Chapter Six
A Snapshot of Migrant Construction Workers

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the aggregate findings from formal structured interviews with one hundred foreign workers from eight construction sites located in and around Bangkok and its Metropolitan areas, with particular attention paid to unskilled (and semi-skilled) workers. The interviews were conducted between the months of January and March 2005.

The chapter begins with a brief background about the nature and significance of the construction industry in Thailand. This is followed by the presentation of findings from the interviews. The findings focus on the characteristics and experiences of foreign workers. In the final section, the chapter presents concluding remarks.

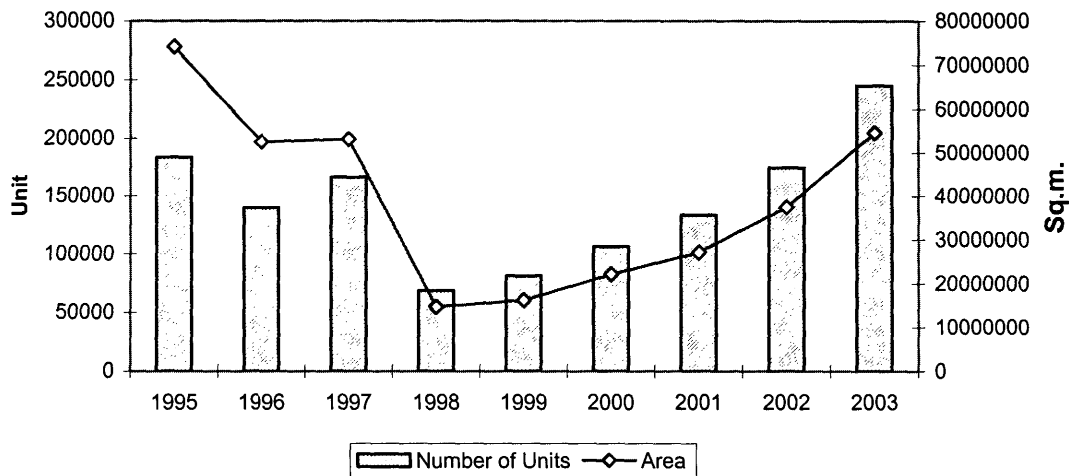
6.2 The Construction Industry in Thailand

The construction industry is one of the largest industries employing registered unskilled foreign workers in Thailand. Construction is also one of the most labour-intensive and perilous lines of work (Rojanaphruk 2005). Unlike other industries, such as manufacturing, the physical production of construction work cannot be relocated (to more labour intense or lower labour cost areas). Thus, when the economy apparently remains relatively technologically static and the local supply of labour is tightening, the importation of immigrant workers is necessary and unavoidable.

The extensive growth of construction work in Thailand over the past decade is illustrated by Figures 6.1 and 6.2. The total number of buildings being erected each year and the total volume of construction (as measured in square metres), previous to the 1997 Economic crisis, was indeed large: there were 183,648 newly constructed buildings in 1995, 139,822 in 1996 and 166,349 in 1997, covering in total nearly 180 million square metres. As a result of the Crisis, the number of buildings and the volume of construction plummeted in 1998. However,

it appears that the industry quickly recovered. After the total number of buildings fell to 69,018, and total area reduced to around 15 million square metres in 1998, there was a continuous rise afterwards. By 2003, the number of buildings under construction and the total area of construction increased just in excess of fourfold (Figure 6.1).

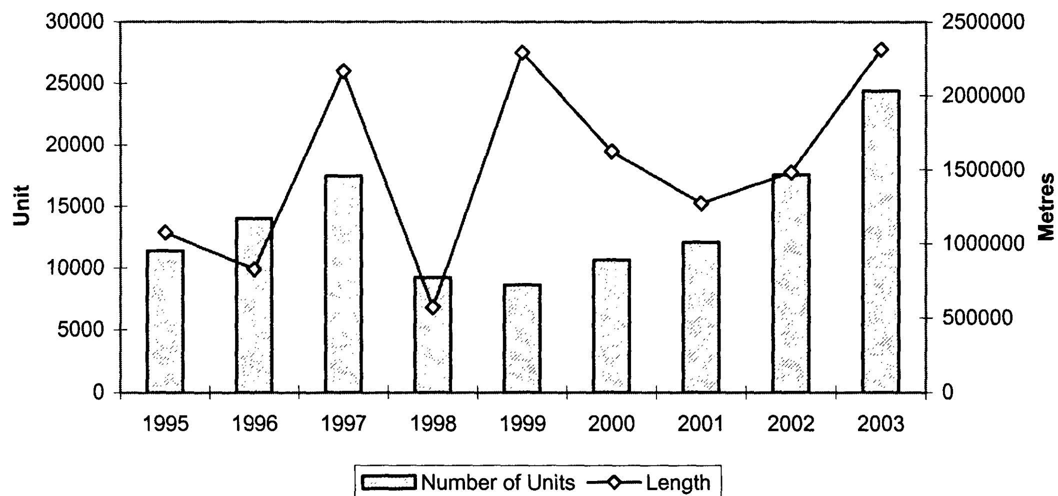
Figure 6.1 **Number of Units and Area of New Permitted Building Construction in Thailand, 1995-2003**



Source: National Statistical Office (2005), p. 39.

For civil engineering construction, Figure 6.2 depicts a similar trend. The total number of projects – such as roads, bridges, and dams – suddenly dwindled from 17,469 units in 1997 to 9,234 units in 1998 and continued to fall to 8,655 units in 1999. However, the number of such construction projects started to rise again after 2000. By 2003, the total number reached 24,392 units (Figure 6.2). Likewise, the volume of construction (in this case measured by length) began to rise continuously after 2001. It is, nevertheless, important to note that the actual number of units and the actual size may even higher, given that these figures only present the new permitted construction; they do not include unregistered construction and expansion work. As the construction industry expands, the demand for labour increases. In fact, the shortage of labour in this industry has been felt since 1981 (Chiengkul 1986: 318).

Figure 6.2 **Number of Units and Length of New Civil Engineering Construction in Thailand, 1995-2003**



Source: National Statistical Office (2005), p. 40.

6.3 Interview Results

Following the structure of the questionnaire (Chapter Two), the results of the interviews are presented in six sections: General characteristics of participants, Occupation and earning details, Process of migration, social life and social networks in Thailand, Financial issues and remittances, and Post-migration. For the most part, the results reflect the questions as they were posed in the questionnaire. The results are presented in a graphical and tabulated format, along with analysis and narrative information.

6.3.1 General Characteristics of Participants

This section presents demographic data under five headings: Country of Origin, Age Range, Gender, Marital and Parental Status, and Levels of Formal Education.

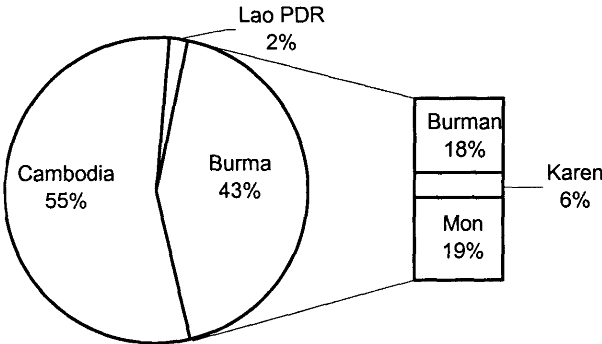
Country of Origin

The results of this particular research were reasonably consistent with the official data from the illegal migrant worker registrations in terms of the proportion of migrant workers and the

countries of origin (Chapter Five). The study found that the majority of foreign construction workers were Cambodians and Burmese. Even though, as examined in the previous chapter, the number of Laotian workers in Thailand – in general – is quite significant, the statistics from illegal migrant worker registrations show a comparatively low proportion of Laotians in the construction industry. The majority of Laotians were female (60.2 per cent), working mainly in private household services. It is not surprising, therefore, that this research found a very small number of Laotian workers. From the eight selected construction sites, only two Laotian workers were found.

As shown in Figure 6.3, of the total one hundred participants, 55 people were from Cambodia, 43 were from Burma, and two from the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos). Interviewees from Burma usually preferred to identify themselves by their ethnicity or state of origin. As a result, of the 43 Burmese participants, 19 can also be identified as Mon, 18 Burman, and six Karen (Figure 6.3). This reflects the still-unresolved political troubles in Burma.

Figure 6.3 **Proportion of Participants by Country of Citizenship and Ethnicity**



Age Range

For ethical and legal reasons, the population sample of the study omits participants under the age of eighteen. Not surprisingly, the results show that the significant majority of participants were young adults in the working age group. As can be seen in Table 6.1, the largest group among the sample population was that aged between 18 and 24, constituting 40 per cent of the

total sample population. And, the rest of the population comprised 33 participants aged between 25 and 34, 26 aged between 35 and 49, and one participant aged over 50.

Table 6.1 **Number of Participants by Age and Country of Citizenship**

	Age					
Country of Citizenship	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-65	Over 65	**Total**
Burma	23	13	7	0	0	**43**
	53.5 %	30.2 %	16.3 %	0 %	0 %	**100 %**
Cambodia	17	18	19	0	1	**55**
	30.9 %	32.7 %	34.6 %	0 %	1.8 %	**100 %**
Lao PDR	0	2	0	0	0	**2**
	0 %	100 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	**100 %**
Total	40	33	26	0	1	**100**

Gender and Marital and Parental Status

Table 6.2 shows that males accounted for 56 per cent of total participants and females 44 per cent. Surprisingly, over half of the participants (both male and female) were married (55 persons) or currently living with a partner without marriage (3 persons) while 39 people were single and three people were widowed or divorced. In addition, the study found that the great majority of the married and in de facto relationship participants (72 per cent) had their partners with them in Thailand, while the remaining 28 per cent left their partner at home and came to Thailand by themselves. While it is generally believed that migrant workers are young and single, the explanation for this high number of married participants is quite simple. There are two reasons. First, as discussed later, the majority of the participants were farmers before migration and thus, presumably from rural areas, where people are commonly known to marry young. Second, there is a small possibility that both partners participated in the interview. As discussed in Chapter Two, chances of both partners taking part in the study were minimised, though not eliminated, by selection of a sample drawn from a range of different construction sites in diverse locations across the study area.

Table 6.2 **Number of Participants by Gender and Marital Status**

	Never Married	Married	Divorced/Widow/Widower	De facto	**Total**
Male	25	29	0	2	**56**
	44.6 %	51.8 %	0 %	3.6 %	**100 %**
Female	14	26	3	1	**44**
	31.8 %	59.1 %	6.8 %	2.3 %	**100 %**
Total	39	55	3	3	**100**

Inter-marriage is not a common practice for this group of foreign workers. Almost all of the married and in de facto relationship participants were married to, or living with, a spouse with the same citizenship as their own. Only one person had a Thai partner (Table 6.3). A further interview with this person revealed that, because of his illegal status, he cannot marry his Thai partner, even though they already have children together. Nevertheless, as a Laotian which, by and large, has a similar culture, language, and appearance to the Thai (especially those from the North-eastern part of the country), he has so far experienced no problems with the police or in assimilating into the local community for the ten years that he has been in Thailand. In his own words, this is because 'we [Thais and Laotians] are not just relatives [fraternal relations]; we are in fact siblings. *Isaan* [people from the north-eastern part of Thailand] and Laotians are the same.'

Table 6.3 **Citizenship of the Spouse**

	Citizenship of the spouse		
	Same	Different	Total
Married	55	0	55
	100 %	0 %	100 %
De Facto	2	1	3
	66.7 %	33.3 %	100 %
Total	57	1 (Thai)	58
	98.3 %	1.7 %	100 %

As Figure 6.4 demonstrates almost half (49 per cent) of the participants had at least one child. Figures 6.4 and 6.5 show that 61 per cent of those with children did not bring their children with them to Thailand; most of the children were looked after by relatives and some by friends of the participants. Almost half of the participants who had at least one of their children with them in Thailand stated that their children also worked with them in the same construction site.

Figure 6.4 **Number of Participants by Parental Status**

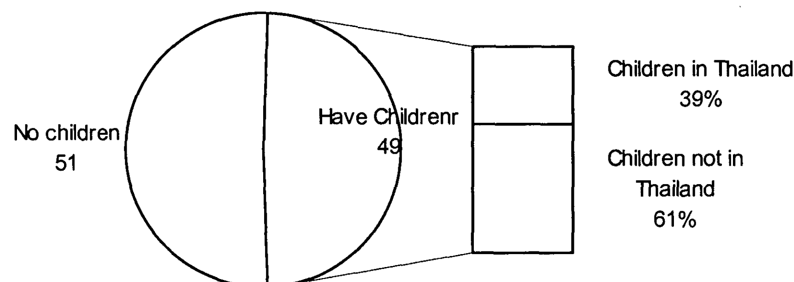
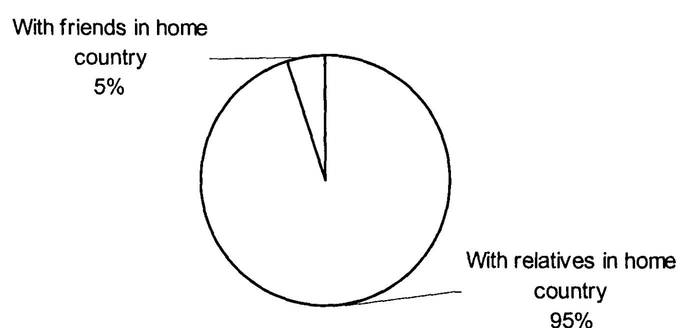


Figure 6.5 **Whereabouts of Children Who Are Not in Thailand**



Level of Formal Education

It is clear from Table 6.4 that the bulk of the interview participants received no more than primary education. A quarter of the study population had never attended school and 60 per cent only received primary schooling; only 14 per cent had received some secondary education and only one person had obtained a university degree. Because of his low pay, and especially the type of his current work, this seemingly well-educated person is not considered to be a skilled worker. (The issue of skill level classification is discussed in detail in the next chapter).

Table 6.4 **Number of Participants by Citizenship and Level of Formal Education**

	None	Primary	Secondary	College/ University	**Total**
Burmese	14	24	5	0	**43**
	32.6 %	55.8 %	11.6 %	0 %	**100 %**
Cambodian	11	34	9	1	**55**
	20 %	61.8 %	16.4 %	1.8 %	**100 %**
Laotian	0	2	0	0	**2**
	0 %	100 %	0 %	0 %	**100 %**
Total	25	60	14	1	**100**

Note: Definitions following Carrington and Detraigiache (1998 cited in Lowell 2001: 5)

6.3.2 Occupation and Earning Details

This section presents findings about the participants' occupational experiences, including their overseas work experience, their previous work, and current occupation and employment. It, then, examines their overall earnings and compares the differences in average earning between

various groups of participants. Finally, it presents findings about participants' employment process, casual work and work status.

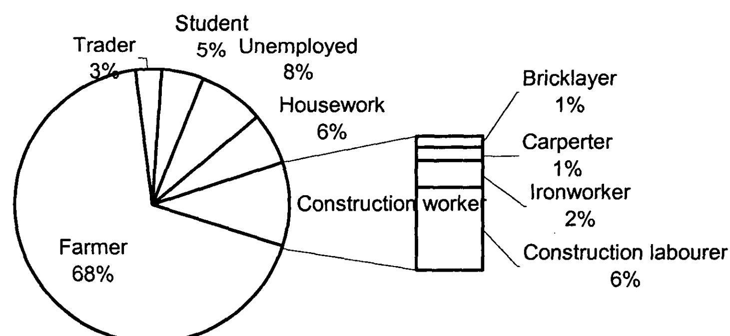
Overseas Work Experience

Because of the economic cost of, and limited information about, migration, this group of workers was less mobile. The study found that almost all of the sample population (97 per cent) had never had overseas work experience. There were two people who had worked in Malaysia for a couple of months, and one Cambodian claimed that he had previously worked for a year in each of Laos and Burma. In other words, for the vast majority of migrants interviewed, their move to Thailand was their only international experience.

Previous Occupation

The greater part of the sample population possessed very little, if any, skills in construction work before they came to work in this industry in Thailand (Figure 6.6). There were only ten participants who had had some experiences of construction work. Of these, six were construction labourers, two ironworkers, one a carpenter, and one a bricklayer. The overwhelming number of the participants (68 people) worked as farmers (including farm-hands) before coming to Thailand; eight were previously unemployed, six were homemakers, five were students, and three were traders (Figure 6.6).

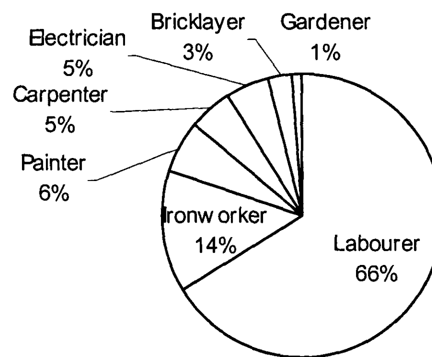
***Figure 6.6* Number of Participants by Previous Occupation**



Current occupation and employment situations

In a similar vein, the participants were asked to specify their current work. Even though the large majority of the participants (66 people) were general labourers (locally called *Kam-ma-kon*), it appears – considering the lack of previous experience in construction work – that quite a significant number of them were working as semi-skilled workers (locally called *Chank*) (Figure 6.7). Because the nature of their work requires some know-how, this information indicates some skill acquisition by these workers. One would expect that *Chank* are paid more than those without special skills. This matter is discussed further later in the chapter.

Figure 6.7 **Number of Participants by Current Type of Work**

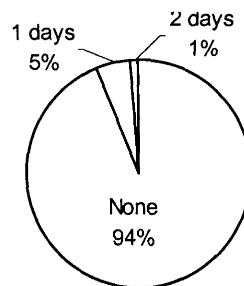


When asked about their current work status, all of the participants indicated that they worked as day labourers. This information is very useful because it explains the participants' long hours of work and the lack of work-related benefits (as required by labour-related law). Additionally and not surprisingly, none of the participants claimed to be a member of a labour union, when asked about the membership of a labour union or similar employee's association (Chapter Four).

When asked about the usual duration of their work, all participants reported working eight hours per day (excluding overtime). Accordingly, as can be seen from Figure 6.8, when asked how many days-off they had per week, the very large majority of participants said that they had no days-off at all, while a small minority had between one and two days off work. With the nature of their work status (that is, as day labourers), workers only get paid according to the number of days or hours they worked. Therefore, in spite of the Labour laws (as discussed

in Chapter Four), these workers had to work as many days (or hours) as possible in order to earn a high income. Workers normally started work at 8 am and finished at 5 pm. There was a lunch break from midday until 1 pm. When needed, the workers might be assigned to work overtime, usually resuming at 6 pm and continuing until 9 pm (or sometimes until midnight).

Figure 6.8 **Number of Participants by Number of Days-off**



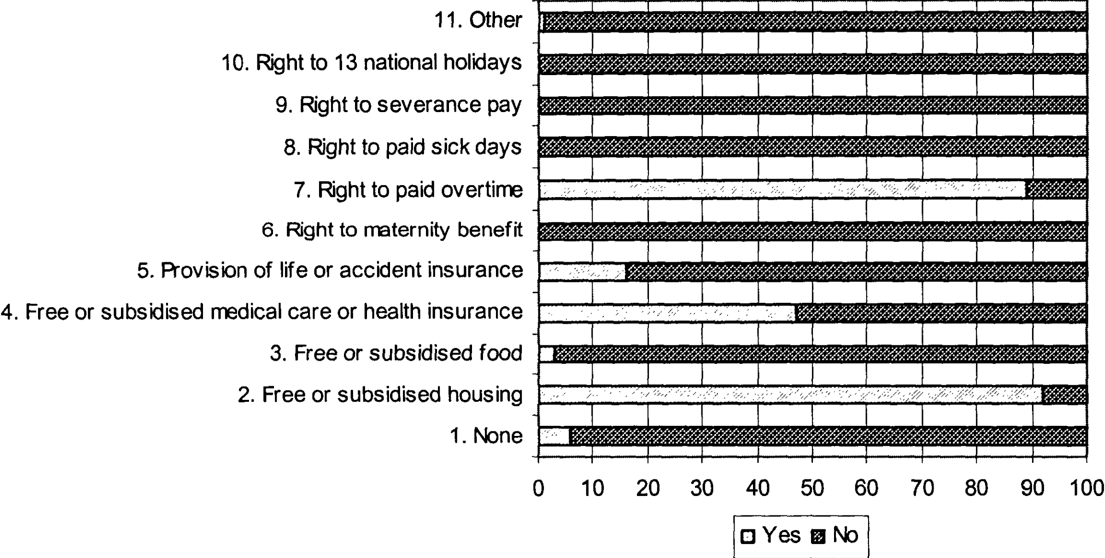
However, this does not necessarily mean that there was always work for everyone to do every day. In fact, resulting from the nature of construction operations, the demand for labour in terms of quantity and specific skills varies according to phases of the operation. Painters, for instance, are not usually needed until the building or structure is almost completed. Thus, while their specific skills are not in demand, they are either out of work or usually forced to work as labourers (which requires the most rudimentary skill or no skill at all). At two of the eight participating construction sites, operations were approaching completion, and it was noticeable that there were not a large number of workers. In fact, I was informed that, while waiting for the company to start a new operation, nearly half of (both Thai and foreign) workers had already gone home and would come back when work commenced on new sites. The returned workers would be contacted by friends or relatives who still remained at the sites. This arrangement encourages and relies on networking. Because of the restrictions imposed on work permits (as discussed in Chapter Four), foreign workers, who remained in Thailand, could not work elsewhere or for other employers. Most of them seemed to comply with the restrictions for fear of arrest and repatriation. That is why a large number of workers were idle or doing odd jobs, possibly gratis, in the two completing construction sites.

This information is valuable not only because it demonstrates the problem of long working hours, but also brings to focus the overlooked problem of fluctuating work volume, and thus

the uncertainty facing foreign workers in this industry. In addition, it demonstrates the growing significance of modern technology – communications and transportation – that facilitate movement and networking.

As far as labour standards are concerned, of the one hundred participants, the majority (94 people) received some benefits from their current employment, including the right to paid overtime, free or subsidised housing, and free or subsidised medical care or health insurance (Figure 6.9). A small number (6 people) reported receiving no benefits at all. Nevertheless, even though most of the participants received some benefits, they were in effect (lawfully) deprived of many basic rights as defined by Thai labour standards and governed by the labour-related laws and regulations (Chapter Four). This is because of their work status as day labourers. None of the participants had the right to maternity benefits, or to paid sick days, or to severance pay (or termination benefits), or to at least 13 national holidays a year with full pay. No doubt, had the workers' status not been day labour, they would have been – at least, legally – eligible to all of these benefits. Nonetheless, the situation is not completely adverse for this particular sample population. The majority of them (89 people) still reported having the right to paid overtime; 11 people either never did overtime work or were in fact deprived of that opportunity (Figure 6.9).

Figure 6.9 **Number of Participants and Work-related Benefits**



Interestingly, most participants reported not having the provision of life or accident insurance (84 people) and many reported that they lacked medical care and health insurance (53 people) (Figure 6.9). It is interesting because, as discussed in Chapter Four, under the 'Illegal Migrant Worker Registration', registered workers are requested to pay for health insurance (which also includes accident insurance) in addition to the registration fee. Participants who reported not having such benefits may not be registered (there were 16 workers who were not registered in this sample population), may not have had accidents or been sick, and/or the participants may not have had knowledge of accessibility to such benefits.

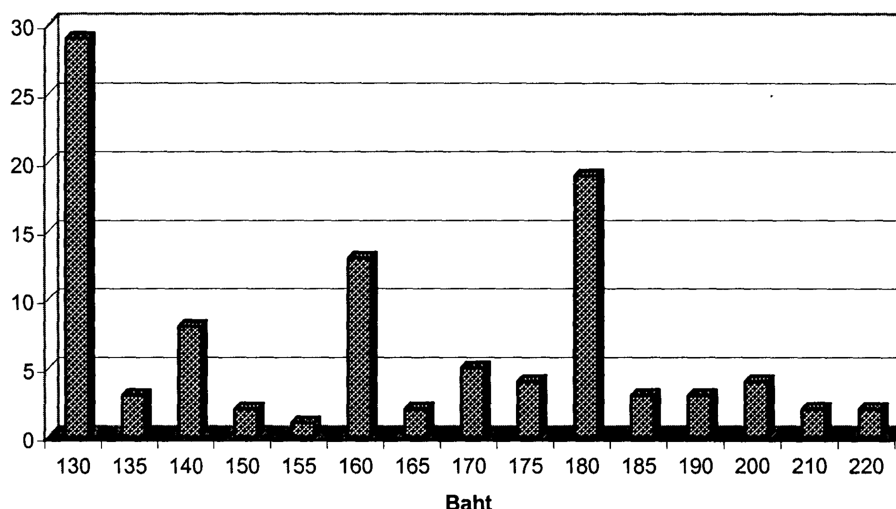
Also of interest are housing, food and other special benefits. Observations revealed that most workers lived in makeshift sheds built around the construction sites but some, especially young and single male workers, occupied rooms in the completing building. From this arrangement, the large majority of the participants (92 people) had free accommodation. However, what is more interesting is that a small number of the interviewees (8 people) reported not considering their housing arrangement as free of charge. This is not because their housing arrangements were different from the others; however, workers in almost all of the eight sites were required to contribute around a hundred baht per month purportedly for the electricity. In addition, of the one hundred participants, only three people reported having free food provided by the companies. The great majority lived independently. Only one participant described having any other form of benefits (free clothes) (Figure 6.9).

6.3.2.4 Earnings

Participants were asked about their earnings. The study found that a large number of them were paid below the standard minimum wages (the stipulated minimum wage for Bangkok and the most part of the Bangkok Metropolitan areas was 170 baht per day, for Chon Buri was 153 baht, and for Ayutthaya was 142 baht). As can be seen from Figure 6.10, participants were paid between 130 baht and 220 baht per day. There were as many as 40 participants reporting earning less than 142 baht per day (which was the lowest stipulated minimum wage for areas of this study). In fact, many of the participants worked in Bangkok and an area near Chon Buri. (For ethical reasons, the locations of the participating construction sites were not recorded.)

This means that the actual number of the total under-paid participants could effectively be higher.

Figure 6.10 **Number of Participants and Earnings**



Also of interest is the discrepancy in earnings between various groups considered by gender, age, level of education, skill, and citizenship. Therefore, together with other pertinent information, means (or arithmetic averages) of earnings per day for each group were computed and are presented in Appendix Q1. And, to statistically examine whether the differences in the mean values are significant, the study conducted – for each group – a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) at the 0.05 significance level, for which the results are presented in Appendix Q2.

In the sample population, male workers, on average, earned notably more than their female counterparts. The mean earnings of male participants was 177.68 baht (SD = 16.431), while the mean of earnings of female participants was merely 135.57 baht (SD = 10.795) (Appendix Q1). The ANOVA result also indicates a significant difference between the means of the two groups (F (1, 98) = 215.619, p = 0.001) (Appendix Q2).

Nevertheless, there seems to be statistically no differences in earnings amongst workers in different age groups or with different levels of formal education. Statistics presented in Appendix Q1 show that the mean of earnings of workers aged between 35 and 49 is higher (mean = 164.81, SD = 27.331) than of those aged between 25 and 34 (mean = 162.42, SD

28.644), and even higher than of those aged between 18 and 24 (mean = 153.50, SD = 19.813); and the mean of earnings of workers with secondary schooling is higher (mean = 162.86, SD = 28.197) than of workers with only primary education (mean = 160.25, SD = 25.585) and much higher than of workers with no formal education at all (mean = 153.60, SD 23.386). They, however, are in fact not significantly different when tested by ANOVA (Appendix Q2). Note that, because there was only one worker aged over 65 and only one worker reported having a university degree, the respective means of earnings are the same as their actual earnings (130 baht and 180 baht, respectively); and they are omitted in the respective ANOVA.

As previously expected, the statistics shown in Appendix Q confirm that *Chank* or semi-skilled workers were indeed paid on average higher (mean = 177.94, SD = 20.342) than labourers or *Kam-ma-kon* (mean = 149, SD = 22.086). And, the results of ANOVA show that a statistical difference exists (F (1, 98) = 39.298, p = 0.001) (Appendix Q2).

It is, also, interesting to examine the discrepancy in earnings between the three nationals: Burmese, Cambodian, and Laotian. On average, Laotian workers were paid highest (mean = 190, SD = 42.426), followed by Cambodians (mean = 166.27, SD = 23.3777) and Burmese (mean = 148.60, SD = 23.282), in descending order (Appendix Q1). Nonetheless, because of the very low number of Laotian in our sample population (2 people), Laotians were left out when conducting the ANOVA. (It is shown in Appendix Q1 that one Laotian was paid 160 baht per day, while the other one earned 220 baht per day.) The ANOVA result is significant (F (1, 96) = 13.834, p = 0.001), and thus suggests that the Cambodian workers were – on average – paid higher than their Burmese counterparts (Appendix Q2).

However, further investigation suggests that the higher average earnings of Cambodian workers than that of Burmese workers can be simply explained by the fact that – as can be seen from Table 6.5 – the proportions of male (72.7 per cent) and semi-skilled workers (40 per cent) of the Cambodian population are significantly higher than the proportion of male (34.9 per cent) and semi-skilled workers (25.6 per cent) of the Burmese population. This, in effect, means that the discrepancy in earnings of this sample population is primarily determined by gender and levels of skills.

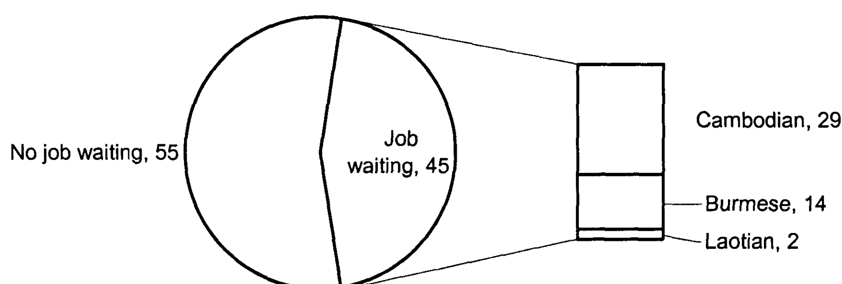
Table 6.5 **Number of Participants by Countries of Origin, Gender, and Skill Level**

	Gender			Skill Level		
	Male	Female	**Total**	Labourer	Semi-skilled	**Total**
Burma	15	28	**43**	32	11	**43**
	34.9 %	65.1 %	**100 %**	74.4 %	25.6 %	**100 %**
Cambodia	40	15	**55**	33	22	**55**
	72.7 %	27.3 %	**100 %**	60 %	40 %	**100**
Lao PDR	1	1	**2**	1	1	**2**
	50 %	50 %	**100 %**	50 %	50 %	**100 %**
Total	56	44	**100**	66	34	**100**

Employment process, casual work and work status

When asked whether or not they had their current job waiting for them before they came to Thailand, 45 people responded 'Yes', of which 29 were Cambodians, 14 were Burmese, and two were Laotians. These 45 people indicted that they either previously worked for the company or already had relatives or friends working here and thus were brought to the site by them (Figure 6.11).

Figure 6.11 **Number of Participants by Availability of Current Job Prior to Their Arrival**

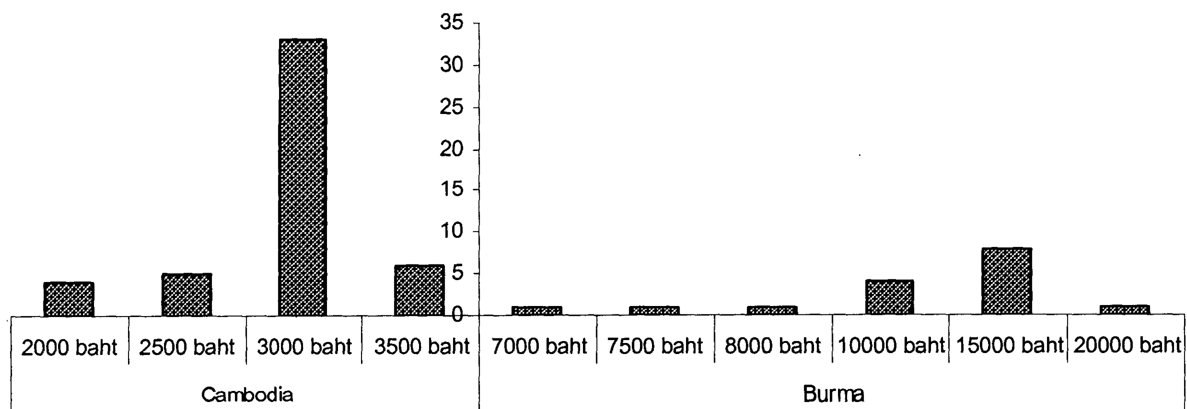


And when the participants were further asked if they had to pay a commission for their current job, all interviewees apparently denied having to pay any commission. Yet, as shown in Figure 6.16, 64 interviewees, comprising 48 Cambodian and 16 Burmese, reported paying a smuggler for transferring them from their home countries to Thailand (whether or not they had a job waiting for them). The money was paid for transportation and the smuggling services. This means the almost all Cambodian workers who participated in this study (87.3 per cent) paid for such services, while only 37.2 per cent of the Burmese participants and neither of the two Laotian participants paid for this. This information is indeed useful because it indicates that –

at least for this sample population – the network connections of Cambodian workers were mostly run by smugglers, whereas the network of Burmese and Laotians – in general – operates through interpersonal ties, like friends and relatives, from whom assistance normally costs nothing.

Additionally, Figure 6.12 shows that, among the participants who reported paying for smuggling services, the Burmese workers paid a great deal more for the services than did Cambodian workers. While the Cambodian workers were charged by their smugglers between 2,000 baht and 3,500 baht per person, the Burmese workers reported having to pay much more prohibitive fees that ranged from 7,000 baht to 20,000 baht per person per trip. Hence, these high costs of movement not only indicate the lucrative smuggling business and high expected returns for the movement of workers, but also suggests that the participants were not indeed from a background of 'absolute' deprivation, for without such funds they would not be able to leave their home lands. This suggests that the migrant workers are not drawn from 'the poorest of the poor'. In other words, migrant workers are only those who can afford to move.

Figure 6.12 **Number of Participants by Country of Origin and Amount of Payment for Smuggling Services**

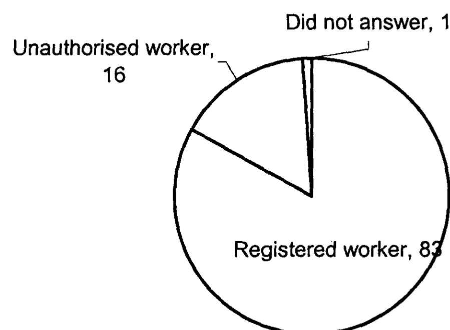


When asked about extra or casual work, all the one hundred interviewees reported not doing any other work outside their construction sites. This is partly because of restrictions imposed on their work permits. Nevertheless, many of the foreign workers would inevitably (intentionally or unintentionally) infringe these restrictions. As mentioned earlier, *Chank*, for instance, would be forced to work as labourers when their special skills were not needed. By

law, such practice is prohibited. However, in practice, as long as they work for an authorised company and within the confines of the stipulated area, such restrictions seem to be leniently policed.

In addition, as can be seen from Figure 6.13, a large number of the participants reported registering themselves through the illegal migrant worker registration programme (83 people). There were only 16 people that were working without authorisation and one person did not answer the question (Figure 6.13). The high number of registered workers was expected because, prior to the interviews, the government had just implemented a new registration procedure. It has also been reported that the overall cost for registration is cheaper than the bribes requested by officials when workers are arrested, which is about 6,000 baht per person per year (Suksanan 2001: online). Even though it is incumbent on foreign workers to carry their Work Permits at all times, the study found that none of the participants possessed them. Work Permits were kept with their employers as the assurance that the foreign workers will not escape.

Figure 6.13 **Number of Participants by Legal Status**



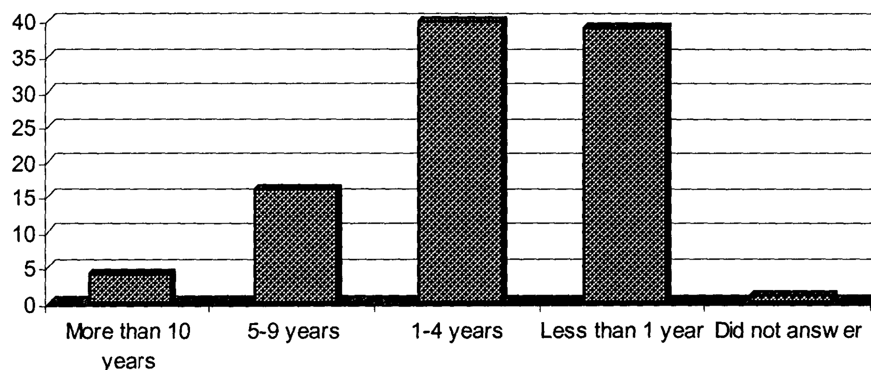
6.3.3 Process of migration

In this section, findings about length of stay and intended length of stay of the participants are presented first. Then, data about language preparation in the pre-migration phase are presented. This is followed by details about the process of the actual border crossing. Finally, the migratory decision and incentives for the movement of the participants are examined.

Period of stay and intended length of stay

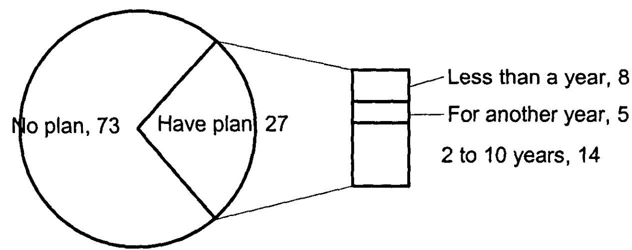
Of the total one hundred participants, the study found that the interview participants have been in Thailand, on average, for approximately two and a half years per person. The longest reported period was 12 years and the shortest was eight days. As can be seen from Figure 6.14, of the total 99 participants taking part in this question, 40 claimed that they have already been in Thailand for one to four years and an almost equally large number said they have been in the country less than a year (39 people); whilst four people have been in Thailand for more than 10 years and 16 people had been in Thailand for more than five years but less than ten years. This information is very important because it suggests that labour immigration in Thailand is a continuing and growing phenomenon.

Figure 6.14 **Number of Participants by Period of Stay in Thailand**



When the participants were asked to specify their intended length of stay in Thailand, an overwhelming number of the participants (73 people) said that they did not know yet (Figure 6.15). Even though the other 27 people reported that they had had a plan, many of them seemed to be quite uncertain about their plans, especially those who said that they would stay on for more than one year. Understandably so, because there is still uncertainty about the government's policy on the registration and control of illegal migrant workers. Of the 27 people who had plans, eight participants reported planning to go home in less than a year; five people planned to stay for another year, and 14 people planned to remain in the country for another two to ten years (Figure 6.15).

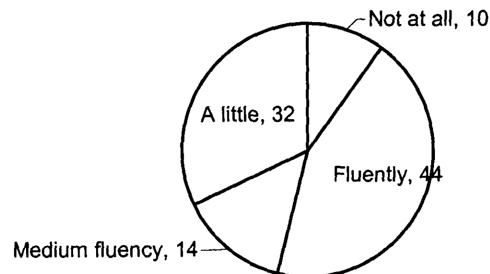
Figure 6.15 **Number of Participants by Intended Length of Stay**



Pre-migration

Because Thai is a unique language, the participants' fluency in Thai and information about where they picked up the language should give an inkling about their pre-migration preparedness. The level of language fluency of a participant was judged from the ability of the participant to communicate with the interviewer. As shown in Figure 6.16, ten people could not speak or understand Thai at all, while as many as 44 people could understand and speak Thai very well, 14 people adequately, and 32 people a little.

Figure 6.16 **Number of Participants by Level of Fluency in Thai Language**



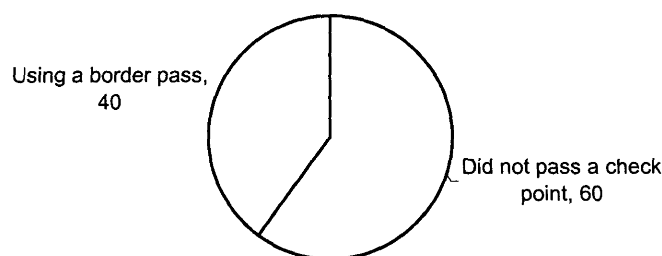
What is perhaps more interesting is the fact that the study found that almost all of the interviewees who could speak or understand Thai at least a little (97 per cent) learned the language after coming to Thailand. This information is worthy of note because it suggests a well-built network of workers. As mentioned before, the Thai language is unique and, moreover, most Thai people do not speak or understand other languages; by not knowing the language, these foreign workers needed assistance, at least during the initial period of their stay, which mostly can be found through networks of family or contacts who assist them until their language skills are developed.

Two of the three participants who said they had learnt the language before coming to Thailand were Laotians. Most Laotian people can speak and understand Thai; their language is akin to Thai language and it is indeed the same as the Thai dialect used in *Isaan* (i.e. the north-eastern part of Thailand). Thai television programmes are also broadcasted in Laos. The other participant (from Cambodia) reported being taught the language before coming to Thailand by parents who used to worked in Thailand, indicating careful preparation and planning.

Border crossing

As for the process of actual border crossings, the study found that the participants came to Thailand by land and – in general – used two courses. On the one hand, as can be seen from Figure 6.17, just over half of the participants (60 people) entered the country without passing an immigration check point, which is obviously breaking the law. The participants briefly detailed their journeys in which they hid in a vehicle – such as car, bus, truck, van or boat – of their smugglers when crossing the international border, or walked through woods and were picked up by their smugglers or relatives on the Thai side of the border to take them to their destinations. On the other hand, the other 40 participants reported crossing the border through immigration check points with a border pass or day pass, which normally allows them to stay in Thailand for a few days (Figure 6.17). They then carried on their journey with smugglers, relatives, or by themselves to their destinations. This group of participants were, as discussed in Chapter Four, legal migrants; but when they started working and/or overstayed their passes, they became unlawful. This reflects the findings of research carried out by the Asian Migrant Centre (AMC) (Harima, Varona, and DeFalco 2003: 229-230).

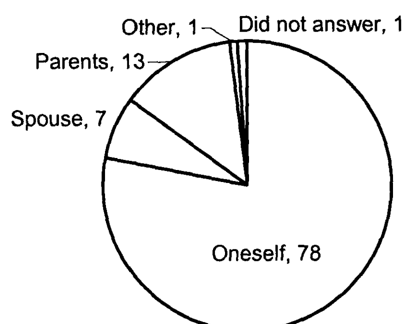
Figure 6.17 **Number of Participants by Means of Entry and Documentation**



Migratory decision and incentives

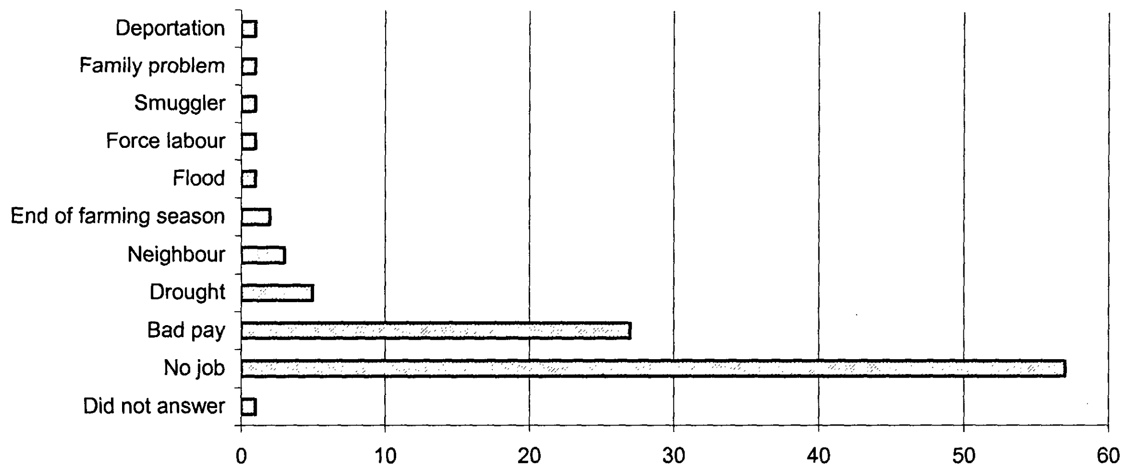
When it came to the decision making process, the information shown in Figure 6.18 indicates that, even though the majority (78 people) reported making the decision to come and work in Thailand by themselves, 13 people reported that their parents made the decisions for them; seven people claimed that they came to Thailand because of their partner's decision; and one person was under his grandparent's influence. Therefore, this information indeed substantiates the fact that the migratory decision is not exclusively an individual matter but also a collective one. As discussed in detail in Chapter One, some schools of thought perceive that migration decisions are made collectively by, particularly, family members. This is because households generally see to their economic well-being through the allocation of their resources (family labour) and the 'interpersonal income comparison'.

Figure 6.18 **Persons Most Influential in Migratory Decisions**



The participants were asked to specify the main reason for their decision to leave their home country or their former residence. And, in a similar vein, the participants were asked about the main reason for the choice of Thailand as their destination. As presented in Figure 6.19, the majority (57 people) stated that they left their home countries because there was no work available for them, 27 were not satisfied with the pay in their home countries, five escaped drought, three were motivated by neighbours who worked in Thailand before them, two had no work after the end of the farming season, one escaped flood, one was persuaded by a labour smuggler, one had family problems (a marriage break up), one was deported from the previous country of employment (Malaysia), and one escaped forced labour in the home country (Burma).

Figure 6.19 **Number of Participants by Main Reason for Leaving Previous Residence**



Likewise, as can be seen from Figure 6.20, the reported main reasons for coming to Thailand can be bracketed together into ten broad groups. The top motive was to find work and to make money (30 people), followed by hearsay about better pay in Thailand (22 people), hearsay about the abundance of work in Thailand (15 people), proximity to home countries (8 people), no knowledge of other countries (8 people), persuasion by friends and relatives (4 people), a somewhat uncomplicated migratory process (4 people), having friends and relatives already in Thailand (4 people), hearsay about a better life and working conditions (3 people), and to accompany a husband (1 person). Additionally, when asked to specify other reasons – beside the main reasons – for them to come and work in Thailand, the participants reported similar explanations to the main ones.

Generally speaking, the study found that the main reported motives of the participants for leaving their home countries and for coming to work in Thailand are mainly economic reasons – that is, employment-related grounds and financial matters. However, it would be misguided to completely discount the significance of the other incentives. Keeping this fact in view, by using a Likert-scale, the study further asked the participants to rate the importance of various pre-designed reasons or factors that might influence their decision to migrate to work in Thailand (Figure 6.21).

Figure 6.20 **Number of Participants by Main Reason for Coming to Work in Thailand**

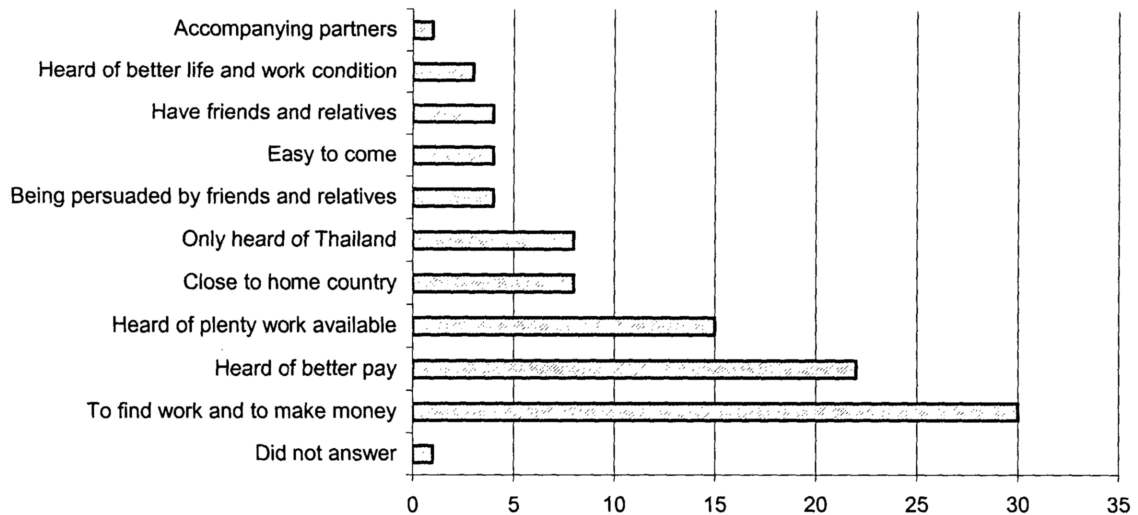


Figure 6.21 presents the raw results from the Likert-scale questions in relation to the significance of the 13 incentives for the movement. At the first glance, the results seem to confirm previous findings, as the overwhelming majority of the participants allot the level of 'very important' to 'higher wage than at home' and 'no jobs available at home'. Nevertheless, it is more meaningful to examine the results as mean ratings. As can be seen from Figure 6.22, on a scale from 0 = not important at all to 4 = very important, mean ratings on the 13 incentives ranged from 0 to 3.58. An incentive with an average scale over 2 is beyond neutral level, and thus, considered important. This suggests that when the participants made a migratory decision there was in fact more than one reason or factor that influenced them.

For this particular sample population, the results presented in Figure 6.22 show convincingly that, beside the higher wage in Thailand than in their home country (average scale of 3.58) and the lack of jobs at home (average scale of 3.37), the workers considered the working conditions in Thailand better than in their home countries (average scale of 2.91). As well, they rated the financial improvement of neighbours with family members working in Thailand (average scale of 2.52), and having friends and/or relatives already in Thailand (average scale of 2.17) as also important incentives that affected their decision to migrate and work in Thailand.

Figure 6.21 **Number of Participants by Level of Importance of Given Reasons and Factors Influencing the Decision to Migrate**

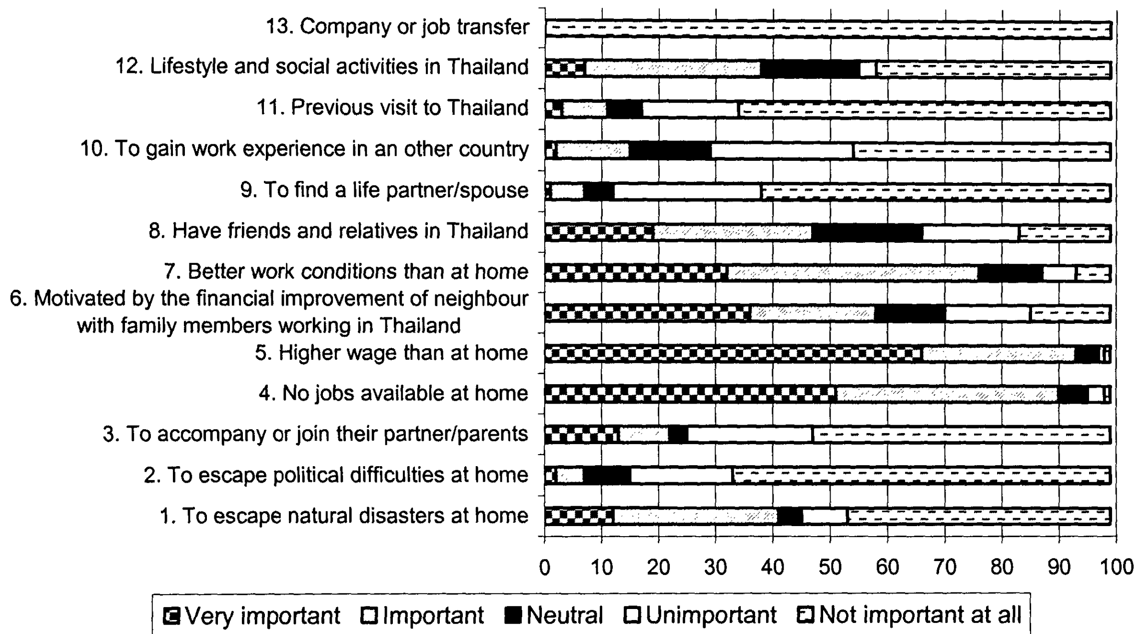
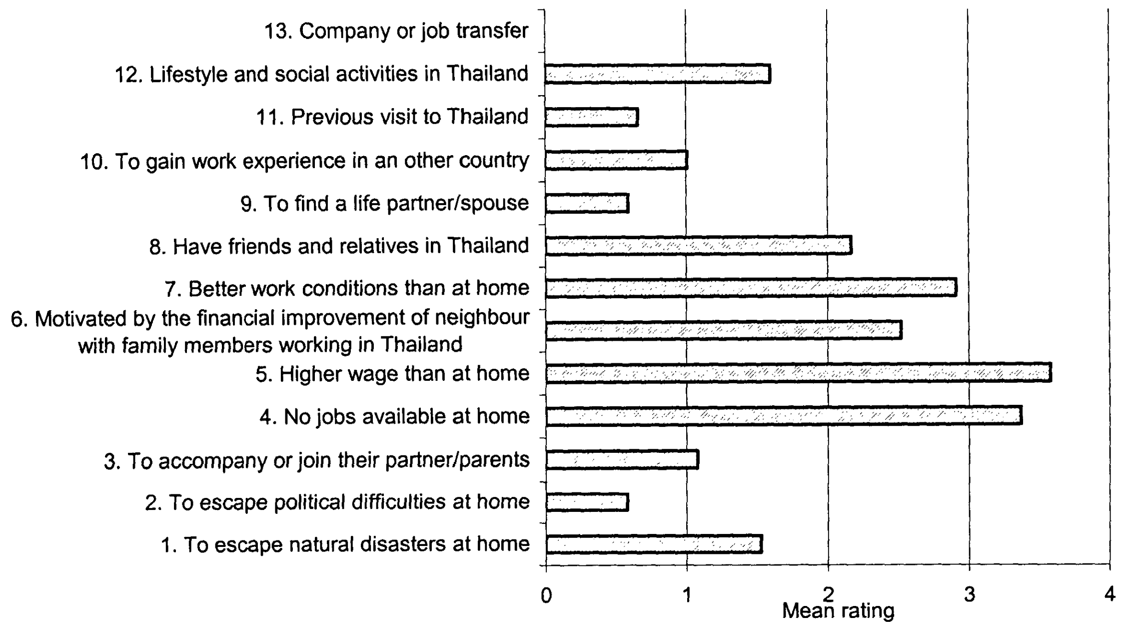


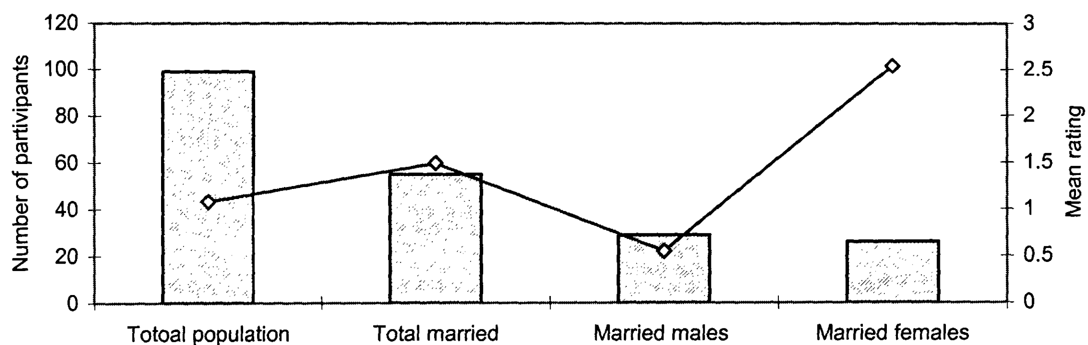
Figure 6.22 **Mean Rating of Importance of Given Reasons and Factors Influencing the Decision to Migrate**



Note: Scale of mean rating: 0 = not important at all; 1 = unimportant; 2 = neutral; 3 = important; and 4 = very important.

The mean rating for 'accompanying their partners/parents to Thailand' of both the whole sample population and married population were insignificant, with an average scale of only 1.08 and 1.49, respectively. However, results from a further examination, shown in Figure 6.23, indicate that 'accompanying their partners/parents to Thailand' was, in fact, considered an important incentive by married female participants, with an average scale of 2.54, while it was rated only 0.55 by married male participants. This demonstrates a gender differential in this incentive.

Figure 6.23 **Mean Rating of Importance of 'Accompanying Their Partners/Parents to Thailand' in Influencing the Decision to Migrate of Married Participants**



Because of the nature of these workers, it is not very surprising that they rated other incentives – including 'company or job transfer', 'lifestyle and social activities in Thailand', 'previous visit to the country', 'to gain work experience in an other country', 'to escape natural disasters at home', and 'to find life partners' – very low in terms of effect on their migratory decisions (Figure 6.22).

The incentive, 'to escape political difficulties at home' was also rated low, with an average scale of 0.58. This is surprising because almost half of the population came from Myanmar, about which there are still many accounts of political conflicts, torture and forced labour. One would have expected that the average scale of such political incentives would therefore be high (Kaidsawang and Archvanitkul 1997; Mawdsley 2002; Panam et al. 2004). Yet, as shown in Figure 6.21, there were only seven people who rated political difficulties as very important or important incentives for them to migrate and work in Thailand. Four of the seven participants were Burmese; the other three were Cambodians. It is, nevertheless, important to

note that this result by no means indicates that political difficulties did not exist in the participants' home countries. It does indicate, however, that these workers did not take such difficulties into account when they made a migratory decision. There appears to be no clear explanation for this phenomenon. However, because the situations have been appalling and seemingly unresolvable for a long time, these people – in the usual course of events – may tend to accept such political difficulties in their home countries as a *fait accompli*. This view is, indeed, shared by Victor Mallet (2000: 71) and James Mawdsley (2002: 111). Also, one of the participants, who was very much a case in point, recounted the situation at home that:

> There were always conflicts: It's just a way of life there... And, I didn't know and I still don't know what 'forced labour' really means. I just know that we need to send one of our family members to work for them [the government or army]; the rest of us will be free. And because my brother is now working for them, I am free. So that I don't think it [the political difficulties] had anything to do with my decision to come here. I am here to make money so my family can live a comfortable life.

Nevertheless, this finding should be treated with caution. The question still remains as to how willing the participants might be to talk about the political situation, especially as many of them still have family in their home country. Also, it is arguable that it could be political oppression that makes the economic choice of foreign work so attractive. This is because the political difficulties are generally one of the factors that result in poor job opportunities, low wages and unpleasant working conditions. Thus, the immediate stimulus to migrate is economic opportunity rather than political oppression. For instance, even though a Cambodian worker claimed that 'money' was his motivation to come to Thailand, he also imparted that:

> There are no jobs at home. In my village, the paddy fields are full of landmines. Many people are deformed, like my mother. And we fear the Khmer Rouge; they always shoot at us (Vanaspong 1997: online).

6.3.4 Social life and social network in Thailand

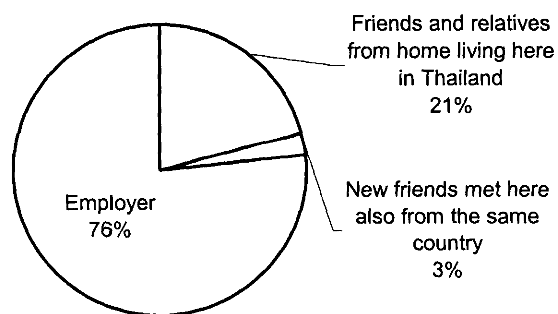
This section discusses social networking among the sample population. It begins with the findings of the participants' sources of non-financial assistance, followed by their sources of financial assistance, methods of finding work, their activities during their spare time and, finally, their connections with friends and relatives in their home country.

Non-financial sources of assistance

As can be seen from Figure 6.24, when asked about the sources of non-financial assistance that they had sought in Thailand, of the total one hundred participants, only 21 said that they had never sought any non-financial aid from anyone. The remaining 78 participants reported that, during the time in Thailand, they had sought some non-financial help, mainly from their employers (63 people), their friends and relatives from home living in Thailand too (28 people), their new friends from the same country (7 people), and their new friends from different countries (3 people). As can be seen from Figure 6.25, of these 78 participants, 76 per cent reported that their employers were of most assistance, while 21 per cent said that they mostly sought non-financial help from their friends and relatives from home who also lived in Thailand, and 3 per cent sought most help from new friends from the same country.

Figure 6.24 **Number of Participants by Sources of Non-financial Assistance**

Figure 6.25 **The Most Sought Source of Non-financial Assistance**



Financial sources of assistance

A similar pattern emerged when the participants were asked about any sources of financial assistance that they had sought during their time in the country. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 6.26, of the total 99 participants, the majority (75 people) reported that they had not sought any financial assistance from anyone since they came to Thailand. This suggests that, as long as there was work, the workers were financially self-sufficient. However the remaining 24 participants reported that – when needed – they normally sought financial assistance from their employers (16 people), their friends and relatives from home who also lived in Thailand (8 people), their friends and relatives at home (3 people), and their new friends from the same country (2 people). As shown in Figure 6.27, 67 per cent of these 24 participants reported that the most sought source of financial assistance were their employers, 17 per cent often sought financial assistance from their friends and relatives who also lived in Thailand, eight per cent still sought financial support from friends and relatives at home, and the other eight per cent found themselves seeking financial assistance mostly from new friends from the same country.

Figure 6.26 **Number of Participants by Sources of Financial Assistance**

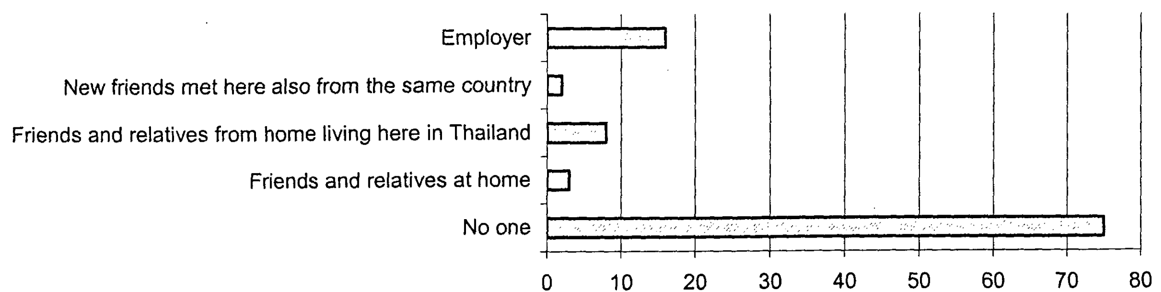
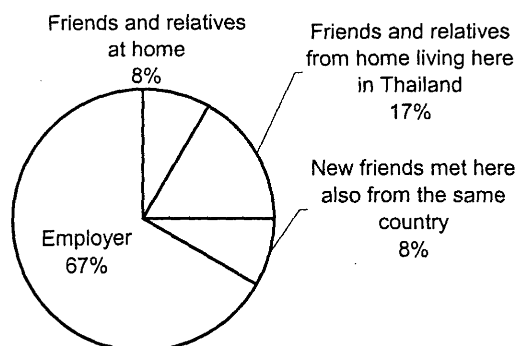


Figure 6.27 **The Most Sought Source of Financial Assistance**



Methods of finding work

Of the total one hundred interviewees, nearly half (47 people) claimed that they had at least once looked for a job since they came to Thailand (Figure 6.29). The information presented in Figure 6.28 shows that they found work through friends and relatives living in Thailand (34 people), new friends met in Thailand and also from the same country (10 people), new friends met in Thailand but from a different country (1 person), and by asking and visiting potential employers (9 people). As shown in Figure 6.29, of the 47 interviewees who had had looked for a job in Thailand before, 31 of those reported that friends and relatives who also lived in Thailand were the most efficient source of employment information and helpful connection in getting the job. Seven people reported that the most efficient method in finding a job was through the connection with their new friends who were also from the same country, and ten people reported that they mainly found work by asking or visiting potential employers.

Figure 6.28 **Number of Participants by Method of Finding Work**

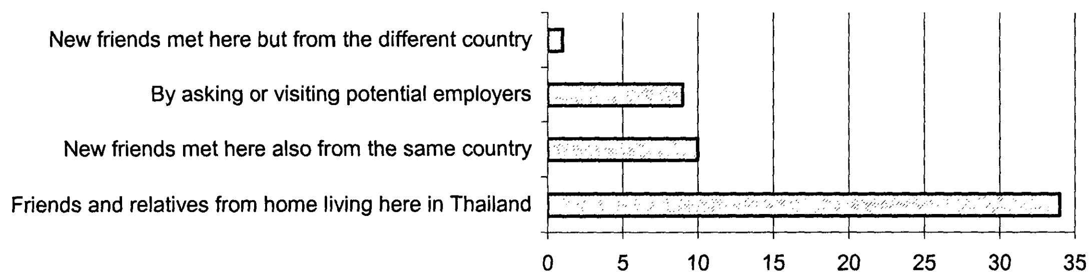
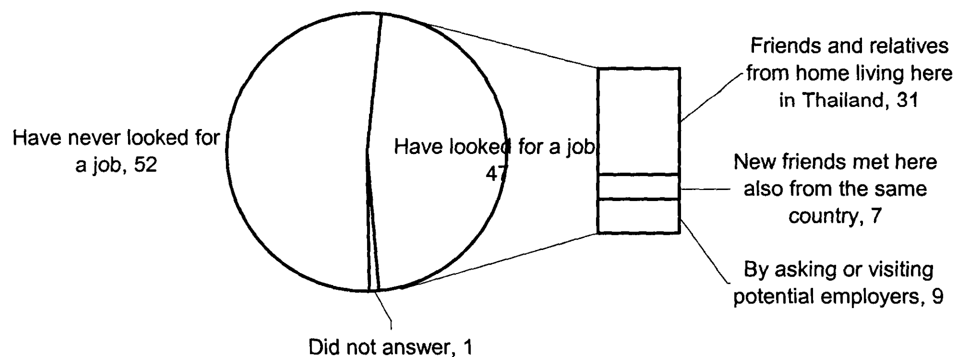


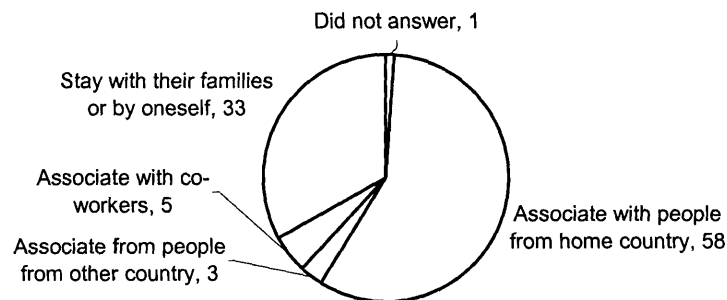
Figure 6.29 **Number of Participants by the Most Efficient Method of Finding Work**



Leisure time

The participants, in addition, were asked about their leisure time activities. As can be seen from Figure 6.30, the overwhelming number of the participants indicated that they spent most of their spare time with people from their home country (58 people) and with their families or by themselves (33 people), while five people reported associating with co-workers (mainly Thai), three people with friends from different countries, and one person did not answer the question. In addition, some of the respondents clarified their favourite spare time activities as sleeping (resting) (2 people), watching TV (4 people), drinking (5 people), or just hanging around in the construction site (2 people).

Figure 6.30 **Number of Participants by Activity in Leisure Time**



It is, therefore, becoming clear from the above findings that – for life outside their home countries – these foreign workers relied very much on two groups of people: employers and compatriots. Apparently, the employers played quite a vital role in the workers' life. This is because the employers provided workers not only work and, in return, money; they also provided them with much needed protection and shelter. As the workers lived in confined construction sites, the rules were mainly determined by the employers. And, most importantly, the employers controlled many of the workers' legal issues (such as updating registration, dealing with the authorities, and applying for work permits). That is why the majority of the participants reported that they sought both non-financial and financial assistance, mostly from their employers (Figures 6.25 and 6.27). Nevertheless, when the workers were not at work or no longer with their employers, their families and friends and relatives from their home country were the main, if not only, sources of support. With the close relationship with

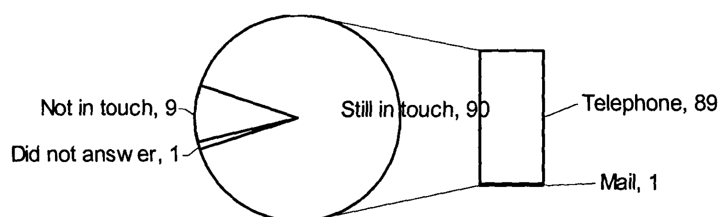
families and compatriots, the workers could easily build their social networks and, with them, 'social capital'. That is why a large number of participants who had had previously looked for work in Thailand reported that the most efficient method of finding a job was through relatives and friends who also came from the same country (Figure 6.29).

It is worthy of note that, despite a number of established non-governmental organisations (NGOs) assisting migrants in Thailand such as the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD), Education Means Protection of Women Engaged in Recreation (EMPOWER), International Rescue Committee, Jesuit Refugee Service Asia-Pacific, and National Catholic Commission on Migration, none of the participants reported receiving any sort of assistance or having heard of such organisations of the kind. This suggests that, despite the Institutional theory (discussed in Chapter One), 'formal' networking plays no vital role in the migration of these workers and – perhaps – of foreign workers in general in the country. This is because such organisations are not yet institutionalised. They mainly focus on small groups of migrants such as women, children, domestic workers and refugees, and on limited issues such as trafficking, sexual violation and forced prostitution.

Connection with friends and relative in home country

Also of importance is the connection between the workers and their family at home. Figure 6.31 shows that the overwhelming majority of the participants (90 people) are still in touch with their friends and families who were in their home countries. It is also evident from the information presented in Figure 6.31 that telephones were the most common means of communication. This information is valuable not only because it suggests the strong link between the workers and their home countries, but also because it indicates that most of the workers and their people at home had access to telephones. This highlights the fact that technology facilitates migration and strengthens networking. With quick communication, workers can contact and recruit their friends or relatives at home when there is work available without having to risk themselves being arrested by the Thai authorities. As mentioned earlier, it is evident that many workers did go home when the work at their construction sites was dying out, while some of their friends and relatives remained in the construction site and would contact them when there was more work.

Figure 6.31 **Number of Participants by the Main Means of Communication with Friends and Family at Home**



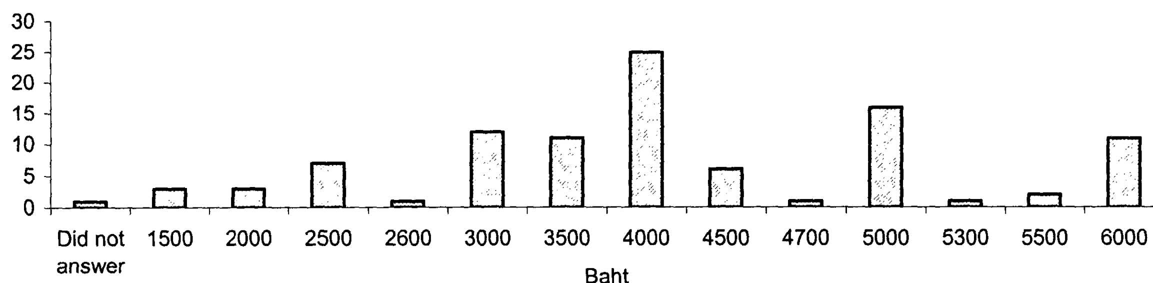
6.3.5 Financial issues and remittances

This section first presents the findings on two major financial topics: total monthly incomes and savings. This also includes the main uses of incomes. Finally, the section presents findings about estimated monthly remittances, as well as an examination of the remittance behaviour.

Total monthly income

First of all, it is necessary to point out that the estimated monthly income reported here may not match a computation of incomes from the previously reported earnings (per day) and reported days of work. From findings of reported lowest earning (130 baht) and reported shortest period of work (5 days a week), one would expect that these workers would earn at least 2,600 baht per month. Instead, as can be seen from Figure 6.32, not less (14 people) reported that they made less than 2,500 baht per month. This is because these workers were day labour and there was not always work for everyone every day. There were, nevertheless, cases where monthly incomes were higher than what otherwise might be expected, owing to overtime.

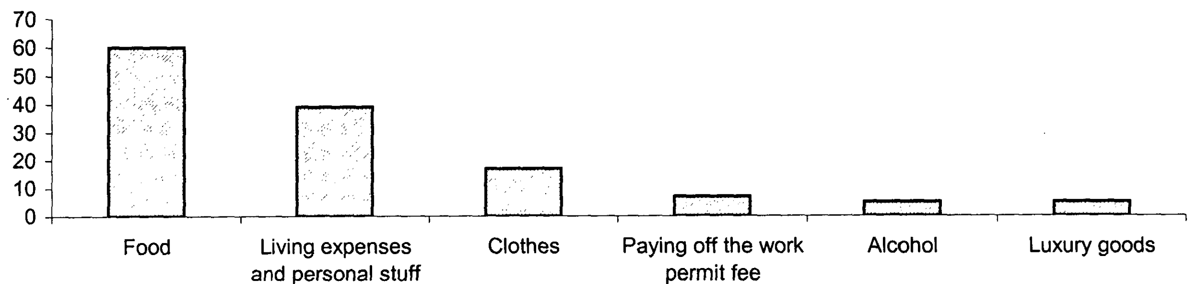
Figure 6.32 **Number of Participants by Total Monthly Income**



On average, workers in this sample population earned 4,031.31 baht a month. With this money, as shown in Figure 6.33, the participants reported spending mainly on necessities, such as food (60 people), clothes (17 people), and other living expenses and other essential personal items (39 people): seven participants reported using it also to repay the work permit fee, while five participants reported spending it too on alcohol, another five on luxury goods (televisions, CD players, mobile phones, and gold necklaces), and two to pay off their debts.

Despite prohibition by law, as discussed in Chapter Four, it is common practice that the fee for the workers' work permit that is initially paid by employers is deducted from the workers' wages. As discovered from the interviews, some of the participants further stated that, on pay day, their earnings regularly had deducted from them between 500 and 1,000 baht a month to repay their work permit fees. In fact, if the fees had not been deducted directly from the workers' wages, the number of workers who reported spending a large part of their income repaying the work permit fees could be higher. Many of the workers took a number of months to pay off the full work permit fee, like the seven participants who reported still paying off the unavoidable debt after more than two months since the last registration ended on 15 November of 2004.

Figure 6.33 **Number of Participants by Main Uses of Income**

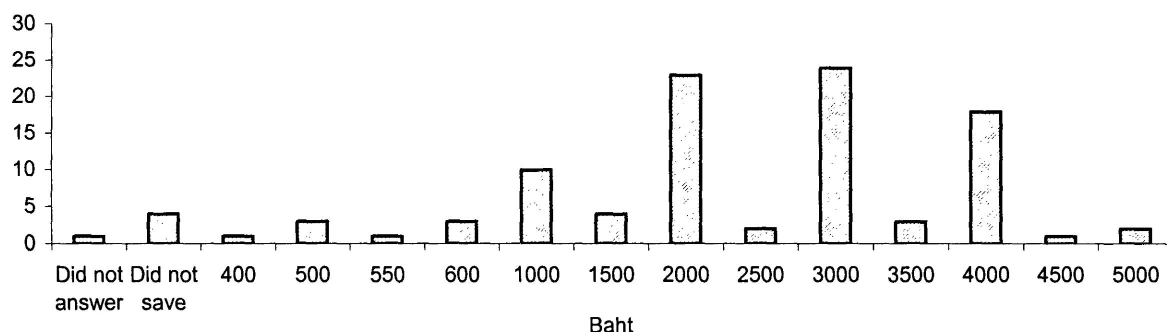


Total monthly savings

In addition, not only did the majority of the participants seem to spend their hard-earned money only when necessary, they also appeared to be saving it, which indeed implies that they were earning quite sufficient incomes. As can be seen from Figure 6.34, of the total 99 participants who took part in this question, 95 reported managing to save some of their

incomes. 24 participants reported saving about 3,000 baht a month. The highest reported saving was 5,000 baht, and the lowest 400 baht a month. In all, these workers saved, on average, 2426.77 baht a month. As a whole, therefore, they saved almost 60.2 per cent of their average monthly income (i.e. 4,031.31 baht).

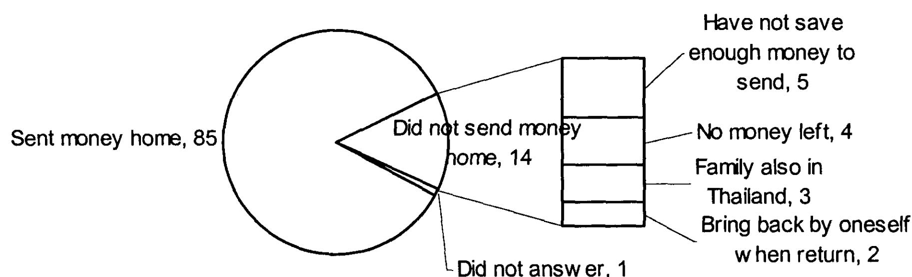
Figure 6.34 **Number of Participants by Amount of Money Saved a Month**



Remittance and remittance behaviour

When asked about remittances, as many as 85 participants reported that, since they came to Thailand, they had sent some of their income to their family in their home countries. While one person did not take part in this question, 14 of the total one hundred interviewees reported that they had not sent money home, mainly because they were still saving money (5 people), or they had their family with them in Thailand (3 people), or they planned to bring money with them when they return home (2 people). Four people reported that they did not have any money left (Figure 6.35).

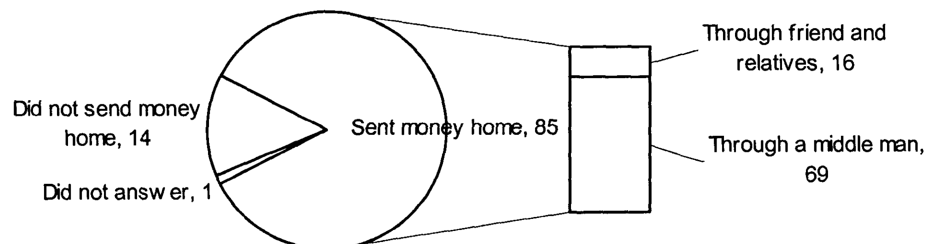
Figure 6.35 **Number of Participants by Reason for Not Sending Money Home**



Of the total 85 people who reported sending some of their earnings home, 16 usually sent the money through friends and relatives who were going back to their home towns, while the majority (69 people) reported that they used a middle man or the so-call 'remittance agent' who had a connection with people in their home town (Figure 6.36). The use of the later method, no doubt, suggests a well-organised network. Almost all of the 69 participants stated that they did not actually know the middle man personally. The middle man regularly visited their construction sites. The workers usually gave the money to the middle man and called their family at home to pick up the money from the other agent in their home town. There was probably a charge made for this service. However, the method was considered to be quick and relatively safe.

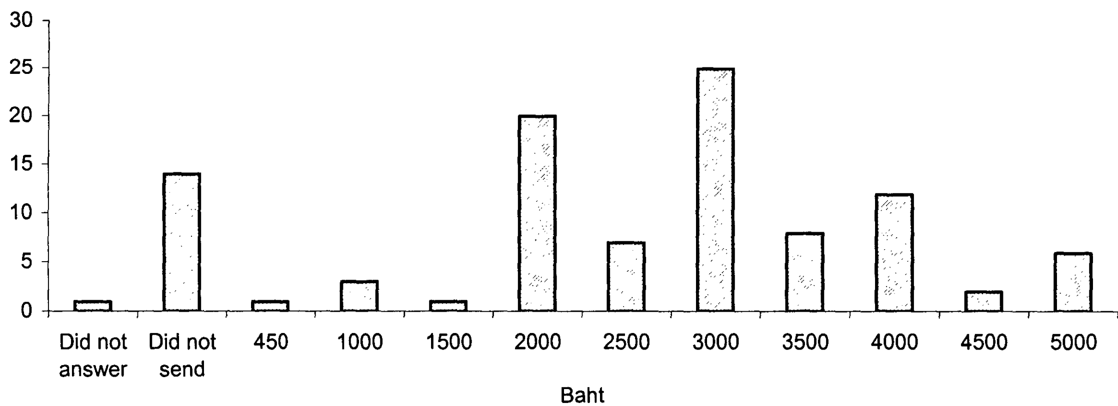
Because of their illegal status and lack of identification, none of the interviewees reported sending the money through an official channel (such as a bank transfer). Nonetheless, there is a very good chance in the near future that registered illegal migrant workers will be allowed to open a special account which will enable them to transfer money back home. The Thai authorities and some banks – especially Krung Thai Bank (a state owned enterprise) – are, reportedly, considering the provision of such services (Jaihao 2005).

Figure 6.36 **Number of Participants by Means of Sending Money Home**



The 85 participants who had sent remittances home estimated that they sent home between 450 and 5,000 baht a month (Figure 6.37). On average, this was 2,970 baht per worker. This number may not, of its own accord, seem to be very significant. However, if this sample population were representative of the loosely estimated one million illegal unskilled migrant workers in Thailand, this would indicate that Thailand was losing roughly 36 billion baht a year to the neighbouring countries as remittances.

Figure 6.37 **Number of Participants by Estimated Amount of Monthly Remittances**



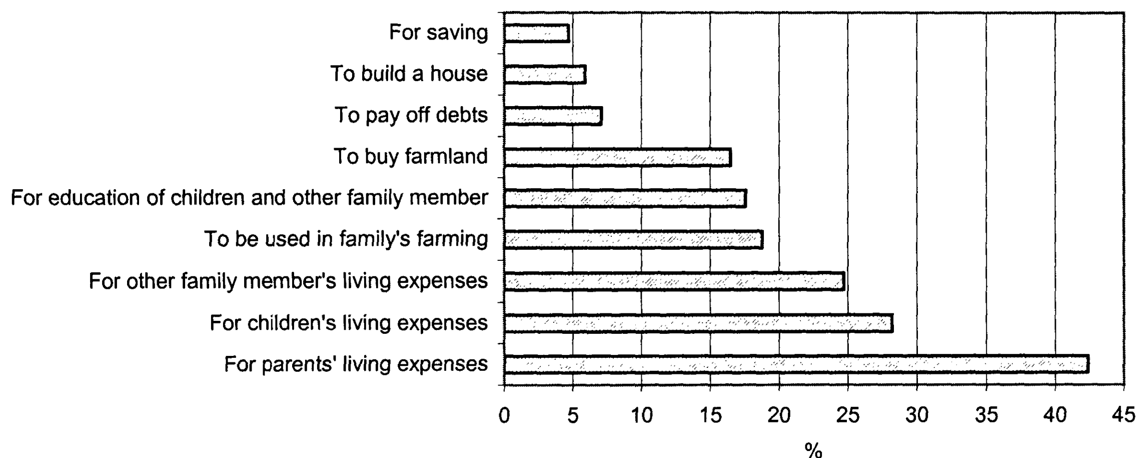
The total income of the workers determines how much money is available to save and send home. There are significant positive correlations between the total monthly incomes, the amount of savings (r = 0.583, df = 97, p = 0.001), and the size of remittances (r = 0.511, df = 83, p = 0.001), and between the amount of savings and the size of remittances (r = 0.557, df = 83, p = 0.001) (Appendix R). Participants with higher total monthly incomes tended to save more and remitted more. Likewise, the participants who saved more tended to send home more money.

In order to understand more about remittance behaviours of this group of workers, the study looked further into the tendency of these workers to send remittances by examining the relationship (correlation coefficient) between the participants who reported sending remittances and other variables, including their marital status, parental status, gender, age, education, and skill level (Appendix S). The study, also, tested discrepancies in the size of the remittances among various groups, by conducting ANOVA tests (Appendix T).

It is clear from the results of the correlation analysis that there is no difference in the tendency to send remittances between different age groups, between different education levels, or between workers with different skill levels. People who reported not having their spouse or partner with them in Thailand (r = 0.247, df = 56, p = 0.062), those who reported leaving their children in their home country (r = 0.285, df = 47, p = 0.047), and males (r = 0.220, df = 97, p = 0.028) were more likely to send money home. This contrasts with participants with spouses, partners or children in Thailand, and females generally, who were less likely to send money home (Appendix S).

As a result, this information clearly suggests that, as a whole, the tendency of this group of workers to remit their earnings back to their home countries is very much influenced by the nature and strength of family ties and, with it, responsibilities to their family back home (such as having their partner and/or children in their home countries), and their gender. The correlations between the participants who reported having sent remittances and those who also reported having their spouse or partner with them in Thailand, and those who also reported not having their spouse or partner with them in Thailand, may not be significant at the 0.05 significant level. The result is still indicative if not conclusive. In fact, the family tie is not only dictated by the bond between the workers and the partner and the children, but also by the bond between them and their parents and other relatives (such as siblings). This fact became evident when the workers later specified their reasons for sending remittances (Figure 6.38).

Figure 6.38 **Percentage of Participants by Main Purposes for Sending Money Home**



Thus, male participants and those with stronger family ties back home have a higher tendency to send home *some* of their earnings than their female counterparts and those who had their family with them in Thailand. However, it is not necessarily true that they also send *more* money. Generally, one might expect that workers, whose partners and/or children remain in their home countries, would send back more money than those with no dependents at home. Interestingly enough, the ANOVA results presented in Appendix T indicate that – on average – the sizes of estimated monthly remittances were not statistically significantly different among those with different family ties, or among different age groups, or among different education or skill levels. The results only bear out that male participants sent home more money than female workers. This is probably because of their higher incomes.

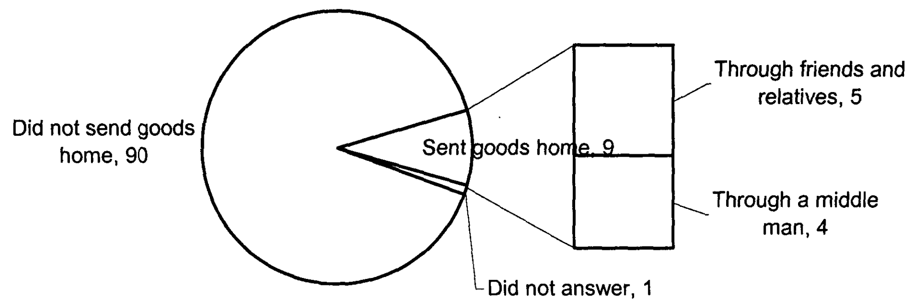
In summary, the remittance behaviours of this group of workers can be explained by two key factors: family ties back home and the amount of their total incomes. While the family ties (and responsibilities) at home have some bearing on the tendency to remit, the amount of money sent home is mainly determined by their incomes and savings.

Also of interest for their remittance behaviour is the purpose for sending remittances. The participants were asked to specify their purposes or reasons for sending money back to their family at home. Not surprisingly, as shown in Figure 6.38, the most frequently reported purpose for sending money home was for their family's living expenses. Of the total 85 participants who reported sending remittances, 42.4 per cent reported sending money for their parents' living expenses, 28.2 per cent to pay for their children's living expenses, and 24.7 per cent for other members of the family to use. This, thus, indicates the dependency of family in the home country on migrant workers for financial survival. This in turn explains their long period of stay in the country and, according to the Cumulative causation theory, causes the perpetuation of migration (see Chapter One). However, some of the remittances were also reported to be used productively. Of the 85 participants who had previously sent remittances, 18.8 per cent reported sending remittances for capital inputs for the family farm (buying fertilisers, pesticides, and fodder), 17.6 per cent reported sending for the education of their children and other member of the family (brothers and sisters), and 16.5 per cent reported buying farmland. A small number of participants reported sending remittances to repay their debts at home (7.1 per cent), to build a house (5.9 per cent) and for saving and to be used when they return to their home countries (4.7 per cent).

Remittances may not only be in the form of cash or money; they can also be in the form of goods or gifts that the workers send home. As shown in Figure 6.39, however, not many participants sent goods back to their families or their home countries. Many of the participants explained that money was more desirable than goods at home, for it could be saved and used to buy necessities and/or whatever the recipients desired. Of the total one hundred participants, only 9 those reported sending some goods back to their families or to their home countries, mainly through friends and relatives (5 people) and a middle man (4 people).

The study found that the most frequently reported items sent home by those nine participants were clothes (7 people), followed by televisions (4 people), CD players (2 people) and telephones (1 person), all of which – according to the participants – were of better quality and/or cheaper than in their home countries.

Figure 6.39 **Number of Participants by Means of Sending Goods Home**



6.3.6 Post-migration

This section presents the finding of the participants' views on their migratory experiences and future plans. In discussing their future plans, the majority (69 people) stated that they did not intend to stay in Thailand permanently. Whilst nine people did not know yet, and one person did not participate in the question, the remaining 21 reported that, if possible, they would like to stay in the country permanently (Figure 6.40).

Of the 21 participants who reported intending to stay in Thailand permanently, 12 would like to live in the country because there was plenty of work, while five enjoyed the life style and independence that they had while living in Thailand, three were starting to feel at home in Thailand, and one person had a Thai partner. On the other hand, of the 69 respondents who reported intending not to stay in Thailand permanently, 38 preferred to be with their family at home and to look after them, 19 of those had only planned to come to Thailand to make enough money and go home, and 12 reported feeling lonely and unsettled in Thailand (Figure 6.41).

Figure 6.40 **Number of Participants by Reason for Intending to Stay in Thailand Permanently**

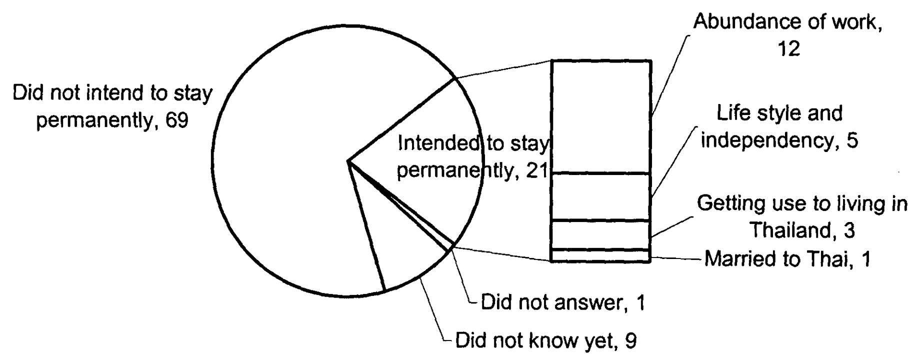
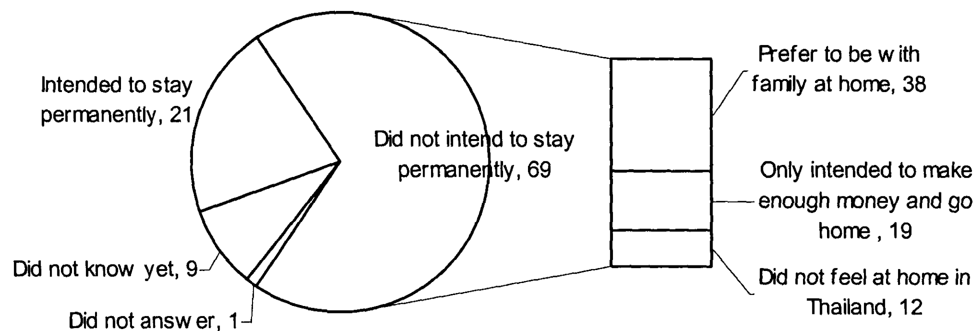


Figure 6.41 **Number of Participants by Reason for Intending to Not Stay in Thailand Permanently**



When asked to compare their current situations to those of people in their home countries who did not come and work in Thailand, of the total one hundred interview participants, nearly everyone reported that they were either better off (59 people) or much better off (36 people) than most people at home (Figure 6.42). Only one person reported feeling discontented with the situation in Thailand, and three people reported feeling indifferent.

Likewise, if they were asked, the overwhelming majority (76 people) of the participants would encourage their friends and relatives to come and work in Thailand; however, 14 said they would say nothing, and nine people would not encourage others to come and work in Thailand, mostly because of the fear of being arrested by the Thai authorities (Figure 6.43).

Figure 6.42 **Number of Participants by Level of Comparative Welfare**

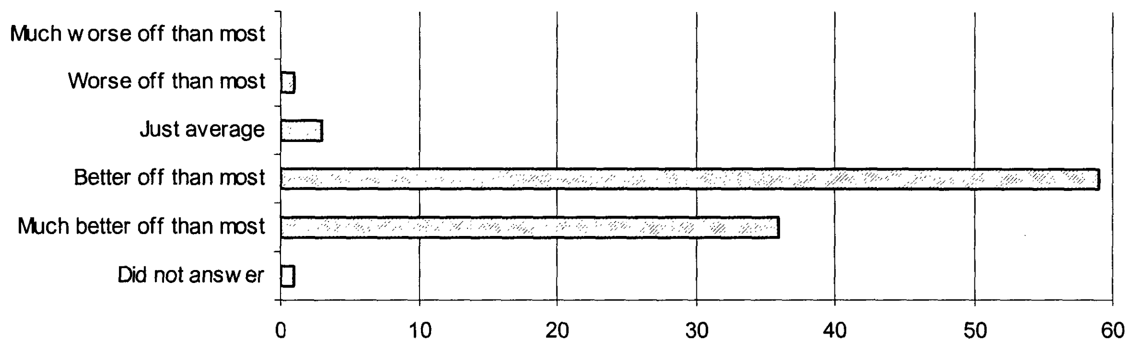
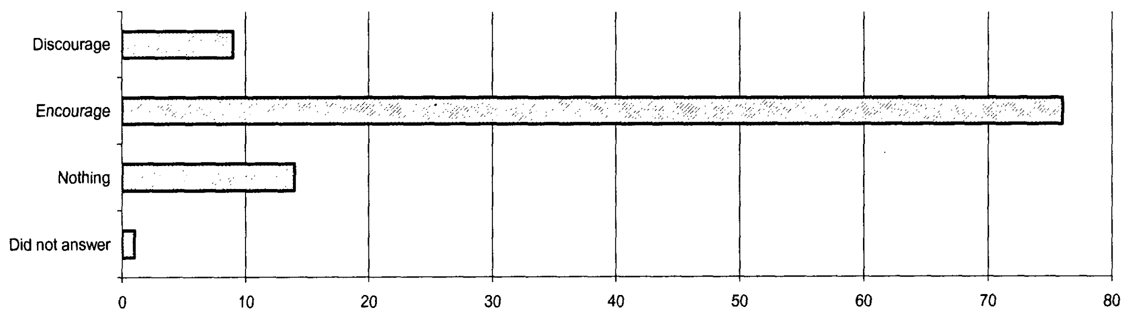


Figure 6.43 **Number of Participants by Recommendation Given to Migrating Friends and Relatives**



The participants were, also, asked whether or not they would return to work in Thailand again, if they had – for some reason – to go home now. Figures 6.44 and 6.45 indicate that the majority of the participants (79 people) reported that they would come back to Thailand, while 11 people would not return, nine people could not decide yet, and one person did not take part in the question. Of the 79 participants who would return to Thailand, a very large number wanted to make more money (32 people) and to work (31 people). While ten reported the reason for returning was that there was no work at home, five reported getting used to life in Thailand, and one person to return to his Thai partner and children in Thailand. Of the 11 participants who would not return to Thailand, five reported feeling homesick and preferred to live with their family, while two people reported having saved enough money. Of the remaining four people, two found that it was too expensive to return and two thought that they were too old.

Figure 6.44 **Number of Participants by Reason for Returning to Thailand**

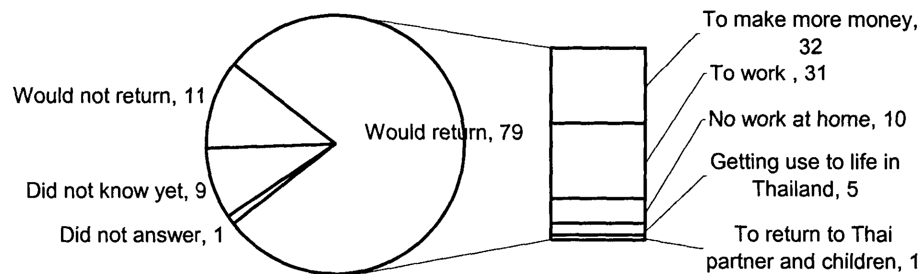
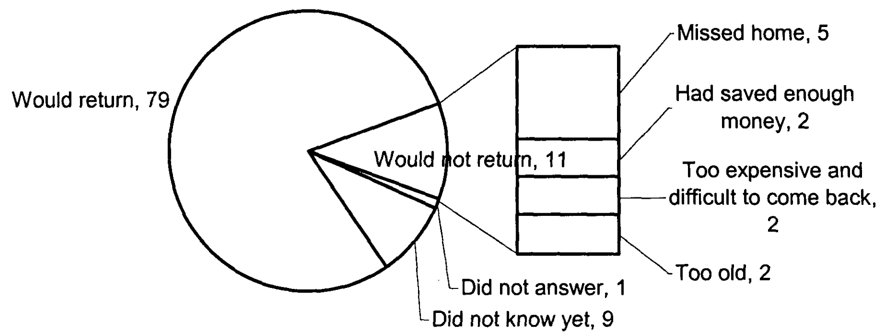
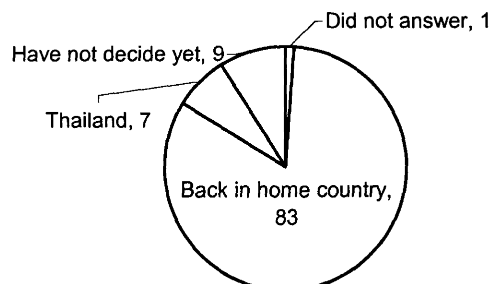


Figure 6.45 **Number of Participants by Reason for Not Returning to Thailand**



When all is said and done, the above information does not only indicate the satisfaction of the majority of the participants about their situation in Thailand, but also strongly suggests the likelihood of continuing migration. Nevertheless, despite this high level of satisfaction, when the participants were finally asked to specify where they would like to settle down after retirement, the large majority of the total one hundred interviewees (83 people) reported preferring to retire in their home countries. While nine people had not decided yet, seven would like to retire in Thailand, and one person did not answer the question (Figure 6.46).

Figure 6.46 **Number of Participants by Desired Place for Retirement**



6.4 Conclusion

There is no doubt that the construction industry is growing as the Thai economy currently burgeons. As a result, the demand for workers increases. The overall findings of the interviews give a clear indication that Myanmar and Cambodia are the main sources of imported unskilled and semi-skilled workers in Thailand's construction industry. The number of Laotian workers was comparatively insignificant. The study found that the nature of work in this industry is quite unique. The demand for workers in terms of quantity and types of skill varies according to phases of production, causing problems such as law infringement and occasional unemployment. This issue needs to be taken into consideration when migratory policy is imposed or further research is conducted.

Examination of these findings focused on six main themes – general characteristics of the workers, occupation and earning details, process of migration, social life and social networks in Thailand, financial issues and remittances, post migration – which revealed the following major points.

It is, generally, believed that migrant workers are predominantly young unmarried men. However, even though the study found that the majority of the sample was young and of working age, most of them were married with children. The proportion of female workers found in the study was close to that of the male counterparts. Most workers were not well-educated: they received no more than primary education. Only a few of the workers had overseas work experience. The majority of them were former farmers, which partly explains the large number of married participants. The study found some signs of 'skill acquirement', as many of the workers were currently found working in some semi-skilled jobs.

All of the workers were employed as day labourers. As a result, they received very limited work-related benefits – receiving mainly the right to paid overtime and free accommodation. At least every two in five of the sample population were paid less than the standard minimum wages. On average, male workers were paid higher than their female counterparts, and *Chank* earned more than general labourers.

There were two courses of border crossing: through an immigration check point and through an illegal entry point. This determines the legal status of the migrant. However, all of the workers eventually became illegal migrants either because of overstaying their residence permits or illegal entry. The study found that about four in five of the participants registered with the 'Illegal Migrant Worker Registration'. This indicates that this group of worker follows 'Pathway Two' and 'Pathway Three' of the 'employment of illegal migrants' process (Chapter Four). Even though the Registration allows workers to work and stay in the country for only one year with no clear indication of extension, the overwhelming majority of the participants did not know when they plan to return home. Therefore, the findings about the period of stay and intended length of stay indicate the continuing phenomenon of labour migration to Thailand.

In the decision making process, the study found some signs of collective migratory decision making. Even though, the majority of the workers made their own decision to migrate, a significant number of them were influenced by parents, partners and other family members. Despite political difficulties in some of the origin countries, the study found that economic reasons underpin the entire rationale for the movement. Mostly, the participants noted that the main reasons for which they left the home country were 'no job' and 'bad pay', and reasons for which they came to Thailand were 'to find work and make money', 'heard of better pay' and 'heard of plenty of work available'. Distinctions between men and women seemed to play a little role; however, female participants gave higher regard to 'accompanying partner/parents' than male participants when making the migratory decision.

The study, also, found some signs of well-established networking: minimal language preparation prior to the movement, smuggling services, and the use of a middle man in sending remittances home. In fact, the participants considered 'having friends and relatives in Thailand' as a relatively important incentive to migrate. The network seems to come in two forms: an interpersonal tie and middle man (remittance agent or smuggler). Telephones play a major part in facilitating networking and communication with friends and family at home. Beside employers, most of the workers relied very much on friends and relatives from the same origin for financial and non-financial support, and particularly, in finding employment.

The majority of the sample population were frugal. Most of their incomes were remitted home. Workers with strong family ties at home had a high tendency to send remittances; but the size of the remittance was determined by the amount of income and savings. The study found that remittances were intended to be used for general expenses, and some to be used productively. Remittances were generally in the form of money rather than goods and gifts.

Even though the overwhelming majority of the participants found themselves in a better position than that of their friends and relatives at home, the study found no strong sign of permanent settlement. Nevertheless, it found a strong sign of perpetuation of migration, as the majority of migrants would encourage their friends and relatives to come and work in Thailand.