

Psychological Resilience of Migrant Workers in Thailand: Between Challenges and Adaptation in the Destination Country

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Abstract

Psychological resilience is an important factor in determining the mental well-being of migrant workers. Migrant workers are people who migrate or have migrated from one country to another who will be employed by anyone other than themselves. This study aims to determine the factors which influence the psychological resilience of migrant workers in Thailand, and how they adapt to challenges in the new environment. This study is a qualitative study. The subjects in the study were three migrant workers in Thailand. Data collection methods used were interviews, observation and documentation. Data analysis used was data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study showed that the factors influencing the psychological resilience of migrant workers in Thailand can be grouped into two, specifically internal factors and external factors. These internal factors are spirituality, self-efficacy, optimism, self-esteem, hope, and hardiness. External factors are social and family support. Meanwhile, the description of the adaptation of migrant workers in Thailand to the challenges in the new environment can be grouped into three strategies: social adaptation, economic adaptation and cultural adaptation.

Keywords: psychological resilience; migrant workers; challenges and adaptation

Introduction

Labor migration is a global phenomenon which continues to increase, especially in the Southeast Asian region. Thailand is one of the main destination countries for migrant workers, including from neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) shows that more than 4 million migrant workers work in Thailand, with the majority in the construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and domestic work sectors (Tasya, 2023).

The majority of Indonesian migrant workers work in the informal sector, especially as domestic workers. According to data from the International Labour Organization (ILO), around 80% of the 6.5 million Indonesian migrant workers work as domestic workers (Boangmanalu, 2017). This work generally involves tasks such as cleaning the house, cooking, washing, caring for children or the elderly, and other domestic tasks. The focus of this study is Indonesian migrant workers who work as domestic workers in Thailand. An initial interview with one of the Indonesian migrant workers in Thailand stated that the main reasons for choosing to work as a domestic

worker in Thailand were the opportunity to earn a better income than in Indonesia, having a stable and secure job with better working conditions, getting access to decent health services and developing new skills that would be useful in the future (NS, 2024).

Working in a foreign country brings its own challenges. Indonesian migrant workers in Thailand face various challenges that affect their well-being. Many migrant workers in Thailand face language barriers, cultural differences, discrimination, and harsh working conditions. In addition, the lack of access to mental health services and social support in the destination country often makes Indonesian migrant workers vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and depression. A survey by the International Labour Organization (2022) found that more than 60% of migrant workers in Thailand experience psychological stress due to workload and uncertainty of legal status.

On the other hand, not all Indonesian migrant workers in Thailand experience the same psychological stress or negative impacts. Some of them are able to overcome psychological stress, adapt to new environments, develop coping strategies, and demonstrate strong psychological resilience (Adi, et.al., 2023). This is what makes it important to understand the factors contributing to the psychological resilience of migrant workers in Thailand.

Studies in migration psychology show that psychological resilience is an important factor in determining the mental well-being of migrant workers. According to Ungar (2012), psychological resilience is an individual's ability to adapt positively despite facing significant stress and life pressures. Research by Chen, et.al. (2021) found that social support, effective coping strategies, and cultural understanding in the destination country play a key role in shaping the psychological resilience of migrant workers. Meanwhile, Bollini, et.al. (2018) showed that migrant workers who have religiosity and community-based adaptation strategies tend to be better able to cope with psychological

stress than those who feel isolated. In addition, research on labor migration by McKay, et.al. (2019) emphasized that minimal legal protection and unstable working conditions can reduce the psychological resilience of migrant workers. Therefore, understanding the factors which support or hinder their psychological resilience is essential in improving the well-being of migrant workers.

Based on the social facts and literature above, it can be concluded that migrant workers in Thailand face various challenges which can affect their psychological condition, but some are also able to survive and adapt well. Psychological resilience is a key factor in determining how migrant workers cope with the challenges they face in the destination country. Therefore, this study is important to analyze the factors affecting the psychological resilience of migrant workers in Thailand, as well as how they adapt to challenges in the new environment. By understanding the psychological resilience factors of migrant workers in Thailand, this study can provide recommendations for policy makers, humanitarian organizations, and migrant worker communities to support the psychological well-being of migrant workers.

Methods

The research method used is qualitative. According to Bogdan & Moleong (in Dama, et.al, 2023) stated that qualitative research is qualitative methods are research which provides descriptive information in the form of written or spoken words about people or behavior to be observed. Data collection methods use interviews, observation and documentations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three Indonesian migrant workers who work as domestic workers in Thailand. Meanwhile, participant observation aims to see the subject's activities and obtain more complete data. In this research, according to Miles and

Huberman (in Sugiyono, 2019) data analysis techniques used in qualitative research have three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and data verification.

Results and Discussion

The object of this study is the psychological resilience of migrant workers in Thailand in adapting to challenges in the destination country. Migrant workers are Indonesian citizens who work abroad, either formally or informally. This term replaces the terms Indonesian Migrant Workers (TKI) and Female Migrant Workers (TKW).

Currently, many Indonesians work abroad because of job opportunities and higher salaries. They also hope to improve their families' standard of living. The reasons for working abroad are getting higher salaries, increasing career opportunities, a more professional work environment, more guaranteed facilities and protection for workers, taking advantage of opportunities to improve the family's economy. In January-August 2024, there were 207,090 Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) placed in various countries, one of which was in Thailand. The following is data on migrant workers in Thailand who are the subject of the research.

Table 1. Research Subject Data

No	Subject	Work	Duration	From
1	NS	Domestic Workers	7 years	East Java
2	OD	Domestic Workers	8 years	West Java
3	PN	Domestic Workers	10 years	Central Java

Based on the data above, there are three Indonesian migrant workers in Thailand who will be the subjects of the study. Subject NS who comes from East Java and has worked in Thailand for 7 years. Subject DG comes from West Java and has worked in Thailand for 8 years. Subject PN who comes from Central Java and has worked in Thailand for 10 years.

Psychological resilience is the ability of individuals to adapt positively despite facing stress, challenges, or difficulties in life (Ungar, 2012). In the context of migrant workers, resilience refers to their ability to cope with stress, cope with work difficulties, and adapt to the social and cultural environment in the destination country.

Challenges Faced by Migrant Workers in Thailand

Migrant workers in Thailand, including from Indonesia, face various challenges which test their psychological resilience, such as:

1. **Uncertain Legal Status:** Many migrant workers enter Thailand through irregular channels or experience visa problems, leaving them vulnerable to deportation and labor exploitation.
2. **Harsh Working Conditions:** The majority of migrant workers work in manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and domestic work, with long hours and low wages.
3. **Language and Cultural Barriers:** Not all migrant workers can communicate in Thai, which complicates social interactions and access to public services.
4. **Discrimination and Social Isolation:** Some migrant workers experience discriminatory treatment from local communities and feel isolated from their own communities.
5. **Limited Access to Health and Welfare Services:** Many migrant workers struggle to access mental health services and psychosocial support in Thailand.

Although some migrant workers have difficulty facing various challenges in their destination countries, many migrant workers survive and even thrive in their destination countries and new environments.

Resilience factors can come from within (internal) or from outside (external). Grotberg (in Desmita, 2012) explains three sources of resilience, one of which is the "I am" factor (Inner Strength), the "I have" factor (External Support) and the "I can" factor (a source of resilience related to what a person can do in relation to social and interpersonal skills). Here are some factors which able to help improving the resilience of migrant workers in Thailand: internal and external factors.

Internal Factor

Internal factors of resilience are factors coming from within a person which influence their ability to adapt and face challenges (Rukmini & Syafiq, 2019). Internal factors of migrant workers in Thailand to continue working there are as listed below.

1. Spirituality

Spirituality is the belief and good intention to practice religious teachings (Nasrudin & Jaenudin, 2021). Beliefs and practices carried out by migrant workers in Thailand to establish a relationship with God and achieve a meaningful life through various means, such as practicing worship, being tolerant, and adapting to the surrounding environment.

"I do the worship, at least the obligatory prayers, while adjusting to my workplace. At the beginning, I never heard any call for praying because the mosques are rare here. Praying makes my heart calm" (OD, 2024)

"My employer is not a Muslim, but sometimes he reminds me to do my

prayer. Especially when I have a lot of work and make me stress, praying makes it all calmer. In addition, my employer is a nice person. Alhamdulillah" (PN, 2024)

"Household work is a lot, Mbak, sometimes it makes me stress, so usually I do my obligatory prayers and Tahajud prayers" (NS, 2024)

Migrant workers in Thailand practice spirituality through obligatory prayers in dealing with stress and pressures of life in Thailand. Studies show that religiosity and spiritual practices can be effective coping mechanisms in dealing with stress and pressures of life (Sari & Haryati, 2023). Rahmandani & Maysa (2023) stated that *tahajud* prayer can overcome stress and anxiety. Islam is the largest minority religion in Thailand. Most muslims in Thailand live in the southern provinces, to be specific Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, and Satun (Ekawati, 2020). This makes it difficult for migrant workers in Thailand when they want to carry out spiritual practices in the mosques.

2. Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to complete a task or achieve a certain goal (Zagoto, 2019). Self-efficacy is also defined as the ability of oneself to solve problems. Self-efficacy is an important factor in determining a person's drive and persistence in pursuing goals. Many migrant workers in Thailand have a strong motivation to improve their family's economy in their home country, which makes them more resilient to stress and challenges in the workplace.

Self-efficacy is an important factor in determining a person's drive and persistence in pursuing goals. Many migrant workers in Thailand have a strong motivation to improve their family's economy in their

home country, which makes them more resilient to stress and challenges at work.

“Based on the experience of my friend working here (in Thailand), the work is easy and it pays a lot so I was ensured that I could help my family economically, it makes me want to work better here (in Thailand) so I work hard and believe that I can get over any problems” (NS, 2024)

“Any household work, I will finish it because I know I can do it even though I need to take a short break because there are a lot of work to be done” (PN, 2024)

“I believe I can help my family in West Java by working in Thailand, I finish the housework better, so the result will be good and I can help my family economically” (OD, 2024)

Migrant workers in Thailand believe that they can help the family economy better by working and solving problems and tasks well. The results of research by Lestari, et.al. (2023) stated that migrant workers have a strong belief that working abroad can help the family's economic resilience. In line with the research by Rohmah, et.al. (2017) that there were changes in the respondents' standard of living in terms of economy, social, education, and even health compared to before becoming Indonesian Migrant Workers, although the level of change was not too significant. This is what makes migrant workers in Thailand have the confidence and ability to help the family economy.

3. Optimism

Optimism is an attitude which sees everything from the positive side and has the belief that all problems can be overcome. Optimistic people tend to think more positively and do not give up easily (Anshory

& Hafid, 2022). Becoming an Indonesian migrant worker (PMI) is an option to improve the family's economic level because the salary standards abroad are better.

“Alhamdulillah, after three years working here, I was able to send my mother on Umrah. I am optimistic that working here can help my family even though it is far away, but it does not become a barrier to achieving success in another country” (PN, 2024)

“At the beginning of my first year of work, I wanted to give up and go home, because there was a lot of work and my salary was often late. Because I remembered my family in West Java, I had to be enthusiastic and optimistic that by working here I could help my family” (OD, 2024)

“From the beginning, my friends told me about the work here, so from the beginning I was sure and could succeed working abroad, I could handle any problem well” (NS, 2024)

Optimism is an important factor which can help migrant workers in Thailand achieve success. Optimism can also encourage migrant workers to learn from every process of their life. Lusiawati (2019) explains that the success achieved by optimistic people is due to positive thinking, persistent efforts, and self-confidence in facing every situation. According to Zulkifli (2017), optimistic people are confident in doing business, then confident that their efforts will achieve what they want. Optimism can help migrant workers to rise and achieve success.

4. Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a person's assessment of themselves as a whole. Self-esteem can be measured as high or low (Iqbal & Nurjannah,

2017). Indonesian migrant workers often experience challenges which can affect their self-esteem, such as violence, delayed wages, and others that affect self-esteem. However, their self-confidence is an important factor in helping them adapt to a new environment, thus increasing the self-esteem of migrant workers in Thailand.

"I regularly send my salary to repair my family's house in my hometown, buy rice fields, and help pay for family members' education. Although when I first started, I felt threatened because there were migrant workers who were involved in cases of violence, and salaries that were not in accordance with the agreement" (PN, 2024)

"When I first started working, I felt like I was forced to do forced labor, because I not only did housework, but was also asked to take care of the employer's young child. As long as I could, I did everything. Alhamdulillah, the employer gave me an additional salary because the work was doubled" (OD, 2024)

"Alhamdulillah, I joined an official agency, I assessed myself well, and got an employer who was also a good person" (NS, 2024)

The dignity of migrant workers can be threatened by various problems, such as violence, slavery, and forced labor. In the research subjects, only DG experienced forced labor by working as a domestic worker and caring for children, while subjects PN and NS felt safe and protected. To protect the dignity of migrant workers, the Indonesian government has issued regulations and protection policies.

Natalis & Ispriyarso (2018) stated that feminist legal theory urges the government to create regulations, especially regarding the protection of female migrant workers, which place women in a special position.

Sepang (2021) explains that the Government has issued Law No. 18/2017 concerning the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers as an improvement on Law No. 39/2004 concerning the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers Abroad.

5. Hope

Hope is a feeling of optimism about the future, which encourages individuals to strive to achieve goals and overcome challenges, with the belief that good things will happen (Muniroh, 2018). The expectations of migrant workers in Thailand are the desire to get decent work, strong legal protection, and adequate welfare in the destination country, as well as ease in the placement and return process.

"I hope that wages or salaries can be increased and are decent, as well as better welfare, and I can continue to take leave to be able to return to my hometown" (PN, 2024)

"I hope to have a decent job, get good treatment, get paid on time, get paid according to the workload, and be able to go home once a year" (OD, 2024)

"My goal of working here is to help improve my family's economy, join an official agency, and be protected by law, hopefully, my goal can be achieved in helping my family" (NS, 2024)

Hope is a positive mental state about the ability to achieve goals in the future. The hope of migrant workers in Thailand is generally to get proper treatment, have the same rights as other workers, fight for common rights, and improve the standard of living of their families. Research from Shaliha & Ulfran (2023) states that protection of work and equal treatment for

migrant workers. Nandini (2017) states that the contribution of optimism will create happiness in employees. Meanwhile, Solikhah & Suminar (2022) state that there is a positive and significant relationship between hope and resilience.

6. Hardiness

Hardiness is the psychological resilience or tough personality that a person has in facing stressful situations (Garaga, 2017). Migrant worker hardiness is the ability of migrant workers to face various challenges and problems faced while working abroad.

"The initial difficulty of working was the language, I didn't know Thai, my employer was originally from Thailand and used Thai, the initial adjustments were often wrong, I used a lot of signs. Little by little, I learned Thai and bought a dictionary too. Alhamdulillah, now I understand and need to learn more" (PN, 2024)

"My difficulty at the beginning was the hard work, not only housework, but also being asked to take care of a child, still a baby. Confused, stressed, and taking care of a child, initially I only knew that I would work as a domestic worker, not a babysitter, while washing clothes suddenly the child cried, so I did what I could, taking care of and cleaning the housework" (OD, 2024)

"When I first started working here, I felt alone and isolated because I didn't know the people here, because I worked here and intended to earn a living, so I approached and chatted with the neighbors here, so that they would become family" (NS, 2024)

The hardiness of migrant workers in Thailand is very good. The three migrant workers experienced different and

challenging situations, even stressful at the beginning of working in Thailand, and it was a challenge in itself to be able to live and get through it well and become a tough person.

Hardiness can help someone manage stress, reduce negative effects, and stay physically and mentally healthy (Rahmat, et.al., 2021; Rohmah, Sari, & Ayu, 2017). According to Maullasari, Wibowo & Awalya (2021), high hardiness will greatly assist in the process of adapting to new things so that the stress caused is not much. Nurjan & Linda (2023) stated that there is a significant or positive relationship between hardiness and psychological well-being in Indonesian workers domiciled in Saudi Arabia. This means that the higher the hardiness of Indonesian workers in Saudi Arabia, the higher the level of psychological well-being of Indonesian workers in Saudi Arabia.

External Factor

External factors of resilience are factors which come from outside, such as social support, access to resources, and a safe environment (Rukmini & Syafiq, 2019). These factors can help Indonesian migrant workers working as domestic workers in Thailand face problems and adapt to difficult situations.

1. Social Support

Social support is a form of attention, care, appreciation, comfort, calm, or assistance given to others, either individually or in groups, which aims to help them deal with problems or difficulties (Patilima, et.al., 2021).

"[...] from the beginning, I have joined an official agent and received support from the organization if there are problems while working in Thailand, such as legal aid, mental health services, and others, Sis" (NS, 2024)

"From the beginning, I have joined the migrant worker community in Thailand, there is also a WAG, Sis, so if something happens to us, we will definitely be informed and we will help together" (PN, 2024)

"[...] at the beginning, I hadn't joined a community, but a friend invited me to join an organization and community so I could get information and emotional support in my work, Sis" (OD, 2024)

Migrant worker communities play a vital role in helping each other through emotional support, information, and social solidarity. This community often functions as a place to share experiences and strategies for dealing with the pressures of life in the destination country. The three migrant workers in Thailand received social support by actively joining the migrant worker community in Thailand.

According to research by Fitriani, et.al. (2024), the forms of social support for migrant workers are as follows.

- a. Support from International Organizations and Social Institutions
Organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and various NGOs is active in providing legal assistance, labor protection, and psychosocial services for migrant workers.
- b. Support from the migrant worker community can be in the form of assistance in improving the quality of life, economic empowerment, and protection from legal, economic, and social aspects (Fitriani, et.al., 2024).

2. Family Support

Extended family support is one of the factors influencing the welfare of migrant workers' families (Rosiana, et.al., 2023). This support

can be in the form of attention, advice, and help with household chores.

"Alhamdulillah, my family in Indonesia always supports me, by reminding me and giving me advice to work properly, we still often communicate via WA" (PN, 2024)

"My family certainly supports me working here, besides my family, there are fellow migrant workers, helping each other with work and advising each other if something goes wrong" (NS, 2024)

"My family really supports me working here, when I first wanted to leave here, they told me to work well, be careful, and take care of myself in a foreign country" (OD, 2024)

Family support can help migrant workers in various ways, such as providing attention and advice, helping with household chores, and providing encouragement and motivation. This is in line with the research results of Rosyidah, et.al. (2023) which stated that the role of family support in family resilience shows that the higher the support received from the family, the higher the level of resilience in the families of Indonesian Migrant Workers (TKI) in Bangkalan. Another study by Faradiah, Mariyati, Maryami (2021) stated that there is a relationship between family support and resilience.

Migrant Workers' Adaptation in Thailand

Adaptation is a process of adjusting to new things regardless of whether we want them or not (Soemantri, 2019). The adaptation carried out by migrant workers in Thailand is in the form of social adaptation and economic adaptation.

1. Social Adaptation

Migrant workers' social adaptation is the process of migrant workers' adjustment to social life in a new environment. This social adaptation is important so that migrant workers do not experience problems in interacting with people around them. Social adaptation refers to the ability of migrant workers to adjust to the social environment in the destination country, including culture, norms, language, and social interactions with local communities and fellow migrant workers.

Indonesian migrant workers who work as domestic workers in Thailand often face more difficult conditions than workers in the formal sector, this is because a few issues below.

- a. Limited social space: Most domestic workers in Thailand work and live in their employer's home, so their social interactions are limited.
- b. Cultural and language differences: The difficulty in understanding Thai customs and language makes communication with employers and the surrounding environment a challenge for domestic workers in Thailand. Thailand has a different culture from Indonesia, especially in terms of food, communication methods, and social customs.
- c. Isolation and lack of social support: Unlike workers in the industrial sector who can interact with many people at work, some domestic workers in Thailand work and live in their employer's home, so interactions with the outside community are limited.
- d. Discrimination and exploitation: Some domestic workers in Thailand experience unfair treatment, such as long working hours, delayed salaries, and limited access to holidays.
- e. Lack of personal freedom: Some domestic workers in Thailand are not allowed to leave the house or have sufficient rest time.
- f. Lack of legal protection: Not all domestic workers in Thailand receive strong legal protection, especially those who enter through informal channels.

To overcome these challenges, Indonesian Migrant Workers working as domestic workers in Thailand often employ the following strategies:

- a. Joining a community of Indonesian migrant workers in Thailand: A community of fellow migrant workers is a place to share experiences, seek support, and get information about their rights.
- b. Utilizing technology for communication: Social media and messaging apps such as WhatsApp or Facebook are used to stay in touch with family and migrant communities.
- c. Learning the language of the destination country: Many domestic workers in Thailand independently or through communities learn the local language so they can communicate better with their employers and the surrounding environment.
- d. Using holidays to socialize: Domestic workers in Thailand often use holidays to gather in certain places with other migrant communities.
- e. Recognizing and understanding the work culture in Thailand. By understanding the work culture and norms, domestic workers in Thailand can adapt more easily to their employers and the work environment.

2. Economic Adaptation

Economic adaptation refers to the ability of migrant workers to manage finances, obtain stable employment, and improve their economic well-being while working abroad. Economic adaptation of migrant workers can be done in various ways, such as adopting a new culture, coordinating with placement agencies, and getting assistance from the government.

Indonesian migrant workers who work as domestic workers in Thailand often face several economic obstacles such as:

- a. Unstable wages: Some domestic workers in Thailand receive below-standard wages or experience delays in wage payments.
- b. High cost of living in big cities: Big cities like Bangkok have a relatively high cost of living, which can reduce the amount of money can be sent to family in Indonesia.
- c. Lack of access to banking and financial services: Some Indonesian migrant workers do not have bank accounts or use remittance services with high fees.
- d. Dependence on a single job: Work as a domestic worker in Thailand often does not provide additional income opportunities, so they are completely dependent on the salary from their employer.

To survive and manage their finances, many Indonesian Migrant Workers working as domestic workers in Thailand apply the following strategies:

- a. Saving and managing finances well: Many Indonesian migrant workers working as domestic workers in Thailand have started to set aside part of their income for savings or small investments.
- b. Using more cost-effective remittance services: Indonesian migrant workers working as domestic workers in Thailand usually choose remittance services which offer lower fees so that the money sent to Indonesia is more optimal.
- c. Learning additional skills: Some Indonesian migrant workers working as domestic workers in Thailand use their free time to learn skills such as cooking, sewing, or other skills which can be useful in the future.
- d. Working part-time if possible: In some cases, Indonesian migrant workers working as domestic workers in Thailand look for additional jobs such as cleaning other houses or cooking to increase their income.

- e. Investing in their hometown: Some Indonesian migrant workers working as domestic workers in Thailand have started to plan small businesses or property investments in Indonesia in preparation for when they return home.

Social and economic adaptation of Indonesian migrant workers working as domestic workers in Thailand by implementing several strategies so that they can survive and thrive in a different work environment.

Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that the factors which influence the psychological resilience of migrant workers in Thailand can be grouped into two, that is internal factors and external factors. The internal factors are spirituality, self-efficacy, optimism, self-esteem, hope, and hardiness. External factors include social and family support.

Meanwhile, the description of migrant workers' adaptation in Thailand to the challenges in Thailand can be grouped into two strategies, specifically social adaptation and economic adaptation. Social and economic adaptation of Indonesian migrant workers who work as domestic workers in Thailand requires the right strategy so that they can survive and thrive in a different work environment. With community support, improving language and other skills, and good financial management, many Indonesian migrant workers who work as domestic workers in Thailand are able to live a better life while working in Thailand.

To improve the psychological resilience of migrant workers, collaboration between the government, international organizations, worker communities, and support from families in the country of origin is needed. Government collaboration regarding fairer legal protection and policies for Indonesian migrant workers working as

domestic workers in Thailand remains a challenge that needs further attention.

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