

Case Study: Mrs Walya Pa-tha (Dressmaking)

Mrs Walya Pa-tha (a fictitious name) was 48, divorced, and had three children. She lived with her relatives in Ban Sing subdistrict of Ratchaburi province's Photharam. Her eldest son was married, had two children and lived in Bangkok. Walya's two single daughters lived with her eldest brother in Bangkok. Walya finished her four-year schooling and helped her parents growing rice to support her younger siblings' education till she was 18. Then a friend persuaded her to work in Bangkok. She was hired to work in the stretch fabrics unit at Thong Thai Textile factory, located in Bangkok's Bang Khae area. After working there for five years, she resigned and went to work at a better-paying factory. After three years of working at the new factory, Walya's friends persuaded her to take similar job in the US. The employment was arranged by the Department of Labour (the former name of the Ministry of Labour). She decided to go and work with United Company, a factory producing brand-name clothes, located on Saipan Island in West Pacific. There were a total of 400 Thai and foreign workers there. With a monthly salary of about 30,000 THB(1,000 USD), Walya was well off enough to send money back to support her elder sister. But after three years of working on the island, she had to return to Thailand because her father had taken ill and needed her as his caregiver.

Back at home, Walya tried to find an employment of her own and decided to use all her savings as an investment in sewing work. She spent 100,000 THB(3333 USD) buying five sewing machines, or 20,000 THB(667 USD) each. About 4-5 workers were recruited as members of her team to do the sewing of T-shirts subcontracted from a factory situated on Buddhamonthon 2 Road. Each week, Walya's groups sewed about 1,000 T-shirts, at the rate of five baht per piece. At the same time, Walya had to pay for the water and electricity bills out of her own pocket.

Just over a year of sewing in this manner, her group was at a loss because the wages gained from the factory were not much enough to cover the workers' wages and other rising expenses caused by the economic slump. To compound this, the contractor deducted 10,000 THB (333 USD) of the group's wages as a fine, citing the groups delayed delivery of work that caused the factory to miss its shipment to overseas customers. Such delays happened two or three times, costing the group about 50,000- THB (1,667 USD) in fines. Walya said the reason could be the workers' lack of sewing skills.

Later on, she sold some of the sewing machines so that she had money to invest in selling vegetable, fruits, and food to order at Bang Khae Market. Again, Walya's trading venture took a loss. She also had problems with her husband, who made her return to live in Ratchaburi and take on bulk sewing work. After two years of bulk sewing, Walya a tumor was found on the nape of her neck. All her body's muscles could not be controlled and her arms and legs were too weak to enable her to do anything on her own. She spent two years having her illness cured. During that time, she could not work but had to borrow some money from a loan shark to spend on her medical treatment. In her opinion, homeworkers are being exploited by employers who do not offer any sickness benefit. This left Walya and her family in considerable suffering and burdened by a heavy debt.

At the time of writing, Walya had had an operation and was back in good health. But she had to take bulk sewing work, at the rates of 3-5 THB(0.1-0.17 USD) per piece, and sew doll heads at a rate of 1.50 THB (0.05 USD) per piece. She could sew about 100 heads, earning around 150-200 THB (5-6.7 USD) a day. When the work was available, she would work from 8:00 am till 9:00 p.m. However, the work was not regular. Despite the uncertainty of the income, irregular work and reduced wages against the rising cost of living, Walya still had to continue her sewing job to earn money to repay her debt made with the loan shark. Without any education, skills, or funds to turn to other occupations, Walya was in no position to negotiate with her contractor for higher wages. Nor could she be choosy about the work she wanted to do.
