THE IMPACT OF LABOR MIGRATION LIBERALIZATION IN THE ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY: MANUFACTURING SECTOR IN THAILAND

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate the impacts of labor migration liberalization in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) on the manufacturing industry of Thailand. The research was conducted because with the recent introduction of the AEC, there has been an increase in international trade between countries, including an increase in movement of labor (migration) between countries. Some industries, including manufacturing and finance, have particularly high levels of demand for skilled labor as well as a high level of intra-ASEAN FDI, indicating a high level of regional international trade. To achieve this aim, a quantitative survey of Thai workers was conducted (n = 400). The study showed that in practice, most workers were not interested in international economic migration. Factors that were associated with the intent to migrate within ASEAN for economic reasons included wages and salaries, career advancement prospects, and to a lesser extent economic conditions and political stability in Thailand. The findings also showed that the AEC was a minor (though significant) influence on intention to migrate, although it was viewed as a major reason for migration into Thailand. The implication of this study is that firms can attract and retain talent by making sure salaries and career prospects are competitive with firms in other countries.

Keywords: Labor Migration Liberalization, AEC, International Trade, Migration, Manufacturing Sector

1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is essential for developing countries due to insufficient domestic savings being available for investment (Dollar and Kraay, 2001), and can help reduce the gap between savings and investment, not to mention its other advantages (Borensztein et al., 1998). However, along with the many rewards, there are also certain risks. One of the downsides of direct foreign investment is the risk of capital outflow; less capital from abroad especially loans to investors (Kolstad and Tøndel, 2002). Additionally, FDI is accompanied by technology and the transfer of knowledge from abroad, resulting in industry development and an increase in competitiveness which in turn will contribute to employment and have a profound effect on economic growth in the long term. Countries looking to implement policies and measures to attract investment from foreign sources should beware of the ripple effect since a shift in investment is likely to cause market volatility. Furthermore, investment fluctuations in FDI may affect employment, the consumption of domestic exports and gross domestic product (Rama, 2001).

Currently, economic integration in different regions of the world is fast becoming a key factor in raising ASEAN awareness for the need to unite in order to align policy implementation and increase competitiveness. In 1992, the ASEAN agreed to establish the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in order to promote trade by enacting zero tariff rates on virtually all imports within the group. Being able to attract investment from outside the region is now more essential than ever.

After the successful establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area, or AFTA, ASEAN leaders agreed to establish the ASEAN Community, consisting of three pillars; the ASEAN Security Community, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Though equally important, the latter pillar has been the most prioritized among the three. To that end, a plan for the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC Blueprint) has been laid out. The AEC Blueprint is an integrated guideline for the smooth implementation of the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) scheme with the goal of a single market and production base. For trade in services, investments are conducted via open market transactions, including agreement on the mutual recognition of professional services, and supporting joint investment under the rules and procedures of transparency as well as accelerating competitive advantage in the region and reducing the development gap of member states.

The aim of this research is to investigate the impacts of labor migration liberalization in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) on the manufacturing industry of Thailand. The objectives of the research include:

1. To identify the relationship between driving factors for workers moving out of their home country and intention to migrate to other ASEAN countries; and
2. To identify the relationship between labor migration liberalization in AEC and labor movement in Thailand by focusing on the manufacturing industry.

Table 1
Intra-ASEAN FDI flows by economic sector, 2014-2018 ($million)

		Year				
Source Country	Sector	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Total ASEAN [00]	[A] Agriculture, forestry, and fishing	4 101.39	4 126.25	2 752.58	3 824.96	3 405.65
	[B] Mining and quarrying	1 289.81	1 190.99	1 216.60	665.58	-835.60
	[C] Manufacturing	5 924.03	4 404.86	6 603.35	7 337.29	7 983.37
	[D] Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	-50.77	471.69	113.78	921.01	249.28
	[E] Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	8.89	28.49	88.85	40.27	29.58
	[F] Construction	166.81	281.03	118.12	610.58	407.93
	[G] Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motor cycles	1 400.70	1 247.49	1 623.43	3 286.35	4 318.14
	[H] Transportation and storage	300.04	426.10	242.90	208.19	66.20
	[I] Accommodation and food service activities	-27.25	42.40	227.18	106.49	123.37
	[J] Information and communication	219.68	771.28	231.70	1 321.63	567.92
	[K] Financial and Insurance activities	4 879.55	2 530.78	5 342.68	2 395.88	3 665.32
	[L] Real estate activities	4 654.52	2 980.22	3 464.87	3 109.45	1 725.46
	[M] Professional, scientific and technical activities	41.26	-24.77	139.18	167.26	147.39
	[N] Administrative and support service activities	49.10	20.65	50.97	37.90	135.08
	[O] Public administration and defence; compulsory social security			6.35	0.24	0.10
	[P] Education	8.80	5.20	16.71	14.48	12.17
	[Q] Human health and social work activities	40.38	24.94	56.00	113.69	106.37
	[R] Arts, entertainment and recreation	0.03	-18.55	11.04	3.04	91.11
	[S] Other services activities.	-1 568.15	186.88	1 398.21	1 319.97	233.89
	[Z] Unspecified activity	742.07	2 123.36	2 024.28	0.04	2 111.20
	[999] TOTAL activities	22 180.88	20 819.28	25 728.79	25 484.30	24 543.94

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The concept of free flow of labor

Movement of labor has existed since ancient times. The two main causes of labor migration are economic problems and an unstable local political landscape detrimental to alien workers (Daniels et al., 2011). Other possible causes are natural disasters such as drought or famine, forcing existing labor to migrate to safer countries with better economic conditions. Nowadays, although migration as a result of war is increasingly common, the majority of immigration is still due to economic reasons. Harris and Sabot (1982) note that the meaning of migration is the decision to move to another geographically different area in pursuit of more desirable work opportunities. It occurs when the expected gains are significantly more than the expected costs as far as demographic migration is concerned.

In the view of many economists, migration means not only the evacuation of the population structure and population size, it also considers its impact on the economy of a country. This means that migration of the economy should be weighed between the expenses or costs against the benefits expected to be derived from the migrant workforce. One of the main causes of migration between countries is driven by factors encouraging the current workforce to move out and attracting workers from abroad to move in (Wrage, 1981; Ravenstein, 1885).

a) Driving factors for labor moving out.

- Underemployment due to a lack of jobs to match individual skills creates a labor surplus. If skilled workers cannot find employment suited to their skill levels, they are more likely to decide to move overseas.
- Lower wage levels compared to other countries for professions with the same job description; working as an immigrant abroad would provide a larger income.
- Lack of incentive for career advancement. Workers with expertise but unable to progress in their line of work may consider moving abroad to pursue better work opportunities. Furthermore, some incentives that come with career advancement cannot be measured in monetary terms.
- Social and political factors are also significant in this day and age. Some workers may prefer to migrate to a foreign country due to social and political discontent in their local environment.

b) Factors attracting foreign talent.

- Wages and salaries are higher abroad than in the home countries of migrant workers.
- Opportunities for career advancement are readily available to skilled workers. Studies have proven that career advancement is crucial to many start-up companies. Developed countries with the facilities and development plan which emphasizes meritocracy will definitely attract a highly-qualified workforce. Foreign talent from developing countries will move abroad for opportunities to advance in their career.
- Countries should strive for a liberal regime, without discrimination of race, religion, or any other adverse factors toward international labor movement to ensure a safe and conducive environment to attract qualified highly skilled labor.

2.2 The concept of International Trade

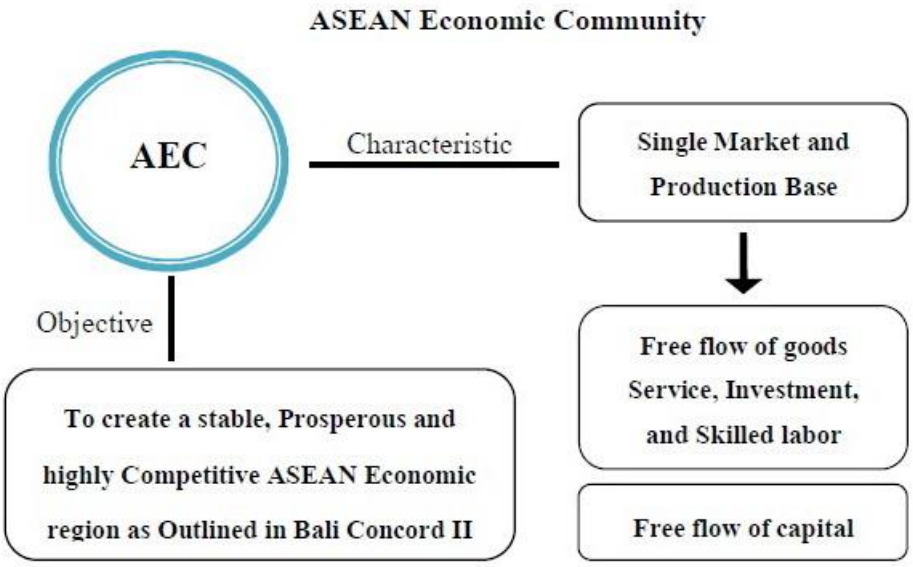
International trade may be viewed in the context of international business, which includes all types of commercial activities including sales, investment, and transport between two or more countries. The goal of a private business is to make profits while governments cannot focus on profit alone, and sometimes business is conducted for political reasons (Daniels, Radebaugh, and Sullivan, 2011).

2.3 ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

The AEC is one of the three pillars of the ASEAN and the driving force for its economic integration with the aim of a single market and production base through the movement of goods, services, investment and skilled labor, and investment freedom. The consumer can choose from a wide range of goods and services within the region and can travel more easily and freely (Department of Trade Negotiations of Thailand, 2009).

The AEC aims to facilitate trade between member countries as well as the outside world through four approaches: (1) a single market and production base, focusing on the movement of goods and services, investment, capital, and skilled workers between countries; (2) the ability to compete on the implementation of competitive policy, infrastructure development, protection of intellectual property, information and communication technology (ICT) and energy; (3) develop economic equality by encouraging the participation and expansion of SMEs, provision of aid to new members such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV), thereby reducing the development gap; and (4) integrating into the global economy to completely focus on the FTA and CEP with dialog partners, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community



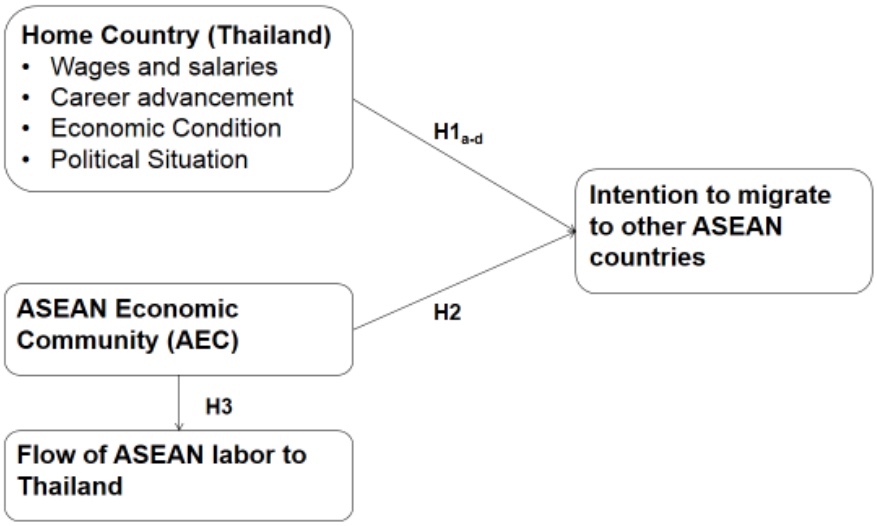
2.4 Free flow of skilled labor in the AEC

Free labor mobility is the key to achieving the objective of the AEC, whereby certificated skilled labor from one member country can work in any other ASEAN member country, following the principles of the Economic Union (EU). The liberalization in the movement of skilled workers, such as managers or executives trained abroad, and professionals such as architects or engineers has tremendous implications for all ASEAN countries. The engineering profession supports the development and expansion of the economy in both the short and long term.

2.5 Research Framework and Hypothesis

The research framework and hypotheses are summarized in Figure 2. There are three hypotheses that are in the research framework, which are based on the previous studies.

Figure 2
Research framework



The first hypothesis argues that individual and economic conditions in the worker's home market, including wages and salaries, career advancement opportunities, economic conditions, and the political situation, could influence intention of Thai workers to migrate to another ASEAN country for work. The first hypothesis states:

> **H1:** There is a relationship between driving factors for labor moving out of home country and intention to move to another ASEAN market for work.
> **$H1_a$:** Wage and salaries offered in home country can positively impact on intention to migrate to other AEC countries.
> **$H1_b$:** Lack of career advancement in home country can positively impact on intention to migrate to other AEC countries.
> **$H1_c$:** Poor economic condition in home country can positively impact on intention to migrate to other AEC countries.
> **$H1_d$:** Unstable political situation in home country can positively impact on intention to move to another ASEAN market for work.

The second hypothesis argues that labor market liberalization has a positive effect on intention of Thai workers to migrate to other ASEAN countries for work. This hypothesis is based on two observations. First, labor market liberalization within ASEAN was intended to make it easier for qualified workers to move between markets, in line with the objectives of the AEC (Ministry of Commerce, the Department of Trade Negotiations of Thailand, 2009). Second, studies within the EU, which is structured under a similar agreement, has high levels of worker mobility associated with labor market liberalization and freedom of movement for workers (Panglilat, 2012). Therefore, H2 states:

> **H2:** Labor migration liberalization in AEC can positively impact on intention to migrate to other ASEAN countries.

The third hypothesis argues that, just as labor market liberalization influences Thai worker intention to move to other ASEAN markets, it would also make it easier for workers from other countries to migrate to Thailand for work. This hypothesis is based on the same

bases as H2, noting that Thailand is one of the more attractive markets for workers in the AEC. Thus, it states:

> **H3:** Labor migration liberalization in AEC can positively impact on the flow of labor move into Thailand.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This quantitative research study uses questionnaires to understand the impact of labor migration liberalization in the AEC on the manufacturing industry of Thailand using the following research methodology.

The population used in this study consists of engineers in Thailand working in the electronics and computer sectors. Since the researcher did not know the number of engineers working in the electronics and computer sector in Thailand, and because of time constraints, convenience sampling was selected for this study. A sample of 400 engineers working in the electronics and computers sector in Thailand via distribution of a questionnaire in October 2019.

This research uses a questionnaire survey to ascertain the impact of labor migration liberalization in the AEC on the manufacturing industry of Thailand. This questionnaire consists of six sections as follows:

Section 1: Demographic Information
Section 2: Driving factors for moving out of home country
Section 3: AEC
Section 4: Flow of ASEAN labor to Thailand
Section 5: Intention to migrate to other AEC countries
Section 6: Impact of AEC

The hypotheses were tested using single and multiple regression. Linear regression is a statistical approach to estimate a function representing the relationship between one or more independent variables (on the x-axis) and a dependent variable (on the y-axis) (Black). Regression techniques were selected for this research because they can be used to estimate relationships between variables within a population (Black). Which technique was used depended on the specific statement in the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1 and its sub-hypotheses were tested using multiple regression. Multiple regression uses two or more independent variables, which gives a more accurate estimate for situations where there are several factors that may interact (Black). This choice was made because it was expected that the personal and economy-level factors could interact. Single regression uses a single independent variable. This was used for H2 and H3, both of which had only one independent variable proposed.

4. RESULTS

The reliability was measured by Cronbach's alpha. The lowest score was for political situation (alpha = .728), with the highest score being for wages and salaries (alpha = .935). These scores are in the range that indicates internal consistency reliability of multi-item Likert scales, which is .700 to .950 (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, the scales were considered to be reliable enough for the research, and no changes had to be made to the scales to improve reliability of the scales.

The result of multiple regression analysis for Hypothesis 1 are shown in Table 2 (model summary), 3 (ANOVA), and 4 (coefficients). The ANOVA test confirms that this regression model is significant ($F = 1182.430, p < .001$). The R-square (.923) indicates that the coefficients explained 92.3% of the variance in the outcome variable, which was intention to move to another ASEAN market. This indicates that the model was highly predictive.

The t-tests of individual variables indicated that wages ($t = 17.967$, $p < .001$), career prospects ($t = 7.096$, $p < .001$), economic conditions ($t = 3.763$, $p < .001$) and political instability ($t = 3.100$, $p = .002$) had significant effects. The B coefficients (unstandardized coefficients) indicate that wages ($B = .588$) had the strongest effect, followed by career prospects ($B = .226$), economic conditions ($B = .141$) and political instability ($B = .052$). These results mean that H1a, H1b, H1c, and H1d can all be accepted. Wages and salaries, career advancement, and economic conditions and political instability in Thailand could all have a strong effect on the intention to move to another ASEAN market for work.

In short, it can be concluded that wages and salaries in home country ($H1_a$), lack of career advancement in home country ($H1_b$), poor economic condition in home country ($H1_c$), and political instability in home country ($H1_d$); can positively impact on the intention to move to another ASEAN market for work. Thus, hypotheses $1_{a\text{-}d}$ are accepted.

Table 2
Hypothesis 1 model summary

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.961[a]	.923	.922	.30547
a. Predictors: (Constant), Politic, Career, Wage, Economic				

Table 3
Hypothesis 1 ANOVA

ANOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	441.325	4	110.331	1182.430	.000[b]
	Residual	36.857	395	.093		
	Total	478.182	399			
a. Dependent Variable: Intention						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Politic, Career, Wage, Economic						

Table 4
Hypothesis 1 Coefficients

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.092	.058		-1.581	.115
	Wage	.588	.033	.599	17.967	.000
	Career	.226	.032	.237	7.096	.000
	Economic	.141	.038	.142	3.763	.000
	Politic	.052	.017	.047	3.100	.002
a. Dependent Variable: Intention						

The result of regression analysis for Hypothesis 2 is shown in Table 5. The coefficients shows that this was a weak effect, with the unstandardized coefficient for AEC (B = .276) being much smaller than the constant or intercept. Since this model was significant, Hypothesis 2 was accepted. However, there is indication that this is overall a very weak effect, especially given the strength of the factors tested in H1. As the hypothesis 2 is accepted, Labor migration liberalization in AEC can positively impact on intention to migrate to other ASEAN countries.

Table 5
Hypothesis 2 Coefficients

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.138	.209		5.438	.000
	AEC	.276	.055	.244	5.030	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Intention						

The result of regression analysis for Hypothesis 3 is shown in Table 6. The coefficient (B = .767) indicates that this is a moderately strong influence as well. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was accepted, as this test did show that it was perceived that labor market liberalization in Thailand was a factor in flows of labor into Thailand. Indeed, labor migration liberalization in AEC can positively impact on the flow of labor move into Thailand. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is accepted.

Table 6
Hypothesis 3 Coefficients

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.992	.133		7.482	.000
	AEC	.767	.035	.742	22.084	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Intention						

5. DISCUSSION

The discussion offered in this section is divided into two parts. This includes the individual and economy factors in labor migration to ASEAN and labor migration liberalization and flows of labor to and from Thailand's manufacturing industry.

5.1 Individual and economy factors in labor migration

There were four factors tested as individual and economy factors in labor migration from Thailand's manufacturing industry to ASEAN as part of Hypothesis 1. These factors included wages and salaries and career advancement prospects, as well as economic conditions and political instability. Results showed that although all four of these factors were significant and positive, individual factors (wages and salaries and career prospects) had a stronger effect than economy-level factors (economic conditions and political instability).

The notion that labor migration is an individual decision intended to improve working conditions or opportunities is a long-standing premise of many economic theories. For example, Harris and Sabot (1982) noted that individual desires to seek out better working conditions are behind the decision to move internationally. Under this model, the individual evaluates the costs and benefits of migration, making the decision based on the economic gains associated with better work opportunities compared to the cost of migration.

There is also some theoretical basis for broader economic factors in migration. Under world systems theory, it can be argued that migration results not just from individual decisions (or family decisions, under new economic theory (De la Brière,et al., 2002). Instead, migration results from broader economic conditions in different countries, which change the demand for labor in different markets and create incentives for workers to move among these markets (Henderson, 2005). Other theories also identify economy-level factors in migration. For example, neoclassical economics identifies various push factors, like poverty and low living

standards, which incentivize movement of workers from less-developed countries to more-developed countries in the absence of other barriers (Bencivenga and Smith, 1997). Under extreme conditions, this can even lead to a so-called 'brain drain', where highly skilled workers may move to another market due to better working conditions such as higher wages, leaving a gap in the labor market in the country with poorer working conditions (Bencivenga and Smith, 1997).

Some theories argue for an interaction between individual and economic factors in migration (Wrage, 1981; Ravenstein, 1885). These theories argue that workers may be subject to underemployment and skills mismatches in some economies, which can leave them struggling to find work and, if they can find work, will have lower wage levels and lack of career advancement opportunities compared to what they could achieve in different countries. However, social and political factors, as well as economic factors, are responsible for the individual decision to move to other markets for work (Wrage, 1981; Ravenstein, 1885). This model, which reflects both individual and economy-level influences on the decision to move internationally, is the best theory to explain the results. This is because although concerns like wages and career advancement had the strongest effect, political and economic conditions also had an influence. Thus, the world systems theory and the empirical evidence from Wrage (1981) can be viewed as the best explanation for the findings of this research.

5.2 Labor migration liberalization and flows of labor into and out of Thailand

The research also investigated the effect of labor market liberalization of the AEC on flows of labor out of and into Thailand. The effect of the labor market liberalization of the AEC on intention to leave Thailand for other ASEAN markets was very weak, although it was significant (H2). However, the effect of labor market liberalization on labor flows into Thailand was quite a bit stronger (H3). Both of these effects were positive. Thus, the findings showed that labor market liberalization was viewed as a factor both in the individual worker's intention to move abroad and for the movement of workers into Thailand.

These findings are not surprising, given that the intention of the AEC was, at least in part, to enable the free movement of labor between different markets. The theories underlying international trade offer some insight into the meaning of these findings. For example, under the theory of absolute advantage (Daniels, et al., 2011), movement of labor in the absence of barriers could be said to contribute to the development of country-level industries in which they can gain absolute advantage. Thus, countries may draw on their workforce to achieve this advantage. The Heckscher-Ohlin factor proportion theory (Daniels, et al., 2011) argues that the ability of countries to draw labor can create a comparative advantage. Thus, Thailand's ability to draw workers from other ASEAN countries could contribute to its advantage in different industries. At the same time, factor movement theory suggests that movement of people is more expensive than movement of financial or physical capital (Daniels, et al., 2011). Therefore, it is possible that both firms and individual workers would try to move physical and financial capital before moving workers. This could explain some of the general reluctance shown in the survey to consider moving internationally. In summary, the movement of people within ASEAN can be explained, in the absence of barriers like visa requirements, to be a movement toward industries or countries that have a higher competitive advantage. However, the cost of labor movement compared to movement of other forms of capital could inhibit this movement even if there are few or no institutional barriers.

6. CONCLUSION

The objectives of this research were to study the relationship between driving factors for workers moving out of their home country and intention to migrate to other ASEAN countries and to identify the relationship between labor migration liberalization in AEC and labor movement in Thailand by focusing on the manufacturing industry.

These objectives were accomplished through a survey of domestic workers in the Thai manufacturing industry (n = 400). The results of the survey showed that, in practice, most of the workers in the survey were not considering migration away from Thailand to another ASEAN market for economic reasons. However, if respondents were to migrate for economic reasons, the strongest effects were found for individual factors, including individual salaries and wages and career advancement prospects. Broader factors, including economic conditions and political instability in Thailand, were also significant, but had a much weaker effect than individual economic factors in the migration decision. Another test showed that AEC labor market liberalization did have an effect on the migration intention for Thai workers, although it was a very small effect compared to the individual and economic factors. At the same time, workers viewed AEC labor market liberalization as a major factor in the migration of workers into Thailand. This finding suggests that the Thai market may be one of the most competitive markets for labor in ASEAN, since most workers do not want to leave Thailand, but have co-workers from other countries that have moved to Thailand.

In conclusion, this research has shown that the AEC's labor market liberalization has had an effect on individual decisions to move to different labor markets in ASEAN, but also that individual factors like wages and career advancement have a much stronger effect than just the implementation of the AEC and its elimination of labor migration barriers. Thus, the removal of barriers to labor migration, such as work permits and visas, is more of a facilitator which reduces the cost of migration rather than a main reason for movement of labor between countries.

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