

Gendering the Financial Crisis:

*Export Economics and the Manufacture of Gender Difference among
Migrant Communities on the Thai-Burma Border*

Soe Lin Aung, MAP Foundation, September 2010

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“We, migrants from Burma, live in a perpetual state of crisis, and the global economic crisis is further adding to our difficult and sometimes desperate situation.”

— Joint Conference Statement
Two Destinations, One Origin (TDOO)
Kuala Lumpur, June 2009

(1) Introduction

On 18 December 2009, the day recognized globally as International Migrants Day, two strikes by migrant workers from Burma made headlines in Thailand. One strike involved about 5000 workers at a poultry farm in Ratchaburi; the other strike included some 3000 garment workers, the majority of them young women, at the Top Form brassiere factory in Mae Sot (*Network Media Group [NMG] 19/12/09; Altsean-Burma 2009*). Meanwhile, Juan Somavia, Director-General of the International Labour Office (ILO), marked the occasion of International Migrants Day with a celebration of anniversaries: the sixtieth anniversary of the first international convention on migrant workers adopted by the ILO, and the near-twentieth anniversary of the 1990 UN convention on migrant workers. But Somavia also struck a somber note, acknowledging the continuing ‘especially adverse impacts’ of the global economic crisis on migrant communities around the world (ILO 2009b). For migrants on strike in Thailand, this less sanguine commentary may have more appropriately marked the occasion, as 2009 drew to a close in much the same fashion as it began: in the uncertain times of economic crisis.

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While broad and far-reaching, the effects of the recent financial and economic crisis have not been uniform. In pursuit of a productively situated analysis of the crisis, this paper explores the gendered impacts of the economic downturn among migrant workers from Burma on the Thai-Burma border, drawing on an already rich literature calling attention to the need for gender analyses of this latest cycle of economic crisis. This literature contains several relevant trends. Beginning in the earliest stages of this cycle of crisis, with the financial and economic crises² coming on top of the food and fuel crises of 2007, researchers were quick to identify the impact of rising adverse economic conditions on women's formal employment in the global South, particularly in export-oriented sectors like garment and textile manufacturing (Pearson and Sweetman 2010, Gaerlan et al 2010). These negative impacts have been seen as tied to the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s, which, as pursued by various international financial institutions (IFIs) and related international agencies (for example, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund [IMF], and US Agency for International Development [USAID]), aggressively sought to foreground export-led growth in emerging Southern economies, thereby exposing export sectors—not to mention the vast, and highly feminized,³ labour markets that sustain them—to devastating shocks rippling through transnational capital networks (Pearson and Sweetman 2010).

More recently, gender analyses of the crisis have complimented the early focus on formal employment with a turn towards effects on women in informal sectors, often

² Hereafter, the 'financial and economic crises' should be read interchangeably with the following: the economic crisis, the economic downturn, the global recession, etc. For while the recent cycle of economic crisis has often been described as including multiple stages of crisis and recession, such that 'crises' (with the emphasis on the plural) may best describe the relevant events of 2008-2010, this paper will use broader and more flexible language in order not to be restricted to one or another rendering of the period in question.

³ The idea of 'feminized' labour markets, and the related concept of the 'feminization of migration', have sparked some debate in recent years (UN-INSTRAW 2007). See 3C for a more situated discussion of this issue, as well as a suggestion of how these 'feminization' discourses can be deployed with some precision. Broadly, however, the description of labour markets as 'feminized' is usually meant to indicate the high percentage of women working in them, rather than a proportional change in gender composition over time. Above and elsewhere in this paper, references to 'feminized' sectors is made with this more common usage in mind.

noting that pre-existing gender inequalities in wage and labour hierarchies have heightened adverse impacts for women working informally. Women migrant workers, as well as small-scale women traders, waste pickers, and home-based and domestic workers, have been highlighted as facing decreasing wages, increasing variability of working hours, a growing sense of powerlessness and vulnerability, and even the overcrowding of informal sectors as the informality of labour markets increases overall (Dullnig et al 2010, Cohen 2010, Horn 2010, Fernandez 2010). Throughout the recent crises, analyses of the situation in Thailand have continually found export dependence to be responsible for large-scale adverse impacts to women workers, including both large segments of the Thai women's labour force (World Bank 2008) and women migrant workers from neighbouring countries (Durano 2009, Aung and Aung 2009, Pollock and Aung 2010).

To date, most gender analyses of the economic downturn, including most of those above, have focused on impact assessments, gathering testimony and data as to the current situations of women amidst the downturn around the world. Relatively less attention has been paid to structural questions about how, for example, the gendering of wage hierarchies and labour markets prior to the downturn created the conditions necessary for highly gender-differentiated impacts. Even less attention has fallen to how women have responded to the economic downturn, elaborating 'self-initiated protection strategies' (KHRG 2009: 8) designed to mitigate negative impacts, and retain a level of dignity within social life. This paper aims to integrate these latter perspectives, interrogating the degree to which Thailand's export-led growth strategies consolidated a gendered labour hierarchy in their structuring of labour markets, thereby generating the disproportionate vulnerability against which women migrants would assert their implicit claims to economic citizenship in the midst of crisis conditions. A central question, then, will be the following: How did women migrant workers come to occupy the most crisis-vulnerable positions on the Thai-Burma border and elsewhere? And to the extent that this vulnerability proceeds from gendered labour structures, which this paper will suggest, how much of the production of such gender hierarchies can be ascribed to economic systems, and how much to more socialized processes? These questions raise the complicated problematic of the interaction between the economic and the social in the

formation of labour structures, suggesting dangers and advantages of privileging one or the other mode of explanation.

Drawing on community-based action research conducted along the Thai-Burma border by MAP Foundation in mid-2009, with follow-up research conducted at several points during late 2009 and 2010, this paper seeks to use locally scaled research findings to suggest how gendered crisis impacts, the veracity of which are now essentially incontestable in Thailand and elsewhere, can be traced and situated, and thus forestalled in the future. In addition, this analysis aims to suggest that, in identifying possible openings for agency and resistance among women migrant communities, such a project can suggest a path forward for researchers and activists building progressive solidarities with migrant women. To these ends, the paper will be structured as follows: first, a review of gendered crisis impacts among migrant communities on the Thai-Burma border, establishing their relationship to gendered labour hierarchies; second, an examination of the roots of gender-structures in labour, from the perspectives of export-led economic growth strategies and social dynamics in and between migrant communities; and third, a concluding look at self-protective response strategies among migrant women, with an eye towards the possibility of new projects in resistance and solidarity. In pursuing these questions, this paper aims to situate analysis within several critical contexts: Thailand's fraught negotiations with transnational capital networks; its pursuit of 'graduated sovereignty' (Ong 2006) in and against intra- and inter-regional capital flows; and the persistent relevance of global capitalism to understanding changing relationships between gender, work, and the subjectivity of labour. Throughout the arguments contained herein, this paper seeks to help describe the terrain on which the feminized subject of Southeast Asian labour migration may begin to stake a claim to meaningful economic citizenship, thereby challenging the elaboration of non-belonging (Kapur 2010) along lines of gender-based exclusions.

(2) The Economic Crisis in Thailand: Gendered Impacts

In Thailand, the financial and economic crises that began in late 2008 have necessarily called up fraught recollections of the 1997 crisis. Yet unlike in 1997, when strong demand for exports drove Thailand's recovery, this recent cycle of crisis has

derived in no small part from a steep drop in demand within global export markets. With exports now accounting for almost 70% of Thailand's gross domestic product (GDP), this drop in demand had already caused discernible negative effects to Thailand's economy in the first quarter of 2009. The Thai economy overall had contracted 7.1% year on year, and January's year-on-year figures for export and import values were down 26.5% and 37.6% respectively (Chomthongdi 2009; *The Economist* 19/3/09). Growth estimates fluctuated in the negative single figures (eventual 2009 growth came to -2.2%), and job losses were seen to be concentrated foremost in garment and textile manufacturing, and second in electronics production (Yanuch 2009; Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU] 2010). As analyses tied crisis impacts to these export industries, the relation between adverse export impacts and effects on women workers began to gain attention, due to the highly feminized labour force driving export sectors (World Bank 2008, Aung and Aung 2009, Durano 2009, Pollock and Aung 2010).⁴ In addition, despite the centrality of migrant labour to Thailand's export economy, the Thai recovery package effectively excluded migrant workers, and little attention was paid to the effects of the crisis among migrant communities (Aung and Aung 2009). Social impacts overall received limited attention compared to financial and economic impacts, with a joint Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-World Bank social impact assessment offering little more than the claim that 'there is a shortage of data that could be used to monitor the effects of the global financial crisis' (ASEAN Secretariat 2010: 4).

In order to gauge the extent of changing needs and vulnerabilities in migrant communities, and acutely aware of research gaps with respect to crisis impacts among migrant communities, MAP Foundation undertook focused community-based action research in mid-2009, seeking a localized assessment of the impact of the downturn among the border-area migrant worker communities with and for whom MAP has worked for more than fifteen years. Eventually published as a report titled *Critical Times: Migrants and the Economy in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot* (Aung and Aung 2009), the research emerged with a focus on the gendered impacts of the crisis among migrants and their families in and around Mae Sot, a Thai border district featuring high numbers of

⁴ The ILO (2009a) estimates that the women-to-men ratio within factory-based labour forces in Southeast Asia's export economies is roughly 5 to 2.

migrants from Burma working in many sectors and occupations, especially garment and textile factories. Several hundred factories, some of them ‘home factories’ employing only a small handful of workers (5-20), and some of them large-scale knitting factories employing anywhere from a hundred to several thousand workers, provide the most common form of employment for migrants in the area. Working conditions and labour rights in the area are widely considered to be very poor.⁵ Low- and semi-skilled positions in factories are particularly likely to be occupied by young women from rural Burma, with women accounting overall for at least 70% of all factory labour in and around Mae Sot (Kusukabe 2008).

The *Critical Times* research drew on in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and survey-based outreach with a total of 374 migrants working in various sectors. Three types of indicators were examined, all of them interconnected: income and income-related indicators, workplace-related indicators, and ‘secondary’ indicators (including family dynamics and domestic violence, the fluidity of the labour market, and the potential for reverse migration). Over the course of the research, five areas—again, these being very much interconnected—emerged as the key impacts migrant respondents reported in relation to the economic crisis: declining income, declining ability to save, declining ability to support family members, declining labour mobility, and rising retrenchment (Aung and Aung: 3). Cross-analysis of these findings by sector and gender revealed considerable differentiation, with factory workers, and workers at large-scale knitting factories in particular, reporting a greater degree of adverse impacts than workers in other sectors. Similarly, migrant women were more likely than men to report negative effects, especially with respect to income and income-related findings (for example, wages, expenditures, and ability to save and support family). With local factories employing substantially more women than men, and these factories being highly export-oriented, there is a considerable degree to which differentiation by sector and gender overlap (39-40). Gendered impacts can thus be seen

⁵ In a 2003 interview, Phil Robertson, then of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, and now the Deputy Director of the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, said Mae Sot is ‘the cesspool of labour rights in Thailand. All labour laws are violated....You find the most systematic oppression of workers in Thailand’ (*Asia Times* 3/10/03).

as proceeding from the ways in which export-sector labour structures partake of gendered hierarchies. As reported in a later elaboration of these research findings,

Sector-specific economic effects of the crisis—on export-dependent textile factories especially—map onto gender-specific impacts with troubling clarity. In Mae Sot, the suffering of certain industries can hardly be separated from the suffering of the women migrants who disproportionately work in them (Pollock and Aung 2010: 220).

An incremental examination of the gender-differentiated crisis impacts, organized by set of indicators—income-related indicators, workplace-related indicators, and secondary indicators—should further situate the questions at hand, and better locate some of the arguments that will follow. Research limitations include the fact that, with the economic situation very much in flux in mid-2009, a sense of urgency informed MAP Foundation’s approach to this research, such that methodologies could not always be fully rigorous. Thus, the study made use of a combined approach: efforts were made to both allow migrants’ reporting to speak for itself (particularly in qualitative commentaries), and yet also to situate results based on migrant reports, including quantitative data, within MAP’s institutional knowledge. When deemed necessary, findings were checked against the intuition, experience, and claims of MAP staff and other leaders in local migrant communities. As a result, these findings should not be viewed as definitive per se, but rather as a contingent attempt at detailing a complex situation.

(2A) Income-Related Indicators⁶

For the purposes of the 2009 *Critical Times* study, income-related indicators included income itself (wages, primarily), and several secondary income-related indicators, including the ability of migrants to save, their situation regarding expenditures, changes in goods prices, and ability to support families, including via remittances. Indeed, income-related results suggest income itself, as well as the secondary indicators tied to income, to constitute a set of impacts that is fairly clear in

⁶ See Aung and Aung (2009: 24-30) for the reporting of these findings in the *Critical Times* report.

demonstrating not only broad-based negative crisis impacts, but also gender-differentiated adverse effects.

Both quantitative and qualitative findings suggest this picture of rising income-related challenges among migrant communities. First, a plurality of migrant respondents (43.8%) reported a year-on-year outright decline in income, while a slightly smaller percentage of migrants (42.7%) reported no change in their income (only 13.4% of respondents reported an increase in income). A strong majority of migrants (85%) also reported increases in the prices of daily goods, and qualitative reporting from migrants repeatedly announced concerns about a widening gap between wages and daily living costs. Comments from these two migrants point to this latter concern:

Spending costs are more than income, so recently I have not been saving money... Now everything is expensive, but workers' wages are not increasing, so workers are in trouble. (IDI 2, factory worker [male], 1/8/2009)

I am not saving money, because the spending cost is more than income. (IDI 3, construction worker [female], 3/8/09)

This anxiety over wages not keeping pace with price changes, one of the most widely reported concerns among migrant respondents over the course of this research, suggests that even static wages are cause for insecurity, while outright declines in wages are almost certain signs of urgent daily struggle. With migrants reporting such adverse year-on-year income change, further negative changes to indicators tied to income come as little surprise. Strong majorities of migrants reported decreased ability to save (67.1%), while a similar majority reported increased difficulty supporting family members (72.2%), whether cross-border via remittances, or in Thailand at household or familial levels). Comments about the need to curtail spending were prevalent as well.

The gender-differentiated aspects of these figures emerge upon further analysis. In particular, more women than men reported outright drops in year-on-year income—47% of women to 39.1% of men—while women's income was reported considerably less likely than men's to stay the same (34% to 44.13% respectively). In addition, women were more likely than men to report a decline in the ability to save money (68% to 60.3%), and these negative effects appeared concentrated among the

highly feminized factory labour force, with factory labour being by far the sector most likely to report both falling incomes (57% of factory workers reported as such) and declining ability to save (70.1% of factory workers reported as such). Thus, while income-related findings suggest that impacts to incomes are widespread among migrant communities, these figures also suggest, and with a reasonable degree of clarity, that this set of negative impacts is more severe for women than it is for men.

These comments from two women factory workers highlight the degree to which wage changes have very tangible impacts, all the more so because they shift and unsettle financial planning cycles that are as immediate and short-term as being daily, weekly, and monthly.

In recent years I got 75 baht per day, so in a fortnight around 1000 baht or more. After water and electricity fees, monthly I would get nearly 2000 baht. But this year we have to try hard for 1000 baht for the whole month, because the job situation is not so good. We have more financial hardship. (FGD 1 ID 6, factory worker [female], 24/6/09)

At this time wages are so low. I just get 30 to 90 baht per day. And spending costs have increased, so I cannot save money right now. (IDI 4, factory worker [female], 1/8/09)

Migrants' increasing difficulty saving money was identified in the 2009 research as indicating the possibility of ripple effects from the economic crisis, as communities expecting the eventual deployment of those savings—in the form of remittances sent to families inside Burma, for example—would not expect it immediately. Negative impacts would be experienced with some measure of delay. Likely nearly all indicators tied to income in this research, the questions of savings and support to family members offered clear indication of gender-differentiated impacts, with women migrants' ability to save and provide support impacted more negatively than that of men in these communities. This gendered unfolding of crisis impacts arises in no small part from these income-related indicators, helping to describe how, with respect to income and indicators tied to income, women migrants shouldered a disproportionate share of adverse crisis impacts in Mae Sot-area migrant communities.

(2B) Workplace-Related Indicators⁷

Workplace-related indicators included working hours, working conditions, retrenchment, and the question of crisis-related factory closures. These indicators were among the study's more complicated findings, particularly with respect to working hours, retrenchment, and factory closures.⁸ Still, a significant finding, and one that fits contextual representations of focused impacts on export sectors, is that shifts to working hours were more likely among factory workers than workers in other sectors. Given the high degree of feminization within the factory labour force, these findings again indicate a set of impacts that effect women migrants more than men.

Retrenchment and working hours emerged as closely related issues, with low- and semi-skilled workers reporting great variation in their working hours, as well as a greater degree of targeted retrenchment. Workers considered more skilled, on the other hand, actually reported increased working hours (though without lawful overtime compensation, as reported by 61.2% of respondents), likely due to a shift in the distribution of working hours resulting from smaller labour forces—for those workers retained, the burden of labour increased. Workers engaged in less valued work—that is, so-called low- and semi-skilled workers, strong majorities of whom are women—largely found declining working hours, and rising retrenchment. Migrant community leaders emphasized this dynamic of factory retrenchment as a central feature of crisis impacts, with survey responses suggesting some level of confirmation (45% of migrants reported recent retrenchment at their own workplaces). No redundancy packages have been offered, and the majority of retrenched workers are notified on the day of their job loss. According to one female factory worker,

They told us to pack up and leave. I heard someone ask for their wages, and the foreman shouted that he was ready to call immigration if anyone wanted to make a complaint. We all hurried to pick up our things. (Pollock and Aung 2010: 222)

⁷ See Aung and Aung (2009: 30-35) for the reporting of these findings in the *Critical Times* report.

⁸ Findings on working conditions suggested little if any year-on-year change. As noted in Pollock and Aung (2010: 221), this may be due to the already very poor working conditions, which leave little possibility for further deterioration.

Meanwhile, some factories appear to have drawn on the economic downturn as a means of peremptorily settling labour disputes, closing down factories—and then reopening again, with a new company name and new workers—for supposedly economic reasons in the midst of labour disputes. The Hi-Act Knitwear Factory drew on this dynamic explicitly, while the Han San Factory, also a large knitting factory, used a similar strategy. According to migrants and community leaders, some outright factory closures were likely tied to the downturn, but such closures should also be viewed as potential anti-worker strategies, with the downturn providing a kind of new cover for this longstanding method.

Two Han San factory workers described this management strategy, which was deployed after about two hundred workers had joined to assert claims for back wages.

The company changed its name and reopened again. 180 employees were left in the factory. Each one received 4000 THB per month. Out of the employees who were fired, 130 went back to work with the company because they had no job and faced difficulties. (IDI 4, 1/8/2009)

The boss changed the name of the company, gave it a new name, and then reopened again. (IDI 5, 1/8/2009)

The first comment, it is worth noting, suggests a lack of fluidity in the local labour market, with a different job difficult to obtain—a situation that could be related to the widely reported decline in labour mobility (see 2C), and thus the rise of further obstacles to workers' ability to escape poor working conditions.

Thus for working hours and retrenchment, albeit with some retrenchment related more to worker suppression than the economic downturn per se, this research found that workplace-related changes by and large were concentrated among factory workers. Workers in other sectors did not commonly report new dynamics in retrenchment, or significant changes to working hours. Shifts in working hours and retrenchment for factory workers, particularly as manifested most negatively for low- and semi-skilled workers (as they have been), means these impacts—like impacts related to income-related indicators as well—are shouldered by women more than by men, due to a gendered labour hierarchy that locates women workers in more at-risk positions. As largely factory-based impacts, then—and impacts, at that, that are focused among

feminized positions—declining working hours and rising retrenchment constitute a reasonably clear set of adverse gendered crisis impacts, despite the complexities behind differential working hours changes (for skilled and less skilled workers) and factory closures as a particular management strategy.

(2C) Secondary Indicators⁹

These indicators sought to capture impacts that could be seen as proceeding from other indicators already examined—included under secondary indicators, then, were labour mobility, family dynamics (including domestic violence), and perceptions of changes in relationships between local Thai citizens and people from Burma. These latter indicators were not among the most revealing in this study. In quantitative and qualitative findings, migrants reported little to no change in Thai-Burmese relations, and were hesitant to engage questions of family dynamics (see 2D).

Labour mobility responses were more instructive. These responses provided some clear indications of crisis impacts, and in relation to retrenchment trends, point to further gender-differentiated effects among migrant communities. In particular, migrants highlighted a decline in the fluidity of the labour market—that is, changing jobs appears to have become more difficult since the onset of the crisis—while migrants also reported that retrenched workers were largely staying in the Mae Sot area, rather than returning to Burma (suggesting that reverse migration had not substantially taken hold). Percentage figures are helpful: 61.6% of respondents reported increased difficulty in finding new jobs, while only 36.4% and 1.9% of migrants reported that the possibility of finding new jobs had (respectively) not changed or become easier. Given the retrenchment patterns found in this research, it is likely that downward trends in labour mobility have disproportionately affected women factory workers. These are the workers, dismissed in higher numbers than others amidst the downturn, who would have been drawing on the local labour market—with less success than in the past, according to these labour mobility findings—to find new jobs.

⁹ See Aung and Aung (2009: 35-38) for the reporting of these findings in the *Critical Times* report.

Lack of reverse migration, despite labour mobility findings and other research results, underscores the commitment of migrants to staying in the Mae Sot area. A very strong majority of migrants (95.4%) reported that retrenched workers, despite difficulties in the labour market, have largely remained in Mae Sot. Comments from two women factory workers emphasize this trend.

I have been living in Mae Sot for four years. My economic situation is not okay now. Income and spending are not balanced. Therefore, even if I want to go back to Burma, I cannot go back. So I am very depressed. (Survey 2 ID 14, factory worker [female], 6/2009)

We came here because of trouble. If we go back there will still be trouble. (FGD 1 ID 6, factory worker [female], 24/6/09)

These stark commentaries begin to suggest some of the resilience necessary for migrants to stay and work in Mae Sot for the long term. This commitment proceeds in and against the impacts outlined in this study—impacts, as we have seen, that have unfolded differently for women and men, with a fair degree of evidence suggesting impacts have been more severe for women. Like other indicators examined in the *Critical Times* research, labour mobility findings emerge as gendered to the extent that they, in their relationship to retrenchment patterns amidst the crisis, link back to impacts focused among feminized labour sectors. In Mae Sot and surrounding areas, export-oriented garment and textile factories very much depend on a majority female labour force, such that impacts to these sectors are, in important ways, difficult to separate from impacts to the large numbers of women who compose their labour force.

(2D) Subsequent Findings and Impact Conclusions

The *Critical Times* research period concluded in August 2009. In preparation for a further research paper based on those findings, MAP Foundation undertook some subsequent research activities at several points during 2010. These additional findings sought to clarify the impacts of the crisis on family dynamics, and investigate implications for migrants' security and stability. These latter concerns about security arose in part due to an early 2010 deadline for Thailand's final migrant worker registration. Threats of an imminent crackdown on unregistered workers circulated, while

Thai regulations forced workers from Burma to enter complicated engagement processes with the Burmese regime in advance of a new registration system. Workers' dual concerns about engaging with the junta, and facing a new round of mass deportations, were seen as sparking some of the labour unrest presented at the outset of this paper, including with respect to the strike led by women workers at the Top Form brassiere factory in Mae Sot (Pollock and Aung 2010: 223-224). Once again, questions of sector and gender overlap, as security threats to factory workers remain issues intrinsically tied to the women migrants who drive the factory labour force.

Follow-up findings on family dynamics further specified gendered impacts among Mae Sot's migrant communities. For while MAP researchers found that it was ultimately difficult to explicitly connect the economic crisis to changes in reported domestic violence, some impacts on migrants' education situation were discernible, especially among family units working in agriculture and construction in the Mae Sot area. Explaining that families' mobility had increased amidst the economic crisis, with families moving more often in search of work, one agricultural worker described changes to education in the community as follows:

All our community had wanted was for our children to go to school. We asked MAP to help organize that to happen a couple of years ago, and we were so excited when they went to school. But now, many families are taking the children out of school. Our community lives far from the school, and we are always a little scared when the truck comes to pick up the children. Now we either don't have the money or are even more afraid that the children won't be returned at the end of the day. (223)

Furthermore, migrant families reported that with declining income, only one child could remain in attendance at school. Thus, when necessary, a son could continue to attend school, while a daughter would likely be brought home—a daughter, these migrants claim, is more valuable at home than a son (222).

Additional impacts on family dynamics were found with respect to sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly as many migrant women from Burma work in Thailand during the peak years of their reproductive lives. When their income declines, they have reported, or when retrenchment rates rise, they are faced with difficult choices regarding family planning. Ability to access and afford general health care and necessary

medical treatment—including reproductive health care such as contraception and emergency medical care—are oftentimes tied to job security, such that the retention of one’s job becomes an important priority (223). Indeed, as people who are not just workers, but also women in their communities, mothers within families, and young people with social lives, women migrants may relate to their work situation differently than men, looking to their job status as a source of safety and security, and a key vehicle for social acceptance. In this sense, social expectations vis-à-vis family and community help define the framework in which gendered crisis impacts unfold. Thus, retrenchment or declining income, for example, may mean something different for women and men, according to social conditions. As reported by women participating in MAP research, from the standpoint of health and family dynamics, the loss of jobs or decreases in wages could effect women in a more extreme manner than they would men, even as they have been shown to occur more often for women. The difference, then, is not only in frequency, but in degree as well, with women again facing a greater burden amidst the ongoing economic downturn.

Overall, and in line with reporting from elsewhere in Thailand and in the region, MAP Foundation’s 2009 and 2010 research suggests that the gendered structure of export-oriented factory labour in Mae Sot has been a key source of the economic downturn’s gender-differentiated impacts among migrant communities on the Thai-Burma border. Furthermore, these gender-specific impacts can be summarized according to several specific indicator areas (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of gender-differentiated crisis impacts by indicator areas

Income-Related Indicators	Export-focused factories suffered from a drop in global demand, leading to declining wages, and related difficulties saving money and supporting family members, for the young women who largely fill low- and semi-skilled positions within these relatively large factories. Migrant women also reported the need to curtail daily expenditures against a backdrop of rising goods prices, while remittances to communities inside Burma likely dropped.
Workplace-Related Indicators	Likely due to declines in orders, factory managers scaled back their labour forces, retaining workers with higher skill levels. For lower-skilled workers, the majority of whom are women, working hours

	decreased and retrenchment rates increased. Some factories shut altogether, but migrants and community leaders were hesitant to connect all factory closures to the downturn, connecting some instead to a longstanding worker suppression strategy of closing factories in the midst of labour disputes, and reopening later under a different name.
Secondary Indicators	While findings related to labour mobility and Thai-Burmese relations revealed little direct gender differentiation, and initially the same for family dynamics, later research on the latter subject suggested that within family units, particularly at the household level among agricultural work communities and construction worker communities, girls have been somewhat more likely than boys to cease schooling in cases of increased family mobility. And with an overall decline in job security for women factory workers, these workers report concerns about impacts to health affordability and access, including with respect to sexual and reproductive health.
Overall	The gendered impacts of the economic downturn among migrant communities in the Mae Sot area, as reported by migrants reached in MAP Foundation's 2009 and 2010 research activities, include declining incomes, declining ability to save money and support families, declining working hours, increasing retrenchment rates, decreased access to schooling for girls, and rising barriers to health access and affordability.

Perhaps the central feature of the gendered crisis impacts among Mae Sot-area migrant communities is the considerable degree to which sector- and gender-specific impacts have overlapped. That is, with the rise of a gendered labour hierarchy in export-oriented factory labour in Mae Sot, crisis impacts tied to a large-scale collapse in export demand necessarily effected the area's women migrant communities disproportionately. Male migrants, the total population of which—in Thailand overall—roughly equals that of women migrants, are simply less likely to work in export sectors, or if they do, their positions are more secure within the structure of current labour hierarchies. While MAP Foundation's 2009 and 2010 research did not explore the relationship between gendered crisis impacts and Thailand's export-oriented economy, that research not explicitly examine the relationship between export-led growth strategies and the rise of a gendered labour hierarchy. That relationship, as this paper contends, may have been causal, and

may have created the conditions of possibility for the unfolding of highly gender-differentiated crisis impacts—insofar as, over time and due to some extent to the labour-forming effects of export economics, young women factory workers came to occupy the most crisis-vulnerable positions in export-oriented factory labour forces. This paper now turns to the latter subject.

(3) Thailand's Export Dependence and the Gender-Structure of Labour

Over the past thirty-some years, sweeping changes have occurred in the geography of commodity supply chains, with 'core economies' in the West moving towards selectively globalized production models, integrating East and Southeast Asian industrial networks in the midst of these countries' own moves towards more export-focused growth strategies. These countries' shifts from domestically focused economies towards export-oriented industrialization (EOI) took place in part due to the advising of a certain constellation of so-called Washington Consensus actors, including most prominently the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) (see Pearson and Sweetman 2010, Arnold 2007). Beginning in the early 1980s, a push towards neoliberal, transnational monetary flows released substantial capital investment from East Asia into Southeast Asia (in Thailand, from Taiwan especially), forming the foundation of the foreign direct investment (FDI) that would enable the capitalization of factory-based industrial manufacturing in the region (Arnold 2007). In Thailand's western border regions, meanwhile, flows of refugees and migrant workers from Burma increased in the early to mid-1990s, supplying a ready labour force—most workers being young women from rural Burma, the first generation of an industrial labour force—for the aggressive border-area industrialization then being pursued for the first time by Thai policymakers (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009).

While the previous section engaged localized analysis of economic crisis impacts among migrant communities in the border area, connecting those impacts to labour hierarchies that locate women in the most at-risk and vulnerable occupations, this section turns to the roots of such labour formations, seeking them first in the broad historical process of Thailand's engagement with EOI growth strategies. Next will follow a look at

feminized border-area migration patterns—a subject that should enable a socialized analytical orientation that mitigates against an overdetermined economic evaluation of the roots of gendered labour hierarchies. Both lines of analysis imply that, with respect to women's migration patterns in Thailand and other parts of the world, the explanatory value of anti-capitalist critique is considerable:

Perhaps the most notable feature of female migration is the extent to which it is founded upon the continual reproduction and exploitation of gender inequalities by global capitalism. For the most part, female labor migrants perform 'women's work' as nannies, maids, and sex workers—the worst possible occupational niches in terms of remuneration, working conditions, legal protections and social recognition. In this way, gender acts as a basic organizing principle of labor markets in destination countries, reproducing and reinforcing pre-existing gender patterns that oppress women. (UN-INSTRAW 2007: 3)

In Mae Sot, while 'women's work' includes the occupations noted above, export-oriented garment and textile factories employ more women than any other sector, and arguments about gender inequalities in the labour market very much still apply. As this section aims to suggest, the structure of these gendered labour hierarchies, which is also the foundation of gendered impacts from the economic crisis, arises from the dual influence of export-oriented growth strategies and the social conditions adhering in migration flows in this area.

(3A) Historicizing EOI Models in Thailand

Tracing the history of export-led growth strategies, and thereby historicizing their current primacy, is a process that might best begin with the economic trends of the 1980s, when East Asian capital inflows first made ripples in Southeast Asian countries. In Thailand, investment from Taiwan-based transnational corporations (TNCs) was particularly significant, as a shift in Taiwan towards EOI growth strategies released capital that enabled, and eventually precipitated, a similar shift in Thailand (Arnold 2007: 10). Since the 1960s, like Taiwan in advance of their export shift, Thailand's economy had been organized around a relatively inward-looking policy orientation, with a focus on domestic industries and agriculture dominating this period of import substitution industrialization (ISI). Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat has been seen as a champion of this

model in its early stages (24). By the mid-1980s, however, this basically protectionist orientation was challenged by a series of factors. These factors included falling prices in agriculture, signs of a gathering recession, currency and balance of payment problems with neighbouring countries, and political concern that ISI-driven policies—including, in particular, a ‘growth pole’ approach to economic development that focused on regional urban centers like Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen—had created uneven growth across the country (Phongpaichit and Baker 1998: 37). An EOI approach emerged as an alternative around this time, as policymakers sought to marry declining ISI success with new investment capital coming from Taiwan and other Tiger economies (Japan and Hong Kong especially).

The ISI-EOI shift is a familiar story among the rising Asian economies of this period. In Thailand as elsewhere, the shift signaled a move away from nationally directed economic policies and towards linkages with regional neighbours and international supply chains. Yet while sharing in these trends, Thailand’s more distinct relationship to these shifts proceeds from the administration of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan (1988-1991). Under Chatichai, Thailand pursued the much-vaunted ‘from battlefields to marketplaces’ approach in the former Indochina, and a ‘constructive engagement’ approach with respect to the Burmese military dictatorship. These regionalist moves amount to a claim on the part of the Chatichai administration that, after decades of conflict, and the resilience of military rule in Burma, rising East Asian capital investment made for new integrationist possibilities—in particular, integration on developmental economic grounds. Thailand’s opening economy thus sought the subsequent opening of neighbouring economies, largely according to a policy framework emphasizing deregulation of capital and trade networks, and the free movement of FDI (Fink 2001; Arnold 2007). Not without due cause, this trajectory has been seen as one chapter within a larger history of free trade and neoliberalism around the world. Still, Chatichai’s regionalist vision implied the assertion of relational power vis-à-vis post-conflict societies and persistent authoritarianism, causing a co-mingling of mobile capital and regional history that helps situate the unique dynamics at work in the rise of EOI models in Southeast Asia.

Chatichai's push towards a liberalized reconfiguration of regional trade networks occurred amidst Thailand's export boom, both of them supported and spurred on by policymakers with a series of free-trade reforms—among them, tariff reductions, the restructuring of corporate and income tax, and the overall relaxation of trade controls (WTO 1999). These policy moves helped Thailand's manufacturing sector enter global supply chains for the first time, gaining access to major consumption markets in the US and Europe. Indeed, during Thailand's ISI period and until the 1997 economic crisis, Thailand recorded not a single year of negative economic growth. Moderate growth prevailed between 1958 and 1986, but the 1987-1996 period has been called 'super economic growth,' with growth rates reaching as high as 13%. At one point Thailand's was the world's fastest growing economy, and *The Economist* predicted, in 1995, that Thailand would be the eighth-largest economy in the world by 2020 (Vines and Warr 2003; Phongpaichit and Baker 1998). By 1997, Thailand's entire economy had changed shape in little more than twenty years: from an ISI-oriented economy focused on agriculture and domestic production, to an export-focused economy premised on labour-intensive light manufacturing. In 1990, factory-based garment and textile production were very much driving the export push, with the manufacture of light goods accounting for up to three quarters of all exports. The subsequent years of the early and mid-1990s would mark some diversification of the export sector, including the arrival of more capital-intensive industries like electronics and automobile production (Phongpaichit and Baker 1998: 4, 37). Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) would summarize the country's position at that time as follows:

The Thai economy has grown rapidly and has become increasingly internationalized. During the Sixth Plan period [1987-1991], the Thai economic growth has skyrocketed with gross domestic product (GDP) expanding at an average of 10.5 percent per year, twice the Plan target, representing the highest average growth rate of the past twenty-five years. Furthermore, the economic structure has become more outward-oriented and internationalized, as indicated by the increase in the proportion of international trade to GDP from 60 percent in 1986 to 80 percent by 1991. (NESDB 1992: 1)

Thailand's export boom and its regional economic ambitions are deeply intertwined: export success helped establish Thailand's power in pursuing regional

economic leadership, while that latter objective was part of an overall push towards liberalized trade infrastructure that in turn strongly supported Thailand's ascendant export sector. Within this feedback relationship, the regionalism of Chatichai indicates a certain emphasis on border areas, particularly as intra-regional trade then (as now) occurs mainly via overland transport routes. Border areas thus emerge as important transport coordinates between trading partners. Additionally, developmental planning authorities understood these liminal regions effectively as agrarian spaces awaiting industrial transformation. In 1992, for example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) announced its Greater Mekong Subregion Program (GMS Program), which contained strong emphases on infrastructure development (particularly transport) and cross-border trade growth. Also in 1992, Thailand's NESDB unveiled its 7th National Development Plan (1992-1996), targeting border-area trade amidst discussions of 'new economic zones' and decentralizing growth patterns. The next year, the Board of Investment (BOI) in Thailand announced a three-tiered investment structure that heavily incentivized industrial relocation to Thailand's rural and border regions. These initiatives signal a disavowal of the growth pole development models of the ISI period, and a marked shift to the rural as the priority subject of industrial change (see Mekong Migration Network [MMN] 2011 [forthcoming], Arnold 2007: 35-37).

This rural turn, a principal attribute of developmental planning in the early to mid-1990s, drew on decentralizing moves to integrate previously marginal national space into reimagined regional formations, thereby seeking to address, according to policymakers, the unevenness of Thailand's growth in the 1970s and 80s. The Bangkok-area establishment of major automobile manufacturing in 1995 (Honda, Hyundai, Daewoo) and 1996 (Chrysler, Ford) denotes the continued strength of centralized industrial growth at this time (Phongpaichit and Baker 1998: 37), while trends in state planning, alongside implementation measures like the BOI initiative and the ADB's regional program, leave little doubt that Thailand's peripheries had assumed primary status for policy-level discussions about leading trends in export-sector industrialization. The onset of the 1997 crisis largely brought to an end Thailand's export-driven boom period, as the Thai baht declined by half in value, foreign investment dropped sharply, and poverty levels suddenly spiked amidst widespread retrenchment in finance, construction, and real estate

(Hunter et al 1999: 193-198). Mass deportations of migrant workers took place as well, on the order of several hundred thousand. However, this crisis being relatively localized compared to the more recent crisis, global export demand remained high, especially in vital European and American consumption markets. A steadfast, albeit humbled, export sector thus survived the 1997 crisis, and even led the recovery of the Thai economy as the century turned. Under Thaksin's administration (2001-2006) and then through the political turbulence following his removal from power, the export sector has remained the cornerstone of the Thai economy, currently still accounting for close to 70% of GDP (Chomthongdi 2009). While the latest economic crisis has severely shaken export-oriented industries, recent projections suggest Thailand will see a strong recovery in exports for 2010 and 2011 (see Table 2) (EIU 2010: 8).

Table 2: Thailand's export sector growth rates against changes in GDP, 2008-2011

	2008*	2009*	2010^	2011^
Export Sector	5.1	-12.7	12.0	6.6
GDP	2.5	-2.2	4.1	4.1

Source: EIU (2010: 8). * denotes actual; ^ denotes EIU forecasts.

The consolidation of Thailand's export sector over the past thirty or so years should not, as the preceding suggests, be understood in terms of overdetermined, triumphalist narratives of free-market progress and expansion since the closure of the Cold War—nor in terms of the unqualified teleologies of an all-consuming, ever-globalizing neoliberalism. These too-familiar thought-lines obscure more than they reveal, foreclosing on the contingent, not to mention contested, aspects of more locally defined histories. Here, we have seen that Thailand's relational exercise of economic power in and against regional conflict and military despotism forged an intimacy between liberalized capital flows—originating in the Tiger economies of East Asia—and state-level violence that depends on situated histories, and thus implies a level of distinction. As the next sections will explore, this more critical reading also makes space for projects

of dissent and resistance, defamiliarizing the common recitation of neoliberalism's practically unrestrained state-to-market transformations.¹⁰ Equally important for this discussion is the fact that a certain rural turn characterized the trajectory of Thailand's export push since the influential administration of Prime Minister Chatichai. Set within a regionalizing geography of capital investment, this 'discovery' of the rural by developmental planners carried with it a new recognition of border space as the primary frontier for industrialization in the region. This staging of border regions laid them bare to state projects of enclosure through industrial integration, depending in Thailand's remote northwest on the steady flow of cross-border migrants from Burma. The next sections turn to this more localized subject.

(3B) Situating Export Growth in Mae Sot: National and Local Dynamics

The regionalism of Chatichai very much survived the 1990s, including the 1997 crisis, such that the Thaksin Shinawatra administration in Thailand (2001-2006) arrived to find a resurgent export sector, strengthened post-crisis financial systems, and increasingly interconnected GMS trade networks. In 2002, the ADB unveiled a system of Economic Corridors (ECs) as a central feature of their GMS Program. The North-South, East-West, and Southern ECs amount to projects in transportation infrastructure, identifying and streamlining crucial overland trade linkages throughout the GMS (see Appendix B, Figure 1) (MMN 2008). The next year, a Thaksin-led regional initiative called ACMECS (Ayeyawaddy-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy) heralded a new series of programs designed to further facilitate economic connectivity. Like the Chatichai vision of the early 1990s, ACMECS also included a focus on border areas, and with quite direct emphasis. Four border-crossings on the edges of Thailand were selected at the outset of the initiative to be established as Special Border Economic Zones (SBEZs), all of them positioned on ECs: Mukdahan-Savannakhet, Trat-Koh Kong, the Chiang Rai Special Economic Zone (SEZ), and Mae Sot-Myawaddy (Tsuneishi 2008).

¹⁰ Indeed, the advance of neoliberal late capitalism has not been met unopposed in Thailand, though the dispersal of labour-intensive firms to rural areas has been seen as fracturing labour movements, mitigating against unified organizing and suppressing the role of labour in broad social movements (Arnold 2007: 18-20).

At the national level, the Mae Sot SBEZ was officially approved via a cabinet resolution on October 19, 2004. A subsequent draft bill sought to upgrade Mae Sot's SBEZ status to that of a larger-scale Special Economic Zone (SEZ), but the bill was withdrawn by early 2007 after continual non-passage, likely due to political instabilities crowding out other policy objectives (Arnold 2010). Nonetheless, Mae Sot, like the other border areas selected as SBEZs, emerged as a test case for the achievement of ACMECS's main objectives. These objectives, based on the solidification of preceding developmental concerns, include three main factors: foremost, relocating industry to border areas, thereby creating a kind of economic dam to stem emergent cross-border labour migration flows; in so doing, addressing persistent uneven income distribution across Thailand and the GMS; and overall, positioning Thailand as a donor nation regionally, securing political and economic capital within an expanding free-trade framework (Arnold 2007: 37-39; *Asia Times* 21/6/07). In relatively clear terms, Thaksin's pursuit of these goals can be seen as drawing on Chatichai's legacy, seeking tangible implementation where his predecessor had set out broad guidelines. As one analysis puts it,

More than his recent predecessors, Thaksin returned to Chatichai's ideal of regional integration through trade-based cooperation, pushing the expansion of neoliberal capital networks as the best means to achieve the region's economic potential (MMN 2011 [forthcoming]).

While deeply related to trends in export-sector growth in Thailand and neighbouring countries, these integrationist moves were also consequential in terms of regional migration trends. These trends arise from the unequal effects of regional economic integration, with Thailand gaining considerably more from emerging patterns in trade. Cambodia and Laos, for example, have largely been 'integrated' into regional markets only to the extent that they provide transport corridors between Vietnam and Thailand, and re-export of goods produced elsewhere. Re-export and transit provide limited economic benefits, while Thailand's surging export sector has driven its emergence as by far the strongest economy in the GMS. As a result, between 1992 and 2004, absolute poverty declined significantly across the GMS, but relative poverty increased, with liberalized trade flows producing highly selective gains (see Appendix B,

Figure 2) (MMN 2008). In this sense, the ACMECS objective of reducing uneven income distribution has seen at best limited success, as regional integration can be said to have exacerbated inequalities in social and economic development. As a result, these regional and demographic divides have generated strong push factors for intra-regional migration, with migrants moving across complex social, economic, and political differentials towards locations perceived to be variously more secure (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009: 75).

Thailand's status as the region's main destination country owes much to these dynamics. Fittingly, migration trends on the Thai-Burma border share in these patterns to a large extent—and yet certain specific characteristics are necessary to note as well. In particular, migration trends in this border region have unfolded according to a combination of military conflict and economic stagnation that, unlike elsewhere in the GMS, has very much extended into the 1990s and 2000s. Even in the late 1970s and the 1980s, as the isolationism of other GMS countries resulted in limited cross-border movements, a consistent flow of displaced people from Burma constituted one of few steady migration streams in the region (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009: 75). Throughout the region, mobility would increase with economic integration policies through the 1990s, while in Burma, that increase was also related to military conflict and political and economic stagnation. In the late 1980s and early half of the 1990s, a renewed counterinsurgency campaign created large-scale forced migration from eastern Burma into Thailand; and the military regime's turn to a 'market-oriented' socialist economy in the 1990s, alongside outreach to regional neighbours that resulted in Burma joining ASEAN in 1997, could not reverse a failing economy that has continued to push migrants abroad (see Kudo 2007, Lubeigt 2008). Around the mid-1990s, this latter migration flow became the dominant stream on the Thai-Burma border, and has remained as such since then. While some have portrayed this shift as a move from forced to economic migration (World Bank 2006), other actors, including migrant rights organizations like MAP Foundation, have questioned this characterization. This challenge often includes the assertion that, like refugees, so-called economic migrants from Burma also commonly arrive in Thailand, and certainly in Mae Sot as well, in order to escape abuse,

intimidation, and tangible threats to personal and community livelihoods (see Pungpond 2009, KHRG 2009).

Due to these and other factors, high among them the simple fact of geographic proximity to Burma, Mae Sot has long been a major destination community for migrants from Burma. First in the context of conflict-induced displacement, and later in response to a mix of political and economic pressures, a community of several hundred thousand migrants has coalesced over roughly the past twenty years (Aung and Aung 2009: 22). Change over time has been considerable. According to Arnold (2007), only twenty to thirty factories were operating in Mae Sot in the early 1990s, with a total migrant population of two to three thousand mostly working in small businesses and agriculture. Through the 1990s, registered capital investment increased from USD 4.54 million in 1993 to USD 24.21 million in 2000 (46-47). Recent estimates value current capital investment at about USD 58.69 million, with yearly earnings from Mae Sot-based industries totaling roughly USD 1.42 billion (MMN 2011 [forthcoming]).¹¹ For the area's growing migrant community, many of whom work in an export sector that now includes some two to three hundred factories, increasing investment and the growth of light manufacturing has brought limited positive changes. Arnold argues, on the contrary, that

...labor rights are consistently sacrificed in order to attract and maintain investment, raising questions as to who are the primary beneficiaries of capitalist development. As Thailand and neighboring countries take further steps to increase border industrialization and development, labor standards are being pushed down both directly for the migrant workers employed in border industries, and often for domestic workers who are being forced to accept lower standards.
(5)

In this sense, there is a way in which the mobility of regional capital flows have shared in the exploitation of border-area migrant communities, insofar as management actors have

¹¹ Another measure of rising trade in Mae Sot has been the alarm with which the 2010 border closure (ongoing since early July 2010) has been met in Thailand. The border closure, enforced by the Burmese junta and costing Thailand roughly USD 2.8 million per day, has widely been seen as a challenge to Thailand in advance of Burma's November election, as well as an attempt to apply pressure to non-state armed groups who, while operating lucrative unofficial trade routes, have hesitated to embrace the junta's ambitions to secure more power in the border area (*The Irrawaddy* 18/8/10, 24/8/10).

sought to secure and maintain capital investment through the persistent suppression of labour rights. The specter of capital flight, of investment relocating to more ‘capital-friendly’ areas, has been cause for the production of a flexible labour force (Arnold 2007: 20-23), the vulnerability of which has been very much legible in times of crisis.

Accordingly, the disproportionate vulnerability of women factory workers within the recent economic crisis owes in part to a regional geography of mobile capital, in which sites of heavy investment are, causally, sites of worker vulnerability. Shifting flows of export-oriented capital thus generate, in turn, gendered patterns of labour insecurity—marking, as a result, a level of historicized complicity between export-led growth strategies and gender-specific crisis impacts.

(3C) Tracking the Feminization of Mae Sot’s Factory Labour Force

In previous sections, the question of gendered crisis impacts in the Mae Sot area has been set up as owing to gendered labour hierarchies in export-oriented factories. The roots of these gendered labour hierarchies, which are thus also the roots of gender-differentiation in crisis impacts, proceed in part from the elaboration over time of an export structure that, in Thailand, is based on a labour-intensive production approach. This light manufacturing model, which is the central model in use among the Mae Sot area’s many garment and textile factories, requires high numbers of low- and semi-skilled workers. As we have seen in the preceding sections, these workers’ export-sector occupations are not only highly susceptible to transnational economic tremors like the recent economic crisis. They are also vulnerable to downward pressures on workers’ rights due to the mobility of investment capital within increasingly intra- and inter-regionalized capital networks. These factors help explain, from the standpoint of economic change and expansion, the evolution of gender-differentiated vulnerability. Moreover, this processual composition of labour reveals much about the formation of gendered labour structures, but as a primarily economic explanation, it cannot stand alone without a more social evaluation alongside it—one that situates the economics of feminized labour within the social dynamics that help determine it.

The centrality of women in the Mae Sot-area factory labour force indeed depends much on social networks within source and destination migrant communities. According

to reports from local migrant organizations, cross-border migration flows are roughly equally distributed by gender, and then based on various factors upon arrival, women and men are ‘filtered’ into different occupations. Women, particularly young and single women from rural Burma, are likely to work in low- and semi-skilled positions in garment and textile factories, which as a result feature high percentages of women workers (Pollock and Aung 2010: 221). While 70-30 (women-men) is a common estimate of the current gender breakdown in Mae Sot’s garment factories, Kusakabe (2008) cites 75-80% women as the gender ratio as early as 1991 in the area’s industrial workforce, with that number holding ‘remarkably stable’ through at least 2002. These figures are all the more striking given that, according to recent official registration numbers, the overall gender breakdown for GMS migrants in Thailand is majority male, at about 54%—a percentage that holds closely for migrants from Burma, who are registered as 53.8% male. In Tak Province, however—Tak is the province in which Mae Sot is a district—women account for 67.3% of all registered migrants from Burma, which is a considerably higher percentage than any other province in Thailand (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009: 85).¹² Sectoral differentiation by location likely explains this concentration of women workers: Mae Sot, and by extension Tak Province, features high numbers of export-oriented garment and textile factories, sustained by an overwhelming majority of women workers. Factories are located in other areas as well, but alongside sectors that feature more men. Construction and fishing, for example, are male-dominated industries, while agriculture tends to feature family units, including in large-scale plantations in southern Thailand.

Still, despite the clearly central position occupied by women in Mae Sot’s factory labour force, reference to ‘feminization’ for this sector must be made carefully. The term implies that over time, the proportion of women in the sector has increased, whereas in actuality, it has remained extremely high since the early 1990s, when industrial manufacturing first took root in Mae Sot. However, broader ‘feminization of migration’

¹² Official labour migration statistics are notoriously unreliable in Thailand, as it is impossible to account for the high volumes of unregistered and irregular migrants living and working in the country. However, Sciortino and Punpuing (2009: 59) estimate that in 2007, the year of the latest figures for their study, the proportion of registered workers to total registered and unregistered workers was only 26%.

discourses can be instructive here. Researchers and scholars have noted that the proportion of women in migration flows around the world has not changed significantly since 1960, and yet there has been change in the characteristics of women in those flows, as women now are more likely to travel independently, rather than within family units or with husbands (UN-INSTRAW 2007). Feminization as a transformation in migration trends, particularly as a process describing the rise of women migrating independently, has relevancy with respect to Mae Sot, a destination community where, as we have seen, the majority of women migrants are young and single factory workers. Migrants moving independently must draw on elaborate networks of friends, family, and sometimes brokers and employment agencies to negotiate job placement and occupational choices. Huguet (2007, cited in Pungpond 2009) emphasizes these social fabrics as a set of pull factors that has grown strong over time for migrants to Thailand. Families' decisions to diversify economic risks by sending a single family member abroad for work also figure into socialized pull factors. Early in the 1990s, the rapid establishment in Mae Sot of a women-dominated factory labour force very likely created a kind of positive feedback effect within these social networks, such that, within the terminology elaborated above, a feminized labour force has reproduced and reinforced itself durably over time.

The socialized reproduction of gendered labour is not an unfamiliar trope for many researchers and scholars, and yet there is reason to believe that it has occurred somewhat differently in Mae Sot than elsewhere. Ong's (1987) well-known ethnographic study of women factory workers in Malaysia, for example, records in detail the highly gendered recruitment practices of factory management in fast-industrializing areas of peninsular Malaysia. Young women were not simply available in 'relative oversupply'; they were actively preferred to male workers. Japanese factories' recruitment materials from this time contain mentions of how the 'feminine' traits of 'oriental girls' are particularly well-suited to labour-intensive work in the emergent electronics manufacturing sector. Factory management also favored the lower wages they could pay to women workers.

Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of a bench assembly production line than the oriental girl? (152)

In Mae Sot, there is no indication of any such targeted recruitment campaigns taking place, likely due to a lack of need—there is strong indication that well-established social networks provide for continual and consistent quantities of women factory workers. In addition, Ong’s Malaysian locale lacks the cross-border migration element so central to the situation in Mae Sot. With a combination of strong push factors convincing migrant women to come to Thailand, intensive recruitment efforts are not necessary to fill low-valued factory positions.

Absent active recruitment by factory management, the socialized shaping of a gendered labour force in Mae Sot has most likely proceeded more from the localized networks that send young women to the border for eventual incorporation into factory labour. Here Ong’s ethnography emerges less as situational counterpoint and more as a useful conceptual engagement with the status of gender within cultural discourse, and the logic of how that status is operationalized in a factory setting. For Ong, Taylorist models committed to a Marxian recognition, in factory labour, of a forced break between manual and intellectual labour admit of limited explanatory value, being too rigid in their basically structuralist reading of clear capital-labour opposition. On the contrary, Ong draws on the late Foucault to consider the ‘productive’ dimensions of power, arguing instead that factory-floor discipline relies on the production of a certain willing subjectivity on the part of workers—in Foucauldian terms, Ong asserts ‘the power effects of knowledge/power on individuals, their reconstitution, and self-management’ (142-143). More than a clean domination-subordination relationship, this labouring *self-discipline*, a circulated (non-institutional) power that becomes productively reanimated in the ‘felt experiences’ of young women workers, is the crucial source process of the gendered labour subject Ong encounters in her study. Moreover, as Ong states in her introductory chapter, this Foucauldian rethinking of discipline need not be gender-neutral:

Drawing on Foucault’s insights, I argue that in the labor process, young women are being reconstituted as instruments of labor and as new sexual personalities. Foucault has observed that the deployment of sexuality, as part of the expanding political technology of modern power, unavoidably induces self-management in

the subjected, who, in becoming a self-affirming subject, 'opens up the possibility of a substantial shift in tactics' (1980: 130). (8)

Capitalist discipline thus appropriates the subjectivity of labour—though not without, as she argues throughout, '*scattered, fragmentary acts of rebellion by subjugated peoples*'—in the production of '*biological objects, docile bodies, and sexualized subjects in transnational companies*' (143, 177-178).

The relevance of Ong's argument here is its indication of localized—and today we could also say 'biopolitical'—circulations of power as critical source processes for corporations' (as in her chapter title) 'manufacture of gender difference.' Ong's reading of capitalist discipline presages, indeed, later works on biopower and the biopolitical, among them Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000), which offers one of the clearest discussions of biopower:

Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, reinterpreting it, absorbing it, rearticulating it. Power can achieve an effective command over the entire life of the population only when it becomes an integral, vital function that every individual embraces and reactivates of his or her own accord. As Foucault says, 'Life has now become...an object of power.' The highest function of this power is to invest life through and through, and its primary task is to administer life. Biopower thus refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself. (23-24)

Hardt and Negri situate their definition of biopower within transformations in global capitalism that include, in their formulation (it is different than Ong's), a social transition from 'disciplinary societies' to 'societies of control'. Hardt and Negri's societies of control recall Ong's situations of capitalist discipline, insofar as both assert the centrality of circulated power as recomposed and assimilated in individualized labouring subjectivities. In addition, the representation of biopower as a formative (reactivating) structure of control suggests it could legitimately describe the productive forms of gendered power Ong recognizes in industrializing Malaysia. Though Ong would later disavow major pieces of Hardt and Negri's influential formulations (see for example Ong 2000, 2006, and 2007), these past intersections between their work point to an important reading of labour that foregrounds its resilient subjectivity in the face of domination.

Researchers and scholars have localized this discourse of the biopolitical in the Thai-Burma border area in recent years, often drawing on related notions of bare life, zones of exception, and the production of crisis—these subjects having acquired broad theoretical purchase through the 1990s and 2000s writings of Giorgio Agamben—to consider migration patterns (forced and not) and migrant labour in eastern Burma and the Mae Sot area (Kumar and Grundy-Warr 2004, Tangseefa 2006, Malseed 2008, Aung 2009, Arnold 2010, Voelkner 2010). This theoretical terrain is useful here to the extent that it underscores the role of sovereign (state) power in the management and discipline of mobile populations in the border area, which amounts to an analogous retelling of the way in which national and regional economic policies, particularly the targeted relocation of export industries to border areas, have generated hierarchical vulnerabilities in local labour structures. Connected to Ong's work on the subjectivity of labour as reconstituted within advancing industrial capital, especially as situated in the felt experiences of individual women factory workers, macrolevel narrations of national and regional political economy can lock into the microdynamics of localized power to chart a multiply scaled rendering of the vectors at work in the formation of industrial labour. Furthermore, following the early Ong through later elaborations of biopower and biopolitics, we can better pinpoint the question of gendered labour from a social standpoint, reading its composition in explicitly socialized forms. In particular, we can locate the role of cultural discourse in producing gendered notions of discipline that are then reinforced in factory labour structures, and actively reanimated by women workers themselves. This manufacture of gender within factory systems is irreducibly social, and yet situated within a wider political economy driven by large-scale capital transformations in recent decades.

Several discursive approaches are thus available for a socialized reading of how women have come to be so central to export-sector factory labour in the Mae Sot area. Migrant organizations and independent researchers assert the primacy of social networks as pull factors for drawing migrants from Burma to the border area, suggesting the evolution of a feedback mechanism whereby a strongly feminized class of workers reproduces itself over time. Once a large number of women work in certain sectors and in certain occupations, they continue to draw in more such women through localized circuits

of friends, family, and sometimes brokers and employment agencies. Meanwhile, scholars and researchers working on more conceptual levels suggest that within global capitalism writ large, the reproduction of labour as such now takes place not through outright relations of domination and subordination, but through circulating forms of power that appropriate workers' labouring subjectivity as a certain willingness on their behalf. Again, (self-making) workers reproduce themselves. This formative structure of control localizes productive discipline at bodily levels, thereby signifying socialized processes of objectification—and in some cases sexualization—that take on highly gendered valences in feminized factory labour forces. It is relatively clear, then, that social networks and gendered power operations have combined with rising investment to maintain the prominence of women in Mae Sot's export-oriented factory labour force. At the same time, it is possible to infer that the roots of that prominence likely owe to the period in the early 1990s when, with increasing FDI inflows and a change in cross-border migration from refugees to mixed migration, women first became central to light manufacturing in the area. Since then, the reproduction of feminized labour, continually drawn onwards by policymakers' persistent pursuit of export-led growth, has helped consolidate a labour structure that, as we have seen at some length, necessarily produced very gendered impacts amidst the recent financial crisis.

(4) Conclusion: Notes on Self-Protection as Resistance and New Solidarities

This recognition of the role of social conditions in reproducing the centrality of women in the Mae Sot-area export sector should not be mistaken for a retreat from a critical orientation towards the exploitative capitalist relations that have produced much impetus for that reproduction to continue amidst unequal power dynamics. Yet this critique, in which this paper seeks to participate as well, must always occur alongside some level of reference to the sustained critical actions—we can call them, following Ong (1987: 142), a kind of discourse-practice¹³—undertaken by migrant women themselves. Indeed, this analysis has sought to trace gendered labour structures, and thus

¹³ Ong (1987: 142) questions conventional separations of discourse and practice, instead drawing on a Foucauldian approach to consider them together, often referring to 'discourse/practice' as opposed to 'discourse' alone.

differential vulnerability in times of crisis, to their roots in multiply scaled social and economic change in Southeast Asia. In concluding, it turns in brief to the question of resistance among Mae Sot-area migrant women, the actions of whom disarticulate a popularly prevailing image of women factory workers as passive objects of large-scale systems of domination.

(4A) 18 December 2009

When thousands of women began a strike at the Top Form brassiere factory several kilometers outside Mae Sot on International Migrants Day 2009, they were aiming their criticism at a factory whose production chain is a veritable case study in contemporary trends in investment flows and labour supply. On the Top Form website, under a banner reading 'Finesse at our Fingertips,' a section entitled 'Our Manufacturing Facilities' describes the structure of the company's production process: in Hong Kong, the company's corporate headquarters; in China, factories in Shenzhen, Nanhai, and Jiangxi (58% of total output); in the Philippines, the company's first 'overseas' factory (now only 7% of total output); and in Thailand, factories in Ayuttaya and Mae Sot (35% of total output). All factories export to either US or European markets. With respect to the company's Thailand operations, the website reads,

We have a strong presence in Thailand with our factory in Ayuttaya having been established for over 18 years. In line with our corporate strategy of migrating production to lower cost regions, our latest addition in Thailand is our Maesot factory near Burma. Both factories in Thailand cater mainly for the USA market.
(Top Form 2010)

The company's movement of production bases clearly falls in line with common trends in capital flows, with a search for cheaper labour dictating the relocation of production-focused FDI. Meanwhile, the company's narration of these production trends occurs alongside a photography slideshow picturing women at work in the company's labour-intensive factories.

The strike at the Top Form factory did not occur in isolation. Another strike took place the same day in Ratchaburi, with further strikes by Burmese workers in Burma, Thailand, and Malaysia in early and mid-2010 (*NMG* 19/12/09; *The Irrawaddy* 8/1/10;

MMN 19/2/10; Altsean-Burma 2010; DVB 15/6/10; *Mizzima* 21/8/10). A September 2010 strike by Burmese workers in Khon Kaen, which lasted seven days and was largely successful, was said to suggest an ‘emboldened’ class of workers, stronger and more united than in the past (*IPS* 2010). Yet these outright moments of open unrest, while important as indicators of workers’ strength and coordination, take place amidst less visible everyday actions that in many ways constitute a broader challenge to capital-embedded forms of domination and subordination. These acts represent an ‘everyday politics’ (Kerkvliet 2002) of resistance whereby migrant workers protect against abuse and claim their rights. According to Kerkvliet, everyday politics comprises the *‘debates, conflicts, decisions, and cooperation among individuals, groups, and organizations regarding the control, allocation, and use of resources and the values and ideas underlying those activities’* which are *‘a part of daily life’* (11, cited in Hull 2008).

The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), a border-based research and documentation organization focusing on human rights issues in eastern Burma, has drawn on Kerkvliet’s work—which itself owes much to James Scott’s writings on ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (1985)—to consider how seemingly mundane acts by local villagers can be thought in terms of resistance. Examples they use include villagers preparing hidden sites to which they can flee in cases of attack; preparing stores of food in advance of likely displacement; coordinating with cross-border aid initiatives, like mobile health clinics; establishing schools and covert ‘jungle markets’ in areas to which people have fled; and developing warning systems to send information about troop movements and likelihood of displacement (Hull 2008: 6-7). KHRG refers to these acts as ‘village agency,’ and considers them forms of ‘self-protection’ (KHRG 2008, 2010).

Throughout its two decades working with and among migrant communities in the border area, MAP has recognized similar acts of disruption and non-compliance through which migrant workers alternately evade, contain, and confront—depending on the situation—threats to themselves and their communities. Sometimes these threats are of an open and obvious nature, such as employers withholding wages or police raiding a factory; and sometimes these threats arise from more oblique and impersonal circumstances, such as the global economic crisis or yearly seasonal production cycles. MAP considers migrants’ responses to these threats, not unlike the actions of rural

villagers in Karen State, to be practices of everyday resistance, and thus also forms and strategies of self-protection. MAP has witnessed migrants' use of many such strategies, a provisional sample of which includes the below information (Table 3).

Table 3: Migrant self-protection strategies by example response types

Response Type	Examples
Emergency Situations	- Drawing on community networks to identify hiding sites in local-area fields and forests to which migrants can flee in cases of crackdowns and factory raids - Leveraging contact with migrant rights organizations to ensure that hiding sites are equipped with basic supplies like food, water, medicine, and temporary shelter - Ensuring that networks of friends, family, and coworkers relay information quickly and efficiently about the onset of mass arrests and crackdown situations - Coordinating with local community members, including village heads in rural areas, to collect and act on information about impending police actions
Checkpoint Situations	- Limiting checkpoint threats by always carrying some money to pay as bribes, riding with someone who speaks some Thai language, learning (oneself) some targeted phrases in Thai, and carrying some form of ID, even if it is unofficial - Using informal networks to convey information about shifting checkpoint locations and the timing of checkpoints - Evading stable (consistent) checkpoints through the elaboration of alternative routes, and sharing those alternative routes through informal networks
Long-term Strategies	- Accessing migrant-focused healthcare initiatives like mobile medical teams and unofficial care providers, thereby countering the way formal medical systems sometimes exclude migrants who lack legal documentation - Setting up locally based migrant schools, unofficially and informally when necessary, to address barriers to accessing formal Thai schools - Limiting job insecurity in low seasons by working through community-based support systems—again, largely friends, family, and coworkers—to locate available daily work and ‘piece work’

	- Preparing for low seasons by saving money in advance, and drying food that can be preserved for long periods of time - Adjusting spending habits according to income fluctuation, thus adapting flexible economic behavior when necessary
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A key feature of these response strategies is the noticeable degree to which they do not make use of direct confrontation as a method of response to abuse. Rather, migrants' strategies engage varying levels of evasion and containment, combined with types of what could be called collaboration—for example, migrants engaging with police to negotiate fees for the release of migrants in detention. The lack of, and even disavowal of, confrontational forms of resistance recalls Ong's criticism of analytical frameworks that rely on clean relations of domination and subordination. Capitalist discipline, for her, practically precludes overt oppositional action on the part of workers, though less-direct acts of 'scattered, fragmented' resistance occupy a central place in her work. Further anthropological studies of resistance would continue to question binary readings of domination and resistance (see for example Ortner 1995, Mahmood 2005, and Ortner 2006), with Ortner (2006) suggesting that resistance as such is best considered a flexible project in agency rather than a monolithic negative orientation. Acts that are seemingly small-scale and indirect, not unlike many of the strategies engaged by migrants in Mae Sot, are also highly situated in social networks, such that they contain an implied claim to a community-level process of social change. The ethnicization of class difference in global capitalism, in this border area as elsewhere, means these projects are often localized within communities apart from dominant classes. Despite claims about new possibilities for a unified, latitudinal 'counter-Empire' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 205), it remains essential to locate projects of resistance in '*the actual, multiple, and segregated conditions of workers in the Empire's networks*' (Ong 2006: 123).

The idea of resistance as a kind of long-term claim to agency and power has great relevance in the Thai-Burma border area. James Scott's (2010) most recent work tends to this subject in some detail, emphasizing that, over time, the mobility of marginal communities in Southeast Asia has been central to their ability to survive hegemonic statemaking projects in lowland padi states. Mobility as resistance is also a major part of migrant agency in Mae Sot, where a certain search for 'spatial justice' (Soja 2010)

characterizes not only migrants' local responses to attempts at geographic control by the police and other actors (via circumventing checkpoints, for example), but also the larger-scale question of migration flows that amount to a mass performative critique vis-à-vis the persistent livelihood-threatening actions of the Burmese military regime. In this latter sense, out-migration from Burma constitutes a long-term project in resistance itself, followed by migrants' locally scaled acts of self-protection in the Mae Sot area—acts that, over time, accumulate to form a durable sense of community-level cohesion in and against the disciplinary effects of police actions and transnational capital flows. Such a resistance project necessarily affords few opportunities for out-and-out rebellion; reality requires greater nuance of approach. Strategies are not always straightforward. They manifest themselves not only on the level of transparent action, but also on the level of symbolism and discourse, cultural orientation, variously subversive 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin 2006 [1981])—including jokes, public postures and private acts, and certain types of social pretension (Myint 24/9/10)—and other effectively subterranean claims to malleable opposition and agency in the long view.

(4B) New Solidarities: Final Notes

MAP has recently opened a new project on identifying, supporting, and strengthening self-protection strategies in local migrant communities. Table 3 includes some provisional findings from this project, which is called the Community Protection Pilot Project (CP3). Early research activities have included some follow-up on the economic crisis research, particularly with respect to how women migrants responded to the impacts of the global downturn in their communities. What were the self-protection strategies they used in a time of crisis? While findings are limited thus far, and will only grow as the project continues, migrant women have already singled out a few responses as central to daily survival. These include:

1) *Preparing for low seasons within the downturn by saving money in advance.*

Low seasons are roughly November through March for factory workers and August through October for agricultural workers. This kind of financial preparation is a common self-protection strategy for migrant communities, and

yet became simultaneously more crucial and more difficult amidst the economic crisis. (Women's Exchange 21/8/10)¹⁴

2) *Adjusting spending habits to accommodate fluctuating wages.*

The degree to which migrants are able to be flexible with their daily expenditures is a key indicator of their ability to withstand, and actively respond to, income pressures that are largely beyond their control. Comments from migrant women suggest that common adjustments to spending habits include buying less meat and more vegetables, and making greater efforts to shop at markets that are known to offer lower prices, though they may be farther from migrants' homes (which raises the question of travel-related risks in relation to the downturn). As a self-protection strategy, this too is a response used not only within the crisis—but during the crisis migrants had to draw on it more often, and with greater urgency. (Women's Exchange 21/8/10)

3) *Drying foods in advance of low seasons within the downturn, and eating more preserved foods during such low seasons.*

A group of migrant women singled out dried shrimp as a commodity that becomes more crucial in times of hardship. By preparing more dried shrimp, and by changing eating habits to integrate more preserved foods, migrants can decrease daily expenditures and limit trips to markets. (Women's Exchange 21/8/10)

4) *Foraging for food in the forest in order to supplement shrinking diets.*

Several women described searching in the forest for edible vegetables like Morning Glory, as a means to counter decreasing ability to provide food for families. These women suggested this response is also common among migrant communities. (Women's Exchange 21/8/10)

5) *Drawing on local networks of friends, family, and coworkers to locate and secure work outside the factory when regular factory work is not available.*

A group of factory workers described the low-season search for jobs outside of factories, when demand drops off in major American and European markets for the largely cold-weather knitwear factories produce in the April-October high season. Oftentimes the worst month is December. One young factory worker gave an idea of the methods used by workers to find jobs at such times, such as reaching out to well-informed community members, collecting information with

¹⁴ Migrant women meet each month in 11 different locations along the Thai-Burma border to share experiences and learn from each other. This program is called Women's Exchange, and is facilitated by MAP Foundation.

family and friends, and frequenting certain locations where workers exchange job-related information (especially local teashops). (Labour Exchange 22/8/10)¹⁵

- 6) *Maximize relationships with locally based migrant rights organizations to provide relief to migrants in emergency situations.*

Migrant women have increased efforts to reach out to allies in community-based migrant groups, especially with respect to situations of mass arrests and police crackdowns. These periodic police actions, usually undertaken to arrest, detain, and deport undocumented migrant workers, did not cease during the economic downturn, but they strained community-based social safety nets more than they would have otherwise. Oftentimes crackdowns mean migrants flee from factory compounds to stay in fields and forested areas until widespread arrests desist. Migrants regularly contact migrant rights organizations in such situations, in which case migrants and community leaders coordinate with organizations to provide relief, often including food, water, basic medical supplies, and temporary shelter. (Community-based Organization [CBO] Network Meeting 15/9/10)¹⁶

The above responses do not come only from women factory workers—they also include comments from women agricultural workers, as well as comments from a meeting of factory workers that was majority male. Yet it is possible to infer from the 2009 research findings that the need to engage these responses, throughout local-area migrant communities, was likely concentrated among women factory workers, who were more likely to experience adverse impacts from the crisis than other workers in the area. In addition, it is important to note that these responses, understood as self-protection strategies, can be treated as acts by migrants and migrant communities to protect different types of security: their economic security (1, 2, and 5 above); their food security (3 and 4 above); and their personal and community security (6 above).¹⁷ Further, these responses to critical economic conditions underscore two key findings from the 2009 *Critical Times*

¹⁵ The Labour Exchange program is similar to the Women's Exchange program, involving monthly meetings of migrant workers where people share experiences and gain knowledge.

¹⁶ The CBO network meeting is a monthly meeting of migrant organizations and community leaders in the Mae Sot area. Like Labour Exchange and Women's Exchange, this network is also facilitated by MAP Foundation.

¹⁷ These security types are based on the human security framework developed by Dr. Mahbub ul Haq in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) 1994 *Human Development Report* (UNDP 1994). The CP3 project draws on this human security framework to assess threats to, and support responses by, migrant communities in the Mae Sot area.

research findings: first, that for the substantial migrant communities in the Mae Sot area, the economic crisis was experienced not as a wholly new and independent set of challenges and problems, but as a deepening articulation of pre-existing tensions and struggles in migrant communities; and second, that while local communities have moved to protect their own in these critical times, their social safety nets have been pushed to their limits (Aung and Aung 2009: 43). Here we might recall the claim by migrants from Burma that serves as this paper's epigraph: 'We, migrants from Burma, live in a perpetual state of crisis, and the global economic crisis is further adding to our difficult and sometimes desperate situation' (TDOO 2009).

The methods migrants have engaged to survive the economic crisis, which indeed have been deployed in desperation at times, should surely not be over-romanticized, or treated with undue optimism (Pearson and Sweetman 2010: 166). Yet one proverbial lesson learned has to be that, especially in situations where the size and scope of a problem exceeds the capacity of non-governmental and humanitarian actors to fully address it, vulnerable communities will always already be taking their protection into their own hands. At least in the Thai-Burma border area, this lesson is not entirely new. Some independent actors in eastern Burma, for several years now, have oriented programs and practices around a commitment to the fact that local communities are always first responders in moments of need, such that the work of external actors must link up with local people's existing self-protection strategies—at the very least not undermining those strategies, and at best strengthening those strategies (KHRG 2008, 2010). In the Mae Sot area as well, it is clear that during the economic crisis, primary protective activities within communities have not been the actions of external actors; they have been the subject and prerogative of local communities themselves, often involving the elaboration and utilization of highly situated informal social networks. Still, while recognizing and acknowledging the primacy of this level of response, external actors can seek to identify these primary self-protection strategies, and then move towards supporting and strengthening them through new or existing programs.

In this shift towards the local within approaches to protection and resistance in migrant worker communities, a shift that will likely continue to emerge with more clarity in coming years, some optimism may yet be due. For in this local turn lies, indeed,

opportunities for new solidarities, or at the very least, solidarities that have been explored only incompletely in the past. The severe adverse impacts of the global downturn have revealed, and very much in stark detail, the strained methods engaged by migrant communities to provide for their own security when their communities are endangered. The exposure of these strategies lends them a kind of clarity that then marks them as opportunities for vertical and horizontal alliances: for example, between migrant communities who face similar challenges and respond to them differently, and thus have something to gain from exchange and collaboration (horizontally); and between locally based community protection actors who are primary protective agents, and external allies in NGOs and community-based organizations, who in reorienting programs and projects to strengthen existing community self-protection strategies can bolster those strategies (vertically). The emergence of protection practices as nodes of interaction—and practices, at that, that also constitute broad forms of resistance within a generalized movement of agency—suggests that, in however ironic a set of maneuvers, the profound negativity of the economic downturn has uncovered new space, and thus new interfaces, for the pursuit of labour solidarity within global capitalism. At the same time, the fact that such a model of solidarity begins with an a priori recognition of local resistance methods means that such a model also sets as its first task the localization of its procedure, the embedding of its own rules and methods within, once again, the ‘*actual, multiple, and segregated conditions of workers in Empire’s networks*’ (Ong 2006: 123).

Meanwhile, as labour solidarities on Thailand’s border periphery grasp at even the least sanguine opportunities for multileveled mobilization, neoliberal logic continues to govern Thai policymakers’ differential integrations of segmented communities into the national polity writ large. The latitudes of capital mobility are not, as yet, matched by the capacity of marginalized people to produce counterflows of labour, such that the pursuit of ‘economic borderlessness’ continues to generate, in Thailand as elsewhere, ‘multiple political spaces and techniques for differentiated governing within the national terrain’ (Ong 2006: 77). For example, while national workers have received benefits and protections amidst the economic crisis, migrant workers have been formally excluded from state-level impact-mitigation measures—fragmentations in citizenship and population are part of governmentality within neoliberal milieus. However, even while

capitalist discipline forecloses on clear oppositional binaries in relations of domination and subordination, and thus redirects resistance projects towards a view to the long term, it also continues to produce ironic investments in the subjectivity of labour, deploying productive (rather than simply repressive) forms of power amidst newly self-managing working classes. This residue of subjectivity in labour, while very much appropriated by global capital as yet another tool of biopolitical discipline, must also be a condition of possibility for durable projects of resistance and agency, and a sign of capitalism's non-totalizing relation to labour—perhaps migrant labour in particular, the mobility of which offers an indication of resistance in itself.

Time will tell if the 'emboldened' actions of Burmese migrant workers, prevalent in the strikes of late 2009 and throughout 2010, will emerge as critical indicators of a new consciousness towards outright worker protest. More likely, overt strikes and shows of transparent opposition will remain heightened articulations of resistance projects whose proper home is beneath the surface of things—in small-scale expressions of agency that, in the frame of the relative *longue durée*, may safeguard communities more effectively than open resistance, and create opportunities for solidarities that did not exist before. In this process, gendered readings of the recent economic and financial crises will retain their relevance, not only in and of themselves as indicators of women's struggles in times of crisis, but also as signals of how, moving forward, the persistent centrality of women to the border-area labour force implies their equal centrality to discourse-practices of resistance and self-protection. In the case of export-led growth strategies producing gendered vulnerabilities in factory labour hierarchies, those strategies can be said to generate gender difference, as we have seen, alongside more socialized processes. The resulting exposure of women factory workers to shocks in global capitalism means these women become foregrounded as leading subjects of subterranean counter-trends in organizing and solidarity, in actions that signify '*a refusal and a search for liberation*' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 212). For the feminized subject of Southeast Asian labour migration, the search for liberation may lead through the actions of women migrants in the border area, central as they are and must remain as actors in a first generation of industrial labour.

Appendix A: Abbreviations

ACMECS	Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy
ADB	Asian Development Bank
BOI	Board of Investment
CBO	community-based organization
CP3	Community Protection Pilot Project
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
EC	Economic Corridor
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
EOI	export-oriented industrialization
FDI	foreign direct investment
FGD	focus group discussion
GDP	gross domestic product
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
ID	identification
IDI	in-depth interview
IDP	internally displaced person
IFI	international financial institution
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPS	Inter-Press Service
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISI	import substitution industrialization
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
MAP	MAP Foundation for the Health and Knowledge of Ethnic Labour
MMN	Mekong Migration Network
NESDB	National Economic and Social Development Board
NGO	non-governmental organization
NMG	Network Media Group
SAP	structural adjustment program

SBEZ	Special Border Economic Zone
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SME	small- and medium-sized enterprise
TDOO	Two Destinations, One Origin
THB	Thai baht
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN-INSTRAW	United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States dollars
WIDE	Women in Development Europe
WTO	World Trade Organization

Appendix B: Figures

Figure 1: ADB Economic Corridors (ECs) in the GMS



Source: MMN (2008: 25).

Figure 2: Changes in Relative Poverty in the GMS, 1992-2004

GMS Country	Poverty Incidence* (%)		Gini Coefficient**	
	1992	2004	1992	2004
CAMBODIA	39	36	0.37	0.45
PRC	23.8	7.9	0.31	0.35
LAOPDR	43	32.7	0.29	0.37
MYANMAR	N/A	22.9	N/A	N/A
THAILAND	23.2	9.8	0.54	0.5
VIET NAM	58.1	28.9	0.18	0.2

* Based on National Poverty Line

** Measures Degree to Which an Economy's Income Distribution Diverges from Perfect Equal Distribution

Source: MMN (2008: 33).

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