

Taking Small Steps For Vulnerable Migrants

SMU Assistant Professor Song Jiyoung works on migration management, a multidisciplinary field that helps vulnerable migrants and mobile populations.

PUBLISHED ON MARCH 23, 2015



AsianScientist (Mar. 23, 2015) - By Dora Yip - Our earliest human ancestors migrated for reasons of survival: food, shelter and more hospitable climates. Fast forward to the 21st century, human migration has evolved into a complex equation of push and pull factors spanning the spectrum of human experience, from conflict and peace, to desperation and ambition.

Assistant Professor Song Jiyoung from the Singapore Management University (SMU) School of Social Sciences studies why and how people move. A mathematician by training, she recalls watching a documentary about North Korean orphans who had crossed the border into China and were picking up crumbs on the ground to eat.

“As a fellow human being, I felt ashamed of myself for not doing anything about it. I wanted to do something for them but didn’t know what to do or where to start,” she sighs.

But this pivotal moment changed her life, and after completing her Bachelor’s degree in Mathematics and a postgraduate degree in Law, she plunged into work relating to human affairs. A working stint as press secretary to a newly elected South Korean Member of Parliament gave her a real sense of politics on the ground. That was when she decided to complete her PhD in politics, human rights and migration.

“Power is the basis for any human or social affairs. I wanted to understand how power shapes and transforms different human lives and how it is played differently in each society,” she says.

Karen refugees living along the Thai-Burma border

In particular, her research focuses on Burmese Karen refugees who are now living in camps along the Thai-Burma border. Citing the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Professor Song explains that human security can be defined along seven dimensions: personal, community, political, economic, food, health and environment.

“For forced migrants like refugees, personal and political insecurities are the main drivers for their departure. In temporary shelters like the Karen camps in Thailand, basic food and health securities are guaranteed by Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), but they still have no economic or environmental securities. They are not allowed to work or build houses with permanent materials, and when they settle in third countries, they still face community insecurity.”

In a recent two-week field trip to one of the smallest Karen camps in Thailand, Professor Song conducted workshops and focus groups with youths aged between 15 and 26 years. She surveyed where they wanted to go to next, given the context of the upcoming election in Myanmar in October 2015.

“These youths will no longer be regarded as refugees because the international community sees their home country as turning into a democracy. They will be encouraged to move back home,” she notes.

She asked the respondents whether they wanted to return home; be socially integrated in Thailand; resettle in a third country; or stay in the refugee camp. She expected their responses to be similar to a previous survey, where half had wanted to return to Burma, and another half wanting to resettle in the US.

Her survey findings surprised her: one third of respondents wanted to stay in the camp. The youths did not want to go back to Myanmar, where there were no hospitals or schools. They also did not want to resettle in a third country, like the US or Australia, because they perceived issues of community security—including racism, lack of job security and targeted discrimination—to be prevalent.

Voluntary repatriation or forced migration?

For this group of Karen youths, the refugee camps, despite affording them neither basic income nor environmental security, had become like home. Further compounding their tenuous circumstances will be the international community’s desire for them to voluntarily repatriate themselves. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is coordinating meetings between the Thai and Burmese governments to discuss possible relocation of the Karen refugees to a new port construction area in Mergui, the East Coast of Burma.

“The coming year will be critical for these refugees. What will conditions be like in their new location? Will they have jobs and more permanent homes there? From their perspective, they see this as a form of forced labour or slavery. They do not want to be poorly paid construction workers. They want to have a choice as to when and where they go,” she says.

Publication: Asian Scientist

Date: 23 March 2015

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This huge gap between reality and perception—where information is filtered through the refugees' limited social relations—must be addressed, Professor Song adds. With this in mind, she is working on a paper about how voluntary repatriation may be perceived as forced migration from the refugee perspective, with the hopes that her findings will be fed back to UNHCR and the wider international community.

Migration management is a multidisciplinary area of research, involving business, economics, law, information systems, sociology, politics, anthropology, and public policy. Hence, Professor Song is collaborating with Professor Cheng Shih-Fen, a computer scientist from the SMU School of Information Systems, and Professor Cheong Siew Ann, an applied physicist from Nanyang Technological University, to develop agent-based models of migration, where people's mobility is simulated on a computer programme.

All these projects contribute to Professor Song's singular goal: to support policy makers in helping vulnerable migrants and mobile populations.

"This is where I first started. I'm studying humans who want to be in safe places, and in my capacity as a researcher, this is how I believe I can help."