

Case Study: Mrs Chaweewan Boonmee (Sewing Work)

Mrs Chaweewan Boonmee or Pin (a fictitious name), 44 years old, lived in Moo 13 in Mae Na Rua subdistrict of Phayao province's Muang district. Mr Manoo, her husband, was a farmer who would become a construction worker after farming season. The three members of Pin's family—herself, her husband and a son, who was a fourth-year undergraduate at Naresuan University in Phitsanulok province—lived together. Pin started off her sewing work as a dressmaker by taking orders according to her customers' designs back in 1996. She did not belong to any group. She took the orders from a subcontractor, who lived in another village and who delivered the work to Pin's house and came to collect the finished work. The orders included the sewing of quilts, hats, blouses, etc. The quantity of each order was up to the contractor. An order of 100 quilts would take about 5-7 days.

Over 10 years of sewing led to health problems for Pin, which included back pains and clouded vision caused by the need to sew at night because of the occasional rush order for 100 quilts within three days. However, such a rush job did not earn any higher wage. Pin's wages were consistently low. For instance, by sewing a quilt, filling it with kapok and sewing its corners up, Pin would earn only six baht per piece. Since each day, Pin could sew approximately 20 quilts (without considerable strain), she only earned about 120 THB (4 USD) per day. She was informed that in certain villages, similar work garnered 10 baht per piece, so the wage was up to the subcontractor. There was no standard wage to refer to or negotiate for. Pin's monthly income could not support her more than 10,000-THB (333.33 USD) monthly household expenses. Food cost Pin and her husband about 100 THB (3.33 USD) a day. Tap water cost around 40-50 THB (1.33-1.67 USD) while a minimum use of electricity was provided free of charge by the government. Moreover, Pin and her husband had to pay 10,000 THB (333.33 USD) to support their son's education expenses.

Therefore, in 2009 Pin had to stop the sewing work. It was fortunate that Pin's family still had a piece of land, off which they could live by growing rice and vegetables after rice-farming season. Such agricultural practice could bring in all-year-round income of about 84,000 THB (2,800 USD): 30,000 THB (1,000 USD) from growing vegetables and 54,000 THB (1,800 USD) from growing rice. The whole family could live a reasonable life by that amount of income.