Case Study: Mrs Malee Ratana (Shoemaking)

Mrs Malee Ratana or Auntie Ngarm (a fictitious name) was 51 years old in 2011. She lived in Zone 9 of the Rom Klao National Housing Authority Housing Estate, Klong Song Ton Noon subdistrict, Lat Kraban district, Bangkok. Leaving school after finishing the eighth grade, she has earned her living sewing leather sandals and shoes of famous brands, such as Scholl, Bata, Tawin and Findig. The work was subcontracted to her by a contractor who owned a row-house factory. Her husband was hired as a driver, earning 10,000 THB (333 USD) a month.

Auntie Ngarm started this work in 1981. She chose to do this job because she could stay home and also do her housework and look after her three children. Before becoming a home worker, Auntie had never done any jobs at all. After leaving school, she began looking for home-based work and got this shoemaking job as her first employment; it continues to be her job.

Auntie said, "*In the past, a lot of people, about 70-80 in the Rom Klao Community Zone 9, were engaged in shoes sewing. Let's say that almost every household was doing the job, either shoemaking or dressmaking at home. Now there are only 20-30 workers since the business is not good. Not a lot of goods are exported as before. Unemployed workers have to go out looking for work. Some have to collect discarded plastic bottles and cardboard boxes and sell them.*

"*Shoemaking is done mostly by women, not a single man will lend his hand because he believes it's a woman's job. Men will go out to work and leave home-based jobs to women.*"

Auntie further added that when she first started shoemaking, there was a lot of work coming her way from the contractor every day. When the contractor got his orders, she would be the first subcontractor, who would then distribute the jobs to other home workers in the community. Previously, there were loads of work and it kept coming so that she had to work all day. She began work each day at 7:00 am and worked until about 10.00 pm or even midnight, and got only a short break during the day or at supper time. Essentially, she spent about 13-15 hours working.

She recalled that then she "worked with many contractors, depending on how much I could handle it." Initially, 10 row house factory-based employers subcontracted their work, amounting to about 1,000-2,000 pairs of shoes, to her to distribute to other community workers. Recently, there were only 3-4 contractors because some of them were out of business, resulting in Auntie's reduced income. The monthly income of 15,000-20,000 THB (500-567 USD) has now lessened to only 4,000-5,000 THB(133-123 USD). Now she works only five days a week, from Monday to Friday. After finishing her housework, she will start sewing shoes from 10:00 am and work till 9:00 pm., and then she goes to bed. Her daily work totals around 10-11 hours.

When asked if there were any employment contracts with her employers, she said no. There were only simple delivery notes. Moreover, she was working for so many companies that she sometimes could not remember their names. As for the wages, for sewing a pair of sandals, the sewer would get four baht (from the original wage of 2.50 THB-0.8USD) for the side sewing only and 7THB(0.23 USD) for sewing around the two pieces. The sewing of a pair of shoes would receive 7 THB, 2 THB higher than before. For all the work distributed by Auntie, she would deduct one THB as a management fee from the sewing wage of every pair of sandals and shoes.

Here is how she described the current situation of her work: "*Now the work is not regular. The incoming job is meticulous but low-paid work. Although it is a rush-job order, the wages are the same. More importantly, the long hours of working are bad to my health. I have a pain in my back and sometimes my fingers are pricked while I am sewing the shoes.*" She added that once she was pregnant but had to sew the shoes, a situation she had to accept because she had no choice.

She further disclosed that 5-6 years ago (around 2005), she was working for a company; no employment contract was signed but there were only delivery notes. She got 2-3 THB for sewing a pair of shoes. Each order would amount to about 500 pairs. She said she had received many orders for sewing work from this contractor. But there were times that they did not pay her wages on time or often postponed their payment. Optimistically, Auntie Ngarm thought she would eventually get paid, but that was not the case. Altogether, the contractor owed her as much as 100,000 THB (3333 USD). She then went to the contractor's house, but he said he could not pay. That left Auntie nonplussed and she decided to take away the rice the contractor sold at his house in exchange for her unpaid wages. "*At least, it's better than nothing,*" she said. At the time, other workers were also not paid and went to demand their wages, but to no avail. Those workers also took away the rice and anything that they could take from the contractor, who appeared to admit his guilt by saying: "*Take as much as you want, indeed I have no money to pay.*"

Auntie Ngarm elaborated on her own experience in not getting paid for her wages. In the past, she worked for many contractors, about whom she said: "*When they have no money, they will not pay us or they will say they'll pay, but not contact us at all.*" She was so worried because she had to pay those who worked under her, too. It was fortunate that her workers understood the problem. Thus, her remedy was to get new orders from new contractors to compensate for the loss of previous wages. "*I have nothing to offer them, so far I have been cheated all along,*" she stated.

Now she has stopped receiving any work from all cheating contractors, except from a company named David (a fictitious name), based in Bangkok's On Nuch area. The company was an exporter of shoes. She was paid 3 THB (0.1 USD) per pair of shoes and if the design was more complicated, she would receive 10-11 THB (0.33-0.34 USD) per pair. She felt that "*though the work is not as regular as before, it's good to be employed.*"