

Situational Assessment of Labor Migrants in Asia: Needs and Knowledge During COVID-19

Series Brief 1: Cambodia

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Photo by Binh Dang Nam



Introduction and Methodology

Between the months of February and May 2020, more than 90,000 labor migrants returned to Cambodia as the Covid-19 pandemic caused mass business and industry closures in destination countries such as neighboring Thailand.¹ Tens of thousands were left unemployed, facing uncertain futures. To better understand the short- and long-term needs of this population, the USAID Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) project, implemented by Winrock International, collected information from 63 returned Cambodian migrants through a quantitative survey that took place between May 14 - 22.²

Data was collected remotely through phone-based interviews using a closed-question survey. Kobo Toolbox software was used for all data collection. The sample was generated from available contact information gathered on those who had returned to Cambodia after February 2020. This information was collected by field coordinators and community trainers working for the USAID Cambodia CTIP project (also implemented by Winrock International). In total, 716 returned migrants were identified by village chiefs in 17 target villages across five provinces where the USAID Cambodia CTIP project had available field staff. No other parameters were used for identifying the sample (i.e. income level, employment status). Of these, 160 people had phone numbers available and were used as the sampling frame.

There were challenges in reaching this population by phone, primarily due to disconnected/invalid phone numbers, lack of response, and the common practice of changing network providers (and thus phone numbers) in Cambodia.

Of the 63 respondents that were reached and agreed to participate in the phone interview, 54% were female and 44% were male. Over half of respondents were located

in Siem Reap province (19 respondents) or Banteay Meanchey (17 respondents).

Table 1: Number of Respondents, by Province

Province	Respondents
Siem Reap	19
Banteay Meanchey	17
Prey Veng	14
Oddar Meanchey	4
Kampong Thom	2
Svay Rieng	2
Takeo	2
Missing	3
Total	63

In addition to the quantitative survey, 18 remote phone-based qualitative interviews were conducted with Cambodian and Burmese migrants who remained in Thailand.³ Those who participated in qualitative interviews had experience working in either the fishing/seafood processing or domestic work sectors in Thailand.

In total, 91 respondents participated in quantitative or qualitative interviews. Due to the small sample size, results should be taken with caution and cannot be assumed as representative of the migrant population. However, the findings do shine a light on the current situation and needs of some migrants as well as their knowledge of Covid-19.

¹ UNAIDS, 2020. Accessed online:

https://www.unaids.org/en/20200427_Cambodia_migrants

² This is the first brief in a series. Data was also collected with migrants in Bangladesh and Nepal.

³ Qualitative interviews were conducted by the research agency Love Frankie.

Key Findings and Recommendations

- 1 Returned female migrants are finding employment at a much lower rate than men, which may be reflective of the sample including a high number of men with prior construction industry jobs - skills that are in high demand in Cambodia. Therefore, ensuring returned migrant women are included in job placement services and skill building activities are highly recommended.
- 2 The number of women planning to re-migrate is nearly three times higher than men. The high rates of unemployment among female returned migrants could be due to the higher rates of women reporting plans to re-migrate. Messages and information on re-migration should closely consider the needs and risks to women female migrants as this group may be the first – and largest – to migrate for work, when migration is again possible.
- 3 Forty-two percent of respondents said they were planning to re-migrate to Thailand for work, and half of those planning re-migrate said they would return to their previous job. While migrants are waiting to return to Thailand and other destination countries for work, it will be valuable to provide information on employer responsibilities in destination countries. This information could include: fees employers are legally responsible to pay when workers make the journey back, hygienic/health protections that employers must be putting in place, and other worker protection information.
- 4 Two-thirds of respondents said they had not received any support since returning, while 35% said they did not have enough food to eat every day since returning and 57% reported not having enough income to support themselves. The Royal Government of Cambodia should continue assisting this vulnerable population through emergency cash and food assistance. International organizations and NGOs should consider providing the same type of support with available resources.
- 5 Most respondents knew several ways to protect themselves against COVID-19 and have received prevention information, yet a large percentage (over half) said they need additional information. International organizations, NGOs and provincial governments should continue providing protection information in clear, easy to understand graphics or audio messaging. Providing updated information on travel restrictions (particularly between Cambodia and Thailand) will be extremely valuable as migrants prepare to navigate a return journey.
- 6 Providing protection, worker rights and travel information to migrants who remain in Thailand is also an urgent need. Specifically, domestic workers are facing increased vulnerabilities as qualitative interviews found several are working excessive overtime without compensation, while others are worried about being laid off and unable to return home. Migrants interviewed in Thailand said they often access information through Facebook and YouTube. Particularly, The Cambodia Embassy in Thailand Facebook page is followed by migrants interviewed. These channels should be used by both the Royal Government of Cambodia and Royal Thai Government, as well as migrant assistance organizations, to provide targeted information to this vulnerable group.

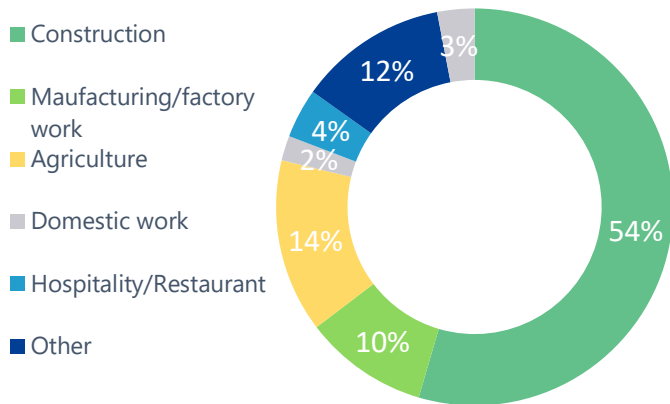
Profiles of Returned Migrants

The sample includes 63 respondents; 54% were female and 44% were male. Over half of respondents were located in Siem Reap province (19 respondents) or Banteay Meanchey (17 respondents). Other provinces include Prey Veng (14) and Oddar Meanchey (4). See table 1 above for a complete list of provinces.

The majority of respondents (78%) were under the age of 40. Sixty percent of respondents reported returning to Cambodia more than a month ago, 20% returned 3 – 4 weeks ago, and only 2 respondents returned 1 – 2 weeks ago.⁴

For all respondents who provided information, 87% returned from Thailand, over half of which were employed in construction work.

Figure 1: Type of work in destination country (n=63)

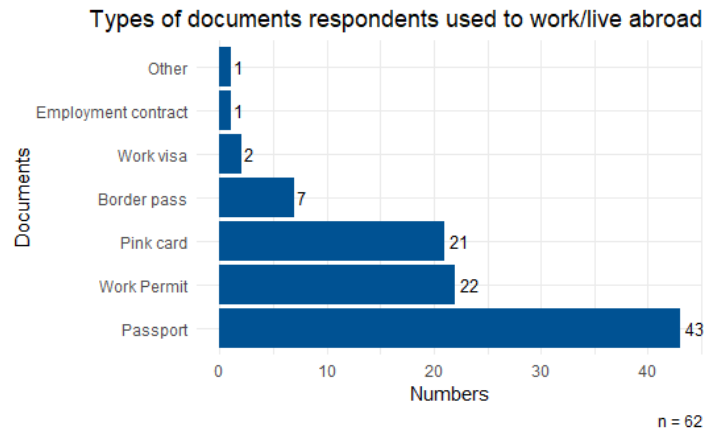


⁴ Surveys were conducted between May 14 -22. Ten respondents did not provide an answer as to their time of return.

Respondents were asked if they had required documents to legally live and work in the destination country. **Most, or 86%, said yes.** The most common document respondents reported having was a passport (46%) followed by a work permit (35%) and pink card (33%). (Multiple responses could be given.)

Most commonly, respondents had at least two types of legal documentation (24 respondents), followed by three types of documents (18 respondents).⁵ Eight respondents answered ‘yes’ as to whether they had legal documents to work and live abroad, but then did not list any document types.

Figure 2: Types of legal documents, by number of respondents



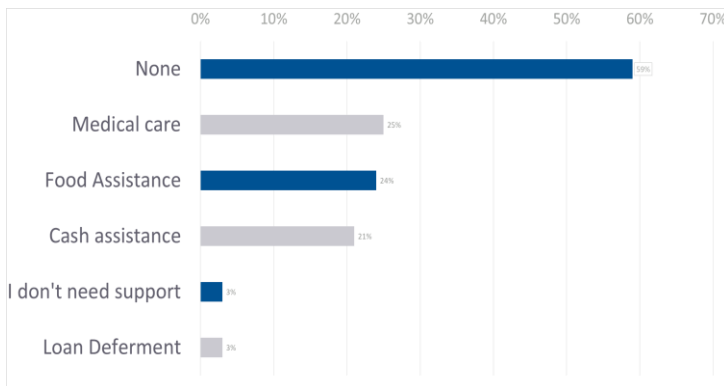
⁵ The types and number of legal documents respondents reported having should be taken with caution, as there could have been some confusion on the name of documents migrants have. The best practice for identifying legal documents is to show respondents a photo as an example, but due to interviews being over the phone, this was not possible.

Needs and Access to Services

Since returning to Cambodia, nearly 35% of respondents said they did not have enough food to eat every day and almost two-thirds said they did not have enough income to support themselves. Yet, **almost 60% said they had not received any support services since returning.** Of those who did receive support, a quarter said they had received medical care; 24% received food assistance; and 21% received cash assistance (*multiple responses could be given*).

For those who provided information, (22 respondents), 14 respondents received support from the government; four respondents received support from friends or family; and three said NGO/international organization. One respondent didn't know.

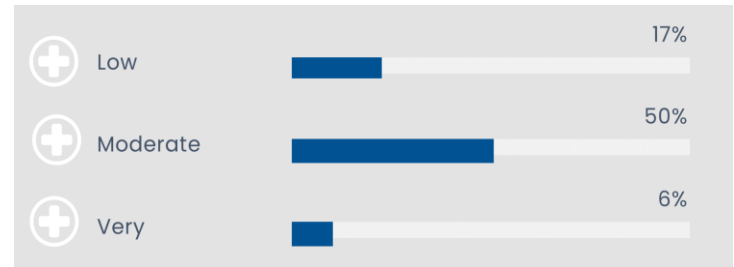
Figure 3: Types of Support Received



Most respondents (78%) answered 'no' when asked if they had been sick since returning to Cambodia. Participants were then asked how confident they were in accessing medical care if they did become sick. Answers were given on a three-level scale of low / moderate / very. Half of participants said they were moderately confident; 17% had low confidence and only 6% said they were very confident in accessing medical care.

Of those that had been sick (nine respondents) eight said they had been able to access medical care.

Figure 4: Confidence in Accessing Medical Care



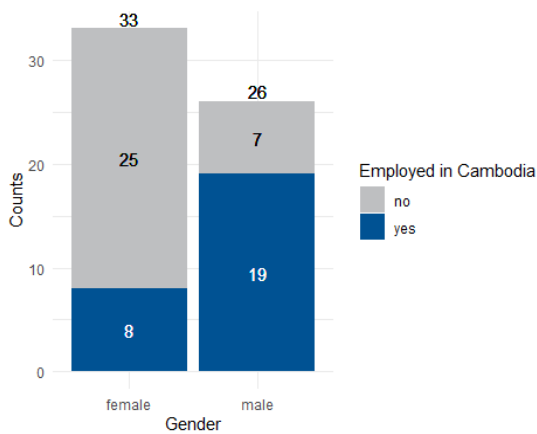
When asked if respondents think returned migrants are being treated differently than others, 76% said they were being treated the same. About 10% thought returned migrants were being treated worse or much worse.

Women were asked if they faced an increased risk of violence since returning and nearly all said no (91%).

Employment and Future Plans for Migration

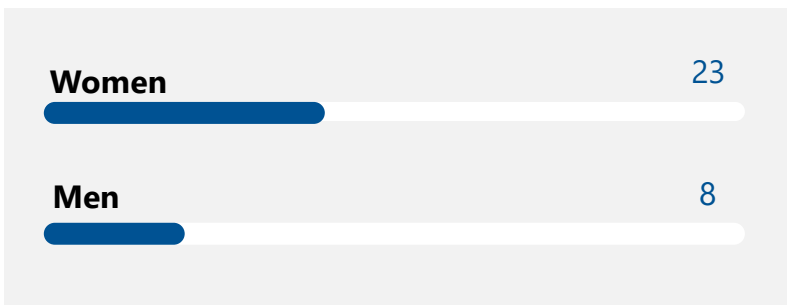
Less than half of respondents said they are currently employed in Cambodia (27 respondents). Twice as many men are employed (19) as compared to women (8). Of those who are employed, most participants (20) are working in construction. Employment findings are not surprising, largely due to the sample being dominated by returned migrants who were working in construction in Thailand, and **therefore were able to secure jobs in Cambodia's construction industry.**

Figure 5: Respondents employed, by gender



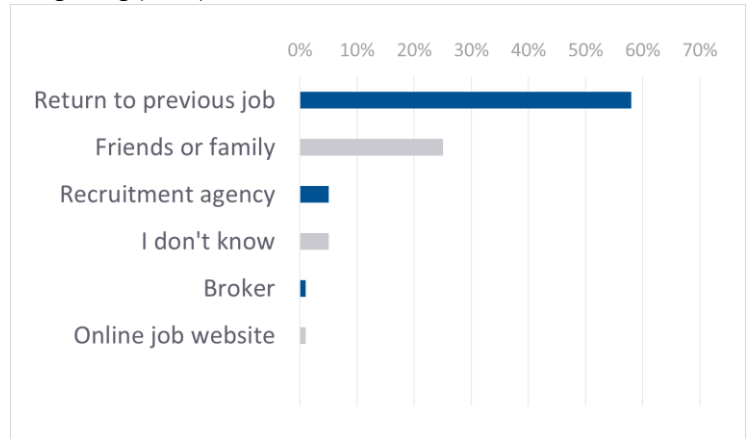
Almost half of respondents (49%) said they were planning to re-migrate for work. Twenty-three of those planning to re-migrate were women compared with eight men. The higher rates of unemployment among female returned migrants is likely a factor in higher rates of women reporting plans to re-migrate.

Figure 6: Respondents planning to re-migrate, by gender (count, n=31)



The majority (87%) of those planning to re-migrate said they plan on returning to Thailand, and over half (58%) said they would return to their previous job. A quarter said they would find a job through friends or family. Only three respondents said they would use a recruitment agency.

Figure 7: How respondents will find jobs when re-migrating (n=31)

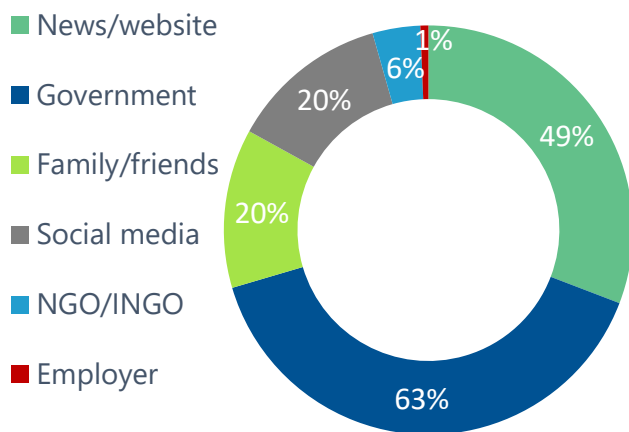


When asked how participants will decide when its safe and possible to re-migrate for work, most common responses included asking family or friends (17 respondents); asking village chief or community leader (13 respondents); six people didn't know how they will decide.

Knowledge and Information on COVID-19

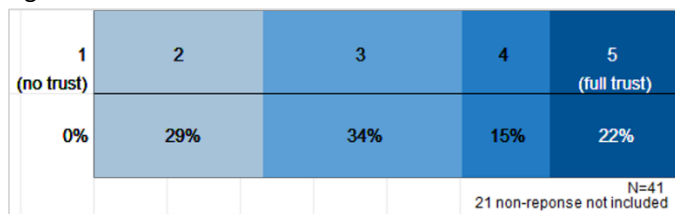
Most participants (81%) said they had received prevention information on Covid-19. Two-thirds had received information from more than one source. Of those who received information, 63% received it from the government, which includes health workers or clinics, followed by 49% who received it from the news/online website. Twenty percent received information from family and friends, and 20% through a social media platform. (Multiple responses could be given for how people received information.)

Figure 8: Where respondents received prevention information on Covid-19



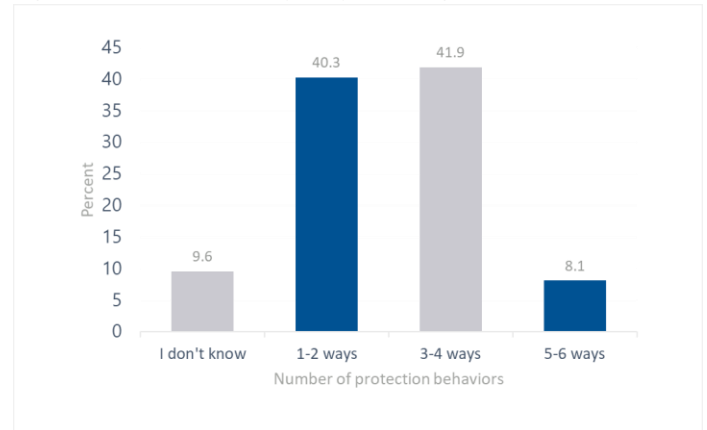
Respondents were asked what their level of trust was in the information received on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being no trust, 5 being full trust). Results were quite mixed, with zero respondents choosing 1 (no trust), and about 22% choosing 5, or full trust.

Figure 9: Level of trust in Covid-19 information received



Respondents largely felt they understood how to protect themselves against Covid-19 and could list several ways to do so. Only 6 respondents (less than 10%) could not list any ways to protect themselves against Covid-19, whereas 40% listed one to two ways to protect themselves and 42% listed three to four ways. The most common protection behavior chosen was hand washing (87%) followed by wearing a face mask or cover (75%) and social distancing (32%). (Multiple responses could be given.)

Figure 10: Number of ways to protect against Covid-19



If respondents developed Covid-19 symptoms, a little over half said they would visit a hospital/health clinic, followed by 15% saying they didn't know. Slightly over 10% said they would call the government hotline.

Although most participants had reported receiving prevention information on Covid-19 and could list multiple ways to protect themselves, **67% said they needed more information on Covid-19**. When asked where people would go for trusted information on Covid-19, 43% said the government (this includes health workers or clinics) and 40% said village chief/community leader. Almost a quarter said Facebook. (Multiple responses could be given.)

The Situation for Migrants Remaining in Thailand

Eighteen qualitative interviews were conducted with both Cambodian and Burmese workers who remain in Thailand. Migrants interviewed had experience working in either domestic work or fishing/seafood processing industries.

Some domestic workers reported working longer hours - including on their specified days off -without compensation, while others are unable to leave their employers residences, making them effectively on call 24/7.

At the same time, some domestic workers are concerned about the stability of their employment. They are aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the economy and businesses of their employers. One domestic worker from Cambodia reported worrying she would lose her work benefits, including her income and small gratuities, as the employer's business is struggling.

Some domestic workers interviewed shared anecdotal reports from other domestic workers who do not stay at the employer's house that they've faced an abrupt termination of employment contracts, due to employers' inability to ensure workers are following hygienic guidelines to prevent Covid-19 when they are outside the employer's home.

Among Cambodian migrants, there's a general concern about not being able to go back to their home country due to the shutdown of international borders.

For seafood factory workers interviewed, while most felt not personally affected, interviewees reported that others they know working in the seafood factories have reported not being paid. Others report that a few factories have closed during the pandemic, though a mix of workers receive aid from their employers, in the form of food and accommodation.

The most common problem expressed among migrants is a lack of income and inability to pay off debt back home. The Emergency Decree in Thailand also limits the ability of workers to return home. Workers can be deprived of labor benefits, including health benefits, as

some Thai employers are known to not comply with labor laws.

Migrants interviewed stay up-to-date with Covid-19 news through multiple channels. Social media channels, particularly Facebook and YouTube, are preferred, as it can be accessed any time they like. Most follow news sites and pages from their home countries. Thai television news is consumed by those who can understand Thai language. Some watch television news from their home country through YouTube.

A key informant from Cambodia shared that migrants also follow Facebook pages of NGOs working with migrants in Thailand, and the Cambodian Embassy in Thailand's Facebook page.

Employers are also one of the main sources of information on Covid-19 for interviewed migrant workers, whether it is a formal announcement from factory employers or informal conversation with individual employers. One fishing vessel worker interviewed confirmed that he relied on his employer for information when out at sea, due to a lack of access to the internet and mobile service.

Those employed in the seafood industry and working in factories stated that healthcare information is provided by healthcare professionals at the factory. They were provided with health information and rules and regulations to follow when working in the factory. But for all migrants interviewed, there is a lack of awareness of healthcare services they are entitled to in Thailand. Many reported being hesitant to access healthcare services if they ever needed to.

None of the Cambodian migrants interviewed are aware of healthcare benefits they are legally entitled to in Thailand. A few Myanmar migrant workers are aware of the social security system in Thailand. One migrant from Myanmar reported to know of a conditional cash transfer program in Thailand, however, migrant workers are not included in the program.



*A five-year (2016-2021) program, **USAID Asia CTIP** is a regional activity that focuses on transnational and regional challenges to combat human trafficking. The program aims to reduce the trafficking of persons in Asia through a coordinated and consolidated action by governments, civil society and business that will foster cross-border cooperation, develop opportunities for private-sector leadership and improve the quality of data associated with human trafficking. [For more information about the project visit us online.](#)*

For more information about research methodology or findings presented in this paper please contact Jeanne Crump, Research Coordinator with USAID Asia CTIP at jeanne.crump@winrock.org

