

Case Study: Mrs Manee Choei-chom (hired to shell sugar-palm fruits)

Mrs Manee Choei-chom (a fictitious name) was 56 years of age (at the time of writing). She finished her four-year primary schooling and lived with her husband and two children in a house located at Ban Klong Ree in Klong Ree subdistrict of Songkhla province's Sathing Phra district. Besides her family, she also had to take care of her own mother, who was well over 70 years old.

Geographically, Ban Klong Ree community is adjacent to the shore of Songkhla Lake. It is a flat area suitable for rice growing. There were about 2,000 sugar palm trees grown naturally along the rice-field dikes. So, most community members earned their living by fishing, growing rice, and engaging in sugar palm-related work. Manee's family was one of many families that fished for a living. Manee and her husband had to go out to the sea to catch fish to support their family. But the income from fishing was not certain, and depended on the amount of the catch. On average, her family earned about 100-200 THB(3.3- 6.7 USD) a day from fishing to support the whole family and a very old mother who could no longer support herself.

Apart from fishing, Manee was also hired by a community factory to shell sugar palm fruits. It was a family business owned by the wife of Ban Klong Ree Tambon (subdistrict) Administration Organization (TAO)'s president. The factory would supply its shelled sugar palm fruits to a food processing factory to produce canned sugar palm fruits. To Manee, shelling of sugar palm fruits was her primary job as she did it every day for eight years.

When Manee was first hired by the factory, her employer verbally agreed to pay her one THB (0.03 USD) per one bag of sugar palm fruits to be shelled. Each bag would contain around 12-13 pieces of sugar palm fruits, which had been previously weighed. Upon delivery, if two bags of shelled sugar palm fruits, put together, did not weigh one kilogram because some of the flesh of fruits was cut while being shelled, Manee would be fined. The amount of the fine varied according to the wholesale price of a bag of sugar palm fruits at that time. For instance, during the season for sugar palm fruits, a bag of them would cost 9 THB (0.3 USD). When the price went up, it could cost as high as 15 THB(0.5 USD) a bag. The fines could be 9-15 THB (0.3-0.5 USD), respectively.

The factory worker would bring 50 bags of sugar palm fruits to Manee's house at 7:00 p.m. every day. Manee worked shelling the fruits from 3:00 a.m. till 9:00 a.m. in the morning,

when the factory worker would come to collect the shelled fruits. Manee would go to the factory to collect her wages every 10 days of work.

This work's problem was its very low wage, and higher and rising cost of living. She admitted, *"I have been shelling sugar palm fruits at the rate of one THB per bag for eight years. The wage never goes up, regardless of the fact that the selling price of the fruits has gone from nine to 15 or 20 THBt. The wage is the same. Today, the prices of rice, eggs, pork and chicken are getting higher. We want to be paid higher. I went to see the employer, asking for a pay rise from one THB per bag to 1.50 THB, so that our daily income will rise from 50 THB(1.67USD) to 75 THB(2.5 USD), which will be a bit more sustainable. But they turned us down."*

Manee described her request for a pay raise to the employer as follows: *"I went to ask for my pay raise two times. First, they wanted me to wait till after the election of the president of the TAO, otherwise they would be accused of buying votes. After the election, I met them again; they said they could not increase my wage. They had to pay high expenses on petrol and factory workers, who had to pick the fruits from the trees, peel the outer shell, separate the peeled fruits, and then collect the shelled fruits. As we do the shelling only, one baht for us is enough, they say."*

Despite the very low wage for shelling sugar palm fruits, Manee was too unskilled to resort to other jobs. Indeed she wanted to take other jobs to increase her daily 50-THB(1.67 USD) income but could not do so. But shelling sugar palm fruits had to be done between 3.00-9.00 a.m. only so that the factory worker could collect the shelled fruits at 9:00 a.m. If they were shelled before 3:00 a.m., these sugar palm fruits could get rancid or go bad. When asked about picking the sugar palm fruits by herself, Manee said that could not be done either. Though the sugar palm trees are grown naturally, they are owned. *"Grown naturally on the rice field dikes but we are not allowed to pick their fruits. The rice field owners will rent out these palm trees, on a rice field plot basis. For instance, the rental of four rice field plots will amount to 2,000 THB (66.67 USD). The renters are entitled to get access to the palm sugar or sugar palm fruits, according to the number of palm trees grown around the four rice field plots. We're too poor to do so. The money we earn is spent on household food and our children's education. There's not enough money to rent anybody's rice fields,"* she said.

Manee badly wanted the authorities to guarantee minimum wages for home working. She said, *"Many of us have tried to negotiate for higher wages, but did not succeed. In Klong Ree, Pha To, Sathing Phra and Bo Daeng areas, there are about four factories supplying*

shelled sugar palm fruits to food-processing manufacturers. Each factory pays different wages. We'd like the government to ensure minimum wages for sugar palm fruits shelling workers, like the price insurance provided for rice farmers."
