

Case Study: Mrs Fatimah Yiha (Hijab Embroidery)

Mrs Fatimah Ratana Yiha (a fictitious name) was now 38 years old and finished her 12th grade schooling. She lived with her husband, who worked as a security guard at Narathiwat airport and earned a monthly salary of 6,500 THB (216.67 USD). The couple and their five school-age children lived in Khok Khian subdistrict of Narathiwat province's Muang district.

Soon after finishing her education, Fatimah got married and had her baby. Work in Narathiwat was hard to come by, and Fatimah also had to look after her baby; she decided to take up hijab (Muslim women's head scarf) embroidery to earn an income to support her family. She spent some time with her neighbours acquiring her embroidering skills and had started doing this type of homework at the age of 18. Later, she joined the Ban Thon Hijab Embroidery Group to exchange experiences in and information about new designs of hijab. Then the group had about 30 members and a lot of Ban Thon community women were interested in learning how to do the hijab embroidering. When they finished their training, these women would take the group's work to do it at home.

Fatimah's work would be given to her by the group's chair, who would receive orders from contractors based in Narathiwat's Muang and Tak Bai districts. The chair would distribute the jobs to the members, who would deliver their finished work to the chair's house to be sent on to the contractors. These embroidered hijabs would then be sent on to shops in Malaysia.

The wages would depend on how difficult or easy the particular work was and the sizes. A 250 THB (8.33 USD) per piece would have a big bouquet covering the area from the hijab's edge to its neckline, whereas a small bouquet could earn as little as 50 THB (1.67 USD) per piece. Simple hemstitching of the scarf, without any flowery design, would earn 20 THB (0.67 USD) per piece. About 10-15 THB (0.33-0.5 USD) per piece would be deducted by the group's chair as a roundtrip transport expense to deliver the work.

Fatimah's working hours lasted from 9.00 am to 3.30 pm. If it was a rush job, she had to work at night too, between 6.00 pm and 2.00 am. For 250 THB (8.33 USD) big-bouquet embroidering, Fatimah had to spend the whole day doing it. In case of a medium-sized bouquet embroidering, which paid 80 THB (2.67 USD) per piece, she could finish two pieces

a day. Only the fabric was provided by the contractors. Other raw materials, such as thread, and equipment like an embroidery machine, scissors, and a hemstitcher were to be bought by the homeworkers. A spool of thread cost 20 THB(0.67 USD)and an embroidery machine was 30,000 THB(1,000 USD). Fatimah had to pay for her machine in 1,000- THB (33.33 USD) monthly installments. If the work was damaged, she would have to pay for the price of the fabric, which varied from 80 THB(2.67 USD)to 100 THB (3.33 USD)according to its quality.

The embroidered fabric from which Fatimah earned 250- THB (8.33 USD) would have a market price of 700THB (23.33 USD); if it included pearly-bead decorations, its price would rise to 1,000 THB (33.33 USD).

As a home-based hijab embroiderer, Fatimah often experienced delayed payment or no payment of her wages at all. She said, *“My embroidery jobs came from many contractors. At first, they were good. Our first delivery of work would not get paid. They would pay for our first delivery of work when we delivered our second lot. Then, the orders were numerous; the first and second lots were a week away. But later on, they began to pay just parts of the wages, citing the delayed payment from their employers in Malaysia as a reason for their overdue payment. They said they’d pay all the wages next month. But then they didn’t. It’s like I worked for nothing. No money came in.”*

Being asked about the unpaid wages, she said, *“I don’t know how to get them. The contractors said their Malaysian employers had not paid them, thus they had no money to pay us either. Going to Malaysia is beyond us. We don’t know who or where they are, not to mention the travel expense.”*

That was not the end of the problems. *“Some contractors brought their work to the group, but did not show up to collect the finished products at the appointed time. We could not get in touch with them by phone either. A pile of products were left at the group’s office and the group’s chair could only take them to sell to some shops in Narathiwat’s downtown. Not all of them were sold. Several trips were made, costing us more in petrol bills. Not much money was left for our wages,”* Fatimah elaborated.

Despite the many problems she faced, Fatimah admitted that she could not stop doing this hijab embroidery job. *“We’ve coped with a load of problems. Some contractors didn’t pay us at all. Others paid some but not all, asking to pay in so many installments that we cannot remember. If there are new contractors offering work to us, we’ll take it even if the same*

problems could happen. Even the former contractors offered us work again, we'd do it. How can we survive by not doing it? We have no other jobs. No work means we have nothing to eat."

Over the past two years, Fatimah and her friends in the group have experienced unemployment. At first, her work was of only a small bouquet that earned them about 60-80 THB (2-2.67 USD) per piece. Then the Malaysian buyers' preference changed from machine embroidery to hand embroidery. This would get 30 THB (1 USD) per piece, while additional decoration of pearly-beads to it would get 50-80 THB (1.67-2.67 USD)—maybe a bit over 100 THB (3.33 USD) as the highest. However, a piece of embroidery by hand would take quite a long time. Now no hijab embroidery work has come into the community at all. Neither machine-made nor hand embroidery was needed. A variety of designs could be produced by a machine and then a ready-made design could be securely pressed onto a hijab. Moreover, embroidery produced by computer-operated machines has become more popular among buyers because there are lots of designs, including those of tailor-made patterns, to choose from.

Fatimah had five school-aged children whose daily allowance amounted to 200 THB (6.67 USD), not to mention the family's frugal food expense of 150 THB (5 USD) a day and water and electricity bills. Though compulsory education was provided by the state free of charge, her children's school activity expenses were her responsibility. With no embroidery work coming in, she could not remain unemployed but decided to help support the family by becoming a construction worker at Narathiwat airport, earning 250 THB (8.33 USD) a day. She admitted, *"Construction work is very arduous. I've never done it before in my life. But however hard it is I have to put up with it so that at least I can feed my children. We have to buy everything as we have no rice field here but the sea and sandy soil. We don't know how to fish. Neither is there embroidery work, only a redundant embroidery machine, whose installment payment had already been completed. Because of the children, I can still smile and not give up."*

About her friends in the embroidery group, Fatimah says: *"There's almost nothing for them to do here. Many of them have to gut and clean anchovy for traders, who will bring the fish to them. Though their incomes are very meager, they have to do it. Otherwise they will have no money to buy food."*

Fatimah’s future is very uncertain. The airport was under construction to elevate it to an international airport status, thus she was still employed. Once the construction was completed, she wondered what work she would do.
