expenses.

After we were paid by the agency, the Ministry of Labour promised us that it would work to get the rest of our money back. That satisfied everyone. But then,

as time went by, nothing happened. So my friends and I decided to take the agency to court ourselves. There were 18 or 19 migrant workers who banded together to take on this court procedure. The others gave up because they thought the court process would take a long time. I decided to go on with some other friends just because we wanted to know what the result would be.

Did my mother die because of me?

When I returned to Thailand I stayed at home most of the time. Unfortunately, my mother had cancer. I spent my time taking her to hospital. Her condition became worse, and she was not able to do anything herself. My mother passed away two months after I returned home.

I felt that my life was going downward again. I was stressed and lost 10 kilos. I was very depressed and always thought that the family was in debt because of me. Then when my mother passed away, I kept blaming myself. Did my mother die because of me?

I thought about committing suicide many times, even though no one accused me of causing my mother's death. But I was aiming so high and I was very disappointed when it did not turn out the way I expected. My father told me that he would have no one else left if something happened to me. Who else would help support him? When he said this, it encouraged me to stand up and live my life again.

I would be very happy if people listened to me because at least they would be aware of all the issues.

Since returning from Poland, I spend most of my time taking care of my father, doing house work, cooking and helping on the farm. Sometimes organizations and foundations working for workers' rights invite me to be a speaker at some events. I am happy to go because it is a chance to give information to those who want to work outside Thailand. They can learn how to protect themselves and how to deal with problems before they leave Thailand. I would be very happy if people listened to me because at least they would be aware of all the issues.

Without a job, I spent almost all of my savings. I never asked for money from my father either because I thought that I was old enough and I had never asked my parents for money since I left home. Sometimes my brother sends me money. Luckily, the aunt has never asked me to pay back the debt. She only says that whenever I have money I can pay her back. If I had

raised money from a loan shark or taken a loan from a bank, I would have faced far more difficulties.

I had some gold I bought with the money I earned in Taiwan. After my savings ran out, I sold nearly all my gold to cover household and personal expenses. At the moment, I have one gold chain left, which was the first one I bought when I was working in Taiwan. I do not feel like myself staying home and doing nothing. I used to work so hard and made money all the time. I want to leave the house, but I cannot because I need to take care of my father.

Because right now my father is most important.

Saranya

I was born in Srisaket province of north-eastern Thailand. My parents have eight children, and we are poor farmers. None of us had much education. I finished only grade 6. My family owns a plot of land on which we used to grow rice, but I don't know how to work on the farm. I started my working life in Bangkok at an early age and have never been back to live in my village since.

When I was around 14 or 15 years old, my elder sister asked me to join her in Bangkok to care for her baby son while she worked as a dishwasher in a hotel. I took care of my nephew until he was enrolled into a kindergarten, then I started my work life as a factory girl. I worked in a number of workplaces, including a food processing factory, a garment factory and as a sales girl. I did not earn a big salary – it was as much as you can expect a village girl with primary education could make. But without a family or a responsibility of my own, I could spare a small amount and managed to send back to my mother every month.

So I could say that my life was not a difficult one.

My life was like a firework, and I got everything I wanted.

I married in 1996 when I was 26 years old. I met my husband when I was working as a sales girl at a retail garment company, where he was a driver. After marriage, I quit my job to start a small business, which was a stall selling fried meatballs in a market. Frying meatballs became my way of making a living.

While I was starting my new career, my husband worked as a driver for a construction company. I considered myself very lucky then. After marriage – my life continued to move upward. I made around 1,000–2,000 baht every day from selling meatballs,

which was quite a large sum ten years ago. After two years of marriage, I could say that I had everything a woman wanted, and then I was ready to have a “full” family – with a child and a house of our own.

I became pregnant in no time. We then bought a small house in Bang Bua Thong of Nonthaburi province. For this house, I spent all our savings and borrowed 150,000 baht from my elder sister. This way I owed money to my sister instead of the bank. When my baby was almost due I closed my meatball stall and then moved to Nonthaburi after the baby was born.

I raised my baby boy almost full time, while doing odd sewing jobs to earn a few baht. My husband was the breadwinner of the house. I planned to get back to work after our son could be enrolled into school.

One year after moving to Nonthaburi, my husband decided that his work life as an employee should end. We looked for options and ended up buying a minivan so that he could join in the van station transporting passengers in Bang Bua Thong area. We decided to spend our savings of 200,000 baht for a down payment on the van and paid 100,000 baht for a place in the van station – so that he was eligible for picking up passengers as public transport. For this we had to pay a monthly instalment of 12,000 baht for the van and 6,000 baht per month as a rent for the space in the van station.

Each day after deducting all expenses, my husband would make around 1,000 baht for this new job. He gave all the money to me. He worked hard. Sometimes he drove night and day and only slept for a few hours. I still felt like I had won the first prize lottery. My life was like a firework, and I got everything I wanted.

Life changed rapidly and I fell from grace before I knew it!

Unfortunately, life changed rapidly and I fell from grace before I knew it!

While we were starting to build up our fortune, my husband turned to gambling and became addicted. He did not drive the van by himself but instead hired a driver to do his job while he spent all the time in casinos. I knew nothing then because he still gave me money as usual.

The truth revealed itself one night. He picked up the van from the driver and drove it back home, but on the way an accident occurred. The van was hit so hard that half of it was distorted. The van flew over to the other side of the road. It took more than two months for the van to be fixed, which meant that my husband could not drive or earn any income. Yet our debts totalling more than 20,000 baht still had to be paid every month. But there were also the debts he had from gambling, which I had never known about. Eventually, he had to tell me about those debts. The payments ate up our savings, including all the gold I collected. My husband could not afford to secure his place in the van station anymore.

I was not earning any income. Our son was very little and the milk that fed him was expensive. A box of milk that cost 500 baht lasted only five or six days. My life then fell back to zero just like that, after moving upward. At that point, both my husband and I had nothing left. We had never fought since marrying, so we just sat and properly talked. I proposed to him, “Let us do like this, because of the way things turned out – we should separate. You should get your new life and I will take care of our son myself. There is no need to regret the past because for now we have no other choices.”

My husband, however, pleaded for me not to leave him. He asked me to give him another chance. He chose to be with his family. I agreed that he could stay with me and our son – not as “my husband” but as “our son’s father”. He made so big a mistake that I could not forgive him.

The only person who gave me the courage to live was my son.

With no income to pay for the loan, we had to sell our house to my sister. She kindly let us stay in the house so I paid her a monthly rent of 1,000 baht. For

the van, we sold it to my brother so that he could take over the responsibility of paying the rest of the monthly instalment. I did not open my mouth to tell anyone how difficult our situation was. I did not ask for any help. I thought I would rather get up again by myself.

One day I carried my boy and walked to the local market 2 km from home. I headed towards a meatball wholesale shop. I desperately wanted to start selling fried meatballs again, but I had no money at all. From what I previously experienced, meatballs cost 20 baht per kilo, the frying oil was 20 baht per kilo and the sauce was 20 baht per half a kilo. Spending 220 baht to buy all those materials, I could sell fried meatballs for 500 baht and that would make almost 300 baht profit within one day.

But I had nothing. I decided to take a chance. I prayed to the Buddha for good luck and then walked straight up to the shop owner and talked to her. “Dear sister, I totally have no money, but I really want to start my career again selling meatballs. If I buy 5 kilos of meatballs and a kilo of frying oil, would you give me a credit?”

The shop owner, Sa-ngiam, who later became my good friend, looked at me quietly for a few seconds before she replied, “Of course!”

As if hearing a reply from heaven, I almost dropped my baby on the floor. I dropped to my knees to thank her with joy. I could not thank her enough. She basically trusted me – totally a stranger – and gave me the credit of 220 baht. She told me later that she thought I was an honest person. That day I got all the material I needed – meatballs, frying oil and seasoning sauce. Luckily, I still had kept a frying pan, gas stove and an old carriage at home. That was how I restarted my old career.

On the first day, my meatballs sold out by 5 p.m. I earned 500 baht and was able to return 200 baht to Sa-ngiam. I really felt grateful to her. I could start again because of her help. After that, I bought materials from her by cash. Sa-ngiam died a few years ago. But she will always be on my mind.

My husband applied for jobs and finally was hired as a driver for an executive who ran a beer garden – which was quite a handsome start. I had to give him a 100 baht pocket money per day during his first month of work. We both had to tighten our belts under this situation.

I saved up the money I earned as much as I could – with the hope that my life would be better in the future. The world around me looked so dull then. Although my husband stayed beside me, it did not relieve my suffering. The only person who gave me the courage to live was my son.

I really believe that my son was born to bring us good fortune. The fried meatballs sold out so well that I had to increase the quantity. There were lots of people living around that area, especially construction workers. I invested each day, from 200–500 baht, and later 1,000 baht, which gave me a profit of 700–1,000 baht. My husband earned 20,000 baht per month, from which he gave me 4,000 baht, and he was responsible for all the household expenses.

One year passed like that and I thought that we had started to get on track again. We decided to buy a house of our own in the same area. My husband and I both borrowed from the bank to cover the down payment. After six months, the two-storey townhouse was ready, and we moved in. My husband moved into the new house with me and our son.

I wanted to earn that kind of money and have that kind of life.

In the residential area in Bang Bua Thong where I lived, I met a woman from Udon Thani who was married to a Swiss man. I thought of her as a woman who lived her life in a dream. I knew a few other women also married to Swiss men, and they were all her relatives. This woman, who became a friend, told me that people who can speak German could find a job in Switzerland, doing something like a cleaner and make 100,000 baht a month. I wanted to earn that kind of money and have that kind of life.

So I asked my friend to match me with a Swiss man. Her husband still had single male relatives who wanted to marry a Thai woman. I only thought to do it so that I could have a green card to stay in Switzerland and could work and earn to send money back home for my boy's future and pay off the debt on the house. My friend showed my picture to the male relatives. If any of the men liked the way I looked he would fly to Thailand, marry me and take me back to Switzerland. If this worked out as planned, I would have given my friend a reward of 100,000 baht.

I did not consider myself then as a married woman. Although my husband stayed with me, we did not have such a “husband-and-wife” relationship. He

agreed to this condition, and we remained independent of each other. I also consulted with my family on this matter. We also agreed that – in case I did go abroad – that my sister would take care of my boy. She was married but had failed to have a child of her own.

My family was quite supportive of my decision. They thought that I should start a new life if “nothing could get better than this”. They all understood that my husband really disappointed me gravely and that I could not bear anymore disappointment if he would make more mistakes.

However, my life must have already been destined – and my soul mate had been decided. It appeared that no man liked my picture. It was strange that other women, less good-looking than me, were all picked by those men and are now married. I waited for my luck for three months with no success.

After that, my desire to start a new life in Switzerland vanished. But by then I had spent more time with my husband and our relationship had rekindled. He proved himself through many good deeds as deserving of another chance. In no time, I forgot my own words, “You can live with us but I will not forgive you.” We then became husband and wife again. This return to him made me feel like winning the lottery's first prize again. He spent all weekends with me and our son, helping me out with house work and preparing for the meatball vending.

We lived in our new house for seven years, and he was consistent with that routine.

The desire to earn more money blinded my eyes so that I could not see that I already had everything I wanted.

An elder sister of mine went to work in Taiwan eight years ago. There was not much fraud and exploitation of migrant labour then. She told me that a monthly salary for a Thai migrant worker in Taiwan was 20,000 baht, not including overtime payment. If a worker worked hard and did not care too much about rest, she could make up to 60,000 baht per month. My sister bought a house, a plot of land and a car from her earnings in Taiwan. And she had 600,000–700,000 baht in her savings account. All was from working in Taiwan for six years.

One day I visited my hometown in Srisaket province. My eyes were widened after seeing the figure in my sister's bank account. I thought how successful

people became from going abroad to work, how they were so different from us who struggled to make a living in our country. We did not have even a small portion of their savings.

At that point, I saw only the figure in her bank account and never thought that with such light work good money really existed. I only heard the other part of the story afterwards – the story of how migrant workers committed to overtime work and skipped sleep for days. There were migrant workers exposed to too much dust and had a lung disease when returning home. This was the price they had to pay. In this case, how would money, a house and a land be worth the price if someone does not know how much time is left for him or her to spend with the family? (But I only came to this conclusion after I came back from Poland, where I went as a migrant worker.)

I consulted with my husband about the desire to go work abroad. He could see that I really wanted to go so he did not protest. Actually, our family did not need money. We were quite well off and my business was getting better. I had some savings, and we managed to buy a pick-up truck as well as renovate the house. My husband also had a secure job. So it all happened because of my own desire to have more.

I could only see that I did not have enough. I only saw that we worked so hard for years, and we had only a house that was not paid off. Although I could earn a living, I was paid only after I worked so hard. I thought only those who worked abroad had a wonderful life, with light work and good pay that led to hundreds of thousands of savings. My hope was that I could make enough money to pay off the house debt of 300,000 baht and have some savings so that I didn't have to work so hard.

The desire for earning more money blinded my eyes so that I could not see that I already had everything I wanted.

I did not dream at all that I would be deceived because so many people in the villages went to work abroad through this recruiting agency.

In April 2007, I asked my sister to help me contact a recruitment agency based in Ubon Ratchathani province. There I was told by the company manager that a job as an “assistant worker” was available in Poland. The job was quite well paid, with the monthly salary around the equivalent of US\$750 per month, plus

overtime payment. I estimated I could make around 40,000–50,000 baht per month. Each contract would last for one year, I was told, but the work permit would allow me to work in Poland for up to ten years.

I filled in the application form right away. I had to pay a deposit, what the company called a “visa insurance fee”, for 20,000 baht. After that, the recruiting agent went silent for a year. I went back to selling fried meatballs while waiting to hear the progress. As time passed, my enthusiasm to go work abroad began to chill.

Once I called the recruiting agency and said, “I changed my mind. I don't want to go to Poland anymore. Can you return the 20,000 baht deposit to me?”

The agent said that the deposit could not be returned to me. Not only that but I had to pay a fine of 50,000 baht if I wanted to withdraw from the recruiting process. At that time I thought this condition was fine and beneficial for me, so I told him, “That's fine. I don't have 50,000 baht.”

Another two years passed and then I was contacted by the recruiting agency and was told that the company was ready to send me to work in Poland. I was told to pay the full recruitment fee of 320,000 to the company as soon as possible. I did not have any cash on hand, so I was asked to bring the land title as a mortgage. I had no land of my own, but my mother did.

My mother – who had seen what her other daughter gained from working abroad – supported me by giving her land title to secure the loan from the company to pay for the recruitment fee. This way, I did not pay any cash to the recruiting agency, but I suddenly had a debt of 320,000 baht. I did not dream at all that I would be deceived because so many people in the villages went to work abroad through this recruiting agency.

Two months after that I joined the preparation training for workers, and then in November 2009, I accompanied 19 other hopeful Thai migrant workers to Poland.

**By the time I returned home
I had lost 20 kilos.**

I carried all my hopes with me to Poland. Even before I boarded the plane, I could not stop thinking excitedly. I was really going to work abroad. I would make 40,000 or 50,000 baht a month, that was for sure. Amid severely cold weather, I and the other 19

migrants landed in Germany. A bus then carried us to our workplace in Poland. The journey took one day and one night.

I ended up in a strawberry farm. The farm cultivated strawberry seedlings and exported them to other countries. Our accommodation could not be described as bad, but it was a dorm room with small beds that men and women shared. Luckily, there was also a heater. There were three bathrooms for all the workers, and we all had to pay 20 zloty, or 7 baht, for each time we went to the bathroom.

There was a kitchen, with only six stoves for 200 workers. There was no chance for a Thai worker to use them because the European workers always took over the whole kitchen. They cooked for long hours, boiling potatoes for almost half a night while the Thais relied on instant noodles and rice.

It took a long walk in minus 30–40 degrees to the place that we could buy food. We had no pocket money. The recruiting company had said that we did not need to carry cash with us because we could claim for necessities from the German agent, who was supposed to care for our well-being while in Poland. As it had happened, after the agent dropped us at the farm, we never saw him again.

The Thai workers started working right away after arriving on that day, with no time to rest. My working day started at 6.30 a.m. and went until 6 p.m. Because the agent was not with us, we could not communicate with our employers other than through body language. He basically told us to wrap ourselves up in winter clothes and waved his hand to suggest that we follow him to the site, without saying anything more.

There he made the Thais pull out the seedlings in the minus 30 degree weather, which is definitely very cold for us. We dared not to resist the order out of fear of being sent back to Thailand. We were outside from morning till dusk feeling our blood frozen. Through broken English and sign language, we told the driver that we could not stand this strong weather and needed to be inside where there was a heater. But we were not allowed. He didn't speak our language, but the driver said in a way that we realized, if we could not continue to work, we didn't have to. But we had to stay outside until the working hours finished. I thought we could have died.

We were not oriented at all so that there was no way to know where we could find drinking water,

where the canteen was and what time was the break. We only guessed when seeing other workers starting to leave the workplace in line, and we just followed them – guessing that it must have been lunch break. We had only a few packs of instant noodles, so we just ate what we had.

The next day, five Thai workers fell sick because of the severe weather and they had to be absent from work. I had a cold all through those four months.

The situation became a little better when some Thai workers who had previously worked in Poland were transferred to work in the strawberry farm. They spoke a little Polish and knew their way around. They showed us a grocery store selling food. In the shop, there were bread, carrots, potatoes and cabbages. Eventually the shop started to sell rice for the Thai workers. I lived mostly on apples. By the time I returned home I had lost 20 kilos.

Our agent transferred us to other workplaces in the middle of the night.

The employer paid all our wages to the agent who took us to work there. The agent was supposed to pay us each month. I was paid 21,384 baht for the first month and that was the only time we were paid.

I transferred all the money into my sister's Thai bank account. But the local broker at home held my ATM card. Once the money was transferred, he withdrew 20,000 baht right away. My sister could only withdraw the rest, which was not much. This did not reduce my 320,000 baht debt at all because the money withdrawn by the broker only covered the interest. Somehow, I felt lucky that my work life in Poland lasted only four months; otherwise, I would have had to work myself to death just to pay the interest while my debt remained the same.

I worked on the strawberry farm for only one and a half months; then there was no more work to be done. Our agent transferred us to other workplaces in the middle of the night. Some workers went to a mushroom farm, while I and 23 friends went to a flower farm.

There I worked with no day off, which was worse than working in the strawberry farm where I had one day off a week. The farm arranged a bus to take us to the workplace every day. Our work was to plant seedlings in the ground. Usually the work finished at 8 p.m. each day. We stayed in a container that was turned into a dormitory located in the middle of an isolated

pine forest. The only good thing about the farm was that there were heaters so that we did not have to bear the cold weather. The bad thing, however, was that none of us were paid.

The agent just disappeared from the scene. He could not be contacted because his mobile was always off when we called. We reported this problem to the recruiting agency in Thailand but the agent there did not believe us. The company representative said that he was always in contact with our agent in Poland who reported that everything was fine.

I had some pocket money I brought with me from Thailand, as did some of the other workers. We had to pool our money to buy food for all of us. But the closest grocery store was more than a 10 kilometre walk through snow.

We also tried to call the Thai Embassy and ask for help but we could not get through the phone line. Luckily, the Thai Labour Campaign, after hearing of our exploitive situation through a friend of one of my co-workers stepped in to contact the Embassy for us. I felt like heaven answered our prayer when a Thai Embassy official contacted us and said that food would be sent to our workplace. We waited for a month, and for some reason it never came.

We struggled through the second month of life in Poland. The only food we could afford was boiled rice seasoned with salt. A boiled egg or a pack of instant noodles might be the only food we had for the whole day. Under this circumstance, our living condition as well as our willpower was continually weak.

You could call us forced labour, considering the conditions we were in.

After working in the flower farm for around a month, I heard that one of the Thai workers who was transferred to the mushroom farm was in jail. From what people said, I understood vaguely that it was because the job specified in her work permit did not match the one she was doing. Hearing this bad news, we lived in fear.

One day our employer at the flower farm ordered all the Thai workers to stop working and to stay in the dorm. There was work to be finished, so this order reflected something was wrong. I guessed that our agent or the employer was concerned that the police might come to check our work permit and would find that some of us held a work permit specifying a type of work different from what we were doing.

I and my colleagues were close to starving for almost a month after that. We received no help from our employer; he claimed that he paid all our wages to our agent. You could call us forced labour, considering the conditions we were in.

The owner of the recruiting agency in Thailand went to Poland to visit the imprisoned worker. He took that opportunity to visit us in the flower farm. I told him that we hadn't had any food for three days, so he gave us some money – around 100 zloty per person [about US\$35].

The Thai workers all reported the exploitive work conditions, including not being paid as agreed. We also asked the recruiting company to pay us the wages and compensation for damages, including the recruitment fee and outstanding debt. This was unfair to us. We had paid the fee to the agency as requested with the trust that we would be taken to work legally and properly. But instead – look what kind of situation we all ended up in, and how much debt we had. I insisted to the company owner, “You better take care of this matter here, otherwise all of us would not go back to Thailand.” We wanted to make a problem for them there.

The company owner tried to motivate us all to go back to Thailand first “and discuss the matter at home”. We did not compromise on this. Finally, we came up with an agreement that if the workers agreed to go home, the recruiting agency would pay us the outstanding two months' salary. We recorded that conversation to be safe.

But our nightmare had not ended. On the first of March, the police came to the farm and took me and other friends to the police station. There they checked our travel documents and work permit. We were later informed that 11 of us could go back to work, while the other 12 had to wait at the police station. I was in the second group. We waited until 2 a.m., then the police stamped a red mark on our passport and ordered us to leave Poland within seven days. The police then took us back to the workplace. I understood later that we held an invalid work permit.

On 6 March, the agent sent a car to take me and the other 11 friends to the airport in Warsaw. We were given a ticket to go home. At that point, we had had only water to drink without any food for two days.

I still remember the last scene I saw before I left the dorm. The friends who were not sent home –

those who endured all the hardship with me during the time in Poland – hugged me and cried. I hugged my friends back tight. I felt sorry for them as much as I did for myself. Those who remained in Poland could not be considered luckier. They saw their future there as similar to us who were sent back.

When the car was about to depart, a friend said, sobbing, “Tell the people to come and rescue us. We’ll wait.”

This journey to Poland left us with the loss of money and mind.

On 8 March 2010 we arrived in Thailand. I felt both happy and regret. I was so happy to see my family again, and, at the same time, I could not help but blame myself for not being able to fulfil my dream.

Before I left for Poland, I had a dream of making a lot of money that could pay off my debt and save for my son’s education. On the contrary, my dream did not come true, and, worse, I had more debt than even before.

For me and my friends, this journey to Poland left us with the loss of money and mind. We Thai workers had nothing left, whether it was our land or our house. All of us were badly in debt after borrowing the money from private lenders. The money was to cover the expenses incurred before leaving to Poland, including preparation of documents, buying clothes and other necessities, in addition to the recruitment fee. Many of us had up to 500,000 baht debt, with a high rate of interest – and most of us earned zero income since coming back from Poland.

Some friends were so depressed that they had to seek help from a psychiatrist. Nowadays, they call me to chat once in a while. But every time I talk with them over the phone, my heart sinks as if weighted by a bag of stones. They remind me of the gloomy days, when I was so much in despair, and I had to take sleeping pills to put me to sleep every night. In those days, I had not known how this was going to end. I had 320,000 baht debt, and my mother’s land was mortgaged. It was the family land inherited from our ancestors. If it fell into the hands of others, how would I dare face my family?

I was then totally hopeless. I had not heard of a case in which a migrant worker who had been deceived by the recruiting agency could claim the money back. What about me? To whom could I voice my suffering?

Where could I do so? I was blinded.

The day I arrived back to Thailand, the airport was full of people, including the media, to follow up our case. We the returnees negotiated with the representative of the recruitment agency and insisted the company pay us the two months’ outstanding salary. Although the company tried to prolong this by saying that we should have discussed this matter at the company venue, we did not fall for that. With a few media people there at the airport, we were successful in pressuring the company to sign a cheque of 50,000 baht for the two months’ salary to each worker. And that was the first triumph! This was my big lesson learned in negotiating and putting pressure on the company – you will have the upper hand if you have the presence of media.

After that I took on the role of leader of all 70 Poland returnees to fight for justice. The second triumph was that we succeeded in claiming back the compensation deducted from the 5 million baht guaranteed payment that the company had to put down with the Department of Employment when it first registered as a recruitment agency. This was required by the law. This 5 million baht had to be shared among all the returnees.

After that the Thai Labour Campaign wanted to support us in suing the recruitment company to pay us back the rest of the recruiting fee we had each paid. But then I had to back out at that stage because I was sued by the broker in Ubon Ratchathani. They wanted me to pay back what had become a 150,000 baht debt. That was from when I mortgaged my mother’s land with the company to pay for the recruiting fee; I signed a loan agreement of 150,000 baht, although I was told that the loan I took was actually 320,000 baht. I did not understand why they had to manipulate the figure in the loan contract. And the court ruled in my favour – I did not have to pay for the claimed debt.

I could say that my life has been moving in a positive direction. I have paid all my debt with the money I received from the company and the money I made through meatball vending. The court advised me to sue the recruiting company and claim for the damage it caused, but I have been too tired. My family’s land was safe.

Those returnees who decided to pursue the court procedure to fight back for their money from the recruiting agency have had to bear with the prolong process because the company keeps requesting to

postpone. People who are affected the most are those who live in the provinces. How can they afford to travel to and from Bangkok that frequently?

Although we had an advantage over the company and would likely win the case, the bigger question was how long would it take to win? And even then, the recruiting company could always appeal for the reconsideration, which could take ten years.

In my opinion, workers like us should have been supported by experts or relevant government agencies on what would be the most effective way to claim back our money paid to the recruiting agency. As you can see from this case, fighting in the court has its limits. I think that the Ministry of Labour should have done more to fight for us.

Because my friends have chosen this path to fight, I only wish them the best luck.

**If I had not lost four months in Poland,
would my life have been better
than it is now?**

I consider myself luckier than the others because I still had my family and career waiting for me at home. When I came back to Thailand, I could go back to selling fried meatballs right away. I consider myself lucky to be sent back home after going to Poland for only four months. Otherwise, my life would be in hell working so hard without hope to pay off the debt. Other friends have had less fortune. They lost their money, land and house and even the family. They lost self-esteem – they lost everything.

I consider myself a lucky person because this suffering period of life turned me to follow the Buddhist's path. The monk that I refer to as my guru gave me a new direction to lead my life. He taught me to let go of things that I wanted and possessed and that only then would good things happen. I got my mother's land title back and my friends won the case in court. I have no motivation to fight back or to sue the company. I prefer to finish up with it. I am back to the arms of my husband and son. What else do I need?

Nowadays, my life gets better and better every day. I have no more desire for going to work abroad. Even if a person shows me what he or she has made – thousands or millions of baht – I won't buy it. I know now how difficult a migrant worker's life is, living in fear and in debt. For me, living and making a living at home is the best choice.

My son would never want me to go away again. This was the first time that I left him for such a long period. When I went to Poland, I had to leave him with my mother in Srisaket. And he found it was difficult to adapt to living without me. His school performance also dropped. I regret what happened and swear that I don't want to put my family in this situation again.

I always ponder over this thought, that if I had not lost four months in Poland, would my life have been better than it is now? But thinking about it again, what is the use of looking at life that way? This four-month experience actually helped me to learn a big lesson.

At least it opened my eyes so that I can see that my life has enough and is good enough.

Pirom

A person wanting to work abroad has to possess both expertise and skills. We have to prepare ourselves by checking the information – where we are going and with whom. The recruitment company we paid should also be inspected before we make any decisions. And one of the most important things is to be really careful with any document we sign.

There have been a lot of information campaigns on labour scams circulating in communities. But it seems that potential migrant workers and jobseekers prefer to turn blind. The recruitment agencies' campaigns are far more attractive. They choose to believe local brokers who tell them all the good things about working abroad, the things they want to hear, such as “You will get tens of thousands of baht salary”.

I have learned these things from my own experience.

When I decided to work in Spain I was full of confidence. I heard the warnings, “Beware of being deceived!” But the desire to go abroad overcame any other thing. My dream was so vivid, and I did not spare my heart for any disappointment.

I did not prepare at all what I would do if things went wrong.

I only wanted to have adventures.

My family could not afford to send the children for education beyond primary school. I finished grade 6 and started looking for a job right away. Later I pursued higher education through the non-formal education system. Since I was a young boy I have never had any ambitious dream for my life, I only wanted to have adventures. When I was young, seeing people driving cars thrilled me. So I just wanted to sit behind the wheel and be able to control the machine. My teenage life ended up working in garages.

That was it. Working in a garage fulfilled my dream already.

My life should have been going with the flow just like that because I was not the type of person who thought much about the future nor planned things ahead. Before my life as a migrant worker began, I worked at different garages in Udon Thani. I lived day by day, spent what I made and never thought of saving for the future.

The motivation that drove me to go working abroad for the first time then was not the money I would make. Rather, seeing many men in the village who went off to unknown lands appealed as tempting. My parents were also supportive of the idea of working abroad, so I followed the path of those other men.

Israel was my first destination where my adventure of youth began.

Working in Israel helped me grow up.

Nong Harn district of Udon Thani Province is well-known for sending a large number of its population to sell labour abroad. The men going to work overseas is a normal way of making a living. I was aware of this practice since when I was young. When I was 20 years old, just having finished high school through the non-formal education system and having avoided the conscription for army service, my parents encouraged me to apply to work abroad just like other men. At that time, a cousin persuaded me to go to a recruiting company with him. I remember paying around 90,000 baht as a recruitment fee. That was considered a large amount for our family, and we had to ask a loan from relatives.

At least I considered my two-year experience in Israel a successful one. I sent money to my parents every month while I was there. On returning home, I managed to pay off the loan for the recruitment fee and

had some savings to renovate the family's house.

I had excessive energy in my youth, and working turned out to be so much fun. In Israel, I was working on a farm where I did all kinds of agricultural work. There I earned around 20,000 baht per month, which I considered quite a large salary at the time. It was the same amount I was told by the broker when in Thailand. I could send the money home every month because I didn't have many expenses. Usually I went to bed right after work, so I saved a small portion each month for myself, and the rest of the salary went to my parents.

The Israel experience opened my world to know people from different walks of life. Working under the schedule helped me to be responsible and disciplined. Working in Israel helped me grow up.

Actually, I came to realize the tactics of recruitment agencies through this Israel experience. I learned that the recruitment agency has a primary goal of sending us workers to the destination after getting paid the recruitment fee. And that's it. It is not their concern what happens to us once we are there. Promises and agreements made in Thailand can easily be ignored.

In my case, for example, the work conditions were not what were specified in the contract. The contract stated that the work would be "agriculture work", which was quite a general term, and it was true in that loose context. However, the company agent told me that the work I would do in Israel would include growing and picking vegetables – not picking oranges. That type of work was notorious among Thai migrant workers who had been to Israel as hard work, and jobseekers would be reluctant to agree to it. The brokers definitely knew this so they avoided saying that orange picking was part of the job – they were afraid they would not recruit anyone if they did. Anyhow, I ended up picking oranges as well as other work on the farm.

For me, that kind of promise from the company agent was a manipulation. But once I was there I had no other choice but to accept it. Many other Thai workers who were there before me also had this experience of being manipulated.

When I finished my two-year contract, I came home with some savings. But I could not stay home for long before thinking to go abroad again. What else could a young man do if he did not have a career? I would not want to leave if I could make a good living

in my own land.

I spent the rest of my savings from working in Israel to pay the recruitment company to send me abroad again for work. That time I had to pay around 100,000 baht to go to Japan. I decided not to go back to Israel because the company agent told me a migrant worker was not allowed to go back to the country after a two-year contract ended, unless I changed my name and applied as a different person. That sounded quite complicated so I gave it up. Also, I had already been to Israel and it was not exciting to go back.

A young heart drove me to look for a greener pasture, just in case things could be even better.

**Although the fee was so high,
if I could work for many years
I could at least break even.**

It took a little more than a year after I came back from Israel before I could make my way to Japan. There I worked on a chicken farm that was a family business. The recruitment company took me to Japan as a student seeking further education. They manipulated the visa application by applying for a student visa.

During those years, Japan was seen as a gold mine for migrant Thai workers because its economy was booming. I would have made a lot of money there. Local brokers came into my village and distributed pamphlets advertising a golden opportunity to work in Japan. Some brokers would come and talk to their target groups in person. I went for this, and paid a recruitment fee around 320,000 baht to go to Japan. I hoped that this was a good investment. Although the fee was so high, if I could work for many years I could at least break even.

My job on the farm was not a difficult one. The work condition was also good enough. Every day my life was surrounded by hens and eggs. The farm was owned by a family of three members. Therefore the management was informal. I had a Thai colleague working with me. Our employer was kind enough. We worked there long enough to gain trust from the employer. We could ask for days off when the work was done. There I earned 20,000–30,000 baht per month, depending on the exchange rate. I sent all my income home to my parents, and it was used for household expenses, my sister's education and for a family business that they had just started.

I worked in Japan for three years, as agreed in the

contract. But when I returned home, I was welcomed with a shock. All the money I had sent back to my family to invest in a small business was gone. The money had been mismanaged and there was no business. We had not one baht left. I had very little cash with me because I sent home most of my earnings every month while I was in Japan. The only luck I had was that I paid off the loan I had taken to pay the recruitment fee for Japan.

In this situation, what next? Well, I only thought that with no money left, I had to look for more. So I planned to find a job abroad again.

Once a person has gone to work abroad, he will not be satisfied with the income he can make in Thailand. This was me. I never considered looking for a job in Thailand as a choice after earning abroad.

I have to partly blame it on the broker who created this false dream and made me believe that I could earn such a big salary.

Not long after coming back from Japan, I started looking for the next possible destination. Where else could I go after Israel and Japan? I went back to the same recruitment company I used to go to Japan. The company agent suggested that, apart from Japan and out of Asia, European countries had good potential, or else I could go the United States or Canada.

I thought I had been to Asia so I wanted to start afresh some place new. Going to work abroad was also a kind of life investment. I had to be confident that my chosen destination would be beneficial or at least I could break even so that my efforts were not a waste. I decided on Spain.

The recruitment company informed me that to work in Spain, the contract would be signed year by year, but it would be automatically renewed for five years at least. Each month I would make between 50,000 and 60,000 baht. Because of the promised five-year contract and high salary, the company claimed that it needed to collect quite a high recruiting fee – 580,000 baht.

Thinking back to that time, I realize I made such a wrong decision. I have to partly blame it on the broker who created this false dream and made me believe that I could earn such a big salary, so that I dared to invest my money for this opportunity.

I went to work in Spain in 2009, my third time working abroad.

The job that I and 19 other Thai migrant workers were given was on a tomato farm where we planted tomato seedlings in a greenhouse. It turned out that the wage we earned was not as high as the broker boasted. I earned around 30,000 baht per month, and it was almost impossible to make up to 40,000 baht. Part of that was because the value of the euro went down so much – from more than 50 baht to 43 baht during the time I was in Spain.

When the income was much less than expected, my only hope to make even on this investment was to rely on the number of years that I could work in the country. If I was allowed to work there for five years, the total amount of income would be fine, even though the monthly salary was not much.

But this hope would also shatter when I could not work in Spain as long as expected. After 12 months, my work contract was terminated. The employer told us that our one-year contract had expired. When I checked all the documents we had, it was true.

The Thai workers tried to negotiate with our employer every which way we could. We called back to Bangkok and asked the recruitment agency to solve the problem – whether asking the farm to hire us or finding us a new job. At that time, nobody wanted to go home. We had worked for only one year, and each of us still had a large amount of debt – more than 500,000 baht – on our shoulders. If we were let go just like that, our lives would be disastrous.

I don't know why the farm did not renew our work contract. From our analysis, this could have been for many reasons. It may be because all the work was done and the farm needed to lay off some workers to save costs. There were workers of different nationalities then – Moroccan, Romanian and Ecuadorian. They were the majority, compared with a small group of Thais. We had less negotiating power. The farm would have been wise enough to get rid of us first to avoid conflicting with the rest.

When we totally lost hope for renewing the contract with the farm, all 19 workers demanded the Bangkok-based agency look for new jobs in Spain for us. We would definitely not accept going back to Thailand as a solution. After being laid off, we stayed at a house arranged by our agent – but we had to bear the cost of living there by ourselves. We waited and waited but they still could not find us a new job.

I also realized that our recruiting agency did

not have a strong network in Spain so they could not arrange a new job for us. I have a relative who also went to work in Spain in the same year as me, but through another recruitment agency. He has been in Spain for three years now. He obviously had better luck choosing a better established company for going abroad. I was so unfortunate choosing the wrong one.

And I guess the Thailand-based recruitment agencies were competing with each other to win credibility with jobseekers. There are many of them even in one province like Udon Thani, but in the end, the jobseekers like us are the ones who have to bear the consequences.

We waited for nearly four months until we could not just sit and wait anymore. We ran out of money, and hope. There was no sign of a new job. At that stage, the recruitment agency persuaded us to fly back to Thailand and discuss the matter. We then decided to go home.

I was just curious to know what it would be like to fight in court.

After leaving Spain, my friends and I met Lek – Chanya Yimprasert of the Thai Labour Campaign. Many people showed interest in our case, but I did not know them well. And nobody was by our side all the time as Lek was.

We were first in contact with Lek while living in Spain. Lek brought a number of media people to greet us at the airport when we arrived home. We started our campaign to demand justice from the recruitment agency at that point and went to file a complaint at the Ministry of Labour later.

We actually went to talk to the recruitment agency after the manager called us. The company offered 325,000 baht to each of us, saying that this amount was all it could afford. “If you want more money, just go ahead and sue us in court. But I don’t know how many years it will take,” the manager said.

Most workers accepted the offer and ended the negotiation that way. They all had family to take care of and were pressured by their large debt. So the faster they got the money, the better. I was in a different situation. I could see that the amount offered by the company could not compare with the amount I paid to them and would not pay off the debt. Lek also advised us not to take the offer at this stage. She said that if we waited we might claim back our full amount after going through the court procedure. Another reason was that I

did not like the way the company insulted us, as if we were nothing and would not be able to do it any harm. Because I had no family of my own, thus less burden of life, I decided to sue the recruitment agency. I was just curious to know what it would be like to fight in court.

Of the 19 returnees from Spain, only I and another friend took on the court procedure to demand back the money we paid to the company. We had a great team of lawyers who did everything to help us. And I learned the importance of relevant documents.

Back when we were sent to work in Spain, although the company collected a recruitment fee from us all and arranged our trip, we were told to tell the immigration officials when traveling outbound from Thailand that we travelled for work on own. This way the company would be free from involvement with our travel, at least on paper. The company’s intention then revealed itself in court – they claimed not to be involved in sending us to work abroad. I learned the papers I had signed indicated I was travelling to work on my own arrangements. There was no contract between me and the recruitment agency, only a contract with the Spanish employer. So the company’s position was that I and the others had no right to claim any of the 580,000 baht back because we all travelled to Spain to look for jobs by ourselves.

Our lawyer team researched through all the documents to find any evidence that the recruitment agency had provided recruitment service for us to work in Spain. I had not kept any of my documents. No bank slip, nothing. I didn’t even have a contract. The lawyer went to the Department of Consular Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and found a paper issued by a company in Spain delegating this Bangkok-based recruitment agency to send Thai workers to Spain.

Forced to surrender by that evidence, the company was then forced to accept their involvement in sending workers to Spain. They then requested the court to arrange a negotiation with the two of us. The company offered us each an amount of money, which was only 40,000 baht more than their previous offer, which the other workers had accepted. Consulting with the judge, we were encouraged to take the offer because it was the fastest way to end the case.

We could insist to pursue the case, the judge said, but the process would take a long time. Would we be happy to wait until four or five years? If we wanted to conclude this fast, we should take the company’s offer and save our time for something else worthwhile. I

thought to myself, it was not bad to just finish off with this. I would compromise so that I can move forward with my life. And I would definitely not make this mistake again.

The court procedure took more than a year. I had hoped to learn about the court process but our case only ended in a negotiation outside the courtroom.

Now I know that the biggest obstacle for us rural poor workers is that court procedures take a long time. We likely will find it most difficult to go through this process to the very end. How could we afford to take a round trip from home to Bangkok that often? Who would pay for the transport, food and accommodation?

This route is not an effective way for workers to fight back for justice. I think that the Ministry of Labour must be more proactive to support workers with this problem. The labour officials know best what to do and could do something for us. Unfortunately, things don't work that way.

In conclusion, I received an amount of 370,000 baht from the recruitment agency. It was ironic that we spent a year going through the court procedure and this amount is only 40,000 baht more than what the other workers agreed to accept from the company. It is nothing close to the 580,000 baht I paid the company to send me to Spain.

I have learned a lesson that whatever I do, borrowing money is totally not a good idea.

When I first returned from Spain, my parents were in deep worry. They were afraid that I would not be able to claim my money back and at the same time disappointed that I could not earn any income for the family as expected. I think that is a normal reaction and expectation from any parent. The neighbours also gossiped about my failure behind my back. But I don't care. Why do I have to?

I instead think that it was good that I had this experience.

Now I just want to have a small garage of my own. I was lucky to have an opportunity to participate in a project for career development and received 20,000 baht seed money to start my garage at home in the village. It is still small but I prefer to start slow. I bought more equipment and spare parts when I earned money. I think about having a bigger garage in a better location, of course. But that is still a future plan because

I don't have much money. My earnings are small but at least I can break even. And I am satisfied.

I think that I should take things step by step. If I go too fast, I will fail again. I have learned a lesson that whatever I do, borrowing money is totally not a good idea. A vendor offered me to launch his products in my shop and gave me a credit of 15 days. But I refused because I did not want to handle more debt. Without debt, our family was doing fine, but we just wanted to have more.

My debt that I acquired before going to Spain remains at more than 100,000 baht. I paid around 300,000 baht I received from the company. I cannot afford to pay back the total yet. I only pay the interest when it is due, not knowing what to do better than that.

I never thought before that I was exploited.

I have returned home to Udon Thani and live with my parents, my brother and his family. Our family makes a living from our land. We have around 11–12 rai of land where we grow rice and sugarcane. The crops are sufficient to feed the whole family. Actually, if we did not have debt, my family would be doing fine.

Maybe our family was too ambitious. We had enough but we wanted more. The more we struggle for money, the tighter we are trapped. It is true that everybody wants to get rich. But along with this desire, there comes a risk of being exploited.

Before this incident, I never thought that paying a recruitment fee to a broker was some kind of exploitation. I never thought before that I was exploited. I only had a desire to go abroad. After this journey to Spain, I had a chance to meet with so many people and I now see the labour recruiting business in a different perspective.

I can see that brokers will do everything they can to persuade people like us to apply for a job abroad that they will arrange. The more people they can get, the more money they can make from the recruitment fee. But for the jobseekers, a heavy burden of debt falls on us.

Nowadays so many jobseekers go to work abroad. There is a young generation who seeks a greener pasture to earn income for their family. And there are those who are not successful in their previous trip returning to the same recruiting agency, hoping that the next time will be better. This may sound absurd,

but I think this phenomenon reflects that poor people do not have many choices in their lives to make things better. Whatever comes through with a slight glimpse of hope, we snatch it.

I have had an opportunity to share my working-abroad experience with other people and with jobseekers on different occasions. My story has not been anything new; it is a story similar to many migrant workers. Except that I am one of those who speak out, and many do not have a chance. I don't know if my story is helpful for those who are making a decision to go abroad, but I do hope it is. I hope they listen to me.

For me, I have learned from my own experience. I feel light now because I can see through it all. I feel I am protected by my knowledge and understand that being a migrant worker may not be a good life.

I have no more thought of going abroad again. Except, if you tell me where there is a good place to go, where it pays well and with good work conditions, if you tell me that, I would research the information. If you tell me that there is such a place, and I study it and find that it is true, I would definitely give you a recruitment fee, even if you wanted 500,000 baht.

But don't expect me to believe what you say. I feel I am protected by my knowledge but I understand that being a migrant worker may not be a good life.

Pramuan

I have heard stories of Thai people who went working in Saudi Arabia since I was young. There were some lucky people who came back with success and there were the unlucky, who lost both land and wife for the sake of going to work abroad. I personally knew some of these fortune seekers who were in my father's generation. I never thought that one day I would go seeking fortune abroad myself.

When I did go, it was as if I had thrown myself down deep into a well that was too deep to climb up out of no matter how much I tried. The only thing I could do then was to stay patient and wait for someone to help me climb back to my normal life.

I agreed to talk about the experience because I wanted people to hear the true story. I wanted others to know that the glorious legends of the Thai workers abroad are mostly myths, not the truth.

I then had to buy vegetables at higher prices but could only sell them at lower prices.

Before I went to seek fortune in Sweden, I was an ordinary farmer. I owned 5 rai of paddy fields in Ubon Rachathani province. In rainy season, I planted rice. In the dry season, I grew vegetables. The purpose of rice farming was mainly for family consumption. We only sold what we had left from what we needed to eat. Due to my interest in community development work, I entered local politics for a while. At the age of 49, I was elected village headman twice and the chairman of the subdistrict administration organization once.

After 2005, I wasn't re-elected and I started to lose interest in politics. Political work required me to fight against all powers, including money – and that wore me down. It also brought me debts because I needed a lot of money for the election campaign and what we called “social tax”, which is what a politician

needs to pay to show his generosity when he attends all the merit and cultural events. I then decided to buy a pick-up truck to start a trade. I went around to different farms to buy all sorts of vegetables, Chinese kale, cabbage, onions, mint, morning glory and celery, and then sold them in the town market. In the good days, I remembered the pile of vegetables that I covered with a net filled the whole truck. Unfortunately, during the economic downfall, many others started the same business and the competition became serious. I then had to buy vegetables at higher prices but could only sell them at lower prices.

My wife and I have two sons. The eldest one now has finished high school and is preparing to follow his dream in a merchant marine college. The youngest one is in grade 8. Our family expenses, which included the expense of my children's education, were quite high. We had debt from the political activities and from the family expenses. I did not get rich from political work, and there were not many alternatives because the business competition was heavy in the area. When a friend who had been to Sweden before told me that there was a short-term job that paid well, I was very interested. He told me, “I went there last year. I didn't get as much as expected and even lost some in the investment. But it's because I didn't work hard enough. I will go there again this year and this time I will spend all the effort I can.”

Hearing his words, I got excited and started to dream. I then thought I should try to go seek a fortune abroad too. Here in Thailand, I was never afraid of hard work. I thought, if I try my best wherever I will, there should be success, shouldn't it?

Picking berries in Sweden...I had never heard of such a job before. ... I did not spare even a little space in my heart for disappointment.

I started preparing for the trip to Sweden in the summer of 2009.

Picking berries in Sweden...I had never heard of such a job before. The person who encouraged me to go was not exactly an “agent”.² He was someone from a nearby village who used to go to Sweden with this company and he introduced me to them. At the time, there were other friends who wanted to join with me but they couldn’t find money for the broker’s fee. They also did not have a land title to guarantee a loan from the company.

At first I was hesitant also because I had no cash on hand. I also did not want to believe anybody’s word too easily. Yet my wife was eager to go because our family had been in debt for so long, as high as many hundred thousand baht. She wanted to clear the debt and have some savings for our children’s education. Finally we decided that both of us should go together.

The broker company charged 75,000 baht to send each worker to Sweden. We gave our land title to the company to guarantee a loan from the agency for 85,000 baht each for me and my wife. I understood that the money was for the broker’s fee, plane ticket, visa fee, other arrangement costs and the three-month loan interest because the working period in the contract was three month. I also had to borrow around 70,000 baht from my relatives for expenses during the preparation. Most people do not realize they need to spend money during the waiting period – apart from the broker’s fee – and that should be included when we calculate our investment.

We started the process in May 2009. We made several trips to the company’s office in Ubon Rachathani town almost every day to apply for a passport, sign a loan contract and for a worker’s training course in Kang Kroh district in Chaiyapum province. The petrol cost me about 400 baht a day. During that time, we could not continue other work so the money borrowed from my relatives was used for living expenses as well as direct costs for such expenses as medical exam fees. The company advised us to buy necessities, such as a

good-quality raincoat, overcoat, gloves, socks, big bags for berries, etc. We also needed to prepare dried food, such as instant noodles, coffee and fish paste, for two months while in Sweden.

My wife and I carried about 30,000 baht to Sweden. Another 10,000 baht was put in the bank for our children to spend during the time we were away.

As far as I understood, the contract was for three months but the real period of work was about two months. I expected that my wife and I would be able to earn up to 200,000 baht in that time. It would be enough to pay off our debts and put away some funds for the future. That expectation came from the workers’ training organized by the company. The instructor encouraged us to have a big hope that we would earn much money. He gave an example of a family that saved a million baht from picking berries in only a few months.

We left for Sweden in July 2009. I was full of confidence and excitement. All that waited ahead was new and exciting to me. I did not spare even a little space in my heart for disappointment.

Yet, when the next morning came, my hope started sinking.

We arrived in Sweden in the early morning. It was a beautiful day. The sky was bright. The weather was fresh and cool. It was like another world to me. My heart was full of hope. I was so excited that I wanted to see what the blueberries, or the “ber”, as the Swedish called them, looked like.

A bus picked us up at the airport. I was with 40 other workers. We headed for a labour camp in a village. It was about 4 p.m. when we arrived.

The labour camp where we stayed during the 40 days in Sweden was a two-storey building. The company rented an old boarding school and adapted it as a shelter for the labourers. A Thai housekeeper who went with us told us that the company had a plan to buy it next year. The camp we stayed in was a small labour camp, with only about 40 of us. There was a bigger camp in the North where more than 600 workers stayed.

The camp leader arranged workers to stay in groups, about eight people each. A truck was arranged for each group to go look for berries. Men and women slept in the same room, in either a single bed or a bunk bed. That was not a problem. The most important thing

² A local job broker whose task is to encourage people to apply for a job with a broker company. The ‘agent’ could be a community leader or a person who used to go working aboard.

was that we needed to work as hard and get as much money as we could.

Yet, when the next morning came my hope started sinking. The camp leader took each group's representative to survey the mountains. We drove up across four or five hills that were about 10 km from the camp. As far as we saw, there were only very few small berries in the bushes. That was not the picture I had imagined. I felt very disappointed. I shouted in my head, "No berries!" I started to worry and saw the future road would surely not be smooth.

After that first day, my colleagues and I sat around the labour camp waiting. The camp leader said it was not the time yet; the Swedish authorities had not allowed anyone to pick berries and anyone found doing so would be arrested. I did not know whether it was true but due to the fear of being arrested, none of us dared go picking berries. We just let the living expenses eat up our savings from home day by day.

After five days of waiting, we got a truck from the camp and my group pooled our money to fill it with petrol and we snuck out to survey the forest ourselves. It cost about 800 kronor for petrol in a day, and each of us paid 100 kronor for it. I looked at the map and tried many new and further routes and tried to remember the road number so we could find our way back to the camp. We found very few berries.

Three days later, after waiting ten days, we were allowed to start working. On the first day, we drove for only 80 km and found an abundance of berries. We were very happy. Everyone worked in good spirits. Some even sang, "Vigo...Vigo!" while working, referring to the trucks waiting for them to buy back in Thailand. That day each of us picked almost 100 kilos of berries. Some had 60 kilos and some had 80 kilos. That was a very good sign. We came back and sold the berries to the camp for 8–10 kronor a kilo. A weighing scale waited for us at the camp only from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. We later learned that the price we were paid in the camp was cheaper than the market price. When we went to a gas station in town, we saw a poster offering to buy berries for 12–14 kronor a kilo. But we did not dare to sell the fruit outside the camp because the camp leader threatened that if we did so, the Swedish police would arrest us.

Picking berries was in fact hard work. We could not just jump out of the truck and run to pick them. We had to walk up and across mountains far and high. Then carrying a big bag of berries on the way down was the

most difficult task. A strong man like me almost found it too heavy, needless to say the difficulty for a small woman. Once I had about 25 kilos, I would carry my and my wife's bags down and go back up again. We also had to take good care of the berries we had picked. If we were careless by leaving them in an open place with no one guarding them, other workers from other countries might steal them. Our truck had no cab lock. Anyone could open it. I had to hide the berries in the forest and gather them up later when we were ready to head back to the camp.

On the third day of picking, the berries seemed scarce. We had to drive farther and farther. On the fifth day I started to wonder if Sweden had run out of berries.

We realized then that it was not possible we could earn even enough to pay off the debt of travel.

After that, wherever we went, other Thai workers' trucks were seen running around and in opposite directions. In some days we met each other about ten times and each time we greeted each other. I learned that no one picked as many berries as they expected. The best would be only 20 kilos each.

Our group tried to go as far as we could. Before dawn, we woke in a hurry to start our journey at 3 or 4 a.m. Leaving at 5 a.m. was considered too late. We went around looking for berries and stopped every time we saw a river. Once I drove for more than 400 km before I found berries. By the time we had arrived there, the day was almost gone; there was little time left for work. Fortunately in the summer in Sweden, the sun sets quite late. So it was visible at 9 or 10 p.m. We could pick berries until the last minute.

On 4 August, 16 days after we had arrived, the workers tried to negotiate for a better berry price with the company. They finally agreed to pay 10 kronor a kilo but insisted there would be no more. The workers shared their concerns among one another. We realized then that it was not possible we could earn even enough to pay off the debt of travel. I calculated roughly and found that to pay off all the debt and have a bit of savings, my wife and I needed to pick 200 kilos of berries a day. Most days we managed 20 kilos.

After several days passed, we asked to negotiate with the camp leader again. This time we asked for a reduction of the living expenses that were collected daily: 50 kronor for boarding, 50 for food and another 50 for the truck rental. Altogether, we had to pay 150

kronor, or about 500 baht a day, and these were expenses we were not told about before we left Thailand, and we had to spend our pocket money on them. We asked the camp leader to reduce the cost to 100 kronor a day, but the guy said he had no authority to make such a decision.

By then, the money my wife and I had brought from home was gone. We had invested all our money and labour for this work.

The letter we sent to the Embassy was only to ask for help.

In the middle of August, our patience began to run out. I knew by then that there was no way to earn enough to pay off the recruitment fees. Workers who came via other companies also said they could not stand it any longer. In addition, I started to see trucks of workers from southern Sweden in our area. That meant the berries in the southern forests were gone too.

A small group of Thai workers, including me, sent a letter of complaint to the Thai Embassy in Stockholm. The letter explained that we, Thai workers, were in a difficult situation and needed help because we could not pick berries in the volume we expected and the living expenses had become too high. Not long after that, the Embassy sent a letter encouraging the employers to negotiate with us. The company then called us to talk, but no agreement was achieved. The employer did not relent to any of our requests. Instead, they demanded to know who was responsible for the letter.

It was the most stressful moment. I recalled the employer called a group of eight workers to his room, group by group. He then tried to force us to tell him who wrote the letter. The conversation started to be abusive. The workers were so scared. It seemed like we were stuck on an island in the middle of the sea, with no way to communicate to the outside world.

The letter we sent to the Embassy was only to ask for help. We had no other intention. But when the employer knew who did it, he threatened that if we did it again, we would be sent back to Thailand and our debt would be doubled. If any worker wanted to go back at that time, the company would allow them to do so, but the person had to sign a paper accepting a doubling of their debt. Consequently, no one dared to leave.

After that, it was impossible to heal the conflict between us and the company management.

If you want your money back, go back to Thailand and try!

One day the Thai Embassy sent a message that the Thai Labour Minister would be in nearby Luleå town in northern Sweden, and workers could go to make a complaint directly to him.

After all that had happened, my colleagues and I decided that we should go. We secretly discussed the plan to meet with the Minister. We agreed we should appear as if we were going to pick berries as usual. That day each truck left one by one at 3.30 a.m. and then all together four trucks headed to Luleå.

When we arrived, we found more than 400 Thai workers gathered in a park next to the hotel where the Minister was having a meeting. I had no idea what the Minister's mission to Sweden was about. But on that day, three recruitment companies that brought Thai workers to pick berries in Sweden came together to negotiate with the workers. Our demands were that the berry price should be equal to what the market paid while the living expenses should be decreased. No one talked about quitting the job and going back home. Deep inside our heart, each of us wanted to continue the struggle to get something out of the hardship.

But the negotiation failed. The company did not agree to any of the conditions we proposed. The Labour Minister seemed to be on the employers' side, saying that the companies also had heavy expenses of their own, and if the workers wanted to file a complaint, he would help us if we went back to Thailand and followed the procedure there.

The Government's attitude and performance was clearly not favourable to us. We all presumed such high-ranking authorities were getting some extra benefit from these companies. The Minister did not appear to care even a little about the workers. The worker representatives who had a chance to join the meeting with the government officials and the employers were staff of the recruiting companies. There was no daily labourer who picked berries among them.

After the meeting ended, the workers' representative came down to announce the result. He said he was able to pick many berries, and there were still ample supply in the area. Those who claimed they could not find much were just lazy. Once he said this, the workers booed him. The meeting that day did not lead to any conclusion. The Thai Labour Minister only said, "Come back and talk in Thailand." He then left

the workers to return to the camp, but we had come too far and we were too afraid. We were concerned of our safety, so we decided to stay in Luleo. A group of Thai housewives, women who had married Swedish men, helped us by dealing with the Luleo governor to arrange lodging for us in a gymnasium. They also gathered donations from the Swedish community to buy us food and clothes.

While we took shelter in the gymnasium, we tried to talk with the employers several times. A local leader helped coordinate the negotiations. The workers wanted their company to pay back part of the broker's fee because the work was not as agreed. But the company representative said they had spent all the money. As the situation heated up, the company's representative simply said if we wanted our money back, we had to go back and sue the owner in Thailand.

I felt there was no way out. It didn't seem possible to go back to work, and there would be no justice in continuing to work through the camp. Our only choice was to go back and fight our case at home. I started to realize then, I had been cheated.

On 28 August, about 200 workers who had been staying in the gymnasium decided to go home. The housewives arranged a bus and accompanied us to collect our belongings in the camp. Their presence guaranteed our safety. The company's representative said he had changed our plane ticket so that we could leave the next day. I had only the clothes that I brought from Thailand with me and the equivalent of 2,000 baht, which had been donated by the Swedish community. I had no pocket money from Thailand left.

I left for Sweden on 19 July and went home on 29 August. In those 40 days I actually only worked from 28 July to 23 August.

Once we arrived back in Thailand, we should be able to fight for justice.

My wife and I and the other workers left for Thailand but we did not leave feeling completely hopeless. We thought once we arrived back home we could use the Thai law to fight for justice.

After the plane landed, I stayed another night in the airport to wait for other workers who returned the day after. We discussed how we would struggle for justice. About 200 of us went to file a complaint at the parliament and started a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Labour. The campaign was supported by Chanya Yimprasert from

the Thai Labour Campaign Project.

The demonstration of the Thai workers who picked berries in Sweden was active for only ten days. After that it was weakened because the company started contacting each worker individually with an offer for a small compensation. Many workers agreed to sign a compromise agreement with the company, which offered to pay them a small sum of money as an initial assistance. They said that the workers who needed more compensation could file a complaint later. In fact, these workers were yet again deceived because after they signed the paper, the negotiation was essentially over and they could not file a complaint or sue the company anymore.

I had a little knowledge about Thai laws because I used to take law studies in Ramkhamhaeng University. I warned those workers that they should not sign the paper or accept the money. At the same time, I also understood them. Most of us were exhausted from the ten-day demonstration in front of the Ministry of Labour, the cabinet house and the parliament house. We had debts waiting to be paid off, and each day that passed meant the interest would just make what we owed even greater. Many workers had a family to take care of and could not spend much time fighting.

Most workers were verbally offered 18,000 baht assistance, although in the end they did not receive it. Instead, the company deducted the amount from the debt the workers had with the company. For some cases, the company claimed the debt and expenses had not been calculated yet and the workers needed to wait. Those words were just to buy time.

I was not offered anything. The company workers probably knew it was not possible to reach such an agreement with me. My aim was to sue the company. Of more than 200 workers who initially fought together, 47 in the end agreed to jointly sue the broker companies.

With help from team of lawyers, we filed a lawsuit charging that the recruitment companies did not honour the contract. There were five channels to go working aboard.³ In my case, the employer chose to have "an employer in Thailand sending an employee to work abroad". According to the law, in this case the company

³ The 5 channels include 1) going by an arrangement of a broker company, 2) going by the arrangement of the Department of Employment - no service charges, 3) An employer in Thailand brings their employees to work aboard, 4) An employer in Thailand send their employees for an internship aboard, and 5) the worker arranges the trip and seeks the job him/herself

could not charge a broker's fee or collect any expenses from workers. Instead, the company was responsible for the visa fee, the medical examination fee, work-related equipment and all the welfare, including food, lodging, truck rental and petrol. To charge the broker's fee and all the expenses to me and my colleagues was illegal and a violation of the employment contract.

The due process started in March 2010 when the court called both the employers and employees for reconciliation. However, the employers asked to postpone several times. We only had a chance to meet with the employers in a courtroom only after the court had changed two judges and the third judge had just arrived. By then it was 13 months. And the reconciliation was not successful; we moved ahead with suing the company for violating the employment contract. But the company said that we had caused them losses and the company was going to sue us for compensation.

Many court warrants to proceed the case followed, but the company kept postponing again and again, claiming their paperwork was not ready. The tactic exhausted us and left us desperate.

Take 20,000 baht and finish!

Throughout that whole process, the company agents regularly contacted all 47 of us to persuade each to compromise. I was told, "take 20,000 baht and finish!" The amount was so little compared with what we had lost. If they offered up to a 100,000 baht, I might have seriously considered.

During 2010–2011, I travelled between Ubon Ratchathani and Bangkok often to work on the case with the other workers and the lawyers. But when the company postponed to buy time and made us wait again and again, we started to give up and step away, one by one. Finally, there were only another friend in Nong Khai and I left fighting.

After the company asked for a postponement too often, they were ordered to appear in the courtroom, in January 2011. My friend was the first plaintiff to testify. After he spoke, the company's lawyer asked for a recess and then a postponement, again claiming they and related documents were not ready. That was sad. In my opinion, we then had the upper hand for suing the company for violating the contract – we had more of a chance to win than they did.

The judge advised us that although we had

sufficient documentary evidence, the process would take a very long time if no one compromised. I was exhausted. My friend and I and my wife did not want to go to court again. We wanted it to end. We came to the conclusion that among all of us workers, there were those who took a loan from others and paid the company in cash, those who signed a loan contract with the company with assets guaranteed, as I had done, and those who both signed a 50,000-baht loan contract with the company and paid the rest in cash. Each groups received compensation differently and those who did not pay cash for the recruitment fee seemed to benefit the most from the little compensation we ultimately received.

The judge asked me whether I would accept the company returning my land title that I used to guarantee the loan and repeal the debt. He said it might be too difficult to demand the company to compensate in cash, and even if we insisted on continuing and won the case, the company would probably appeal and the struggle could go on for five to ten years.

I agreed to meet halfway. I would take my land title back with my debt cleared. Although I did not get enough to pay off the debt for what I had borrowed from others, I thought at least the company relented to our demands. The company's representative said to me, "You're not bad, huh? You made me lose over 2 million baht." Unfortunately, many who paid cash to the company received only 25,000 baht compensation because they had signed the compromise agreement with the company.

Almost two years after the trip to Sweden, our struggle for justice ended.

I guess the employer charged a high broker fee from workers to leave us bonded by debt.

The adventure was our family's important lesson. I guess the employer charged a high broker fee from workers to leave us bonded by debt. There are some people who went to Sweden with me who still have the debt for money borrowed to make that trip. Some had to go abroad with the company again in the next year, hoping to earn enough to pay off the previous debt. This meant they were struggling to earn to pay off the old debt while creating new debt for the new trip and thus were essentially in debt bondage for much of their life.

Now you see – you have land with a title, and then you use it as collateral for a loan. Then you have some money to buy yourself a chance to run after your

dream in an unknown foreign land. This is the way we agree to tie ourselves up with such huge debt.

This year I heard that Chuen, a woman who shared our tearful experiences in Sweden in 2009, decided to go back and try again. In my opinion, there is very little chance for success for Thai workers picking berries. There are also workers from Cambodia, Viet Nam, Poland and other places who head for Sweden for the same reason. It is easier for the Polish because they do not have to pay such high broker fees and travel costs; they only need to go as a group of three or four workers and drive across the country to work in the morning and go back home in the evening. They are spared the living expenses from a labour camp.

Therefore, if I have a chance to meet anyone who dreams to seek a fortune abroad, I will try to warn them to realize that even I, a former community leader, fell into the trap.

In the old days I only ran after the material trends and could not stop myself from running.

More troubles were waiting for my wife and me when we first returned from Sweden. Our paddy fields were destroyed due to the drought and the lack of care. We had no rice to eat and no money for our children's education. I could no longer borrow money from anyone, even my relatives. The situation seemed worse than before we left. I used to think I was poor, but at that time I still had some cash to pay for daily needs.

I had to work up the courage to borrow money from my wife's sister, each time asking for only 50 or 100 baht. It was not possible to start trading like before because my truck that I used to drive around buying vegetables was broken, and I had no money to repair it. I could not even attend a funeral or a merit event because I had no money for even a little donation. All doors were closed for me.

On top of that, my wife and I were also victimized by the villagers, especially by those who are wealthy. They enjoyed mocking me and made me embarrassed that I was stupid enough to be cheated. I came to understand that such reaction from the community kept people who had been in trouble abroad from telling the truth of what happened to them. A man who went to Sweden with me told everyone he received the full broker fee back along with his land. I knew it was not true.

I started to feel better when a loan from the

revolving fund of the Ministry of Agriculture was approved. I took it via the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operative by using my last 5 rai of land as a guaranteed asset. I spent the money to repair my house, paid off most of my debt and kept the rest for investing. According to the contract, I had to pay back 7,500 baht a year; that loan with the little debt remaining came to 20,000 baht. It was enough to give me strength to go on.

We now have hired people to work our 5 rai of paddy field. They get two thirds of the rice and we, the landowner, get one third. This may not sound like good deal but it is better than spending money buying rice. I received support from an ILO vocational fund and started breeding frogs and fish. The subsistence farming training provided through the project inspired me to stand up again. My wife also feels better, enough at least to open a hairdressing salon at home. She earns 100–200 baht a day. Her income plus the income from selling frogs and fish are enough for my children's schooling.

I no longer think about going back to trading. Living like this is fine enough. My family is happier. I have rice to eat, with fish in the pond and vegetables in the garden. This feeds my family well. Before this, we had to buy everything for our consumption. We grew many vegetables in our field but we always sold it and never ate any of it.

The spirit of a community worker is still within me. Therefore I have an idea that I might try to establish a network of subsistence farmers in our community. There are a few community groups in my village. We could develop a health food activity, such as producing brown rice, herbs and healthy snacks. From this we can earn in a good way. To follow this idea means all the money gained is not an "income" but is already "ours".

The painful experience in Sweden made me stronger to try to follow my beloved King's philosophy of sufficiency economy. Actually, I had thought about it before but never really spent an effort on it. In the old days I only ran after the material trends and could not stop myself from running. When I traded, I had to run around buying and selling vegetables all day and night. When I did political work, I also worked day and night to get re-elected. At the time, I only aimed for money and power and had no time left to think what were my real needs and happiness.

But now I believe I know the answer.

Paths to Dreams

Five migrants tell echoing stories of working abroad

This book essays the stories of five migrant Thai workers who had experienced working in European countries. They recount how they were deceived and abused. More importantly, they share how they fought back for justice, and tell the lessons they have learned. It was originally written in the Thai language, and later translated into English for a much wider audience. This book seeks to contribute to educating potential migrant workers on what they should be aware of, and prepare for in case they choose to work abroad. Further, it is hoped that this will help them gain more information in eventually deciding whether this path could actually fulfill their dreams.



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