

# ALIEN WORKERS AND QUALITY OF WORK LIFE : THE CASE OF SONGKHLA PROVINCE

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## ABSTRACT

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This research aims to study and compare the quality of work life for alien workers, classified by personal and work factors. The sample consisted of 309 alien workers working in Songkhla province. The respondents were selected by accidental sampling. The results show that the overall quality of work life for alien workers is at a high level. A comparison of alien workers' quality of work life, classified by personal and work factors, found that alien workers with differences in nationality, size of household, number of employed household members, and work permits experienced differences in their quality of work life. This will benefit related organizations in improving the quality of work life for alien workers.

**Keywords:** Quality of work life, Alien worker, Worker

## บทคัดย่อ

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การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาและเปรียบเทียบระดับคุณภาพชีวิตการทำงานของแรงงานต่างด้าวจำแนกตามปัจจัยส่วนบุคคลและปัจจัยด้านการทำงาน กลุ่มตัวอย่างในการวิจัยคือ แรงงานต่างด้าวที่ทำงานในสถานประกอบการจังหวัดสงขลาจำนวน 309 คน ซึ่งได้จากการสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบบังเอิญ ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ในภาพรวมระดับคุณภาพชีวิตการทำงานของแรงงานต่างด้าวอยู่ในระดับสูง การเปรียบเทียบระดับคุณภาพชีวิตการทำงานของแรงงานต่างด้าวจำแนกตามปัจจัยส่วนบุคคลและปัจจัยด้านการทำงาน พบว่า แรงงานต่างด้าวที่มีความแตกต่างกันในด้านสัญชาติ จำนวนสมาชิกในครอบครัว จำนวนสมาชิกในครอบครัวที่มีงานทำ และการได้รับใบอนุญาตทำงาน มีคุณภาพชีวิตการทำงานที่แตกต่างกันผลการวิจัยนี้จะเป็นประโยชน์สำหรับหน่วยงานที่เกี่ยวข้องในการยกระดับคุณภาพชีวิตการทำงานของแรงงานต่างด้าวต่อไป

**คำสำคัญ:** คุณภาพชีวิตการทำงาน แรงงานต่างด้าว แรงงาน

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## 1. Introduction

Since 1961, a significant shift has occurred in Thailand's economy, using the national economic and social development plan as the tool for the country's development. The industrial economy has now overtaken the agricultural economy. As a result, a big change has occurred in the structure of the production and labor markets. Cheap, skilled labor is an important production factor for every entrepreneur to gain a competitive advantage from his or her current production factors. Because of the continuing expansion of investment and economic growth in

Thailand, these will push up the demand and compensation for all levels of the labor force. Many native Thais are no longer interested in jobs that are risky, arduous, or dirty, so most businesses have to hire non-Thai labor instead (Wongmulitthikorn, 2009). Recently, the number of alien workers has clearly increased—especially from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia—with these workers usually working in the fishing industry, construction, household service, agriculture, restaurant service, and Thai massage (Thitilak, 2010).

The alien workers statistics for Thailand in March 2013 showed a total of 1,126,461 alien workers, including 1,102,782 legal workers and 23,679 illegal workers (Alien Worker Management Office, 2013). However, alien workers in Thailand have problems in terms of management and skill segmentation in order to achieve the optimal usage. Moreover, the worker laws for alien workers in Thailand are not concise or strict enough. The Thai government should organize alien workers by limiting the number of workers each year, classifying workers according to their skills, and giving them training. In terms of employers, they should follow the law seriously and act fairly to their employees. In the case of the government officials involved, punishment for breaking worker laws should be increased. The drug problem is of concern, because this can lead to other problems. Solving all the problems through an integrated collaboration between the public sector, enterprises, and employed workers is also significant (News Bureau of Thailand, 2012).

Besides the social problems that affect Thailand because of alien workers, most workers experience personal risk when coming to work in Thailand. It starts at the first stage of their journey to Thailand, where some of them must pay a commission to agents and government officials. Some of them also die during their time in Thailand. Exploitation by employers lowers their quality of life, collateral, and wages. Most alien workers are paid 20–50% less than Thai workers. Some of them face problems with wages not being paid on time or having deductions from their wages for commission, housing, or food. Working for longer periods, being forced to take drugs, and working in unsafe environments seriously affect their welfare and safety (Hunsong, 2005).

According to the characteristic of the work, the problems of alien workers can be classified as follows (Kanjanadit, 2007):

1) Agricultural-sector workers: Most agricultural workers receive low wages and have no job security because of seasonal demand. Moreover, agricultural workers are not protected by Thailand's labor laws. The most common problem is for employers to refuse to pay wages, claiming other expenses instead. Sometimes, when the work has been completed, such employers request that the police arrest these workers.

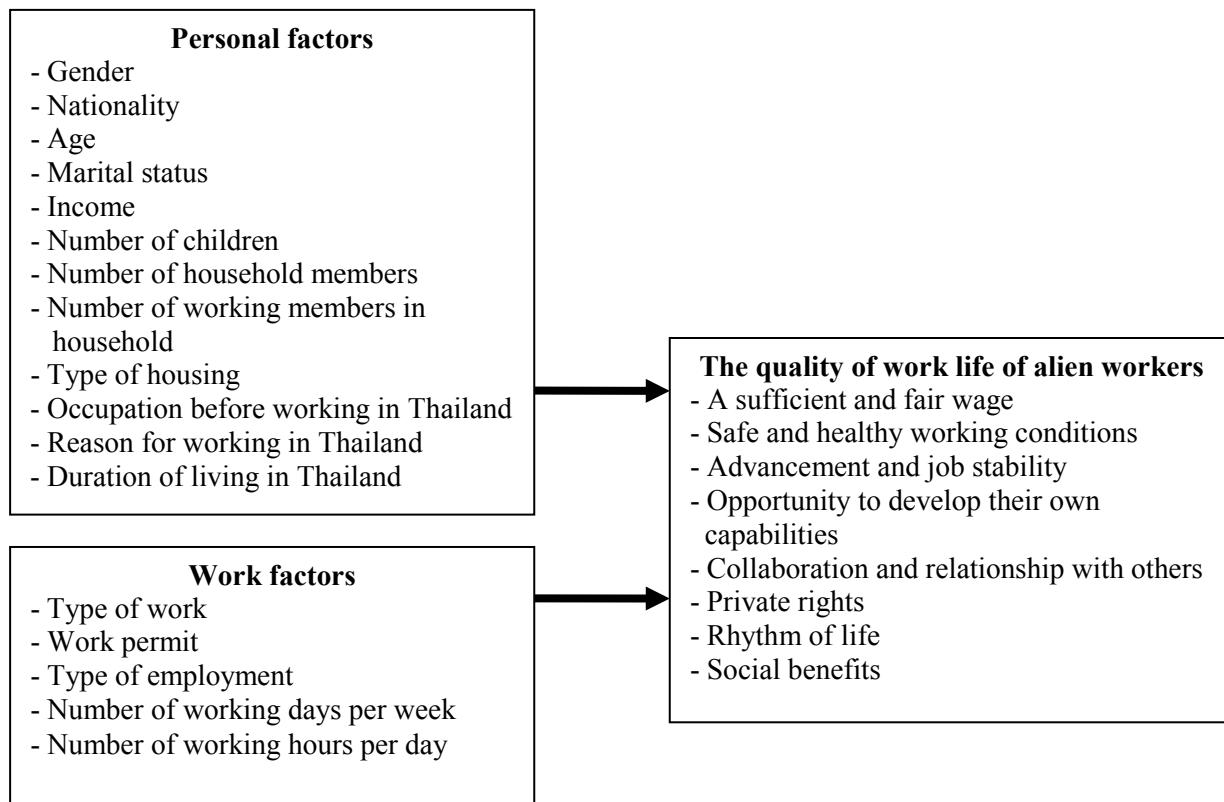
2) Fishing-industry workers: Alien workers often have to go to sea for a long time, typically between four months and a year. They work hard, live in difficult conditions, and have no time to rest. Besides lacking food and medicine for day-to-day survival, they are at risk of being physically abused or killed by supervisors or captains because of unsatisfactory work or fighting. They are called "marine prisoners." Being in the territory of another country can also incur the risk of being arrested by the authorities of that country.

3) Maid workers: These may work all day and all night, and sometimes they need to work for both the employer's business and home. They are forbidden from contacting people on the outside, because the employers are afraid that the worker may contact others to arrange theft. The alien workers may be blamed and severely physically abused.

4) Industry-sector workers: These are not allowed to go outside and must work all day until midnight. The employers serve them with low-quality food that would otherwise be wasted. These workers were found to eat just two small meals a day.

5) Construction-sector workers: These are often cheated of their wages. Until now, wage problems are the main issue among alien workers, and this is found in almost every sector. Employers often defer wages or claim that other expenses need to be deducted. Sometimes, in the case of large payrolls, an employer may get the police to arrest the alien workers in order to avoid paying. During such hard times, most of the workers who do not receive their wages tend to borrow the money or necessary items needed for daily living. Employers prevent the workers from escaping or withholding worker by only paying 15 days for 25 days of work.

Songkhla province is an economic center in the south of Thailand. The alien worker statistics for Songkhla province in March 2013 showed a total of 4,884 alien workers, including 4,879 legal workers and 5 illegal workers (Alien Worker Management Office, 2013). This research aims to study and compare the quality of work life for alien workers as classified by personal and work factors. The results will benefit related organizations in promoting the quality of work life for alien workers. The research framework is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Research framework

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1 Population and sample

The population chosen for this study was the alien workers of the organizations located in Songkhla province. The total number of the population was 4,884 (Alien Worker Management Office, 2013). The sample size can be based on the table of Askin and Colton (1963), in which 309 samples are appropriate to represent 5,000 populations at a 95% level of confidence and 5% margin of error. The respondents were selected by accidental sampling.

### 2.2 Research instruments

A questionnaire adapted from Walton's quality of work life model (1973) was the research instrument for this study.

### 2.3 Instrument verification

Validity and reliability were tested, as detailed below, to ensure the quality of the questionnaire used in this research.

1. Validity: The content validity was tested to ensure that the content of the questionnaire measured all of the research definitions and objectives. The questionnaire was evaluated by human-resource management experts and then tested for validity.

2. Reliability: The questionnaire was tested for alien workers who worked outside Songkhla province. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was calculated to test internal consistency. The recommended value for Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient is 0.70 or higher, meaning that the questionnaire would be suitable as the instrument for the research (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally, 1978). The reliability result of the pilot study showed the Cronbach's Alpha to be between 0.707-0.881, meaning that it is suitable for the study.

### 2.4 Data analysis

The data was analyzed by a statistical software package as follows:

1. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data by percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

2. Inferential statistics were used by t-test and one way ANOVA.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Personal factors

The results indicated that the respondents were relatively equally spread over both genders. Most of them were Myanmar (58.6%), with a

typical age between 20 and 30 years old (66.0%). The marital statuses of single and married were similar in number, 47.2% and 41.1% respectively. They earned incomes of 5,001–7,500 baht per month (44.0%) and 7,501–10,000 baht per month (36.9%). Three-quarters of the respondents worked as the supporting group with at least a 10-year working period. Most respondents had no children (47.6%), and the typical household size was 3–4 (46.9%), while the number of working household members was 1–2 (57.3%). Some of them rented housing (32.4%), while others stayed at worker camps (30.7%). Before working in Thailand, many of the alien workers were previously employed (38.8%), and the main reasons for them coming to Thailand were looking for work and earning more income, accounting for 36.6% and 31.4% respectively. Most had been in Thailand for between six months and two years (60.1%).

### 3.2 Work factors

The results from the study of work factors of the alien workers who work in the Songkhla organization showed that most respondents worked in the construction sector (45.6%), and this is consistent with the results of the studies of Khunssi (1996) and Phewnen (2004). The reason may be due to alien workers having more patience and working harder than native Thai workers (Lorwithee, 1998; Phumephakdee, 2003; Joyjamrat, 2004; ABAC Poll Research Center, 2006). Moreover, Thai workers have no interest in working in the construction sector, and employers would need to pay more for Thai workers. Most of them had work permits (84.8%) and were employed on a daily (44.3%) or monthly (35.9%) basis, consistent with the study of Phongaram (2003). The majority of the respondents worked 5–6 days per week (62.8%) and 8 hours per day (55.7%). The results from the study of Phewnen (2004) also indicated that alien workers worked with greater patience and for longer hours of continuous work. As a result, the number of alien workers has consistently increased.

### 3.3 Quality of work life

The results from the study are shown in Table 1 indicated that most respondents had high levels in terms of sufficient and fair wage, safe and healthy working conditions, opportunity to develop their capabilities, collaboration and relationship with others, private rights, rhythm of life, and social benefits. This is consistent with the results from the study of Suphasri (2005) but is contradictory to the study of Khunssi (1996), who found that alien workers receive 50% lower wages than Thai workers. The studies of Prutthikun (1998) and Phongaram (2003) also indicated that entrepreneurs pay less to alien workers than Thai workers, so alien workers always complain about this issue (Chaikhunthaweechote, Urairat, Yubamrung & Thawornprasert, 2012). Alien workers are often exploited by Thai employers because their employers always believe these workers have no alternatives and they are being paid more than they would earn in their native countries. However, the results from the study of Phumephakdee (2003) showed that alien workers are satisfied with what is supplied by employers, such as providing them with skill development (Phongaram, 2003), and this is consistent with the results from the study of Chaikhunthaweechote, Urairat, Yubamrung & Thawornprasert (2012). Alien workers have the freedom to contact other people, and this makes them happy (Suphasri, 2005). The results from the study of Phewnen (2004) indicated that there were welfare differences between alien and Thai workers, including housing, food and health. The results of the study indicated that only advancement and job stability was at a moderate level, while the overall quality of work life for workers was at a high level and consistent with the results of the study by Suphasri (2005).

**Table 1:** Quality of work life of alien workers

(n=309)

Quality of work life	Mean	S.D.	Level of quality of work life
A sufficient and fair wage	3.47	1.112	High
Safe and healthy working conditions	3.81	1.548	High
Advancement and job stability	2.62	1.354	Moderate
Opportunity to develop their own capabilities	3.47	1.509	High
Collaboration and relationship with others	2.80	2.205	High
Private rights	3.24	1.105	High
Rhythm of life	2.54	0.968	High
Social benefits	2.26	0.990	High
Total	24.22	5.682	High

### 3.4 A comparison of the quality of work life for alien workers as classified by personal factors

The results of a comparison of the quality of work life for alien workers as classified by personal factors showed no difference in quality of work life in the areas of gender, age, marital status, number of children, type of housing, occupation before working in Thailand, and reason for working in Thailand. However, the difference of the quality of work life in terms of income and duration of stay in Thailand, due to at least one group, has a variance less than or equal to 1. The results also indicate a difference in quality of work life in the aspects of nationality, number of household members, and the number of working members in the household. In the aspect of nationality, Myanmar workers have higher quality work life than Laos workers, and this is consistent with the results of the study by Suphasri (2005). In terms of the number of household members, a worker with more than six household members has a lower quality of work life than a worker with six or less household members. An increase in the number of household members may cause an increase in cost. In the area of the number of working household members, workers with 5–6 working members in their households have a higher quality of work life than workers with either less than 5 working members or more than 6 working members. Even if a high number of workers in a household increases the total income, a lack of members taking care of dependent family members, such as children and elderly relatives, may affect the quality of work life.

### 3.5 A comparison of the quality of work life of alien workers as classified by work factors

The results of a comparison of the quality of work life of alien workers as classified by work factors only showed a difference in the quality of work life in the aspect of work permits. Alien workers with work permits enjoy higher levels of quality of work life than those without a work permit. The results from the study of Joyjamrat (2004) indicated that there were several barriers to applying for a work permit, such as a complicated procedure, a need to contact several agencies, and frequent changes in the necessary steps. This was consistent with the results from the study of Phongaram (2003). Without work permits, alien workers can be limited in their employment rights. In order to enhance the quality of work life for alien workers, relevant agencies should collaborate in finding measures to enable alien workers to receive legal work permits.

## 4. Recommendations

4.1 Although the results from the study indicated high levels of overall quality of work life for alien workers in Songkhla province, the quality of work life for the aspect of progress and job stability is still only at a moderate level. Both relevant agencies and entrepreneurs should collaborate in enhancing the quality of work life in this aspect, such as by implementing measures or regulations to eliminate the difference between Thai and alien workers. Legislation to safeguard alien workers could enhance their job stability and guarantee them a better life.

4.2 The results from the comparison of the quality of work life for alien workers showed that different nationalities have different qualities of work life. This issue may stem from the attitudes of employers and entrepreneurs toward certain

nationalities of alien workers and the difference in capabilities between different nationalities. Employers and entrepreneurs should adjust their attitudes toward workers of all nationalities and enhance the capabilities of all alien workers, regardless of nationality. Treating all nationalities in the same manner will enhance the quality of work life for all alien workers.

4.3 The results from a comparison of the quality of work life of alien workers indicated a difference in quality of work life based on the size of workers' households and the number of working household members. Relevant agencies should provide education about family planning and the consequences of not following it. An awareness of family planning will enhance the quality of work life for alien workers.

4.4 The results of a comparison of the quality of work life of alien workers showed a difference in quality of work life in the area of work permits. Alien workers with work permits have a higher quality of work life than those without a work permit. In order to enhance the quality of work life for alien workers, relevant agencies should implement measures to enable alien workers to receive legal work permits in order to prevent them from being exploited by employers. When workers lack permits, employers assume that these workers have no alternative and should be grateful for being paid more than in their native countries.

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