Women’s actions through the FPAR

Through the labour FPAR, the NUOT research team worked with nurses and nurse aides in public hospitals in Thailand to: 1) document working conditions of nurses; and 2) advocate for the improvement of nurses’ working conditions and labour protection.

Through the FPAR journey, nurses along with FPAR researchers initiated advocacy and campaign work to demand nurses’ benefits being covered under the Compensation Fund Act, regardless of the types of their employment.

Not only working to protect workers’ human rights, NUOT also continues their advocacy for the formal registration of public workers’ unions under the Ministry of Labour. NUOT will continue their struggles until nurses can exercise their collective bargaining power and unionised actions.

Recommendations

To the government of Thailand

- Ensure that public hospitals abide by national labour laws, particularly the Labour Protection Act, as well as international labour standards and recommendations as set by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).  
- Ratify ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise; Convention No. 98 on Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining; Convention No. 151 concerning Protection of the Right to Organise and Procedures for Determining Conditions of Employment in the Public Service to respect and protect nurses’ Freedom of Association (FOA) and Collective Bargaining (CB) in Thai public hospitals; and Convention No. 190 on The Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the Workplace.
- Amend the Compensation Fund Act and the Social Security Act to include the coverage for all nurses regardless of their employment types.

To Thai public hospitals

- Comply with the Labour Protection Act, Social Security Act and Occupational Safety, Health and Environmental Act.
- Guarantee nurses, regardless of their employment types, the right to decent work including health and safety, living wages, permanent employment, rights to join union and to collectively bargain.

The situation of women nurses in Thailand

Gender norms are an enforced social expectation on how women and men should behave, and profoundly shape the world of work leading to the systematic subordination of women in healthcare work. In Thailand, most nurses are women, and the profession continues to be undervalued with the lack of access to decent work.

In 2017, many nurses in Thai public hospitals were employed under a short-term employment contract, low wages, and insufficient benefits. The temporary contractual arrangement is claimed to aid training nurses who do not have sufficient work experience before they are hired as civil servants. However, the fact is, many of the temporary nurses in Thailand have been working more than three years without adequate labour protection. Contractualisation is a systematic form of exploitation to gain cheap labour, to avoid accountability as the employers lay off and retrench workers, and to deny the right of workers to unionise. Temporary nurses struggle with longer working hours without any additional pay and other labour protections. Many of them face a wide wage disparity, have night shifts but not entitled to shift differential pay, and subject to gender-based violence including sexual harassment and assault in the workplace often without due access to remedies/justice.

Thai Labour Law discourages the rights to organise and collective bargaining for workers in public sectors; while different forms of labour rights violation without due access to justice demotivates women nurses to sustain their job.

Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) by Nurses Union of Thailand (NUOT)

Nurses Union of Thailand (NUOT) led a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) to investigate the working conditions and understand specific labour issues that women nurses face in Thai public hospitals. The data were gathered through individual interviews, informal group discussions, focus group discussions, observations, workshops, and media analysis. The labour FPAR was conducted from December 2017 to March 2019 in the following public hospitals in Bangkok, Thailand: Thepparat Nakhonratchasima, Maharat Nakhonratchasima, and Debaratana Nakhonratchasima.

About Nurses Union of Thailand (NUOT)

The Nurse Union of Thailand was established in 2008 to advance the welfare of nurses in public hospitals in Thailand who are currently facing low remuneration and insufficient social protection.
**FPAR FINDINGS:**

**The Working Conditions of Nurses in Thai Public Hospitals**

**Disparity at Remuneration**

While most nurses have multiple workloads with long working hours, there is a significant disparity between nurses, doctors, and managerial staff. This pay disparity is primarily due to the contractual/temporary employment most nurses are on, which deprives them of employment benefits. FPAR findings show that Thai nurses have lower remuneration, with a monthly earnings of 14,070 Thai Baht (Equivalent to USD 472) while Thai public hospital doctors’ basis salaries start at 20,000 Thai Baht/month (equivalent to USD 656.38). While their basic salaries gap is not largely wide, with access to full benefits, allowances and compensations given most doctors are on permanent employment contracts, a doctor may earn five times the wage of a nurse. This pay disparity and employment status consequently weaken nurses’ bargaining power which may negatively affect their working conditions. Many nurses choose to stay and expect to get the possibility of contract-to-civil-servants conversion. Even so, the process to convert the status takes more than two years and requires them to take a civil service entrance examination.

The cases of nurses at Debaratana Nakhonratsima Hospital demonstrate that nurses highly rely on their self-motivation and commitments, given there are no incentives and rewards for them as organisational support. The labour flexibility, in turn, situates women nurses quitting the job to avoid burnout, which exacerbates the existing scarcity of nurses with a ratio of nurse to patient as 1:4008. Consequently, there is a significant delay in hiring new nursing personnel due to the lengthy recruitment process. Nurses are hired on temporary contracts, which consequently prevent nurses from working as full-time civil servants, job security, and career progression.

**Poor Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Practices**

Decent work is safe work. Although the labour code protects nurses’ rights to health and safety at work, and the government has promoted OSH guidelines in hospitals, the structural barriers remain for nurses to fully enjoy their fundamental labour rights. A nurse is a person who meets with the patients before the doctor and takes care of them 24/7. Paradoxically, providing health care involves demanding and fatiguing working conditions. Under these circumstances, nurses and nurse aides are working under stressful environments, including poor working hours, and heavy workloads. Some reported that they must provide nursing care to around 60 patients per day to respond to their needs. FPAR finding shows that nurses are forced to work excessively and in rotating-shifts, which leads them to be sleep-deprived. Given that sleep disorders may increase the occupational risk of poor mental health, not surprisingly, some suffer from stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression.

Furthermore, inadequate Personal Protective Equipment exposes nurses to work-related risks, including infection from patients (via the respiratory system, blood, and body) and other work-related injuries. Many nurses avoid accidents during work that are not covered by the hospital nor government, due to the fact that they are temporary contractual workers, which consequently preventing them from the Compensation Fund Act.

Although most Thai public hospitals have set off Occupational Safety, Health, and Environment (OSE) practices, nurses have low awareness and sometimes lack of will to practice its mandates. Nurses are hired on an hourly basis, which consequently prevent nurses from working as full-time civil servants, job security, and career progression. Nurses continuously disapprove of statutory regulations, resulting in further weakening of the collective bargaining power of nurses.

**Violence and Sexual Harassment at the Workplace**

As providing regular nursing service contains a high level of compassion care, nurses are prone to violence and verbal harassment. “Aggression and violence, especially verbal attacks” are considered to be a daily routine when working in Thai hospitals, with most nurses having been subjected to verbal and physical abuse by doctors, patients, patients’ relatives, or amongst nurses. The FPAR finding reports abusive power relations and verbal harassment nurses experience on a daily basis from doctors, patients, patients’ relatives or families, and even colleagues in their workplace.

Being psychologically abused when administering treatment to the patients who are suffering from illness and pain is a shared fear among nurses; yet it is a taboo to discuss it openly. They are subject to sexual harassment and physical abuse. There are cases of rape, which are usually unreported, even when there is robust evidence to report to the police, the hospital management would ask them to stop proceeding with the case and withdraw instead. FPAR finding also reports that an increase in the number of workplace violence and sexual harassment nurses experience on a daily basis from doctors, patients, patients’ relatives or families, and even colleagues. This practice will greatly affect the quality of health service delivery. Conducted efforts and concrete measures to secure nurses’ right to decent work, dignity and wellbeing are in urgent need.