

Case Study: Mrs Buala Kaen-kwang (Gems Cutting)

Mrs Buala Kaen-kwang (a fictitious name), 41 years old, lived in Ban Nong Thum of Na Chum Saeng subdistrict in Khon Kaen province's Phu Wiang district. She had finished her six-year schooling.

Buala's family consisted of herself, her husband and two children, both under 16; one was a pupil. The family's main occupation was growing rice, which earned about 60,000 THB(2,000 USD) a year. After the rice-farming season, Buala's husband would be hired as a truck driver transporting sugar cane, as well as being employed to do odd jobs in the community and rice fields. Such supplementary work brought in another yearly income of 50,000 THB(1,666.67 USD) to the family. Buala also had her supplementary employment of cutting gems at home, earning another monthly income of 5,600 THB (186.67 USD).

Previously, Buala was a farmer but for 5-6 years has turned to cutting gems. She had no formal skill training as a gem cutter but learned from her village neighbours. She would receive uncut gems from a private operator generally known to the villagers as *Hia* (Older Brother) Serm, who lived in Ban Nong Kae, of Kud Kwang subdistrict in Khon Kaen's Nong Rua district. Hia Serm's contracted homeworkers for two types of work. The first step involved slicing and pre-forming the gems (before polishing them). One THB (0.03 USD) per piece of gem would be paid for this step of work. There were four villagers in Buala's community doing this job. The second step was polishing the gems, which paid 1.30 THB (0.04 USD) per piece. Buala and eight other neighbours in her village were employed to do this work. Apart from Hia Serm, there was another contractors operating a small gem-cutting factory employing 20 workers, whose daily wages would be 160-170 THB (5.33-5.66 USD).

There was no written employment contract, only a simple verbal agreement between the two parties. Both Buala and Hia Serm needed no security deposit between them. Buala could produce an average of 100 pieces of gem a day at the rate of 1.30 THB (0.04 USD) per gem, so she could earn about 130 THB (4.33 USD) each day. This wage rate was raised from 1.20 THB(0.04 USD) per piece in January 2003. Hia Serm said he wanted to motivate the homeworkers to work harder so he decided to pay them higher wages.

Buala had to ride her own motorcycle to deliver the work every five days. The round trip to deliver the work cost about 50 THB (1.67 USD). Hia Serm would pay the wages in cash at his house-cum-office within seven days of the delivery. Once Buala's wage was deducted because the gems she cut had been damaged. Hia Serm reasoned that he had to send the damaged cut gems for repair. There were five damaged cut gems, which cost Buala 10

THB (0.33 USD)—2 THB (0.067 USD) per piece. Buala had not been informed about this condition when Hia Serm agreed to contract her, but just let her know two days before her due payday.

Only the uncut gems or rough material and caustic soda liquid were provided by Buala's contractor while she had to pay for other equipment out of her own pocket, such as the grinder, saws, and polishing wheels. Buala spent 2,000 THB (66.67 USD) buying used tools in cash.

Each day Buala spent 7-8 hours, between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., cutting gems. Over the past year, her working hours have been lessened because of other work, for which she was also responsible, such as housework, looking after nieces or nephews, and farm work. Her monthly household expenses included 500 THB (16.67USD) water and electricity bills, 3,000 THB (100 USD) for foodstuff and 1,500 THB (50 USD) for her school-age child. Buala did not hire any children as her helpers.

Her gem-cutting work was not furnished with any safety equipment. In 2006, Buala was informed of occupational hazards and solutions to such dangers by the Northeastern Women's Network and Foundation for Labour and Employment Promotion (Homenet Thailand). The two organizations provided her with information about the safety of gems cutting, physical exercises, and suitable set-up of working conditions.

The gem-cutting occupational problems and health hazards and safety were irritated eyes and back pains. Buala took care of her health by herself by giving her eyes a rest and sleeping when her back ached. If the pains were too much, she would go to Phu Wiang Hospital, where her gold card entitled her to free medical services¹. She said she had never worked when she was pregnant but saw other home-based women do so in their ninth-month of pregnancy, without any negative impacts on the mother and her baby.

About work-related problems, Buala thought there were three main aspects. First were long working hours, followed by health hazards caused by gems cutting. The third problem was the lack of any welfare benefits for home-based gem cutters. The only benefit was an annual New Year party organized by the contractor. In her case, there was no problem about homemaker's rights and work-related justice, "I've neither had any such problems nor been treated unfairly in the gem-cutting employment. So I've never kept an eye on, demanded for or filed any complaints." But in the case of other home workers in general being exploited, she said it resulted first from the lack of clear and binding employment contracts that would hold the employers liable. This was compounded because those workers' lack information

¹ According to the National Health Security Law 2002, all Thai citizens are entitled to free medical services.

about who has contracted their services, such as their real names or addresses; if problems arose, the contractors could not be traced. To Buala, this was not the issue: she knew who she worked for and where to find him. The last problem involved the homeworkers' personal limitations related to age, education, responsibilities and lack of access to necessary information. Without any education or very low education, the homeworkers were left with no options for other employment.
