



NEWS RELEASE
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New Poll Highlights Need for Better Understanding Among Thais of the Importance of Migrant Workers to Their Economy

**Migrants help economy but only one-in-two Thais agree
they should enjoy the same working conditions**

United Nations, Bangkok – 18 December 2006 – A new ABAC poll released today revealed the need for better understanding among Thais of the important contribution made by foreign migrant workers to the Thai economy.

To mark International Migrants Day, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) commissioned a random household survey of 4,148 Thais, conducted by Assumption University between 25 November and 1 December, to get a better idea of Thai attitudes toward the increasing number of foreign migrants who arrive in the Kingdom from neighbouring countries and take on low-paying, low-skilled jobs in many sectors of Thailand's expanding economy, including domestic work. The poll results will be used to help raise awareness in Thailand of the benefits gained through these workers and the need to protect their rights, if Thailand is to remain an attractive country of employment.

It's well-recognized today that Asia's growing economies are increasingly reliant on migrant workers and this market for labour is likely to become increasingly competitive in the future. Today, about half those migrating for work in this region are women. While Thai workers are joining the trend of labour migration to Asia's more developed economies, Thailand's own expanding economy is also in need of more foreign workers.

Figures from the Ministry of Labour suggested rising demand for unskilled migrant workers. Last year, local employers requested 1.8 million unskilled migrant workers from Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia for various occupations. The demand led the Cabinet to approve the idea of importing 200,000 low-skilled workers from the three countries.

Despite this official recognition, the ABAC poll, released to coincide with International Migrants Day, indicated that most respondents believed Thailand does not need migrant workers for sustaining the industrial and agricultural economy and about 58.6% of respondents said the Thai government should not admit more foreigners to work in Thailand compared with only 9.7% that believed otherwise. The respondents believed that hiring more migrant workers will have negative impacts on Thai workers, such as making it more difficult for Thai workers to find a job, making employers value them less and forcing them to settle for lower wages.

However, many Thais today are less willing to take up the low-paid, '3D' jobs - those seen as 'dirty, degrading and dangerous'. Migrant workers are filling that gap, rather than competing with Thais.

The poll also revealed that Thais were divided over the issue of equal pay for equal work, working conditions and whether migrants were entitled to freedom of expression – a basic human right.

When asked about equal working conditions for migrant and Thai workers, Thais seemed to agree on equal working hours and holidays, but not on equal wages. Compared with more than 75% of the respondents who agreed on equal working hours and holidays, only 40% of the respondents agreed on equal wages. The respondents justified their response, in part, by adding that the wages migrants received in Thailand, even though lower than those of Thai workers, were still better than what the migrants earned in their home countries.

According to the poll, 67.3% of the respondents said migrant workers should not be able to apply for any job available in Thailand, and roughly one-in-two respondents (50.3%) said migrant workers should not be provided with the same legal working conditions as Thais. More than half (59.7%) said migrant workers should also not be allowed freedom of expression. About 77.3% agreed that migrant workers should not have the right to form unions.

Most of the ABAC poll respondents, especially those who have been personally acquainted with migrant workers, indicated their belief that migrants are hard working, but not honest and loyal.

The findings from the ABAC poll largely support the results of a year long research study jointly conducted by ILO and the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University. The results of that research found that Thai employers were also of the view that migrant workers were not entitled to the same rights as Thai workers.

In addition, the poll indicated that 84.4% of the respondents were aware that all migrant workers must have legal status through the registration process, despite the fact that large numbers of Thai employers willingly employed unregistered migrants. These include women from neighbouring countries who migrate to Thailand to find employment as domestic workers. Thai employers appear to prefer hiring unregistered migrant workers because they can pay them lower wages and avoid compliance with labour standards.

In the Asian region, where the market for even low-skilled labour is likely to become increasingly competitive, there is clearly a need for greater public awareness in Thailand of the positive role played by migrants in economic development and a need to change public attitudes to the pay and conditions offered to these workers. To be an attractive employment destination, providing protection under Thai labour laws with pay and conditions equivalent to those received by Thais, would be a good starting point.

Importantly, the poll reaffirms that the media plays an important role in shaping public views and knowledge about migrant workers. Four out of five people (79.9%) who remembered media reports recalled reading about migrant workers who had committed serious crimes in Thailand while only 41.4% recalled reports where migrants had been cheated or abused by employers in the industrial and agricultural sectors and only 29% had read about domestic workers being cheated or abused.

On a positive note, the poll showed that Thai people do have sympathy toward migrant workers when they are abused by employers. Most of the respondents said they would report abuse to the police, relevant government agencies and organizations and the media. Only 15.1 % of the respondents said they would do nothing. Greater awareness of the full plight of migrant workers in Thailand may encourage Thais to increase their support for the protection of migrants.

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