

Forgotten Workforce

Experiences of women migrants from Burma in Ruili, China

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On January 7 1995, a group of young female students left Burma for the Thai-Burma border after the military's brutal crack-down on the popular uprising formed the Burmese Women's Union (BWU) to work for the rights of women, to increase women's participation in the Burmese political arena with special focus on women to become decision makers.

We are an independent association aiming to unite and empower the women of Burma, both along the Thailand, India and China borders and internationally. Membership with BWU is open to all women of Burma regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, marital status, sexual preference, or livelihood. Part of our mission is to respond to the social welfare needs of its members and provide short and long-term educational and vocational training programs for women. We send our representatives to regional and international forums and conferences to highlight the situation of women in Burma as well as to gain international advocacy skills and establish a network of international and regional women's organizations. BWU is one of the founders of Women's League of Burma (WLB).

Aims and Objectives

- To promote the role of women in Burma
- To efficiently increase the contribution of women in the struggle for democracy, human rights and establishment of a genuine democratic federal union
- To advocate for the acceptance and exercise of women's rights in Burmese society according to standards recognized internationally
- To use women's capacity to establish stable peace and long term development in future society in Burma

Mission

BWU exists to promote the role of women in Burma and to efficiently increase women's contributions to the political and social leadership functions in the struggle for democracy and human rights and the establishment of a genuine democratic federal union.

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Executive Summary

Burma's continuing political repression and economic deterioration, coupled with China's rapid growth, have caused a new phenomenon over the past few years: large-scale northward migration from Burma to China.

The Yunnanese border town of Ruili (called Shweli in Burmese) has seen an estimated tenfold increase in the number of migrants from Burma since 2006, with numbers now exceeding 100,000. Formerly mainly employed in the jade, transport and sex industries, migrants are now working in a range of sectors, including domestic work, restaurants and hotels, sales, construction and manufacturing industries.

Migrants are arriving from all parts of central and eastern Burma, particularly from the central dry zone, where continuing drought has deprived farmers of their traditional livelihoods. In Sagaing and Magwe, whole villages are draining of young people coming to find work in China.

A large proportion of the migrants are women. During 2010 the Burmese Women's Union (BWU) conducted in-depth interviews with 32 of these women from various work sectors. Most were from Burma's central divisions. About half were high school graduates, and some had even graduated from university, but none had been able to find jobs inside Burma.

The migrant women interviewed by BWU in Ruili revealed persistent patterns of work exploitation, occupational health and safety hazards and mistreatment by employers throughout different work sectors.

A particularly dangerous kind of work being carried out by migrant women in Ruili is processing of petrified wood, imported from Mandalay Division and sold as highly valued home ornaments throughout China. In hundreds of small workshops, women are paid a pittance to sit for long hours sanding and polishing wood, using hazardous electric equipment and chemical solvents, without protective clothing or health insurance.

On top of general exploitative work conditions, women also face gender discrimination, receiving lower pay than men in most sectors, no maternity leave and benefits, and suffering sexual harassment from employers.

Health and safety risks are particularly high for the several hundred Burmese women working in the sex industry in Ruili and Jiegao, who are often forced to have unprotected sex, and face violence from clients, especially those who are drug users. There are no existing mechanisms for foreign migrant workers to seek redress for cases of exploitation and infringement of their rights. They are also forbidden from organising any workers' committees or unions. This has occasionally caused workers' pent-up resentment to erupt into violence against employers.

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There are no signs that the migration from Burma will ease in the foreseeable future. Burma's November 2010 elections were neither free nor fair, and power remains constitutionally firmly in the hands of the military, which continues to receive the lion's share of the national budget, while health and education needs remain critically underfunded. During 2011 the Burma Army has launched fierce new offensives against ethnic resistance groups seeking to protect their communities and environment from damaging resource exploitation.

The military mismanagement at the root of Burma's economic woes thus looks set to continue, together with the outflow of migration to neighbouring countries, including China. Mechanisms to protect the rights of foreign migrant workers and prevent further injustices, particularly against women in China are thus urgently needed.

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Introduction

This report follows on from our earlier reports *Cycle of Suffering* (2000) and *Between Two Hells* (2007), which highlighted the main push factors driving the migration of women and girls from Burma, and exposed the situation they faced as migrant workers in Thailand, India and China.

Since we published these reports, the situation inside Burma has continued to deteriorate, causing the numbers of migration to increase, including to China. Yet little attention has been paid to the growing northward trend of migration from Burma, and few studies have been carried out about the conditions of migrant workers from Burma in China.

As a booming trade gateway, Ruili has become a primary destination for migrants seeking work in China. As numbers of migrants have spiralled, so too have cases of exploitation and other problems, and increasing numbers of women have been turning to us, BWU, for assistance. We realised that it was important that the changing situation of these migrant workers was documented, the limitations of current policies assessed, and recommendations developed for improved policies that could ensure protection of their basic rights.

BWU China border programme

For over ten years BWU has been running programmes for migrant women on the China-Burma border, around Ruili, Jiegao and Laiza. These have included an informal
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library service carrying Burmese language books, novels, and magazines, providing a means for migrant women to improve their literacy skills and gain knowledge. In addition, we hold regular workshops, discussions and trainings on issues such as migrant rights, gender equality, domestic violence and sexual harassment, and reproductive, sexual and general health.

We have also set up an HIV/AIDS education programme, targeting migrant women sex workers from Burma. Our members assist these women by providing condoms, vitamins, interpretation, nutritional foods to those who are ill, transportation service, organizing and facilitating workshops on women's health including personal hygiene, HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). Retreats have been arranged for women to build trust and understanding of each other. Clinic visits, and other emergency assistance have also been provided under the program.

Methodology

The research for this report was predominantly undertaken between April and November 2010 through in-depth interviews with migrant women from Burma currently living in Ruili and Jiegao on the China-Burma border.

A total of 32 migrant women were interviewed about their lives and difficulties in Burma, their living and working conditions in Ruili or Jiegao, and their hopes for their futures. These women spanned a wide range of ethnicities, age groups, places of origin in Burma, and types of employment in China.

In addition, we have drawn on a previous and unpublished study conducted by BWU 8 • Forgotten Workforce

focussing on HIV and AIDS amongst migrants from Burma, including a further 16 cases of sex workers and masseuses documented by our local programme staff in Ruili during the period of October to December 2007. We have also incorporated anecdotal evidence and reports of the general observations of our Ruili staff, based on their day to day work with migrant women on the border.

Finally, we held meetings with other women's organisations from Burma operating on the China-Burma border, a social worker who has worked with various groups assisting sex workers over the last 10 years, and two male migrants and long-time residents of the border region. These meetings helped corroborate the stories of interviewees and give a rounded perspective of the migrant living and working conditions on the China-Burma border.

It should be noted that some of the women interviewed in this research have been engaged with BWU for some time, and have possibly reflected a greater awareness and understanding of their rights and the political situation of Burma. We acknowledge the limitations of this sample pool. Others, however, had had little or no contact with BWU prior to being interviewed.

All names of interviewees have been changed or initials used to protect their identities. In some cases, the names of hometowns have been omitted to protect interviewees and their families inside Burma.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis methods have been employed in this study.

We wish to thank Haley Welgus for her help in compiling the report, and Jackie Pollock for her editing help. Thank you also to BRC for supporting the production of the report.

Important notes

This report focuses on the border city of Ruili, China. When direct quotes of interviewees have been used, however, the Burmese name 'Shweli' is often used to refer to Ruili. This has not been changed in order to maintain the integrity and exact wording of interviewees, however it should be noted that 'Ruili' and 'Shweli' indeed refer to the same place.

All costs and income have been recorded in the currency indicated by the source and converted into United States Dollars (USD) throughout this report. The official exchange rate of the Myanmar Kyat (MMK) is approximately 6.51 to USD 1, however the unofficial rate differs dramatically from this, and is far more indicative of the actual value of the Kyat. As such, all conversions from the Kyat have been made using the unofficial figure in 2010 of MMK 1050 to USD 1.

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Background

Burma-China relations: increased trade and investment, unequal growth

Warming bilateral relations

Prior to the late 1980s, Burma and China did not enjoy close political or economic relations. There was little official cross-border trade, as the areas of Burma bordering China were largely under the control of resistance movements, including the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which was directly supported by the Chinese government. Burma's military regime had also adhered to isolationist closed-door policies since its takeover of power in 1962.

This all changed in 1988, when nationwide uprisings took place in Burma against the junta's political repression and economic mismanagement (which had bankrupted the formerly prosperous country and caused it to sink to 'Least Developed Nation' status). The junta violently crushed the uprisings, and sought to address the economic crisis by opening its doors to foreign trade and investment. The rapid influx of foreign capital, particularly from neighbouring countries eager to purchase Burma's natural resources, enabled it to expand its military and scale up attacks on resistance movements, including the CPB. Already in financial difficulty since China had cut off support in 1985, the CPB collapsed in 1989, splitting into various factions, which soon signed ceasefire agreements with the regime. This cessation of fighting along Burma's north-eastern borders heralded a new era of trade relations with China.

Over the past two decades, Burma and China have become close political allies, with frequent high-level visits between the two countries. China has repeatedly vetoed draft UN resolutions against Burma's military leaders.

Increased investment and trade

China is currently Burma's largest foreign investor¹, primarily in large-scale development projects. Chinese companies are currently building or planning over 25 large hydropower dams on Burma's major rivers and their tributaries, mainly for export of electricity to neighbouring countries. In 2010, China started construction of transnational pipelines to transport gas from fields off Burma's coast, as well as oil shipped from the Middle East, across Burma to Yunnan Province.

China is also one of Burma's largest trading partners. Bilateral trade between China and Burma totalled 4.444 billion USD in 2010², with China mainly exporting manufactured commodities to Burma and importing raw materials, such as timber, gems, minerals and agricultural products.

¹ The China Post article: China tops Thailand as Myanmar's biggest foreign investor in '10: report, February 23, 2011

² Xinhua article: Entrepreneurs of Chinese province, Myanmar hold business meeting in Yangon, March 14, 2011

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Trade figures do not include military equipment purchased by Burma's military leaders from China. In June 2010, it was reported that Burma had bought 50 K-8 jet trainer aircraft from China.³

Burma's development lags behind China

Despite the huge increase in Chinese investment and trade over the past twenty years, this has failed to materialize into meaningful economic development for Burma's people. China's growth rates have soared ahead of Burma's in recent years.⁴

Per capita GDP is over five times higher in China (4,520 US\$ a year) than Burma (582 US\$ a year)⁵. China's social development indicators also rank much higher than Burma's. The chart below shows comparative estimated maternal mortality rates in the two countries.^{6,7,8}

China Burma Eastern Burma

Maternal mortality ratio

(deaths per 100,000 live births)

386 2407 7218

Analysts have consistently attributed Burma's low development indicators to the junta's 'mismanagement of the economy' and the fact that its 'priorities lie with strengthening its military ability.'⁹ Burma has been spending a disproportionate share of its national budget on defence and less than 1% of its GDP on health and education education combined¹⁰. The quality of the health and education services in Burma has thus plummeted, while costs have spiralled. The new large infrastructure projects such as dams will mainly produce electricity for export, despite the fact that only about 20% of Burma's population currently has access to electricity¹¹.

³ Irrawaddy article, Burma buys 50 fighter jets from China, June 15, 2010

⁴ http://www.indexmundi.com/china/gdp_real-grwoth.html; http://www.indexmundi.com/burma/gdp_real-grwoth.html;

⁵ International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database-October 2010

⁶ Trends in Maternal Mortality:1990 to 2008. WHO 2010. Ratio for 2008

⁷ Trends in Maternal Mortality:1990 to 2008. WHO 2010. Ratio for 2008

⁸ Burma Medical Association et al, Diagnosis Critical: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma, October 2010

⁹ Myanmar country report, Economist Intelligence Unit, January 2010

¹⁰ UNDP International Human Development Indicators, <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MMR.html>

¹¹ Burma Rivers Network, statement on International Day of Rivers, March 14, 2011

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Ruili: an expanding border metropolis

The majority of China's trade with Burma passes through the border crossing of Jiegao-Muse, close to the town of Ruili in Yunnan.

As its importance as a border trade centre has grown, Ruili has rapidly expanded from a small border town to a bustling urban sprawl. Its official population is now estimated to be around 140,000¹² and growing, with Chinese moving from other parts of the country to take advantage of the trade and investment opportunities. With ongoing construction of sales complexes and housing estates, the urban district now stretches as far as the Shweli River, adjoining the satellite border town of Jiegao.

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Jiegao, formerly a small village on the eastern bank of the Shweli river, surrounded on three sides by Burma, has been developed into a modern urban complex, with new shophouses, trade offices, warehouses, restaurants, massage parlours, karaoke bars and hotels occupying nearly every inch of its 2.4 square kilometer area. It was designated a “Special Export Processing Zone” in 2000, where goods are sold dutyfree. Trucks from Burma drive into Jiegao and unload, transferring goods to Chinese trucks for transport further into China.

Ruili has built its name as a centre of the jade trade, and even today, tourism promotion websites advertise it as “The Oriental Jewelry City,” with 4,000 jewelry processors and dealers¹³. However, other raw products from Burma are also processed in numerous workshops and factories around the town, including wood, petrified wood and sandstone. These all employ laborers from Burma, who work for lower wages than the Chinese. As Ruili’s reputation as a site for cheap labour has spread, investors have started to set up other small factories producing manufactured goods, where

12 www.tourlijiang.com

13 www.yunnanadventure.com

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they employ cheap Burmese labour. Such factories produce goods such as sweets, dolls, make-up containers and sanitary napkins, which are sold in other parts of China.

The expansion of employment opportunities, also in the growing number of construction projects, in and around Ruili has been a key pull factor for migrants from Burma.

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Research Findings:

Increased migration to Ruili

Five years ago, the number of Burmese migrants in Ruili and Jiegao was estimated by BWU local members to be under 10,000. Now they estimate this number to be over 100,000 and growing. At only one of five police stations in the Ruili-Jiegao area where migrants register for “stay permits,” (see Documentation section on page. 37) over 11,000 migrants had registered during the first half of 2011 alone. This does not include the large proportion of unregistered migrants.

The story we heard time and again from interviewees was that the influx of migrants from Burma to the China border in recent years has been significant and shows no signs of slowing:

“It has just been in the last three or so years (and especially after Cyclone Nargis) that large amounts of migrant workers from Burma have been arriving in Ruili and Jiegao. They are coming from all over Burma. Still many jade traders, but also now petrified wood polishing, furniture production, construction work (...) I’ve never seen so many Burmese workers here before. They are all ages – from about 15-16 up to about 40.” Burmese male migrant, long-time Jiegao resident

“Because of the economic crisis in Burma, whenever I go back inside Burma and look for my friends, they are not there anymore. They have all left for different countries to find jobs. Not many young people stay in Mogoke, only the elderly people stay. Most of the young people have

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already left for abroad to find a better job. (...) When I first arrived in China, I didn't see so many Burmese people, didn't often hear people speaking Burmese. But now today, you can hear many people speaking Burmese in the streets, and there are so many Burmese shops and restaurants." Interview 18, migrated to Ruili in 2006

Push factors:

In our 2007 report *Caught Between Two Hells*, we had summarized three main reasons why migrant women left their homes in Burma: extreme poverty, lack of a future inside Burma under the military regime, and familial obligation – i.e. the gendered expectation for daughters, rather than sons, to provide for their parents and siblings. Our research in Ruili confirmed the same trends, but identified some specific recent factors which have been fuelling the need to migrate.

Growing drought crisis in Burma's 'dry zone'

Interviews indicated that a large proportion of the migrants coming to Ruili were from the central areas of Burma, namely Magwe, Sagaing and Mandalay Divisions. Out of our 32 main respondents, about two-thirds were from these areas in the so-called 'dry' zone in the middle of Burma, which in recent years has faced increasing drought, and where agricultural livelihoods have suffered accordingly.

As a male Burmese migrant worker running a petrified wood polishing business in Ruili explained:

'There are lots of people from Mandalay and Sagaing doing the petrified wood work, as it is so dry in their home area they can't do agriculture.'

Several interviewees described how worsening drought had affected their living as farmers.

'I used to work on other people's farms, getting 1,000 kyat a day. But last year there was very little rain, and the crops, like pulses and cotton, didn't grow well, so there was not much work. I used to sell betel nut, but was hardly able to survive. So I decided to come to China to work and earn money. I arrived here (in Ruili) only a week ago (in April 2010).'

Interview 17, sex worker from Sagaing

'Before, my family planted vegetables and did farming, but later because of the weather, we didn't have good produce any more and it affected our family's living standard.' Interview 25, domestic worker from Sagaing

Another woman from Sagaing described how fifteen other people from her village were now working in Ruili, and that she knew of 200 people from a single village in Bauk township, Magwe Division, who had come to work as petrified wood polishers.

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Falling prices of agricultural goods

Some migrants from farming communities in Shan State were facing problems of falling crop prices. In particular, the price of tea, formerly a high-earning crop, was mentioned as having dropped significantly in recent years.

A Palaung migrant woman from Namsan in northern Shan State, where military authorities profiting from the tea trade have ordered farmers to sell their tea at low prices to traders, explained¹⁴:

"In Burma, our family had tea crops, but the price of tea-leaves is dropping

and we didn't even earn enough money to support our family, let alone children's schooling. So that's why I decided to come to China (in February 2010) and now I'm working as a construction worker." Interview

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Few job opportunities and low wages

While some of the migrants from rural areas had sought first to find work in urban areas or in mining sites, there was either no work available or the work was too lowpaid to enable them to save up any income.

"I didn't intend to come to China...my aunty and brothers and sisters, they said if you want to work, you can go to work in Mandalay. So I went to Mandalay first, but there were no jobs because they only want to hire you if you have finished grade 10 or have a university certificate."

Interview 23, 20-year-old woman from Irrawaddy Division

One young Palaung woman from northern Shan State moved to Mandalay to try and find a job, but was only able to earn 5,000 kyat (US\$5) a month working in a tea-shop. She stayed there only one month before deciding to move to China.

Another Palaung woman tried to find work first in the Mong Hsu gem mining area of northern Shan State, but could only find work as a cook, earning 15,000 kyat (US\$15) a month, and soon moved to Ruili.

Even university-educated women were unable to find well-paying jobs. A woman who had studied Philosophy at Taunggyi University found work as a manager of a cigarette company in Lashio, but earned only 60,000 kyat (US\$60) a month. Realising she could earn much more in China, she left the job after only nine months to travel to Ruili.

14 <http://www.palaungland.org/2011/06/06/the-collapse-of-tea-market-plunges-tea-farmersinto-crisis/>

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Cyclone Nargis and political instability

Two respondents said they had migrated to China as a direct result of Cyclone Nargis, which had struck Burma in May 2008, causing widespread destruction and loss of life.

One 24-year old woman from Rangoon, now working as a sex worker, had formerly worked in a garment factory in Hlaing Thaya industrial zone (earning a mere 30,000 kyat -US\$30 - a month), when the cyclone struck.

"A big tree destroyed our house completely, and most of the contents of our house were washed away, including my ID card. The factory where I worked also closed down for a few months after the storm because it was damaged, so I decided to travel to China to get work to help my family." Interview 16

Another woman was from the coastal region in Irrawaddy Division:

"(I wanted to leave) Because of the instability of Burma's politics, and also the area where I live is near the ocean and Nargis hit our place, so I just wanted to move my parents to a place not near the ocean." Interview

5, 20 years old

The factor of political instability, particularly related to the military crackdown on the widespread demonstrations in Burma in September 2007 (led by monks, and therefore

termed the “Saffron Revolution”), was also highlighted by a migrant woman from Sagaing, working as a shop assistant.

“When I first came to China, I didn’t really see so many Burmese migrant workers here, but after the Saffron Revolution, there are a lot and the numbers are increasing.” Interview 25

Most of our interviewees were not from active conflict areas in Burma. However, a 21-year-old Palaung woman originally from Namsan in northern Shan State was working in a casino in Laogai, in the Kokang area of northern Shan State, when the regime attacked the Kokang ceasefire army in August 2009, seizing the territory and driving over 37,000 refugees into China. Our interviewee fled in advance of the fighting, and returned to her home village for only one month, before deciding to go and work in China.

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Drug use and alcoholism

While economic necessity was the main cause of migration, for several women, drug use and alcoholism of their immediate family members, including husbands, fathers or stepfathers, were compounding factors which made them decide to leave home.

One 32-year-old Palaung woman, now working on a construction site, described how her husband’s addiction to opium and heroin had made her life unbearable:

“My husband is a drug addict. I don’t like him using drugs but I couldn’t stop him anymore, so finally I decided to leave and come to China. I don’t really want to go back to him. If I go back inside Burma, I will go and stay with my mother, not with him.

[We have been married for] over 6 years. After one year of marriage he started using drugs. He had so many friends using drugs, so later he also started using. I have faced so many difficulties, especially because he was using drugs, and I had to take care of the children. Finally, I had no more patience for him and I decided to leave.

Even before he started using drugs, the tealeaf plantation wasn’t going well, but since he started using, [the family’s economic situation] has got worse.

Sometimes he would verbally abuse me because I’d tell him not to take drugs or do bad things. In those kinds of situations he would verbally abuse me. I always explained to him, “Look at our children”. I really wanted my children to grow up like other families’ children, to be able to go to school, to eat proper food, to dress properly. But if people are using drugs, like my husband, they can’t support their families. They can’t afford to send their children to school.” Interview 31

The Palaung Women’s Organisation has conducted research exposing how opium cultivation is increasing in areas of northern Shan State under the direct control of the Burmese military regime and its proxy militia, who are profiting directly from the drug trade.¹⁵

15 Palaung Women’s Organisation: Poisoned Hills, January 2010

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Pull factors: higher wages, proximity and contacts

The overwhelming factor attracting migrants to China is their hope to earn and save more money than in Burma.

Beyond that, proximity to China is a primary factor influencing women from northern Shan State to seek work there:

“I thought I’d come to China because it was the closest country for me to travel to and I didn’t even have enough money for the transportation costs.” Interview 3, from Mogoke

Not surprisingly, given the increasing migration to China, many of the migrants already had relatives, friends or people from the same village working in China, who served as contacts to help them find work there.

Forced Marriage

Although our research was not focused on trafficking, one of the women we interviewed had been forcibly sold as a bride. The woman, originally from Sagaing, had travelled to Mandalay in search of work when she was 17 years old and was tricked into going to Ruili, where she was sold as a bride to a Chinese man from a village about a day’s travel from Beijing. (see story opposite)

In her Chinese husband’s village alone, there were eight other women from Burma who had married Chinese men, some who had been forced/coerced/deceived to come, some who were being abused in the marriage situation and some who came voluntarily and some who were reasonably content with their situation. This highlights a growing trend of Chinese men seeking brides from Burma and in some cases using coercion to bring the woman to China and also sometimes abusing the women after the marriage.

The horror and trauma of the experience are evident from her account. After she had escaped from her husband, she continued to live and work in Ruili, where she later remarried a Burmese man.

All of our other interviewees had travelled safely to Ruili, mostly with friends or relatives. A 21-year-old woman from Magwe, currently working as a domestic worker, had travelled to the Chinese border alone, but relied on her wits to avoid being trafficked. When offered work, she had openly challenged the broker for proof that she was not a trafficker.

“I came to China when I was 18. I came alone. I wanted to try and earn some more money (to send my six younger brothers and sisters to school), even though people had warned me about being trafficked on the China border.

“I started off working at Muse (on the Burmese side of the border) as a domestic help. Then I moved to Shweli. I had met a woman in the market in Muse, who offered me work. I asked her straight out if she was a trafficker, and then she gave me a telephone number to ring and check who she was.” Interview 5

A forced bride tells her story

My family is really poor, that’s why I didn’t want to stay at home, so I decided to go to Mandalay to find a job. When I arrived in Mandalay though, I found that jobs there didn’t really give me enough income. So

I decided to come back home, but then I met a mother and daughter, two ladies from Lashio, and they asked me whether I wanted a job or not. I said, "Yes, I want a job". They said, "If you want a job, you can follow us to our place", so I decided to follow the two ladies and then when I arrived at their home I had to sleep there for one night. I met one girl there who had arrived two days earlier, her name was Ma Khaing. She said that she had had the same experience and that she came here to get a job too. When I arrived they gave me food and a place to sleep. Ma Khaing and I didn't realize that they were going to sell the two of us to Chinese men.

The next morning they brought us to the China border, Shweli. At that time, I had no idea about brides being sold to Chinese men, I had never heard about it. I was only about 17 years old. When we arrived in Ruili, different Chinese men came to the house to choose the girl they wanted, then brought her to their place. That's when we realized that this lady was selling us to Chinese men, so my friend and I went to talk to the lady and told her we wanted to go back home. The lady said, "We paid a lot for your food and transportation, so if you want to go back, you have to pay all the money back to us". At that time, we didn't even have 1 kyat in our hands, and we'd never even seen Chinese currency, so

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we had no idea and no money at all. And then me and my friend, Ma Khaing, discussed that we could not do anything, even though we wanted to go back and our parents didn't know we were there, we couldn't do anything, so we would have to follow them.

The next day a Chinese man came and got me. I didn't like him, but I had to be his wife. On the way back to my husband's place, I was only thinking about how to escape from him. When I was on the train I was thinking about finding a way to escape from him, but finally I thought, I don't know anything here, I don't know anybody. I was also scared that people would beat me and attack me. So in the end I had to follow him, and I arrived at his place. I had to live with him for 8 years.

[...]

When I first arrived, I didn't understand Chinese at all, so whatever they said, when they blamed me and shouted at me, I had to just stay quiet. I cried every day. They were even verbally very rude about my parents. Not only my husband, but his sisters too. It was really painful for me, because I wanted to say something back to them but I could not speak Chinese. By the time I could speak Chinese, when the family said something rude to me about my parents, I complained to them and spoke back to them, then my husband would beat me for saying that to them. He beat me and strangled me twice with his hands. Whenever he beat me and strangled me, I tried to do something back to him. He got angry at me, but I told him, "You bought me and I had to marry you. I never loved you. If I had been able to choose for myself, I would have chosen a lot better than you. Because you bought me, I have no choice

and I had to marry you". Whenever we had a fight, our neighbours came and told him that he should not beat me or violate me because I was away from my parents and I had nowhere to go and no one to rely on. The first night (I spent with him), I was menstruating at the time so I didn't want to have sex with him, but I couldn't speak Chinese so I didn't know how to tell him. But he is a man and he wanted sex with me. I had no choice, I had to sleep with him. I was a virgin.

At that time in November it was pretty cold but he wouldn't allow me to wear a shirt or socks in bed. He really wanted me to take off all my clothes. I am a Burmese girl and in our culture this is not appropriate and I felt really shy to take off all my clothes. I told him, "I cannot do that, I will sleep with my clothes on." Finally he let me sleep with my clothes on.

Before I had my kid, I was forced to sleep with him and at that time I followed his desire. But when I had my daughter I didn't want to sleep with him anymore. At night when he really wanted to have sex and came

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close to me, I told him, "If you want to have sex with me, you have to pay me 100 yuan". And then he said, "Instead of giving you 100 yuan, I will go to the brothel and then I only have to pay 20 yuan to have sex with a woman". I told him, "If you want, you can go to the brothel, so don't come close to me!"

[...]

During that time (that we were married), I was always thinking in my mind of ways to escape. When I found out that I was pregnant, I didn't want the baby because this marriage wasn't recognized by my parents, they didn't even know that I got married, but I had no choice and I had a baby. When I asked my husband, "I want to go home", he told me that I could once my baby is grown up. I said, "When my baby is grown up, I will go home". He said to wait until the kid goes to school.

In my married life I suffered a lot. [...] Throughout the years I tried to be very nice, I pretended to be very nice to him. My goal was to one day ask him very nicely and return to my family. When my daughter was 7 years old, I asked my husband if I could go visit my family, and I left my daughter with him and I never returned there.

I can call my daughter. However much I hate my husband, I still love my daughter. When I first left my husband, I went back inside Burma and stayed with my parents for about 3 months then my parents told me to stay with them and not to go back to my husband. I told them however much I hate my husband, I miss my daughter. So I returned to my husband. I stayed there 2 months. I was not happy at all living with him. I still missed my parents and my family and I wanted to go back. So finally I took 1,000 yuan of his money and left. Neither my husband nor my daughter knew.

I haven't seen my daughter for over a year now. It is so hard for me to see her now because I do not have my marriage certificate anymore so

I cannot travel. Before, I could travel wherever I wanted in China with my certificate. Whenever I see children about my daughter's age, I always miss her. Especially when I see the kid downstairs in the shop, my daughter is a bit taller than her. I always miss her. I can call her because my husband has never changed his phone number. But he complains that I left them without letting them know. He said, "We lived together for over 8 years. We all love you, but you don't love us". I replied that I also want to live with my family. He said "You can come back when your parents are not there anymore". Whatever he says, my daughter is there so whenever I miss her, I call her.

I remarried this Burmese guy a few months ago. This husband also knows that I have a daughter but he doesn't really like that I call her often. But I say to him, "If you want to leave me, you can leave. For me, I can't leave my daughter because she is my daughter, and I have to call her." Interview 21

Working in Ruili: Migrant women's work experiences

Employment options in and around Ruili

As mentioned earlier, the majority of women interviewed have migrated to Ruili for employment and/or financial opportunities. Whether such opportunities are perceived or actual, it is undisputable that the range of industries and employment options for migrants has boomed on the border. The range of industries now requiring cheap Burmese labour has expanded, giving migrant women more options than in the past. The spectrum of work being done by the women we spoke to included sex work, domestic work, bead work, the gem trade, retail and construction:

The types of work carried out by the women we spoke to are shown in the table below.

Type of work	Number	Percentage
Sex industry	8	25%
Factory or workshop	6	19%
Sales (shop or market vendor)	6	19%
Unemployed (mostly because of childbirth)	4	12%
Domestic work / live-in tutor	2	6%
Restaurant	2	6%
Traditional massage	1	3%
Jade trade	1	3%
Bead work	1	3%
Construction	1	3%
Total	32	100%

Many interviewees had worked a number of jobs, often spanning several different industries, during their time in China. Reasons cited for changing jobs included wanting to earn more money, mistreatment by employers, and pregnancy. The types of work available reflect the pattern we had identified in our earlier report *Between Two Hells*, of migrant women tending to carry out gender-stereotyped "women's work," i.e. predominantly service oriented jobs, such as domestic work and

service industry work. While some were employed for other labour-intensive work, in factories, workshops or on construction sites, where men were also employed, the women tended to be given different, less well-paid tasks (see section below).

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Factory and workshop labour

As detailed earlier, large amounts of raw materials are being imported from Burma into China. Spates of factories and workshops which transform the said materials into exportable goods provide employment for thousands of Burmese migrants. The most common types of factories employing Burmese workers in Ruili are petrified wood (wood which has fossilised into stone which is imported from Burma) factories, furniture factories and gem cutting and polishing.

The petrified wood business has boomed in recent years, following the discovery of large amounts of this resource in Na Toe Gyi township, in Mandalay Division. Dealers soon began exporting uncut pieces to Jiegao-Ruili, for polishing and sale to the Chinese market. Polished petrified wood is extremely popular in China, where it is sold for high prices as a home ornament. The cutting and polishing of the intricately shaped pieces is delicate and dangerous, involving electric cutting equipment, and is usually carried out by Burmese migrants.

“The work is so dangerous the Chinese don’t want to do this kind of job, just the Burmese.” Interview 28, wood polisher

Both men and women are employed, but men tend to use heavier cutters to cut off the ‘husk’ of the pieces, while women use electric sanders to give the final polishing. Furniture factories, where the work is less dangerous, attract more Chinese workers, but the Burmese still outnumber Chinese workers, who are paid more. The workers are predominantly men (in one factory, out of 300 workers, only 8 were women), who are employed as carpenters assembling the furniture, while women do painting and polishing work.

In wood-processing factories, equal numbers of men and women are employed, to transfer wood from chipping machines to compressors to be made into plywood or chipboard, but men are paid more than women, while Chinese are paid more than Burmese.

Other workshops exclusively employing Burmese workers were those polishing and decorating sandstone Buddha images, which are imported from Burma and then transported for sale in other parts of China. One interviewee said that there were at least 15 such workshops in Ruili.

Factories and workshops tend to be clustered together in groups and access for non-staff is difficult at best, and often simply not permitted at all. This makes collating accurate data regarding the number of Burmese migrants doing factory work and their working conditions extremely difficult. However, numbers of Burmese working in furniture and petrified wood workshops alone are evidently in the thousands. :

“There are many petrified wood workshops in and around Shweli. (...)

Altogether there must be well over 1,000 people from Burma both in
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and around Shweli doing this work. A few years ago, there were only about 200-300 people, but now many more people are coming. Especially since Cyclone Nargis. It’s mostly young people doing this work. They

come from all over Burma – including Chin State.” Interview 3, petrified wood polisher

“I think there must be several thousand people from Burma cutting petrified wood in and around Shweli. There are 7 main areas, with 30 or so workshops in each area.” Interview 4, petrified wood polisher

“There are about 6 or 7 furniture factories around my factory and more than 300 workers in each factory, because they want anyone to work, whoever wants a job, they will hire them. Workers are a mixture of Burmese and Chinese, but more than half are Burmese. So for example, in a factory, only about 10-15 workers are Chinese, the rest are Burmese and Shan.” Interview 23, furniture polisher

It should be noted that such workshops rely entirely on resources imported from Burma, which are fast being depleted. If imports dry up, the workshops will be forced to close down and the workers will become unemployed.

Sales

One common area of work for migrant women is sales; several of our interviewees were working as shop assistants or market vendors. In some instances, Burmese staff were employed by Chinese employers simply as cheap labour, however in other instances Burmese staff have been recruited to service the growing Burmese population in Ruili. With the influx of Burmese to the region, retail outlets have opened to cater specifically to this market. For example, around the wood and gem cutting and polishing workshop areas (which employ hundreds of Burmese workers) has arisen a large array of clothing shops aiming to cater to the migrant workers.

A 33-year-old market vendor spoke about catering to the Burmese community in Ruili, working with her aunt who imports produce from inside Burma to sell at one of the markets in Ruili. She told us,

“I came with an aunt who’s been living here 20 years, trading in food from Burma. She imports lentils, onions, dried fish, chillies, and fish paste. I started off helping her, and then set up my own stall in the [...] market selling the same produce, mainly to Burmese customers. There are about 10 other sellers from Burma working in the same market.”

Interview 11

Some shops, however, sell wholesale to Burmese dealers, who then import the goods to Burma. A shop assistant of Kokang Chinese origin from Burma explains how she was hired because of her Burmese and Chinese language skills:

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“After leaving school I came to Jiegao to stay with relatives. I had an aunt who had a gem shop. I helped her deal with customers because I could speak Burmese and Chinese. [...]

“After that I moved to Shweli, because I wanted to earn more money. An old school friend who was working in Shweli found me a new job at a shop selling bags (mainly sold wholesale to dealers who then exported them to Burma). The owner was a Chinese from Funan. He ran the shop with his wife, and they had a young child. I was the only shop assistant. I was useful to them because the owner couldn’t speak Burmese and I could translate for Burmese customers.” Interview 2

The ability to speak Chinese is a strong asset for women seeking sales work. As a woman who had worked as a wood-polisher explained:

“I don’t want to go back to the wood cutting work, because it is too dangerous. The trouble is that I can’t speak Chinese, so I can’t work in a shop. I want to learn Chinese.” Interview 3

Domestic work

Domestic work has long been a common area of employment for migrant women, as there is a gendered assumption that all women can learn the skills needed to be a domestic worker since it is “women’s work.”

It is also an area of work that leaves migrant women particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, behind the closed doors of private homes.

According to a woman who had worked as a domestic worker in Ruili for four years:

“I think Chinese prefer to hire Burmese domestic workers because we are cheaper. (if we are paid 500 yuan per month, then Chinese will be paid 600 or 700 yuan), and we are willing to do all kinds of work. If Chinese are hired to do the cooking, then they will refuse to do other kinds of household work. Burmese domestic workers also generally hardly speak Chinese and won’t argue back to their employers.”

Interview 7 The poor treatment of migrant domestic workers living with individual families is reflected in the fact that five respondents had formerly done this work, but had left due to low pay and bad working conditions. They had all chosen to do other better paid work, except for one, who had decided to continue doing domestic work on a “freelance” basis, rotating between domestic work pictures different households. Such arrangements have become popular among migrant domestic workers, providing them with greater freedom and a better income. She explained:

“I know about 200-300 Burmese women doing this kind of domestic work in Shweli. Some work “freelance”, like me, and some have Burmese “agents” who can speak Chinese and organize the cleaning work for them, but get a percentage of the earnings.” Interview 7

Restaurant work

Several interviewees worked in restaurants where Burmese staff are employed to undertake multiple functions, from cooking and serving, to cleaning, washing up and helping to carry bags of produce back from the market. Cooking is the most highly paid of these jobs, and is often done by men.

One interviewee told us that in her workplace, 10 out of the 12 members of staff are from Burma, while another restaurant worker told us, “There are 10 restaurants along this road. Each has about 10 Burmese workers – so there must be about 100 Burmese working on this road”.

Traditional massage

Massage parlours in China are often associated with sex work, but some in Ruili do not provide sex services. Customers, both male and female, are given traditional Restaurant in Ruili

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messages in shared rooms with mattresses on the floor, and pay between 15-20 yuan (USD 2.30-3.00) for an hour’s massage.

As the work is physically hard, but not very well paid (masseuses earn only 5 yuan, or USD 0.77, per hour), it is commonly carried out by migrant women from Burma. At one of the traditional massage parlours in Ruili, run by a woman from Karen State, all eight masseuses are also Karen from Burma.

Construction work

Construction work in Ruili is increasingly being carried out by migrant workers from Burma. A construction worker interviewed for this report said there were countless construction sites employing Burmese workers. On her own site, all of about 100 construction workers were from Burma. However, only ten of these were women. She said that women were hired to do the 'easier' jobs, such as carrying bricks and mixing grout, but were paid less than men. Both male and female migrant workers were paid much less than Chinese workers doing similar work.

Jade trading

Ruili remains one of the main trading centres for jade along the China-Burma border. There are many freelance brokers from Burma operating around the numerous jade markets and shops. However such work requires contacts among the jade trading circles and ability to assess jade quality. Therefore few migrants newly arriving from Burma have the opportunity to do such work.

Only one of the migrant women interviewed had managed to work her way up over the space of nine years from being a low-paid restaurant worker to finally running

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her own jade trading business. This was clearly a highly unusual case, and was largely due to the determination and entrepreneurship of the woman herself (who had attended university in Burma).

Sex work

"I cried a lot when I made the decision (to become a sex worker). I feel really upset for my body. In my whole life, I never expected to do this kind of job. If my husband was still alive I hope I wouldn't be doing this. I am not interested in this, I never hoped to do this kind of work, especially in my old age. I support my daughter and mother. Last time I called my

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daughter she wanted me to come back. I really want to go back, I feel so unhappy." Interview 29, 42-year-old sex worker

While Ruili's reputation as a 'hotspot' for the sex trade is slowly improving as the town develops, research findings demonstrate that women continue to be employed in the local sex industry.

It is important to note that as sex work is technically illegal throughout China, it is very difficult to calculate exactly how many people are employed in the industry. Calculations are further complicated by the diverse settings of sex work. While massage parlours and brothels provide a place of employment for many sex workers, others solicit customers on Ruili's streets or at bus stations. Furthermore, high turnover rates in the industry make reliable data even more difficult to ascertain.

Nonetheless, in 2005 The Irrawaddy reported that an estimated 100 Burmese women were working as sex workers in Ruili, "offering their services to a clientele of traders, truck drivers and drug traffickers from Mandalay, Lashio, Myitkyina and other Burmese cities, as well as from China"¹⁶, while a further hundred women were working in Jiegao

– 200 in total in this border region. BWU local staff believe the total number of Burmese sex workers to be somewhat similar today, estimating just over 200, but with most now working in Jiegao, following police crackdowns in 2005 on Ruili's main red-light area for Burmese.

A long-time resident of the region who has worked as a social worker with Burmese migrants for the last 10 years also confirmed estimates of about 200 Burmese sex workers, informing researchers that in November 2010, 30 massage parlours doubling as brothels were counted with 6-20 girls working as sex workers in each. She also mentioned that there were fewer cases of forced prostitution than in the past.

BWU staff too have come across fewer cases of women being tricked into sex work, and have noticed a trend over the past few years of women who had already worked in the sex industry in Burma coming to do the same work in China. An immediate reason for this was that in 2009, the Burmese authorities shut down all the massage parlours in Muse, which led to sex workers from the Burma side of the border moving over to Jiegao. However, apart from this, sex workers from other parts of Burma are also coming to work in Jiegao and Ruili. This appears to be partly due to the fact that there is less stigmatization of the sex industry in China.

“The Chinese don't really treat me badly. The situation would be different if I did this work inside Burma – the stigma and discrimination would be worse. Here, it is ok. This business is not viewed as a good business in Burma, but here no one criticizes this business as it is just one other way to make money.” Interview 19, 44-year-old brothel madam from Magwe

16 Irrawaddy, Yunnan's Sin City, January 2005, retrieved 21 April 2010, http://www.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=4333

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Another reason why some sex workers prefer to work in China is that penalties for this kind of work are more lenient. A 39-year-old sex worker from Magwe, who had been arrested and jailed for prostitution in Burma, explained that this was why she had come to China to work:

“I've done this work for about 18 years, but mostly in Burma. I've worked in Bago, Meiktilar, Pyinmana, Naypyidaw, Yangon. I travelled to different places with my friends. I sometimes worked with a “laoban” (“boss”) and sometimes worked freelance. The problem is that if you are caught by the police you get sent to jail for at least one and a half years -- and if you plead not guilty, you can even get a three-year sentence. The “laoban” will get sentenced to 5 years. In China, if you are caught, you just have to pay 200 yuan at the police station and that's all. (Note: Another interviewee mentioned that the fine was actually 500 yuan.)

I was caught and sentenced to 1 ½ years in prison in 2007. I was working in Pyinmana and my “laoban” had already paid off the police, but she was careless. The police warned her one day there would be a raid, but she didn't tell us and we were caught. I was sent to jail in Ye Me Thin. (..) About five months after being released from prison I came to work in China. I met a woman who used to work here and she arranged for me to come.” Interview 18

This woman had first come to work in Ruili in mid-2009, for three months, before returning to Burma. When her money ran out, she came back to Ruili again in April 2010.

This reflects recent trends noticed by BWU staff: a faster turnover of sex workers, and a tendency for some to come back periodically to work in Ruili. As several sex workers explained:

“Mostly women come to work here for three months at a time and then go back to Burma. They can save between 200,000-500,000 kyat (USD 200-500) during that time, which they can take home with them.” Interview 17, 28-year-old sex worker from Magwe

“All of the young women here are planning to return home to Rangoon this June (in two months). If things work out at home, we won’t come back.” Interview 15, 18-year-old sex worker from Rangoon

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Education levels and employment opportunities

The level of education of our sample pool spanned right through from no education at all, to university graduates. One woman even began a Master’s degree but was unable to complete it due to economic difficulties.

Level of Education Number Percentage

University Graduate 3 9%

Started university but did not complete 2 6%

Completed 8th - 10th grade (high school graduate) 11 34%

Completed 4th - 7th grade 10 31%

1-3 years primary school 5 16%

No education 1 3%

Total 32 100%

Two-thirds of those who worked in the sex industry had only a 4th grade education or lower, and none had completed secondary school (10th grade). The only respondent who had never attended school was also working in the sex industry, and the trafficking survivor interviewed only had a 4th grade education.

Conversely, our research has also indicated that having an education is not particularly meaningful in terms of employment opportunities for women migrants from Burma in China, as all of the women interviewed were either working menial jobs or unemployed, regardless of their level of education. Even the respondents who were university graduates - or who had at least started a university degree - were still working in areas such as petrified wood cutting factories and market and gem trading.

One woman had a degree in International Relations and had started a Masters Degree, yet was working as a domestic worker and live-in tutor. One university graduate working as a petrified wood polisher told us:

“My husband is Chinese-Burmese from Lashio. He works as a metal welder. He can get good pay because there are not so many skilled welders. He can earn about 2,000 yuan a month. He is not educated, and he teases me because I have a university degree but I have ended up doing stone-polishing work. He calls me a ‘graduate stone-polisher’!”

Interview 3

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Written by EDITOR

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The conclusion drawn from these findings is that while education might put migrant women at lower risk of the worst forms of abuses and most dangerous lines of work, it does not appear to give them any significant advantages in terms of meaningful employment opportunities.

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Work conditions and health & safety risks

Pay and benefits

Earnings of interviewees in their current place of employment at the time of interview ranged from as little as USD 38 per month up to USD 1478 per month¹⁷, with the sex industry coming out as most lucrative:

“I have two children to support through their education, so if I was just a seller with a small business then I would not have enough money to support my children. Here if you want to earn a lot of money you have only two choices: you have to sell drugs or you have to become a pimp. I was too afraid to be a drug dealer, so I choose to become a pimp.”

Interview 19, brothel madam

¹⁷ This figure is likely to be inflated as it is based on the daily average earnings of a brothel madam, who does not always receive regular income as business is frequently interrupted by police raids. This interviewee's earnings have been removed from the calculations of average earnings per month in order to give a more accurate indication of average income of those working in the sex trade in Ruili and Jegao

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Industry Average Monthly Income (Approx USD)

Sex industry \$208

Construction \$205

Domestic work \$167

Factory or workshop \$139

Sales (shop or market vendor) \$126

Bead work \$121

Traditional massage \$114

Restaurant \$69

About half of the respondents were either sending money home to Burma to help support family members or saving it up for when they returned; these were either single women or mothers who had left their children back in Burma. Those who had married and had children in China reported they were no longer able to save any earnings.

The average monthly figure for savings or money sent home was USD 95.90. Women either transferred this money home by bank from Muse, sent it home via agents, or sometimes relatives came and collected the money from them. Some saved up in cash, and some preferred to transfer their cash into gold, purchased in Muse.

While access to medical care was not a problem for most workers (see later section), almost invariably they had to cover any medical costs themselves, and were not paid for any days taken off work for sickness. Those who suffered work accidents were lucky if they got a small amount of compensation. Thus, workers who are unable to work for any period of time have great difficulty surviving.

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Several of the women we interviewed had recently given birth. They had all needed to give up their jobs, and had to survive on their husbands' wages or on their savings. One woman said she would return to work (as a stone polisher) when the baby was four months old and would carry the baby on her back while she worked.

Disparity in wages between men and women

Regular service-oriented jobs performed by migrant women are the lowest paying of the jobs available to migrant workers. Starting pay for domestic or restaurant workers, is as low as 300-400 yuan (USD 46-61) a month.

In other workplaces, such as construction sites or workshops, where both men and women are employed, men are paid up to twice as much as women. For example, on construction sites, men are paid 50 yuan a day (USD 7.7), while women are paid 25 yuan (USD 3.8). In petrified wood workshops, men are paid about 1,200 yuan (USD 184) a month for removing the "husks" of the wood, while women are paid up to 850 yuan (USD 130) for polishing the wood.

Health and safety at work

Over half of the interviewees referenced dangerous work conditions and/or fear for their personal safety at work at some point during their employment in China. Factory workers had among the highest number of complaints, with issues reported including stories of cut and injured fingers, eye injuries, dust inhalation and electrocution: "I started work at a small petrified wood workshop. I was the only worker – I worked with the boss. He took off the outer layer and then I would polish the stone. There was so much dust. I had to buy a mask and a head covering. It was very dangerous work. I know one worker who got a piece of stone in his eye and was blinded. He got 3,000 yuan compensation, but that was all. Another worker got injured in the face when the blade of the cutter flew off into his face. Another person was electrocuted to death because of faulty wiring with the cutting equipment. The owner didn't give any compensation at all. [...] "Sometimes nails/screws come loose from the cutting equipment and injure people [...] Also my bottom would get sore from sitting on the same hard stool all day. All the workers had sore bottoms like monkeys [...] Most Chinese

don't want to do this work because it is so tiring and there is so much dust. It's bad for your lungs. Some people have had X-rays taken of their lungs and they are all damaged by the dust [...] There's also chemicals used during the polishing, which are really smelly. As a result the workers get blocked noses and cough." Interview 3, petrified wood polisher

"I did this work for about 5 months, then I became pregnant, and I stopped, because I had to climb up to polish the heads of the big Buddha images, and I was afraid I might fall." Interview 5, Buddha image polisher

The high value of gems and jade also meant particular security risks for those dealing in them. Interviewee 14 told our researchers of being robbed of an 80,000 Yuan (USD 12,000) piece of jade whilst riding her motorbike.

Responses from sex workers also indicated that they were at particularly high risk of physical danger, abuse and infection (see section on sex work below).

Mistreatment and exploitation by employers

A significant number of interviewees reported mistreatment and exploitation by employers. Most common was refusal or reluctance of employers to pay full wages

at the end of the month.

“When employers say they will pay the workers 600 yuan per month, at the end of the month they don’t want to pay full payment, so when the workers come to ask for their salary and only get 500, they ask ‘why not 600?’ and they just say ‘Oh you didn’t do a good job, there are so many problems with your work...’ They have so many excuses. The workers can’t complain to them because they can’t speak Chinese.’ Interview 28

Employers were also reluctant to pay full wages when employees announced their resignation:

When they (employers) know that a worker doesn’t want to work there anymore, they don’t pay full payment to the worker. If the worker is supposed to get 500 yuan, they’ll only give them half or, like 300, and they say ‘If you continue working for us, we will pay you the rest next month. If you want to quit your job then we won’t pay you’ or something like that...’ Interview 28

Verbal abuse from employers and being looked down on were also common complaints, particularly among domestic workers and factory workers.

Extreme work hours

A common work-related issue reported by respondents was the need to work extreme hours, with six interviewees having experienced working hours of more than 11.5 hours per day. In the most extreme cases, women had been employed in jobs requiring them to work between 20 and 22 hours each day:

Interviewee 14, who was 35 years old at the time of interview, tells her story of previous places of employment on the China border and extreme hours of work:

“I travelled to the China border in October 1999. I took a bus to Muse, but fell asleep. When I woke up someone had stolen my purse with my ID card and all my money. I only had 200 kyat (USD 0.19) left in my pocket.

So when I arrived in Muse I went to the police station and asked to see the police officer in charge. I made up a story that I was looking for my brother in China and needed to find work there, and asked him to find me a job.

He found me a job in a karaoke restaurant and bar in Shweli. I stayed there almost 2 years. I was earning only 3,000 kyat (USD 2.86) a month, but I got food and board free. I had to do all kinds of work in the restaurant, and I had to work from 4 am sometimes till 2 am the next morning. I wasn’t allowed out at all. [...]

Then I decided to open my own small restaurant on Jegan Lan in Shweli. It was October 2002. I still couldn’t speak hardly any Chinese. I only had about 600 yuan (USD 91), from my savings and from pawning a ring. The rent of the restaurant was 400 yuan (USD 61) a month.

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I made various Burmese dishes, including rice and noodles. I did all the work myself – cooking, buying, cleaning. All my customers were

Burmese. I would work from 4 am till midnight.” Interview 14

“This place opens at about 8 in the morning (Burmese time) and closes at 10 at night. I work every day.” Interview 15, 18-year-old sex worker

There did not appear to be any particular pattern or link between extreme work hours and any one specific industry or area of work, with women working in restaurant work, sex work, massage, factory work and sales all reporting this as an issue.

In addition to working long hours, only a few interviewees mentioned that they were entitled to rostered days off each month as part of their regular work arrangements. Some were entitled to one day of leave per month, with only one woman receiving any more than this, at three days per month. About a third of the women interviewed did not have rostered or monthly days off, but could take unpaid days off if they wished, as could those who were self-employed. Several respondents were not allowed to take any leave at all.

One woman employed as a petrified wood polisher complained that a former employer was so strict in ensuring that workers did not “waste” time during work that she ended up falling ill:

“We were not allowed to talk during work. Also the boss didn’t like it when we went to the toilet. So I used to control myself and not go to the toilet. As a result I got a bad urinary tract infection. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, but I just knew I couldn’t urinate properly, and the boss told me I had yellow eyes.” Interview 3

Sexual harassment

Several interviewees who worked in the wood polishing industry mentioned sexual harassment by both Chinese and Burmese employers, who often stay together with their workers in cramped factory apartments.

One 26-year-old wood polisher left a former job because of sexual harassment.

“When I first quit my job and arrived at the place polishing petrified wood, I didn’t know how to do the work and I had to learn from the employer.

He was Burmese.

I told him I would only take 200 yuan per month for my salary if he taught me how to do the polishing. But I also had to cook for the other workers and wash their clothes. And sometimes I experienced harassment from the employer too, because he wanted to take advantage of me. I had to run.

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Mostly it was verbal harassment, like, he would come to talk to me while I was cooking or washing, “Would you like to go for dinner with me, drink beers together, visit this place together...?” And sometimes when I was cooking he would come and touch his skin against my skin. He was trying to see whether I was the kind of girl just looking for money. If I said yes, then maybe I would have an advantage in life, but I don’t do those kinds of things. So I just tried to avoid him. For me, I feel like if I want to marry, I will marry a person and stay with him and have a family life. I do not want to have affairs like this. He had a wife too.

I didn’t see it in front of me, but sometimes I saw when his wife went back to Mandalay he and some girls went somewhere together. I can

guess what they were doing. Some of the girls don't want to work, they just want to find money in an easy way. He is the boss, so he can pay. When I worked with him, I didn't feel secure. Whenever his wife travelled I had to cook for him and I had to wash their clothes too. So sometimes I was alone and it was not secure for me, he could have raped me at any time. I really wanted to quit this job but unfortunately I couldn't quit because I worried that he had so many contacts and I would just end up coming back to this place again and again. I had also fallen in love with my boyfriend already but I was afraid to tell him because I worried that he would misunderstand. But we were lucky - because of the 2008 Olympics in China they stopped all the jade and petrified-wood jobs, so I took advantage of the situation and told him I would quit my job and look for a new one during this time (that the workshops were closed). So I quit and I got a job with a Chinese employer." Interview 28, 26-year-old wood polisher

However, as workshops tend to be clustered in the same place, and the Burmese migrant community is quite close-knit, news of sexual harassment can spread fast. According to one interviewee, this has forced some employers to improve their behaviour.

"Some "laobans" sexually harass their women workers, but when this happens, the women usually leave and warn other workers about that "laoban". Then he doesn't dare to do it anymore." Interview 4

Sex work: HIV/AIDS, physical danger and security

The illegality of sex work in China, making it clandestine and unregulated, leaves sex workers particularly vulnerable to health, safety and security risks. The most commonly reported issues across the various studies conducted by BWU in recent years were police raids resulting in fines and or arrest, violent clients (often under the influence of drugs), and lack of consistent condom use resulting in the contraction of sexually transmitted infections and diseases, including HIV.

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Brothel owners seemed to have informed all of their employees how to use condoms, and women that worked on the streets seemed quick to educate new employees. However, out of the eight sex workers interviewed in 2010, only three reported using condoms every time they had sex with a client.

The main reason women cited for not using condoms was client request or demand. Several mentioned that they ended up giving in to clients who refused to wear condoms because of pressure from their managers to satisfy their client within the allotted time (usually a "session" costing 50 yuan lasts 15 minutes)

"Some of the customers don't wear condoms, even though I try to persuade them. There's nothing I can do because by that time I've already taken my clothes off, and the time is going by, and I'm worried that the customer won't finish within 15 minutes, then I'll get into trouble with my 'laoban'." Interview 13

Some clients also used violence to force women to have unprotected sex. M. a 19-year-old sex worker at the time of interview in 2007 had worked in Ruili since she was 17. Only two months after entering the industry, she was tested for HIV and

received a positive result. She was unsure where she contracted the disease, but reported that a client forced her at knifepoint to have sex without a condom. She was still working as a sex worker, and said she was careful to always use a condom because she knew being HIV positive made her more susceptible to contracting other diseases and to transmitting the virus. If a client requested sex without a condom, she always informed her client of her HIV+ status before engaging in sexual activity without protection.

Some women reported being selective regarding their condom use, assessing the client and deciding accordingly. C. a 20 year-old woman, had been employed in China as a sex worker for 3 years at the time of interview in 2007 and was planning on returning to her family in Burma the following year. She was aware of HIV/AIDS and the modes of transmission. She had never been tested for the disease because, as she told interviewers, she “never gets sick”. She usually used condoms with clients but said she would engage in unprotected sex if a man didn’t want to use a condom and “he did not look sick”. Similar sentiments and limited understanding of the disease were echoed during interviews conducted in 2010, for example L., a 42 year old masseuse and sex worker from Rangoon who told us, “I don’t feel worried because the social groups come to give us medicine and pills and condoms, so I always try to use condoms. But sometimes the clients don’t like the condoms so I have to work without them. I haven’t been tested but I feel nothing right now so I believe that I don’t have any diseases.” Interview 15

Language often causes an additional barrier for women. Ruili hosts migrant workers from diverse backgrounds who speak various languages, including Chinese, Burmese and Shan. Many women reported having a difficult time convincing Shan and Chinese Forgotten Workforce • 41

men to use condoms, since they were unable to communicate. In such instances, women sometimes put the condoms on the men themselves, others have used a female condom, and some have had unprotected sex.

Many women reported having slept with a drug user at some point during their work in the sex industry. Injection drugs are very common in Ruili, as is the use of “yaba” (methamphetamine). This drug, popular throughout Southeast Asia, makes clients extremely aggressive, and often violent. Many sex workers reported using the drug themselves in order to stay awake and thus serve more clients. The drug may provide additional energy to workers but can also lead to precarious situations and greater health risks - especially for individuals whose immunity is already compromised due to HIV.

L. also spoke to researchers about her experience of servicing drug users. While she was unsure of exactly what substances the men were consuming, she told us that many clients take pills so that even after ejaculation, the penis is still erect. More concerning, she told us of clients who inject the penis before intercourse with an unknown drug to make it swell and increase in size, so that they feel more pressure during sex, increasing their sexual pleasure. For the female sex workers, however, it can be an excruciating experience:

“A lot of them (the clients) inject their penis so it goes very big and they put oil on it and when they have sex with the girls it’s really dangerous

for the girls because it's too big and their vaginas become really hot and painful. Then they can't finish because they feel that they can't force it."

Interview 15

When explaining to us her worst encounter of this nature, L. showed us a piece of wood approximately 8 cm in diameter and said that this was literally the size of the man's penis:

"I've never seen a guy with such a big penis before. He put so many oils and jelly on it and then he tried to put it in me but I couldn't do it, so I had to finish him with my hands. He had injected himself but something went wrong and it was too big. But even though I couldn't take his penis in my vagina, I treated him nicely and massaged him and did it with my hands." Interview 15

Another issue experienced by L. was an accessory which she described as a ring of metal ball bearings which clients sometimes place on their non-erect penis. As the penis becomes erect, the ring squeezes it and increases pressure. She said that this is very painful for her and that clients don't use a condom when they use this device. According to L., the clients claim that they use the ring to increase pressure and sensation for the woman, however the interviewee believed that in reality it is purely for the clients' pleasure.

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Many other sex workers reported dangerous situations and times when they had been frightened for their safety, although a common theme that emerged was that for girls who work in brothels, there is a certain amount of security that comes from working under the watchful eye of a madam and alongside other sex workers, who can often provide support in times of crisis:

"I was once called out by a customer. He took me to his room, and then called 5 more of his friends to sleep with me. I was so angry that I grabbed a stick that was under the bed and threatened to hit them. In the end I only had to sleep with one man. But he wouldn't pay me. So the next morning I called all the other women from the parlour to go to his place and demand the money. We met him on the street and he was forced to pay 100 yuan."

Interview 13, 32-year-old sex worker

"We are like a family here. If we don't want to go with a client we can say (to the brothel madam), "Mother, I don't want to go with him", and she doesn't make us."

Interview 20, 30-year-old sex worker

However, in some locations women do not work under a single brothel manager, but work individually, with the help and cooperation of other men, usually their husbands/partners. They charge the same rate as the women in nearby brothels, but they share this with their husbands/partners. The situation is much worse for these women. The husbands are mostly drug users or alcoholics, and the women have to spend their earnings on this. Sometimes the women end up dealing in drugs themselves, or becoming addicted.

The final area of concern for many sex workers is arrest. While Chinese authorities appear to be more lenient on sex workers than the Burmese authorities, the experience

of arrest in China is still reportedly a degrading experience (see later section).

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Living in Ruili: The general experience of women migrants on the border

Housing conditions

Housing conditions of migrant workers were almost invariably basic, dilapidated and over-crowded. Domestic workers, sex workers and sometimes factory and restaurant workers had accommodation provided by their employers. This ranged from factory apartments housing either a couple or three singles in one room, to four sex workers sharing a small room below their place of employment with just one single mattress on the floor.

Other migrants rented their own apartments, usually in a particular neighbourhood of Ruili where Burmese families and couples lived cramped together. All apartments visited by BWU researchers comprised a bathroom and just one room which served as both living and sleeping space for up to eight people, in some instances. Such apartments generally cost between 170 and 200 Yuan (USD 25.78 – USD 30.34) per month to rent.

Security and freedom of movement

Security, fear of arrest and freedom of movement are all serious issues for many Burmese migrants in Ruili. BWU local staff estimate that approximately one third of migrants do not have official documents. Many migrants reported that they cross back and forth between China and Burma by illegally jumping the fence in Jiegao. Researchers were told that sometimes the Burmese police do spot checks at illegal border crossings and can fine, take possessions, or arrest then fine those caught. Several interviewees reported that their freedom of movement was restricted due to their lack of documents and fear of arrest, in some instances resulting in the women not being able to leave their workplace and or place of residence at all:

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“I don’t have a stay permit. My employer said she’d take responsibility if anything happened to me in the restaurant. But if I go out and get arrested, she won’t take responsibility.” Interview 8

Interviewees in all the different work sectors mentioned that police came to check their workplaces to see if workers had proper documents.

“Sometimes the police would come and check that workers had proper documents. The workers who didn’t would run away when they came.”

Interview 3, wood polisher

Not surprisingly, the migrants who were most often targeted by the police were the sex workers. One sex worker in Ruili mentioned that police frequently came to raid the area she worked in.

“The police come very often so the girls are afraid to go out. They have to go back in and hide, so we lose income.” Interview 19, brothel madam

However, the situation is different in Jiegao, where according to sex workers, they are left alone by police.

“I can go out around Jiegao during the day if I want, but I can’t go to Ruili. I don’t have any permit to stay here, but the police don’t come and check us here so there is no problem.” Interview 15

Migrants working in Ruili and Jiegao are currently not allowed to own or drive a motorized vehicle. If they are caught driving a motorbike, they are fined 500-1,000 yuan.

Documentation

Burmese border-crossing passes

For Burmese to cross the border into Jiegao legally, it is necessary to obtain either a green temporary border pass or a red “border cross book” from the Burmese immigration authorities. The temporary pass is valid for a single journey only and is stamped at the border with the date of entry. It costs approximately USD 0.95 and applicants need to show their Burmese ID card to obtain it. It can be done quite quickly on the Burma side, taking between five and 30 minutes. The temporary border pass can be used in Jiegao, Ruili and other nearby towns such as Jan Fong, Laiza, Yin Jang and Mangshi, and enables the holder to stay in China for one week.

The red border-cross book is a Burma-China border crossing permission card which is valid for one year. It costs 3,000 kyat and needs to be kept “alive” by going to the border and having it stamped every 7 days, making it difficult (or even impossible) for the holders of this document to move away from the Ruili/Jegao area. The document is available to Burmese people from Muse or Namkham, although it is possible to obtain one even if not from these places by paying a higher fee.

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Chinese stay permits

Burmese wanting to stay and work in China legally need to apply to the Chinese police authorities for a green passbook, which is a stay permit that needs to be extended every three months. In order to obtain this kind of permit, Burmese migrants must possess a Burmese ID card, and provide proof of address in the form of a copy of the owner’s house registration.

The passbook costs 87 Yuan (USD 13.20), unless the applicant is already in possession of a red “border-cross book”, in which case the green passbook only costs 37 Yuan (USD 5.61).

Although the majority of Burmese migrants in Ruili have green passbooks, most do not have red border-cross books, due to the difficulty of keeping the document “alive”. This means that when they want to return to Burma, they have no legal border crossing documents, and are forced to use one of the unofficial border crossings, placing themselves at risk of arrest and punishment for illegal entry.

Some employers keep the green passbooks of their workers as a means of control. If problems arise, the employers can then report workers to the police and have them arrested for lack of documents.

Chinese health cards

For migrants working in the service sector, such as in shops, restaurants and hotels, they must also obtain “health cards.” China National Health Inspection officials visit

worksites and take blood samples to test for HIV and other diseases. If diseases are found, the workers are dismissed. If not, the workers are issued with a health card that is valid for one year.

No work permits

Until 2005, Burmese migrant workers could apply to the Chinese Labour Office for work permits to work in Ruili. This card granted them equal rights to Chinese workers, including entitlement to the minimum wage and social security benefits. However, after 2005, the authorities stopped issuing work permits to foreign migrant workers.

Access to medical care

Interviewees generally reported that they had access to adequate medical care in Ruili or Jiegao, either at private clinics or at the local government hospital, or by choosing to cross the border back into Muse for treatment at Burmese government health facilities or at the private “Thazin” clinic (funded by an international NGO) which offers reproductive health services.

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Several women said they preferred being treated in Muse, particularly for more serious ailments, as they found it easier to communicate in Burmese than Chinese.

“If it’s just a very basic headache or something like that, we just to go a clinic in Ruili. If it’s something really big and important, we go to Muse.

Sometimes if we go for injections here in Ruili, as we cannot communicate with them very fluently we have to pay about 70 yuan for one injection, and sometimes 40 or 30. So normally we choose to go to Muse because we can communicate with the doctors and we can ask them what has happened to us and how much it costs.” Interview 24, 34-year-old furniture factory worker

Costs for treatment were slightly cheaper in Burma. Two women said they had given birth in hospital in Muse, costing 100,000-175,000 kyat (US\$100-175), and one woman said she had given birth in Shweli, costing 1,300 yuan (US\$198).

Sex workers both in Ruili and Jiegao mentioned that they were regularly visited by outreach workers from the Thazin Clinic.

“Once a month a Burmese nurse from Thazin comes here and give us each a kind of ‘anti-infection’ medicine. She makes us take 6 pills at once – 4 white and 2 blue. The medicine is very strong. She says it prevents sexually transmitted diseases. She also gives us condoms – about two boxes at a time. They give them to all the massage parlours in Ruili and Jiegao. And she gives me contraceptive pills.” Interview 13

The sex workers said they were also given Chinese condoms by Save the Children (operating from China), but they preferred the Burmese-made condoms.

“The Chinese group give us Chinese condoms, but they are very thin and not well-lubricated so they break easily. The Burmese condoms are well lubricated and thicker.” Interview 15

Compulsory testing for HIV

The Chinese HIV Prevention Unit carries out regular testing for HIV among migrant workers in certain sectors, including sex workers and truck drivers and loaders. The tests are compulsory, and if workers are found to be HIV positive,

they and their employers are informed of their status, which usually means termination of employment. No advice on treatment, prevention of transmission, or counseling is given.

Access to education for children

Migrant workers are allowed to bring their children with them to China without papers
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if the children are under 18. These children may attend Chinese schools, where tuition is free, but there are other costs, such as uniforms, books, medical check-ups, or electricity costs which are quite difficult for migrants to afford. If Burmese children complete Chinese schooling in Ruili, they are entitled to study further in colleges deeper inside China, as long as they have a Burmese ID.

Some migrants prefer to send their children to private schools run by Burmese teachers in Ruili, where subjects are taught in Burmese. These cost 70-100 yuan per month per child.

Services targeting migrant women

There are currently very few services or programs operating on the China-Burma border specifically targeting migrant women. Apart from the Burmese Women's Union, there are two other community based women's organisations from Burma with support and outreach programmes, but they are largely focussed on trafficking survivors. The only services for migrant women provided by international NGOs in this area are those targeting sex workers. The Thazin Clinic in Muse and Save the Children (SCF) in Ruili both have health outreach programs for sex workers, with the former specifically targeting Burmese, but the latter mostly focusing on Chinese sex workers. SCF's staff are Chinese, but they hire a Burmese interpreter for their outreach visits to massage parlours.

There is also a privately run Chinese business which places unemployed migrants from Burma in work. Migrants can purchase a membership card for 50 Yuan (USD 7.58) which entitles them to queue for jobs up to three times. When migrants find work through this 'job centre', they then have access to some support, including interpreters.

Language skills and limitations

Our research found that many migrants tended to remain within their own communities on a day to day basis, working with Burmese colleagues and eating at Burmese restaurants, so they did not feel the need to learn Chinese. However, in cases where Burmese workers felt they were being exploited by their Chinese employers and felt limited in negotiation power, inability to speak Chinese was a source of frustration. BWU local staff also expressed that this is an area of support in particular need of development in Ruili, and that having access to interpreters to negotiate pay and work conditions for migrant workers, or some kind of leaflet in Chinese language detailing the rights of the worker which could be presented to Chinese employers would potentially improve the work experience of many migrants.

"My manager really looks down on the Burmese workers. He takes advantage of the workers, especially those who cannot speak Chinese.

If you work for 30 days, the boss gives you 30 days payment, but the manager wants to take advantage, so he doesn't want to give full payment

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to the worker. Those kinds of things happen in my factory.” Interview 23, furniture polisher

Organizing of workers

Currently migrant workers in Ruili and Jiegao are forbidden from forming any committees or organisations to help promote and protect their rights. A long-time Burmese resident of Jiegao described how he had tried in 1994 to form a committee to organise a Buddhist religious ceremony and had been arrested together with the other committee members and told it was illegal for Burmese to form any kind of committee.

However, there have occasionally been spontaneous joint actions of workers against their employers to try and push for improved working conditions. According to a wood polisher working in Ruili:

“Sometimes if the food is really bad, the workers have stopped working in protest and forced the “laoban” to improve the food.” Interview 4

Employers are not always responsive to such demands. In a recent incident, when workers at a petrified wood workshop protested to their Chinese employer about the stopping of their lunch allowance, he seized a stick and beat the worker translating the demands.

Workers generally don't dare make formal complaints to police about ill treatment, as they fear that the police will take the side of the Chinese employers. In February 2011, factory workers at a synthetic hair factory were forced to work overtime for nights in succession to respond to the high number of orders over Chinese New Year. However, the employer refused to give them overtime pay. When the workers complained to the police, they simply sided with the employer and told the workers they should leave the factory if they weren't satisfied.

When workers have no access to fair redress for grievances, their resentment can erupt into violence. One such incident took place on June 17, 2009. A Chinese couple in Jiegao had hired four Burmese workers to load some goods at their go-down, offering them 50 yuan each for the day's work. However, they ended up paying only 25 yuan. When the workers argued, the husband started hitting them with a stick. The workers were so angry they later returned with a knife and killed the couple. The next day, police rounded up hundreds of Burmese migrants in Jiegao, detaining them in the police station for two days, but were unable to find the culprits.

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The future: Hopes, dreams, realities

“My dream is just to start my own business inside Burma.” Interview 27

Without exception, the women we interviewed dreamed of returning one day to Burma. Most wished to go back to their hometown with enough capital to set up a small shop or “business”, which would help them support their aging parents.

However, most women also recognised that it would not be possible to return until there was significant political and economic change in Burma.

“When our country's situation becomes better and the government changes, I want to return to live in my own country.” Interview 3

Those from conflict areas also mentioned that they would not return home until there was peace.

“I was about to return, but I heard that the situation in my village was

dangerous and there were so many soldiers. So I didn't go back."

Interview 9

'Our country is not peaceful at the moment, not stable. One day when it is peaceful, we all want to go back and stay in our country. We don't want to stay in other countries because it's not safe for us. We want peace.' Interview 23

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Prognosis: increased migration

The November 2010 elections have brought no significant structural political change in Burma. The military rulers remain firmly in power, as ensured by the 2008 constitution, which guarantees that the army remains outside the law. The newlyelected government had no say over the 2011-2012 national budget, enacted in January 2011 before the new parliament was convened. The lion's share of the budget remains committed to defence (24%) while only 1.3% and 4.13% are allocated to health and education respectively.¹⁸ This indicates clearly that the regime still fails to identify social development as a high priority.

Following the election, the regime has become more hardline towards the remaining ethnic resistance groups. The regime has been stepping up its military operations against former ceasefire groups that refused to come under Burma Army control. This includes groups in Kachin State and northern Shan State, close to the Chinese border.

Immediately prior and post the election, the regime has also been accelerating deals to allow foreign investors to access Burma's natural resources throughout the country without enforcing any social or environmental safeguards. This is causing widespread forcible displacement and destruction of ecosystems that sustain the livelihoods of millions.

Thus, the key factors which have been driving migration in the past, namely economic collapse due to military mismanagement, conflict and loss of livelihoods not only remain in place but are set to worsen, threatening to increase the rate of migration exponentially.

¹⁸ AP article, March 4, 2011, Myanmar pro-democracy group slams govt's budget
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Conclusion and recommendations

Our research findings show that while the number of Burmese migrants in Ruili has increased significantly over the past few years, there are no mechanisms in place to ensure protection for their basic rights. Migrant workers from Burma face wage exploitation, occupational health and safety risks, and mistreatment by employers. Women migrants in particular face further wage discrimination, sexual harassment, and particular health and safety risks from sex work.

Given the continuing political and economic instability in Burma, and the likelihood of even greater flows of migrants to China, it is urgently needed to take measures to protect these migrant workers' rights.

BWU therefore makes the following recommendations:

To the Chinese government and local Yunnan authorities:

□ To restore the provision of work permits to foreign migrant workers which guarantee equal rights with Chinese workers, including fair wages and equal remuneration

for work of equal value;

- To ensure that all workers, including foreign migrant workers, can access mechanisms of justice and file complaints about exploitation and infringement of their rights
- To educate employers about the rights of foreign migrant workers and to establish monitoring bodies to determine employers' compliance with safe and health working conditions ensuring migrant workers' rest, leisure and reasonable working hours, and to ensure that migrants have equal access to medical treatment and compensation funds in cases of occupational health and safety;
- To set up government-run employment offices, with translation services, which help foreign migrant workers find jobs with guarantees of fair pay and decent working conditions;
- To allow foreign migrant workers to organise support groups, committees or unions to protect their rights;
- To ensure that all foreign migrant workers can access voluntary, confidential counselling and testing services for HIV and other health conditions and that appropriate treatment is available
- To allow foreign migrant workers to own and obtain licences to drive motorized vehicles.

To Burma's military government

- To improve the current border crossing documentation system, so that migrant workers from Burma who work for any length of time in China are able to return legally to Burma without penalty.

To Chinese NGOs and International Donors

To support community based organizations which provide assistance to foreign migrant workers in Chinese provinces adjoining Burma.

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Appendix: Demographics of respondents

All women interviewed in this study were currently living in the border region of Ruili or Jegao in China at the time of interview.

Age distribution

The largest age group represented among respondents was 20-25 years of age at the time of interview, at 34%. The 31-35 age group also had a significant representation of 25%.

Age Distribution at time of interview

Number	Percentage
Under 20	3 9%
20-25	11 34%
26-30	5 16%
31-35	8 25%
Over 35	5 16%
Total	33 100%

State of origin

Women interviewed were from Karen State, Shan State, Mandalay Division, Magwe Division, Sagaing Division, Irrawaddy Division and Rangoon Division. The highest representation was from Sagaing Division, at 28%, closely followed by Magwe Division, at 25%.

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State of Origin Number Percentage

Karen State 1 3%

Shan State 5 16%

Mandalay Division 3 9%

Magwe Division 8 25%

Sagaing Division 9 28%

Irrawaddy Division 1 3%

Rangoon Division 5 16%

Total 32 100%

Ethnicity

While a large percentage of interviewees did not disclose their ethnicity, the largest specified group represented were of Burman ethnicity, at 28%, with a significant representation of Palaung women, at 13%. Shan, Lisu, Hindu, Po Karen, and women of various mixed ethnicities were also present in the study, including Karen-Burman, Shan-Chinese, and Pa-O-Intha-Karen.

Ethnicity Number Percentage

Burman 9 28%

Shan 2 6%

Lisu 1 3%

Hindu 1 3%

Palaung 4 13%

Po Karen 1 3%

Mixed 2 6%

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Not specified 12 38%

Total 32 100%

Marital status and children

44% of women were married and 25% had children with them in China, or were pregnant at the time of interview, while 19% were supporting children back inside Burma, and a further 9% had children split between China, Burma and/or a third host country.

Marital Status Number Percentage

Single 6 19%

Married 14 44%

Divorced/Separated 3 9%

Widow 2 6%

Not specified 7 22%

Total 32 100%

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Children Number Percentage

No Children 7 22%

Children living in China/ currently pregnant

8 25%

Children living in Burma 6 19%

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Children living in China and children in
Burma/ 3rd country

3 9%

Not specified 8 25%

Total 32 100%

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