



FINDINGS AT-A-GLANCE



International
Labour
Organization

The Mekong Challenge – Underpaid, Overworked and Overlooked: The realities of young migrant workers in Thailand

Objectives of the research:

In general, this research was designed to examine the recruitment practices and working environments of foreign migrant workers present in Thailand (who had arrived from neighbouring countries) in four employment sectors: agriculture, domestic work, fishing boats/fish processing and small scale manufacturing.

More specifically, it sets out to examine the level of labour exploitation occurring in these four sectors and to determine, to the extent possible, how much of it is actually forced labour or trafficking-related. It focuses less on 'movement' and more on the 'destination' – the workplaces where most of the exploitation is believed to occur.

The researchers have also examined the profile and attitudes of employers and recruiters who engage migrants to work in these sectors – as those profiles and attitudes could either be encouraging exploitation or working to prevent it.

Timeframe:

Approximately one year from design stage to final report. Field work was conducted from June to October 2005 in three of the sectors. As regards domestic work, some of the field work was carried out previously by IPSR and a comparison of that data vis-à-vis this study was conducted.

Sampling groups:

- Migrants primarily from Myanmar (Burma) and some from Cambodia and Lao PDR. The vast majority of migrants interviewed was female (75%). One in five migrants (20%) was a child aged 15-17 and one-in-twenty (5%) were below 15. Women aged 18-25 years of age, primarily, and some men aged 18-20 accounted for the remainder. The majority of migrants was registered (i.e. had legal status to work in Thailand) across all sectors.
- Employers (all Thai nationals). More employers were female in domestic work and manufacturing. More males were interviewed in agriculture and fishing.
- Recruiters – ten in total (all Burmese males in Thailand, most of whom had formerly been migrant workers)

Geographical areas (by sector):

- **Agriculture:** Nakhon Pathom Province
- **Domestic work:** Chiang Mai and Mae Sot for the migrant survey, and Bangkok and surrounding provinces for employer survey.
- **Fishing/Fish processing:** Samut Sakhon Province
- **Manufacturing:** Nonthaburi, Nakhon Pathom, Samut Prakarn, Pathumthani and Samut Sakhon

Key findings:

- More than 40% of migrant domestic workers were paid only 1,000 Baht per month – or less. Nearly nine-out-of-ten (89%) received 3,000 Baht or less.
- If the legal minimum wage was applied, the average remuneration to migrants in all four sectors would be well below that standard.
- Around 20% of migrants on fishing boats claimed they were forced to work
- More than 90% of workers in three sectors had no written contract (the question was not asked of domestic workers). Less than half of them were in possession of their original identity documents.
- More than 75% of those registered to work in the fishing sectors did not have access to their documents which were held by their employers.
- Around 60% of migrant domestic workers weren't allowed to leave the premises to meet with others and 8% claimed they had been physically confined or 'locked up' by the employer
- More than half of the employers in agriculture, manufacturing and fishing/fish processing were of the view that migrants should not be allowed to leave the premises outside of working hours without permission
- About half of all employers agreed with a statement that asked whether migrant workers 'should be locked in at night to make sure they don't escape.'
- Nearly half (45%) of those in the fishing sectors and about four out of every five (82%) domestic workers say they work more than 12 hours per day
- Nearly four-out-of-five domestic workers (79%) had no regular day off per month – and the same was true for more than two-thirds of migrant respondents in agriculture (67%)
- Only 10% of migrants claimed they used recruiters to find their current job.
- Though the number of recruiters interviewed was small, both the recruiters, and the few migrants who actually used them, indicated that a fairly positive relationship existed between the two groups – with most recruiters maintaining continued relationships in order to make commissions for acting as liaisons for communications and remittances of migrant wages to families back in Myanmar. In some cases, recruiters were able to negotiate better labour conditions with employers or able to remove migrants from abusive or exploitative conditions.

Research Team:

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