

**Second-Class Citizens?  
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By Irwin Loy**

Faced with a shortage of domestic help, Malaysia has been turning to Cambodia to find workers. Many, though, aren't receiving what's promised.

The wound over Lay Limheang's left ear has healed into a coarse, bulbous lump. But she says it's the scars you can't see that trouble her most now.

There have never been many options for women like her in this small village in central Cambodia: make your living in the fields, or head to town and get a job at the factory.

Limheang chose the latter. But she found she could barely make ends meet working for \$80 a month, so in 2009, she quit her job and moved to Phnom Penh to train as a live-in housemaid.

By that September, she was starting a new life in Kuala Lumpur. She had spent months learning how to cook and clean. But within weeks, battered, penniless and holding no passport, she says she was praying for an escape.

Malaysia is facing what's been described as a crisis over its foreign domestic workers: there just aren't enough of them. Now, Malaysia has turned to countries like Cambodia to fill in the gap. And with its burgeoning population—disproportionately young, unskilled and underemployed—it seems like a natural fit.

Almost overnight, the number of women leaving Cambodia to work in Malaysia has skyrocketed, but the crucial regulations and oversight meant to keep the women safe haven't kept pace. At best, the industry's harshest critics say, foreign maids in Malaysia are treated like second-class citizens and denied minimum labour rights afforded to other workers. At its worst, the job can become a form of modern-day debt bondage.

For Lay Limheang, the problems started within weeks of arriving in Malaysia. The agency that trained her had provided her courses in basic English—she learned the words for different kinds of food and household objects, as well as some simple commands. But the couple she was placed with didn't speak English.

'My boss asked me to bring her some vegetables, but I couldn't understand what they said. They were speaking Chinese,' she says. 'So they slapped me.'

She claims the abuse became progressively more frequent—and more violent.

'I was so scared whenever my boss came home. I just expected that I would be hurt again,' Limheang says.

She's far from alone in making such claims. In 2009, Indonesia—the main supplier of Malaysia's estimated 300,000 foreign domestic workers—imposed a moratorium barring new maids from heading to Malaysia, following a string of high-profile abuse cases. The two sides have yet to reach a new agreement despite continued negotiations on wages, mandatory days off and other benefits. Many of Malaysia's basic rules under its Employment Act that cover rest days, work hours, termination, holidays and maternity leave explicitly don't apply to foreign maids, known as 'domestic servants' under the law.

Meanwhile, the number of Cambodian women working in Malaysia has jumped dramatically. Last year, Malaysia issued 28,561 work visas to Cambodians, according to statistics provided by the Malaysian Embassy in Phnom Penh. More than 24,700 of those were given to domestic workers. That figure is almost five times the total number of visas issued just two years earlier.

At the same time, the number of recruitment agencies operating in Cambodia has taken a corresponding leap. These have established loose networks of agents paid to recruit potential employees from villages throughout the country.

Yu Khorn is one of them. Shirtless and sweating in the afternoon heat, he parks his motorbike beside the family's cows.

He says he was paid \$90 a month to recruit women from the surrounding villages. 'I learned how to convince people. How to speak to people,' Khorn says. 'You tell the women, "You don't have to worry about supporting your families. The company will take care of it.'"

He pulls out a pamphlet that he says he gives to prospective recruits. Young women are pictured grasping fistfuls of US dollars. 'Two years = \$3,500,' the pamphlet declares. Work 3 years and earn \$5,600. Four years gets you \$7,800. The minimum wage at the closest factory here is \$61 a month.

'I have a chance to help people in my community,' Khorn says, pointing toward a large wooden house down the path. It towers over most others in this village. The woman that owns it, he explains, worked in Malaysia for two years. When she returned, she was rich enough to build it.

But authorities in the surrounding commune say they are alarmed by the number of middlemen who have started operating in the area in the last 18 months. Some of the more destitute villages have proven to be fertile grounds for recruitment. In one village alone, 30 women have signed on to what local police chief Hun Miera believes is an uncertain future.

'These people don't have legal protection when they leave. Anything could happen to them,' he says.

But more and more women have still been willing to take the risk.

'The people are very poor. They only have one way to make income: by farming,' he says. 'The crops weren't good this year, so they've become poorer. So they look to Malaysia.'

A few kilometres away, the flattened dirt road gives way to a muddy, uneven path. The houses here are noticeably more basic than in neighbouring villages—thatched leaves for walls, or uneven wooden planks badly in need of replacement.

This, local officials say, is one of the poorest villages in the commune.

Ein Chhunly sits on a slatted bamboo bed perched over the mud, explaining why most of the women in the village have asked her about sending their daughters off to Malaysia.

'There isn't much, here,' she says with a shrug. 'There's not a lot of work.'

Chhunly says an agency pays her to recruit local women. On behalf of the company, she promises the parents 50 kg of rice and the equivalent of \$125 in cash up front—a gift, she says. If the women make it to Malaysia, they can earn up to \$285 each month.

To many of the parents here, the offer is difficult to turn down. Chhunly says she has referred at least 20 young women herself. Even her two daughters, who struggled to save any money while working at the factory, left last year.

She expects many more will follow in their footsteps—if they return with good news.

‘A lot of people are interested in going,’ she says. ‘But they’re waiting for my daughters first.’

And that’s what worries critics of the industry. Labour rights groups say they’re observing a new trend: women have started complaining of ill treatment, either in Malaysia, or during the training process at home.

Adhoc, a local human rights group, is handling more than 50 new cases from workers who have returned from Malaysia, says Lim Mony, the head of its women’s programme. Some have claimed they were raped while on the job.

Another non-governmental organization, the Community Legal Education Center (CLEC) saw its first domestic worker client last year. Now the group is advising more than 20 women who have claimed various forms of abuse or mistreatment.

‘We think it’s a serious problem,’ says Moeun Tola, who heads CLEC’s labour programme. He says many women don’t understand that the money their families initially receive for signing up—what they see as gifts—must actually be worked off. So do the costs of medical tests, visa applications and other expenses. In the end, many of his clients say they go months on end without seeing a single dollar.

Once there, workers have complained that they have few options if they are abused. They say company representatives rarely, if ever, visit the employers’ homes.

‘There’s no protection,’ he says. ‘It’s not just about giving people jobs. There should be someone that inspects the homes regularly to make sure the workers are alright.’

The rapid growth in demand for domestic workers has also left authorities in Cambodia—and the industry itself—struggling to keep up.

Last July, authorities in Phnom Penh raided a recruitment firm, where they found more than 200 people, including underage girls, crammed into rooms in the training complex. Within a week, another agency made local headlines after a woman leapt over the walls to escape, claiming she had been held against her will because she couldn’t pay off her debt.

An Bunhak, director of the Association of Cambodian Recruitment Agencies, says the existing Cambodian law governing the industry, which is more than 15 years-old, has grown inadequate for the current situation. The government is expected to pass stricter regulations this year, including minimum standards at the facilities and restrictions on loans.

But while he acknowledges there have been some bad actors in the industry, he says he believes they are still a minority.

'Not all the companies act like this,' he says. 'We have a code of conduct for our members.'

And in a country where an estimated 250,000 young people are expected to enter the workforce every year, Cambodia must consider domestic work as a valuable option for many of its citizens, he adds. 'We want to strengthen the industry to protect our migrant workers.'

Malaysian officials, meanwhile, dispute these negative characterizations of the industry. Raja Saifful, the deputy chief of mission for the Embassy of Malaysia in Phnom Penh, acknowledges there may be isolated cases where maids have been abused. But those examples shouldn't taint the industry as a whole. Malaysia remains a safe place for the majority of foreign domestic workers, he says.

'I can say the government of Malaysia is very serious in handling the situation. All those people responsible for abuse have been prosecuted and convicted based on existing laws,' he says. 'If there are real cases of abuse, the authorities in Malaysia would really look into the matter and would handle it very seriously.'

But for Limheang, things were to get worse before they improved. She says the beatings grew more violent as the weeks wore on. At one point, she claims, she was hospitalized after an attack. Then, with no explanation, her employers drove her to the airport, handed back her passport and gave her a plane ticket home.

It had been eight months, and she didn't receive a dollar for her work. But the devout Buddhist says she still gave thanks. As far as she is concerned, her prayers were answered.

Today, Limheang is back at her old garment factory, where she works as a cleaner for less money than she earned before she left. But she's still upbeat.

'I feel like I've been born again,' she says. 'I don't want to go back.'

*Irwin Loy is a Phnom Penh-based writer. His articles have also appeared in publications including The Christian Science Monitor, The Guardian and CNN Traveller, among others.*

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