

CHAPTER V

Benefits of Social Networks

When new migrants arrive in a new environment, they do not know or have connections with many people. So they create their social networks and build relationships with people and organisations as quickly as possible. Migrants gain benefits by building social relationships in their host destination. In this chapter, the benefits of social networks and social relationships will be discussed.

5.1 Social network and remittance

The majority of Rakhine migrant factory workers rarely use the bank for remittance because the bank does not exist in every township or village of Rakhine. Some of the respondents said they never have been into a bank. Banks exist only in the big cities but their family members all live in a village, in the remote areas of Rakhine. Besides bank business hours are from 9 am to 3 pm and at that time the migrants are working inside the factory. The banks also are closed on public holidays and Sundays when the migrants are free from work. In this study it was found that it is difficult for the Rakhine migrant factory workers to use the banks in order to transfer their money to their families in Rakhine. Therefore, the migrant factory workers transfer their money with someone who goes to their village or nearby their village instead of using bank transfers. These connections are very important for migrants to remit their money safely.

Sometimes the respondents transfer their money with someone who they do not know well but have received information from their Rakhine community or their colleagues that this is a person who will go to Rakhine near their villages and they are trustworthy. They believe their friends so they give their money to a person who they do not know well to carry it to their family in Rakhine. This is a common practice among Rakhine migrants. There is no instance of money being lost on the way or

money that has been stolen by the carriers. One of the reasons might be that the amount of money that migrant factory workers can remit is mostly around 100,000 Kyats (100 USD) or less. Sometimes migrants receive information that someone will go to Rankine at a the time when they do not have money. At that time they borrow the money from their friends or friends of friends without interest so they can send the money at that time. They pay it back to their friends later..

Mu Mu, a female migrant from the packing section said that;

“I use to transfer money with Lu Kyone (which means someone who will go to or near their village). My friends use to inform me if there was someone who they know well and trusted and is going to Rakhine near my village. Among our Rakhine who ever goes back to Rakhine is used to carrying money and as many gifts as possible as he/she can. Among our migrants, we help each other.”

Sometimes migrants need to transfer the money urgently to their family because their parents need money urgently and there is no Lu Khone at that time. At that time, migrants transfer the money with the bus that goes to Rakhine near by their town or village. Usually the bus that goes to Rakhine is owned by people from Rakhine. Drivers and ticketing staff are also Rakhine. As mentioned earlier, Rakhine migrant factory workers in Haling Tharyar are internal migrants so they are used to going back and forth to Yangon and Rakhine. They know and have a connection with the ticketing staff. Migrants pay an amount of money to ticketing staff to manage the transfer of money with the bus.

When migrants transfer the money with the bus, the ticketing staff give them information about which bus will bring their money and the date and time. Migrants pass this information to their family via telecommunication so their family can collect their money. All migrants remit money around 100,000 Kyats (100 USD) once in four or five months. Without the proper linkage and connection, migrants cannot transfer money to their families and know it will arrive safely.

5.2 Learning through social network

One of the biggest challenges for Rakhine migrant factory workers is the language barrier. Rakhine and Burmese languages are not very different. In writing they are almost the same but are quite different in speaking. Some of the words have the same pronunciation but have a different meaning. The Hlaing Tharyar is a slum quarter so people in Hlaing Tharyar use Burmese idiom and slang words very often. Sometime, even a Burmese old person may not understand the newer slang words. So Rakhine migrant factory workers have to learn Burmese words as well as the slang words. They learn Burmese language from their senior co-ethnic migrants. Learning language for the Rakhine migrant workers is not only communication but it also creates a social network and helps to get access to resources for the group or individual people..

The education level and general knowledge of the majority of the factory workers is very low. The migrants who have more job relevant skills than others tend to discriminate against those who do not have job relevant skills. This studied factory does not provide any orientation or in house training for new employees. When a new employee starts a job in this factory they have to do the tasks that the seniors do not want to do. The factory has a very hierarchical structure and promotions are very competitive. Seniors do not share their gained knowledge to new comers because they worry that the juniors will overtake them. They share with those who can create strong relationships with them. Therefore Rakhine migrants create their social networks and include the seniors and learn specific job relevant skills from them. Without creating strong social networks with seniors, migrants cannot learn job relevant skills. If migrants have job relevant skills, they can be promoted to new positions and to another section that is more comfortable.

Some people learn something for their career development while some other people learn something for their entertainment as different people have different abilities and desires. It does not matter whether they are considered lower class and poor and busy, people need entertainment. When the factory workers enjoy entertainment, they cannot spend much money so they develop cost effective ways to entertain themselves. Playing the guitar is one of these cost effective ways so some migrants

learn to play the guitar from their friends. They play guitar when they are free. By playing guitar together with friends, they relax and entertain themselves.

Being a migrant in a new environment with meager earnings, limits what they can do as they do not have extra money and time. When they first arrived in Yangon, they did not know where to find cheap food, how to take the bus and where they could find what they needed. Everything was new for them. There are many very little things to learn for their survival in Yangon. They learn from their senior migrants or colleagues. If they can learn these important things, they can spend their money and time more effectively.

5.3 Social Network and financial matters

Migrant factory workers are low income earners but as discussed previously they manage to remit some amount of money to their family members in their place of origin occasionally. After they have remitted, they do not have much money and frequently they have financial problems and do not have much money in hand. They find it difficult to save the money and often save money in a group with their colleagues as an alternative way. In a savings group, people have to contribute equal amounts of money based on all the group members agreement. Usually they save an average amount of money between 8,000 Kyats (8 USD) to 20,000 Kyats (20 USD) per month. Among the group members those who will take the money first or second is based on a lucky draw or on the group members decision. Mostly everyone in the saving group wants to take the money the first time so that they can buy what they want early. Sometimes, one of the group member who initiates the saving group or who really needs the money takes it first in accordance with group members agreement.

If someone who has the first the opportunity to take the money their may be able to sell this opportunity to someone who wants it if the group members allow this to happen. This kind of selling happens only if the saving group has many team members and saves a lot of money in a month. Sometimes, someone who takes the first time or who takes their money early does not want to contribute in later months and runs away.

Therefore, group members usually do not accept someone who they do not trust or do not know very well. Sometimes, the group allows someone to participate who they do not know because one of the other group members guarantee and trusts him/her well. Members can get money on a particular month depending on the amount that group members contribute monthly. For example in a group where there are five people who contribute 10,000 Kyats (10 USD) per month. A group member can get 50,000 Kyats (50 USD) in the first month and another member will get 50,000 Kyats (50 USD) in the next month. This continues for five months if there are five people.

Ko Ko, a male migrant from the cutting section explains about his participation in the saving group;

“It is difficult to save the money as my salary is gone with all my expenses that I cannot avoid. Sometime if I need to buy a telephone or watch or need a big amount of money at one time, I participate in a savings group. If I participate in a saving group, I have to pay the exact amount of money as soon as I get my salary. This forces me to save money and provides me with the chance to get a big amount of money at once to buy what I want.”

Money saving with a group is common practice among factory workers. All the respondents have participated in a savings group two to three times at the factory. Migrants can save their money by participating in the saving group together with their friends in the factory. Gambling is another way of getting money. Sometimes some of the migrants make a gambling group to get extra income. Gambling is illegal in Myanmar. Among the factory workers, someone who has a connection with a gambling group outside the factory will take the lead in organizing the gambling group. Those who want to make money gambling participate in these groups. Making a bet on England premier league football match is a famous type of gambling in Myanmar. The respondents in the study sometimes involved themselves in gambling together with their colleagues if they need money.

Zarchi, a female migrant from the Quality Control section explained her experience in that;

“I was gambling when I did not have enough money to enroll and pay for my university fee for my final year in 2012. I had a little money left after I remitted money to my family as they need it urgently. Some of my male friends suggested to me to make a bet on a football match together with them if I needed money. I have no idea and do not know anything about football but I followed their suggestions. I made a bet on one football match together with them. Fortunately, I won the bet and could pay for my enrollment fee with the help of my friends.”

Besides, sometimes when migrants need money, they borrow it from their friends without interest. Borrowing money from each other is a typical activity among the migrant factory workers. If the amount is not more than 15,000 Kyats (15 USD) they can take it from the factory as advance money with the recommendation of their supervisor. Migrants get financial benefits by participating in groups that save money or gambling together with colleagues or borrowing money from friends.

5.4 Social relationship and health

All the respondents of the Rakhine migrant factory workers came from rural areas. When they are in their rural areas of Rakhine they used traditional (or) herbal medicines and consulted with their parents, if they had any health problems. After they migrated, when they are in Yangon they have to use foreign medicines. Myanmar mostly imports medicine from overseas countries so the descriptions are written in foreign languages. The Rakhine migrant factory workers education is very low so they cannot read descriptions in foreign languages. Some people can not even pronounce the name of the medicine in a foreign language correctly to buy it from the drug store. Besides, most of the factory workers make their own medication first so they do not have to spend much money on health. If they have health problems they consult with their colleagues or friends. Then they follow their friends instructions.

Soe Soe, a Female migrant from the cleaning section explained that;

“When I was in my village, I used to consult with my mother about my health problems. My mother is just like a doctor; she gave me medicine and instructions. But in Yangon, I discuss it with my colleagues because I do not want to inform my mother and to worry her about me. My friends tell me what medicines to take. Sometimes they give me medicine. We factory workers always make self medications first as we do not have money and time to go to the clinic.”

According to 1951 Factory Act, all factories shall have a medical box. In the studied factory they have a medical box. If a labourer gets injured or sick, migrants treat themselves with the little medical knowledge that they have. Sometimes their colleagues take the medicine from the box and give it to themselves. It might be dangerous but so far there has been no issues of wrong medication.

Migrants get not only health information and medicines but they also get social support from their colleagues or friends. If a labourer is sick he can take medical leave by showing a medical record from a clinic. However, if they take a day's leave whether for medical leave or any kind of leave they will miss their non-absent day bonus plus their overtime fee, meal and bread allowances for that day which is one third of their basic salary so migrants usually come punctually even if they are sick but sometimes they are unable to continue their work. If a labourer needs to go to the clinic while working in the factory, his colleagues may accompany him. None of the respondents have been seriously sick while working in the factory so they did not need their colleagues to take them to the clinic or home but all the respondent have received health information and medicines from their colleagues and relatives.

Moreover, the respondents are involved as members in one or more organizations which have been created inside the factory. All organization provide health benefits for their members, some a little while others more. For instance, if a migrant is a member of four organizations and is seriously sick, they will get from

10,000 Kyats (10 USD) from Myinttar Ah Lin, 5,000 Kyats (5 USD) from the Labour Union, 20,000 Kyats (20 USD) from the all Supervisors group and 15,000 Kyats (15 USD) from the Quality Control group for medical expenses. Migrants get health benefits by participating in the organisations and contributing membership fees. All the respondents, the Rakhine migrant factory workers are members of the Government social welfare scheme but they do not get any health benefits from it as they do not go there if they are sick. If they go to a Government clinic in the day time when it is open, they will lose their allowances and benefits. Therefore migrants rely on social benefits from the social groups inside the factory. This kind of health care services does support a reduction on the Government of health care expenses.

5.5 Shelter sharing and caring among migrants

As Hlaing Tharyar is an industrial city many people living in that area and its surrounding vicinities are usually workers who are not only local dwellers but also internal migrants from various regions of Myanmar immigrated to this locality in search of employment opportunities. They are the driving forces to fully operate the respective factories in Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone. With regard to accommodation, although it is not a problem for the locals, it is challenging for newly arriving people.

The most significant challenge for the Rakhine migrant factory workers is finding accommodation in Yangon. Living costs are very high in Yangon while the migrant's income is very little. None of the migrants live alone. All the migrants live together with their colleagues, friends or relatives. They live together not only to reduce the living cost but also to support and care for each other while they are away from their families.

Ko Ko, a male migrant from the Cutting section said that;

“There are four people living at our room in a hostel. All are from the same village of Rakhine State. Two of them are siblings and the rest are friends. We all work at factories in Hlaing Tharyar. There are other Rakhine people in this hostel, so it is easy to communicate and request

help in case we need it. I feel more secure living with the people who I know very well”.

In the hostel there are some rules and regulations that are difficult for those living in the hostel. After years sharing with people in the hostel they can make friends and get to know each other. Then they will often change from a hostel to a rented house to reduce the living cost and to get more freedom.

Thandar, a female migrant from the assembly section said that;

“After I lived for two years in the hostel, I rented a house together with two people from the hostel and two people from the factory. In the hostel, there are many rules and some people lost their stuff. So we all five people live together in a rented house to reduce the risk of losing valuable things, to reduce living costs and have more freedom. More importantly, we can provide a temporary place to stay either for relatives or friends who come to Yangon to look for a job”.

Though most of the migrants are living in a tiny house with many people, they have a space for their relatives and friends to temporary stay. Migrants contribute to their social network members as much as possible. In this study it was found that those who live in a rented house or shared house are most likely to be relatives or a group of close friends. Besides the studied factory provides transport service to and from work, but it does not reach every single house but picks them up and takes them to the nearest junctions near the migrant workers home. For some workers it takes considerable time to get home as they need to travel from where the bus leaves them to their home. Most of the migrants live in the cheapest areas of Hlaing Tharyar township so their house is away from the crowded junctions. If there is late night over-time, a woman has to walk alone to her house from the junction, it is too risky. Sometimes women encounter drunks or a group of aggressive men on their way home (Labour Activist, 2013). So if there is late night overtime the women who live away from the factory do not go back home and sleep at their colleagues home nearer to the factory.

Ei Ei, a female migrant from the Sewing section said that;

“If there is a lot of orders, we have to take mid-night over time. I live far away from the factory so if there is late night overtime, I dare not go back home and just sleep at my closest friends home near the factory. The light went out very often in my quarter. If the light went out, it is difficult to identify who is who in the street. That is dangerous for a woman.”

This study found out that all the participants live together with their close friends or colleagues at Hlaing Tharyar township to support each other. Even though their houses are very tiny and crowded they do not hesitate to share with their social network members.

5.6 Supports from kin members

In general it is thought that migrants cannot get support from their kin members when they are away from them. However migrants do get support from their family in the host destination even though they are far away from them. Nowadays, the technology is available for migrants to not only communicate by voice but also see the face of their kin members via telecommunication. All the migrants use phones to talk to their family. All the respondents said they phone their kin members at least once a week especially their mothers. If they talk with their mothers sometime it takes about one hour. If there is a some serious problems they phone to discuss this with their family members. They receive psycho-social support from their parents.

In the factory, most of the factory workers are single. Factory workers rarely marry each other because they do not impress each other. They understand that if they married people like them they would not promote their life. When migrants grow old and cannot find their life partner their parents arrange for them to get married.

Mu Mu, a female migrant from the packing section explained about her arranged marriage that;

“My parents informed me that there was a man from my village who has a good job in Yangon and wanted to marry me, after I was working over 6 years in the Yangon. I did not have any boyfriend and I knew him well. So I accepted his proposal. Now we live in Hlaing Tharyar together.”

Besides if migrants get married in Yangon and have a family the issue of child care needs to be addressed. Both husband and wife are having to work so when they have a baby they have no one to take care of their baby. They cannot send him/her to nursery school, even when the baby grows up the parents will not be able to afford to send their baby to a nursery school. At that time the migrants usually request one of their kin members to take care of their baby while they are working.

Soe Soe, a female migrant from the cleaning section said that;

“When I had a baby boy, I could not hire a babysitter and could not stop working as my family depended on my income. I requested my mother who is old and does not work in the village to come to Yangon in order to take care of my baby while I and my husband are working. My mother takes care of my baby and me.”

This study found out that Rakhine migrant factory workers get support from their kin members especially from their parents.

5.7 Favoritism inside the factory

Although there are many rules and regulations in the studied factory for labourers to follow, all the issues that need a decision are decided case by case and not by the rules and regulations of the factory. Moreover leave requests and promotions are also considered and decided based on supervisors recommendations. Therefore all the rules inside the factory are decided by what people want and are not based on the

policies of the factory. All the respondents mentioned discrimination in the work place. The discrimination is not because of gender or job relevant skills but based on the personal relationships with supervisors or colleagues. So the respondents, the Rakhine migrant factory workers have had to build good relationships with colleagues, supervisors and factory managers in order to receive favoritism if there is a problem or they want something.

Soe Soe, a female from the cleaning section explained that;

“In the factory, supervisors give favor and recommendation for promotion and leave requests to those who they have a good relationship with them but they discriminated and find faults of those who they do not like. Sometimes those who they like make mistakes but they cover for them. But they will also shout at a labourer in front of many people for a mistake if they do not like them. Even if you are neutral, you will be discriminated against because you are not on their side. So whenever I go back to Rakhine, I always bring some presents for them to make good relationships with superiors and colleagues.”

By building good social relationships with colleagues and Supervisors, migrants get favoritism in return for leave requests and promotions that crucial for them.

5.8 Information sharing

As mentioned earlier about the education of migrant factory workers, only a few migrants have got a degree. The majority of them have very little education, have to work many hours in the factory and have to do household chores in their free time. Apart from this, it is difficult to access the educational books for migrant workers because the cost of the books are high when compared with their salary. Therefore, all the respondents answered that they do not read any kind of books.

However, in this study it was found that migrants get information from their friends or colleagues. Among the migrants there are some who can use a smart phone

and access the internet. Those who can access this information share it among their co-workers. Migrant workers can access information from their friends though they do not read any books or newspapers. The factory provides a one hour break for lunch with most of the workers finishing eating within 15 minutes so the rest of their time is usually used in talking and sharing information, while others just take a rest.

Phyo Phyo, a female migrant from the assembly section said that;

“Usually, we are busy and exhausted. Our education is very limited so we do not want to read any newspapers but we get information from our friends. Sometimes, we get job information from our friends. If the job is better, some people will apply and change their job.”

There are some civil society organizations that exist in Hlaing Tharyar Township that provide information. Some of these organizations deliver pamphlets about HIV, AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis diseases. There are condoms available nearby or in the front of the factory. Some factory workers get this kind of information and condoms and bring it inside the factory. This way the respondents access disease information and can get condoms from their colleagues. Information is important for everyone. If someone does not get the correct information their decisions will be wrong. When the Rakhine migrant factory workers have valuable information from their social network members, they can make good decisions for their life to overcome challenges and develop their life.

5.9 Manpower support from friends and colleagues

All the Rakhine migrant factory workers who participated in this research do not live in a home or a room in a hostel. They live in a rented house or share house or hostel in Yangon. They change their house very often because they change their jobs or cannot afford to pay the rental charges. When they move their home some people in Yangon arrange to hire an agent who does the moving and carrying of stuff. The renters of the house do not need to carry and put any things in rooms by themselves as the agent does it on their behalf. For the migrants, they cannot hire agents or people to move their

things so they request their friends and colleagues to carry their belongings when they move their home. All respondents have experienced moving their things with their colleagues or friends. Sometimes they also help their friends in house moving.

Nyi Nyi, a male migrant from the store section said that;

“Once we lived in a rented house together with our friends and paid rental charges equally but when one or two of our friends changed their job and then they no longer live with us. We could not afford to pay the rental charges. So we move to a new cheaper place with the help of our friends. Our friends helped us in moving things. Our migrant friends move their home very often for many reason.”

When the Rakhine migrant factory workers do not have enough money to hire people or agents to move their things, their colleagues or friends help them in moving their stuff. The respondents get help from their friends when they move their home. Moreover, if migrants want to buy expensive clothes or things, they request their friends to accompany them in order to get their ideas. Even if they go window shopping they go with their close friends to get ideas or suggestions from them.

5.10 Psycho-social support from Rakhine organisations

There are 77 Rakhine organizations in Yangon which are helping Rakhine people one way or another. These organizations cooperate together if there are important Rakhine traditional and/or social events such as the Rakhine Water Festival (Thingyan), Rakhine National Day, Rakhine State Day and Sayadaw U Ottama Day. Most of the Rakhine traditional events are held at Thuwunna Stadium. Rakhine Thingyan is the most famous and crowded of the places for the social and religious events.

How Rakhine people in Yangon celebrate their Water Festival in a new environment will now be explained. The Rakhine Water festival (Thingyan) falls around mid-April of every year. April is the first month of the Buddhist calendar. The

Water festival helps symbolize the cleaning and washing away the old year and getting ready for the new year. It is celebrated in three stages; a scented wood – grinding competition, cleaning of Buddha images and holding the water festival. A scented wood grinding competition is held early in the night of the eve of the water festival. In the competition young women grind scented wood with a sprinkle of water on a rounded stone. Men play music and dance to support the competition. On the next day, in early morning the Buddha image is cleaned with the scented water that was received from the scented wood grinding competition. People can throw water at each other after washing the Buddha image. There are approximately 50 Rakhine Thingyan Mandats (temporary buildings to play with the water in the shadows). There is a big boat in the middle of the Mandats to play water with each other (Kyawt Hla, 2007). This event is open for all either Rakhine or non-Rakhine.

All the respondents answered that they all go to the Rakhine Water Festival yearly if they do not go back to Rakhine. They participate and enjoy these events by seeing Rakhine people dance and listen to the music. This is a time when they communicate with each other in their own language, get information about Rakhine, forget about their challenges and enjoy their time and feel proud of being a Rakhine. This is a Rakhine gathering in Yangon. By participating in these events, migrants gain psycho-social support. Moreover, Myinttar Ah Lin arranges a donation trip for the poor and monastic education centres. This donation is a kind of retreat for factory workers. Migrants also get psycho-social support from these trip.

5.11 Summary

Rakhine migrant factory workers consulted with their parents and took traditional or herbal medicine if they had a health problem in Rakhine but in Yangon they are away from their family members and cannot take traditional medicine. So they consult with their friends, follow their suggestions and take foreign medicine. Migrants gain health information and medicine from their friends if they have health problems in Yangon. The workers salary is often nearly fully spent with expenses that they cannot avoid so they do not have extra money to buy a phone or watch or nice clothes.

However, they save money in a saving group with their trusted friends. Saving with the group lets the migrant workers get a large amount of money at one time.

It is difficult for Rakhine migrants to remit money to their place of origin as not all townships and villages of Rakhine have a bank. Migrants can remit money through their social network members who go to Rakhine. Without the support their social network migrant could not transfer money to their family. Moreover, migrants can reduce their living costs by living together with their colleagues or friends in a rented house. They can sleep at their friends' home temporarily, if they have to take late night overtime and are fearful of going back home.

Though migrants are away from their family members, they still have their family members support when they are faced with a lot of challenges and are unable to handle things in Yangon. Furthermore, migrants are used to moving their home in Yangon for many reasons. When migrants move their home, they do not need to hire an agent for moving their things because their friends help them in moving their home.

Overall, not all migrant factory workers can change their career but some of the respondents with the support from their social network members did change their careers and improved their life with the help of their social network.

ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่
Copyright© by Chiang Mai University
All rights reserved