

# Beyond the Shadows

Exploring cases of informality and bonds  
of solidarity among workers in Asia Pacific

Results from the Workers' Study Conference 2024





Initiatives for Workers Solidarity in Asia Pacific

## About the Initiatives for Workers Solidarity in Asia Pacific (IWSAP)

The Initiatives for Workers Solidarity in Asia Pacific (IWSAP) is a regional non-profit organization working to promote unity of all working people in the region through advocacy, workers' campaigns, education and research, cooperation and network-building. The newly-built non-governmental organization aims to strengthen and support unity among formal and informal workers, migrants and local workers, as they experience diverse yet overlapping challenges and struggles in the world of work. The IWSAP is an initiative of the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM) of Hong Kong and the Workers First Union of New Zealand.

### Our Mission

The mission of the IWSAP is to launch initiatives that contribute in forging unity and solidarity of formal and informal workers in the Asia Pacific across nationalities and sectors to defend the rights of all workers in the Asia Pacific region.

### Our Vision

The vision of the IWSAP is the unity of all workers in the Asia Pacific region working together to protect the rights of all workers, promote the wellbeing of working people, develop worker's cooperation, and strengthen labor solidarity for the sector and with the people.

### Our Goals

- Generate support to campaigns and advocacy that address labour concerns in the national and regional level, among formal and informal workers.
- Build and share knowledge on the situation and aspiration of working people in the Asia Pacific region
- Create spaces for all workers in the region to build unities, initiate cooperative and coordinated actions, and strengthen linkages
- Initiate activities to propel empowerment and linkages of women workers in the region.

### Our Activities

- Amplify campaigns of all workers on wages, jobs and rights. Utilize various forms, platforms and media.
- Hold seminars, fora and conferences on workers issues and other themes that impact all workers in the region.
- Conduct researches on topics that promote labour rights and support labour movements
- Facilitate workers exchange and solidarity missions as means for mutual learning and forging of cooperation among workers organisations.
- Engage in advocacy spaces and enable grassroots to organize themselves.



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# Acknowledgements

The Initiatives for Workers Solidarity in Asia Pacific (IWSAP) organised its first Workers Study Conference to better understand the situation of informal workers in our region and how we, in cooperation with trade unions, workers' associations, advocates and civil society can effectively address their concerns and empower them in their fight for rights, justice and a better world for all workers.

We would like to first and foremost thank its Board of Trustees for supporting the WSC initiative which is an important aspect in IWSAP's work.

We would also like to recognize the participants of the WSC 2024 for contributing to the discussions and determining the way forward in forging stronger solidarity among workers. Through them, we become grounded in the actual realities of those often undermined by the system.

We would also like to thank the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants and the Workers First Union for supporting the WSC.





# Introduction

The Workers' Study Conference (WSC) is an annual knowledge-sharing and discussion among workers' organizations and advocates. It aims to showcase different situations of workers in the region as well as share different workers' campaigns happening in different countries.

Last November 23-24, 2024, the First WSC focused on informality and solidarity wherein panel presentations on informal work, gig economy, labor migration, and women in informal work took place and aided in comprehensively understanding the plight of workers from different countries in Asia Pacific. The WSC 2024 gathered a total of 30 participants from Australia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, New Zealand, India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Hong Kong, and Pakistan.

Following the conference, diverse outcomes were collected from the presentations reflecting the conditions of specific sectors of workers in Asia Pacific. From gig and platform workers, migrant workers, musicians, public transport

workers, to women workers, agricultural workers, and displaced peoples, one can see the similarities and nuances in experiences they confront everyday. Systemically, it is clear that the neoliberal framework of the global economic system is the main culprit contributing to the worsening conditions of workers around the globe. States and big businesses manufacture "race to the bottom" conditions for workers to boost profit and lessen costs. As a consequence, various forms of abuse and neglect are being propelled against workers, diminishing their economic power and rights.

Through the results of the WSC found in this document, it is hoped that we get to have a deeper understanding of informal and precarious work, and the intricacies of the challenges they face. At the end of the document, recommendations are presented as a reflection of what needs to be done to realize a more strengthened solidity and unity among formal and informal workers, workers' associations, unions, and other civil society actors.



# On Gig and Platform Work

Gig and platform work are primarily occupied by laborers who toil under ride-sharing applications like Grab, Gojek, and Uber. In recent years, such apps have enjoyed high rates of usage and profit as they are deemed more convenient compared to having personal vehicles or relying on poor public transportation.

In Thailand, many workers are engaged in working for motorcycle taxis and doing deliveries to earn their main income or sometimes, as a supplement to full-time jobs. In their cases, many riders face ambiguity in employment status where they are not given ample protection by the apps they work for and even from the government. In addition, due to platform policies that do not cohere with the need to prioritize the rights and welfare of riders, job insecurity in the form of low wages and subpar compensation is very prevalent.

Job insecurity and dissatisfaction is also evident for Uber drivers in New Zealand. They face lack of protection from the governments. Uber drivers are classified as individual contractors, rather than employees, removing the employee-employer relationship between Uber and the workers. Such an arrangement allows Uber to skirt labor laws and undermine hard-earned wins of workers.

Indonesia is also not a stranger in absorbing thousands of workers under the wings of ride-sharing and delivery apps. Workers are subjected to long working hours without receiving the appropriate compensation. Notably, those who end up as riders were previously migrant workers who cannot be absorbed by formal employment pathways anymore due to age and lack of skills. Due to this, they are forced to subject themselves to informal jobs and unsafe working conditions to continue earning an income.

In the same vein, riders in Cambodia do not receive social security from the apps they work for. Despite being at risk of road accidents as they have to meet daily quotas, the apps do not provide them with appropriate support and assistance. Worse, they have to shell out their own money to buy protective gear such as helmets and other operating resources which is an added layer of burden to the already meager pay given to them.

Two important aspects of working as riders were identified as crucial in analyzing their situations. First, as reflected in the New Zealand case, all other apps found in Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia often operate under a commission-based system where workers are not treated as employees but rather, as “freelance partners.” In this scenario, a percentage of what they earn is redirected as profit of the apps while the rest is for their take-home income. This is a loophole for many apps not to provide standardized and just compensation to riders. And many times, apps have a bigger share in the earning while the riders and drivers have to work for more than 8 hours to fill in the needs of their families. Secondly, given the informal nature of platform work, workers are not covered by labor laws of governments. This makes them vulnerable to abuse and labor rights violations.

Outside the realm of platform work, another face of informal work is doing gig work as musicians. Particularly in Thailand, musicians – who are mostly foreign – face the same fate of job insecurity. Because their income is dependent on the tourism industry which is often seasonal, there are days where they do not earn enough or at all to sustain themselves. Likewise, they are not given ample protection by the government as they are not recognized as formal workers despite their large contribution in boosting the economy and tourism in Thailand.





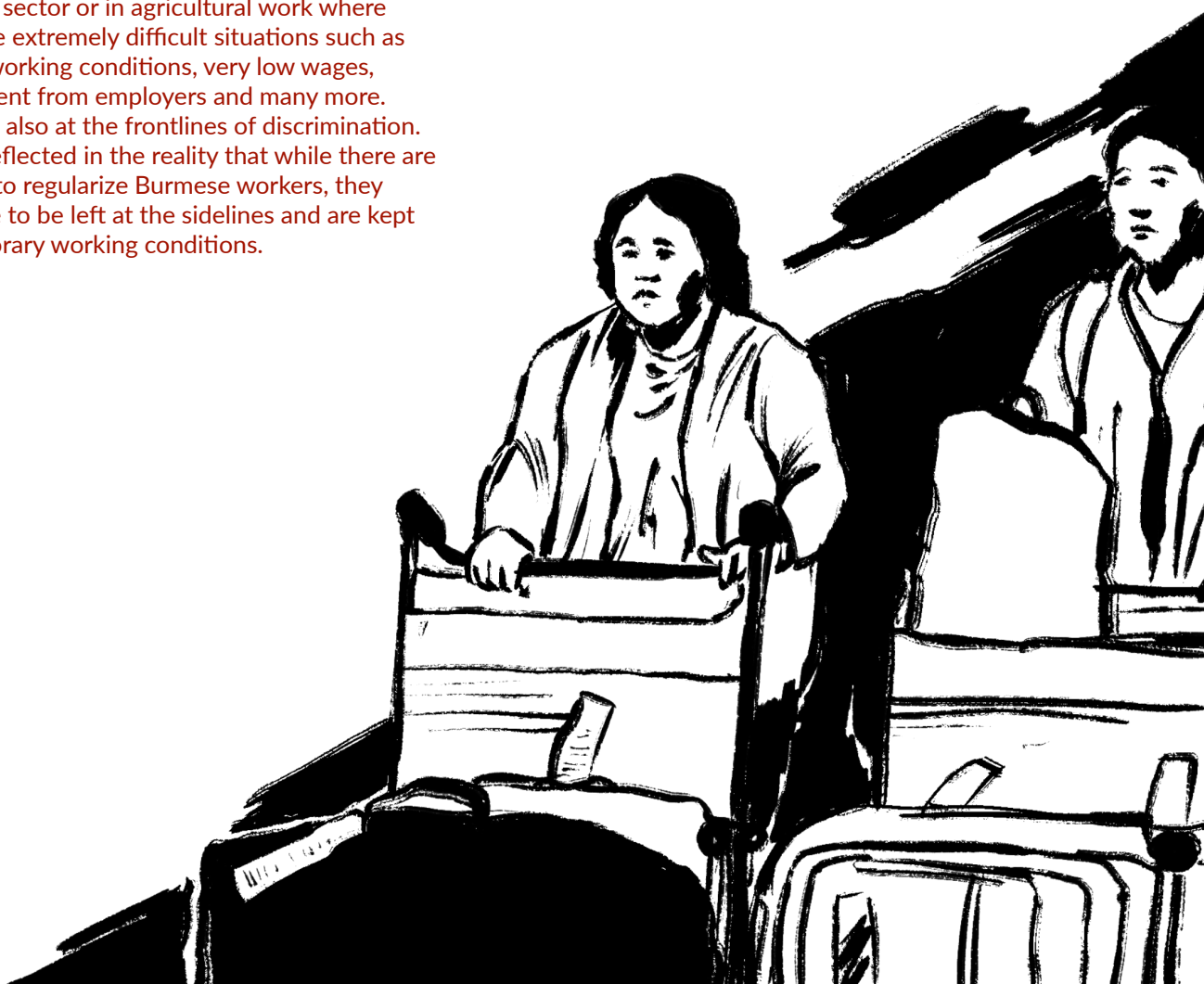
# On Migrant Work

Migrant workers constitute a significant number of workforce in many migrant-receiving countries in Asia Pacific. The lack of jobs and positive economic mobility in many countries force citizens to either leave their provinces to go to urban centers or go abroad in the hopes of finding better opportunities. Migration is also rampant in situations of conflict. The lack of resources and the persistence of violence in many places puts pressure on marginalized populations to seek refuge outside their countries and look for employment opportunities to survive. The current framework of labor migration is forced migration. Both young and old folks have to bear the brunt of such social structure and on top of this, informal work is the immediate avenue they enter as this is the only available opportunity to be able to obtain basic needs.

Accounts from Burmese migrants in Thailand show the glaring picture of labor migration in Asia Pacific. In light of the reign of the military junta in Myanmar, many are going out of the country to find jobs and relative safety. Those who are now in Thailand are working in the garment sector or in agricultural work where they face extremely difficult situations such as subpar working conditions, very low wages, harassment from employers and many more. They are also at the frontlines of discrimination. This is reflected in the reality that while there are policies to regularize Burmese workers, they continue to be left at the sidelines and are kept in temporary working conditions.

Care work done by migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore persists to be one of the primary modes of labor migration in the region. While they do important work for families and care institutions in migrant-receiving countries, migrant domestic workers often receive lesser pay and social protection from agencies and governments compared to their local counterparts. More of these are discussed in the next section on women and informal work.

Migrant workers are often faced with the risks that come with being undocumented making them vulnerable to trafficking and abuse. Lack of paperwork means that they cannot easily file grievances and official reports to authorities to seek protection. At the same time, undocumented is sanctioned most of the time given how immigration systems of many countries lean more towards criminalization rather than protection. This perpetuates the constant cycle of fear of getting deported, jailed, and losing the remaining sources of income that migrant workers possess.





# On Women and Informal Work

A significant number of informal workers are women. There exists a concerning gender bias in terms of treating women workers. They receive even lower wages, are subjected to ineffective social protection, and experience sexual harassment when they are out working.

Female riders in Thailand are more prone to sexual violence and accidents when driving in dangerous environments. As ride-sharing and delivery work is mostly considered as a man's work, gender discrimination is very prevalent. Women are not preferred in this kind of work thus forcing them to double their efforts in acquiring customers just to be able to earn minimum income.

Foreign domestic work is also heavily dominated by women. In Singapore and Hong Kong, women in domestic work face barriers in decent work and wages. Especially in the context where domestic workers are in a live-in arrangement with their employers, physical, mental and emotional abuse become more acute. In spite of this, no significant effort is being promoted by governments to increase protection and streamline grievance mechanisms for domestic workers. The live-in arrangement of domestic workers is used as a scapegoat to provide an unjust amount of wages. Governments and employers justify that because accommodations and food are already free, then domestic workers do not need to receive the same pay as local ones. However, this is a great disregard to the actual state of migrant domestic workers who not only need to provide for their families back home, but also think of ways to survive in a place where the cost of living is skyrocketing.

South Asian women, especially Dalit women in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are also socially and economically sidelined making them susceptible to informal work and all the discrimination, violence, and insecurity that comes with it. Dalit women are most found in manual labor such as cleaning, cooking, and agricultural work. They receive very low wages and are exposed to unsafe work environments that puts them at risk of violence, exploitation, illnesses, and even death.

In all cases of women in informal work, they are still expected to bear the double burden of taking care of their families' domestic and emotional needs. Outside of work, they have to cook, clean the house, and support the education of their children among others. This contributes to extreme stress on a lot of women who do not have stable economic conditions.



## Other Forms of Informal Work

Public transport workers, such as *remork* drivers in Cambodia and auto-rickshaw drivers in South Asia are confronted with difficulties in accessing sustainable livelihood avenues. They are seen as eyesores by the government and are in competition with ride-sharing apps, further minimizing their earnings. There are no institutionalized mechanisms to assist them in obtaining social protection and insurances and obtaining permits can be discriminatory at times. Because of this, they are prone to accidents as well as eviction by local authorities.

Displacement is also being experienced by vendors in Cambodia. The proliferation of food franchises coupled with the hostility of authorities manifested in unjust demolition and confiscation of carts make their situation more precarious. These result in severely unsteady income.

Meanwhile, agricultural and fishery workers in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal make up a large chunk of informal workers in the countries. They deal with slave-like work conditions because

they are not recognized in labor policies and in social protection mechanisms. Furthermore, the effects of the climate crisis make their conditions even more difficult and dangerous as they have to navigate unpredictable weather patterns. With extreme heat and heavy rains, harvest seasons on land and water have become elusive, affecting the survival of many communities who depend on environmental resources.



## The Horizon Ahead

Amidst structural challenges, workers, their organizations, and unions are persistent in mounting campaigns and solidarity-building not just within borders, but among different workers in various countries in the region and even beyond.

Organizations who were part of the WSC are active in conducting and administering research and education initiatives, and strategic organizing at the country and local level. Partnerships with important stakeholders in communities and workers' organizations are important leverages for them to assert and advocate for workers-centered policies and ultimately, to build bridges among workers from

different sectors and industries – especially those who do informal and formal work.

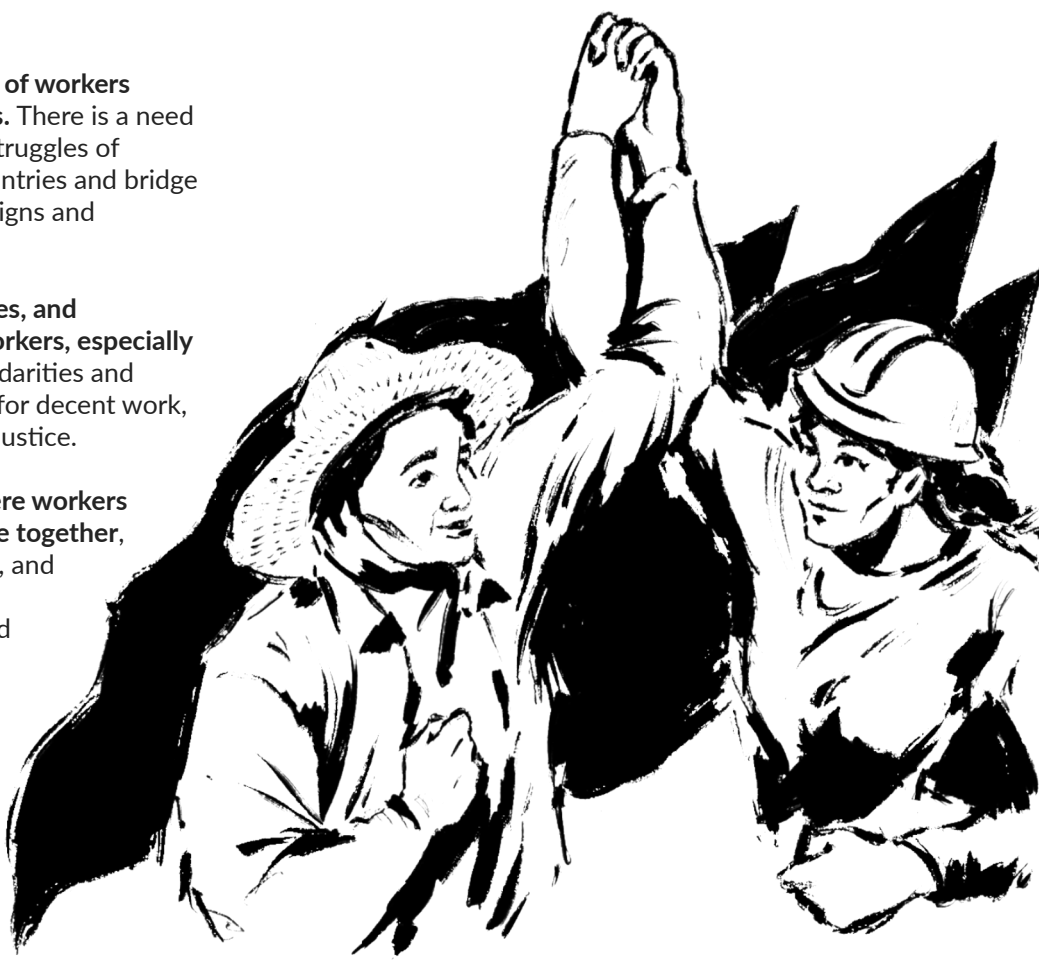
Directly living with and visiting areas where informal workers congregate is also a proven strategy of building and strengthening relationships with them. Albeit with some difficulties because they are scattered in different places, seeking them out by going to their workplaces and communities itself are proven effective in understanding the plight and struggle of informal workers. Through this, the gaps between them and other workers who are in more formal arrangements are made smaller, revealing all the intersections they experience in the hands of employers and big businesses.

## Recommendations

Moving forward, the WSC has identified a number of ways forward coming from what has been discussed from the conference. These are, by no means, exhaustive as we still continue to forge pathways towards greater understanding of the situation of informal workers and how to better connect with them.

- **Expand solidarity-building of workers beyond physical territories.** There is a need to look into the common struggles of workers from different countries and bridge the gaps in building campaigns and strengthening their ranks.
- **Build capacities, capabilities, and movements of informal workers, especially women workers.** Build solidarities and mobilize informal workers for decent work, living wage and economic justice.
- **Have common spaces where workers across the region can come together,** study the current situation, and develop coordination to promote workers rights and welfare.

- **Strengthen cooperation and solidarity between unions and informal workers** through strategic network-building, research and education, and supporting their advocacy and campaigns.





## Participating organizations of the First Workers Study Conference

Asia Australia Workers Link

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and  
Development (APWLD)

Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM)

Asia Pacific Research Network (APRN)

Awaj Foundation

Beranda Migran

Coalition of Agricultural Workers International

Independent Democracy of Informal Economy  
Association

Informal Sector Service Center

Institute for Motivating Self-employment

Kaagapay ng Migranteng Pilipino sa Thailand  
(KMPT)

Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (KMK)

Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW Hong  
Kong)

Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek

Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific (PANAP)

Solidarity Center Cambodia

Solidarity of Asian Trade Unions Foundation Inc.  
(SATU)

Southern Riders Association

Stand Up Movement Lanka

Workers First Union

Young Chi Oo Workers' Association (YCOWA)





Initiatives for Workers Solidarity in Asia Pacific

# *Informal and Formal Workers, Strengthen Our Unity and Solidarity for Rights and Justice*

Launch of the Results of Workers' Study Conference on Informal Work  
& Launch of the Initiatives for Workers' Solidarity in Asia Pacific

**Bangkok, Thailand (hybrid) | 30 May 2025, 2:00PM-4:00PM**

