



CARAM ASIA

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANT WORKERS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

**A REGIONAL
RESEARCH
REPORT**

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Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	03
	COVID-19 in Asia.....	03
	COVID-19 and Migrant Workers in Southeast Asia.....	04
II.	Research Methodology.....	05
III.	Regional Analysis.....	07
	Impacts of the pandemic on foreign migrant workers.....	07
	Loss of employment, reduction in work hours and loss of income.....	09
	Prevention and access to protective equipment.....	11
	Substandard living conditions.....	12
	Mental health and well-being.....	13
	Discrimination.....	14
	Abuse of labor rights and conditions of forced labor.....	15
	Harassment.....	16
	Impacts on access to health services.....	17
	Documentation requirements related to migrant workers' status.....	18
	Impacts particular to the country.....	19
IV.	National Reports.....	22
	Hong Kong, SAR of China.....	22
	Malaysia.....	26
	Thailand.....	31
V.	Recommendations.....	37
VI.	References.....	41

INTRODUCTION

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), more commonly known as COVID-19 is a contagious disease that is known for the ongoing pandemic that started in 2020. The first recorded case was in Wuhan, China, and although attempts to contain it were made, it ultimately failed, and the virus spread so fast that it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. The virus was officially named COVID-19 by the WHO.

COVID-19 in Asia

According to Ian (2020), despite being the first nation to identify a coronavirus case on the 19th of December 2019, mainland China was able to minimize the spread of the coronavirus within its borders within months, in part through severe restrictions on mobility and aggressive contact tracing. It is unclear how many people died from the disease in China, though, as reporting was controlled by state media. Other Asian countries each responded differently to the pandemic. Vietnam, Taiwan, Province of China, and Singapore were applauded for their willingness to aid their healthcare system, and therefore the COVID-19 situation in these countries was initially contained. As for other Asian countries, they acknowledged COVID-19 as a pandemic, but they lacked preparation and measures to deal with these issues. Misinformation became a major issue during the pandemic, as it is easily spread on social media, creating unnecessary fear. In fact, xenophobia was a quite common response. Most countries closed their borders, causing chaos and hardship with the disruption of travel. Some countries sent migrant workers home, others locked them in their residences, and kept them segregated from the main population. Similarly, some countries imposed quarantines upon their own citizens, to the point of violating human rights.

Each country seemed to react differently. Without a uniform response, plans to contain the virus failed, resulting in variants deriving from the original virus in various parts of the world and then spreading rapidly, such as the Alpha variant and then the Delta variant. Each variant had changes to its genetic content, resulting in unusual characteristics of transmissibility and

severity of symptoms. Recently, a virus that is a derivative of the delta variant called Omicron was discovered and was observed to be twice as transmissible the Delta variant, although it has been observed to cause milder symptoms than its predecessors.

At the time of the publishing of this report, it had been reported that over four hundred million people had been infected with a variant of COVID-19, and there were approximately six million known deaths, and many more suspected under-reported.

COVID-19 and Migrant Workers in Southeast Asia

Countries around the world have been struggling due to the havoc wrought by the health crisis and the social and economic disruptions. The virus has taken millions of lives and has heavily damaged economies. Additionally, it has caused psychological trauma to those who were infected, as well as to their loved ones and to the communities. The most affected demographic has been the working class and the poor. There were significantly disproportionate job losses and higher rates of infection and death among the lower and middle economic classes, accompanied by the trauma of losing someone due to COVID-19.

Among the working class, there is a subpopulation that has been battling the pandemic in their own way – migrant workers. Working in a foreign land, with little to no support systems, the pandemic has hit the lives of migrant workers hard. They are considered second-rate citizens in countries that need them but do not value them. Yet, in some countries, they had little to no option of returning to their country of origin due to international travel restrictions. Whereas in other countries, they were unduly repatriated.

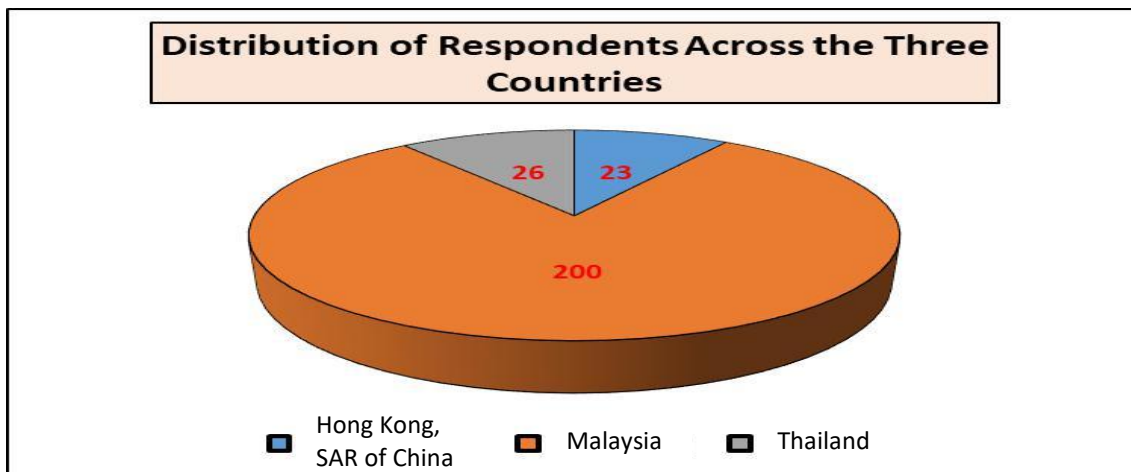
This research attempts to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting the lives of migrant workers in host countries which were part of this study, namely, Hong Kong, SAR of China, Malaysia, and Thailand; and based on empirical evidence, recommend appropriate solutions to, or at least, mitigate the difficulty of their current conditions.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research was to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers and their families in Asian destination countries and uncover concerns and unaddressed issues of migrant workers, including those with special vulnerabilities. The research utilized a combination of qualitative research methodologies along with a survey (only carried out in Malaysia due to technical issues) and desktop research.

Across the three countries, the participants in the research were identified via purposive sampling. This was, in part, due to the restrictions in place to limit the spread of COVID-19. The aim was to tap as wide a representation of migrant workers from different occupations and in different situations in the host countries as possible, to get a broad sketch of how migrants were being affected by and were responding to the pandemic. However, due to limitations, it is not a comprehensive picture of all situations migrants faced in these countries, and in fact, was limited to a certain level by the demands of convenience.

Figure A-1: Distribution of Respondents across the Three Countries



The participants were selected from among the population of migrant workers in Hong Kong, SAR of China, Malaysia, and Thailand. For Hong Kong, SAR of China, the participants were distributed as follows: fifteen foreign migrant female domestic workers, one (1) official or officials from each of five (5) NGOs, the owner of one (1) private employment service company, and two (2) foreign migrant workers who run their own business. There was no detail supplied

relevant to the distribution of the participants according to nationality, but the majority of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, SAR of China come from Indonesia and the Philippines. The participants from the Thailand study totaled twenty-six, composed of twelve men and fourteen women from Myanmar. The participants were all located in Northern Thailand. There was an average age of thirty-six, where fourteen are of Burmese ethnicity, and twelve are of Shan ethnicity. More than 75% are married or with a partner, and twenty-two out of twenty-six have children. For Malaysia, a total of two hundred respondents were tapped, where forty respondents went through interviews from each of the five main countries represented among migrant populations, namely Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD), done either face-to-face or via zoom, was the primary method utilized in gathering data from the participants. Moreover, individual telecommunication interviews (a combination of email, telephone, and online apps) were utilized, as well as face-to-face individual interviews, and a brief written survey.

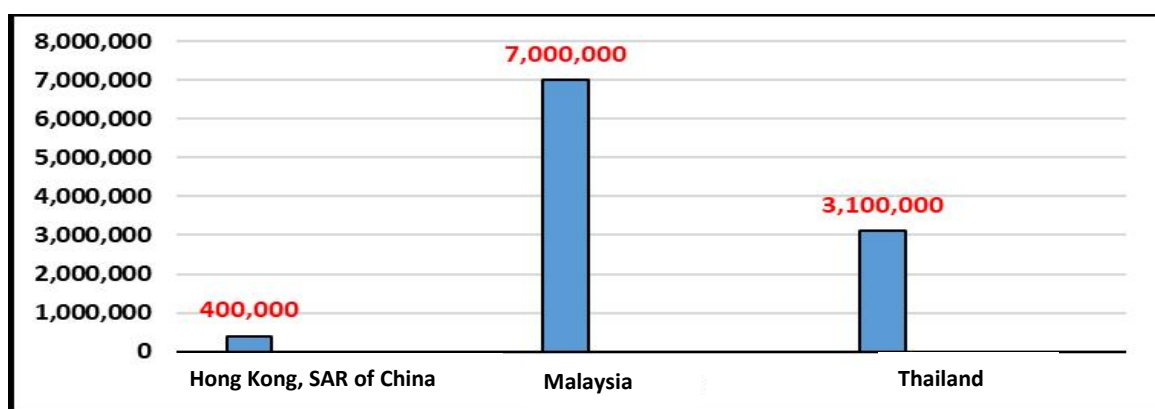
REGIONAL ANALYSIS

Impacts of the Pandemic on Foreign Migrant Workers

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns enforced by countries in the Asian Region took a serious toll on their economies. The three countries that were part of this research all faced the same predicament. The enforcement of quarantines and lockdowns as the government's prevention measures significantly altered the way people conducted their daily lives. While the needs for products and services remained, the opportunity and the capacity to meet those needs were substantially reduced. Subsequently, the volume of business activities significantly decreased, and many private businesses resorted to downsizing and or adopting different schemes, i.e., limited workdays in a month, shorter work hours, etc. Some businesses had to temporarily shut down, discarding employees and leaving them without means of earning enough to fend for their own and their families' basic needs. Worst-case scenarios included workers being locked down and not provided work, income or other support.

The chart that follows displays the statistics on migrant workers in the three host countries at the onset of the pandemic, which also suggests the number of migrant workers whose employment and daily lives were affected by this global health crisis.

Figure A-2: Estimated Statistics on Foreign Migrant Workers (2019)



In Hong Kong, SAR of China, the exact number of documented foreign migrant workers, other than foreign migrant domestic workers (FMDWs), cannot be identified. In 2019, there were about 400,000 FMDWs in the territory, comprising five percent of Hong Kong, SAR of China's population. Among them, about 219,000 (55%) were from the Philippines, 171,000

(43%) were from Indonesia, and only about 9,000 (2%) were from other countries. About 98.5% of FMDW are women. (Census and Statistics Department, n.d.) FMDWs represent 9% of the overall workforce and are found in 11% of local households (Research Office Legislative Council Secretariat, 2017).

Malaysia is a country with a migrant population estimated at 5.3 to 7 million or more (38% are women), mostly coming from other Asian countries, such as – Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Around two million are formal labor migrants with proper documentation, and an estimated 3 to 5 million are irregular or undocumented migrants. Malaysia has a labor force of about fifteen million. This means that migrants make up approximately 30% of the labor workforce. They can be found in labor intensive sectors: plantations/ agriculture, manufacturing, services, domestic work, and construction.

As of the end of 2019, in Thailand, there were 3.1 million migrant workers registered with regular documents (65% from Myanmar). Of that number, 828,000 were considered fully regularized, 1.3 million were partially regularized, another 1.18 million were temporarily registered, and between 800,000 to 2 million undocumented migrants were estimated to be present. (IOM, 2020) In Thailand, migrants are also relegated to “unskilled” / labor-intensive jobs.

Of these figures on foreign migrant workers, an approximate number of those that lost their jobs due to the pandemic can be inferred from the data in following paragraphs.

At the 2020 end-of-year number of FMDWs in Hong Kong, SAR of China, was lower than that of 2019. It dropped from 399,320 to 373,884. This is equivalent to a 6.37% decrease in number, which translates to around 25,436 foreign domestic workers who either lost or left their jobs during the pandemic.

In Thailand, the number of registered migrant workers went from 3.1 million pre-COVID, to only 2.2 million registered migrant workers in the country at the end of April 2021. It was estimated that around 500,000 returned to their home countries, and 592,450 documented migrant workers dropped out of the system and became undocumented between August 2019 to October 2020. Altogether, the number of migrant workers who lost their job during the first wave of the pandemic was close to 1 million. Then, 654,864 migrant workers registered with

the Thai authorities under the amnesty extension (15 Jan 2021 – 13 Feb 2021), of which, 596,502 had employers.

In Malaysia, tens of thousands of foreign migrant workers were repatriated in the early months of the pandemic, and there was a ban on entry of non-nationals. Those whose work permits had expired could leave the country without penalty, as long as their passports were still valid. A policy was put in place to put all undocumented workers found in detention camps. After some large-scale, high visibility arrests, undocumented migrants hid or returned home. The number of migrants infected with COVID-19 was very high in Malaysia, and correspondingly, it is suspected that significant numbers of migrants who were infected were either deported or died. Unfortunately, none of these numbers have been made available, so the picture of the migrant population in Malaysia is currently unclear.

Loss of Employment, Reduction in Work Hours and Loss of Income

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on foreign migrant workers in Hong Kong, SAR of China, Malaysia, and Thailand were broad and diverse, yet all three countries experienced some similar effects. Across these three host countries, many of the foreign migrant workers lost their jobs during the pandemic. As measures to absorb the initial economic impact, many business owners resorted to one or a combination of schemes, i.e., layoffs, limited workdays in a month, temporary shutdowns, reduced salary, etc. However, with extended and or repeated lockdowns, some businesses eventually had to permanently close, with employers simply terminating workers' contracts, without prior notice. Due compensation was not paid to those who were terminated. For those whose work was suspended, employers refused to pay wages too. There were employers who transferred work to other business sites but left the employees behind. For those whose employers resorted to temporary shutdowns, many migrants had to stay put and wait for instructions from their employer, or tried to find a new job, with limited success. Changing employers was not easy. Not many employers were hiring new workers for fear that they might be infected and due to the economic situation affecting their business. As a result, most migrants who were laid off had to settle for daily work which paid daily wages, when they could find it or languish in shelters or other temporary residence. Some migrant workers were able to change jobs and employers, but not their documents. This meant some migrants were becoming

undocumented so they could find odd jobs to survive, yet ran the risk of being discovered and subsequently punished, including possible deportation. The pandemic also caused a domino effect on various segments of the population, including small business owners who count on foreign migrant workers as their customers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrant workers in Hong Kong, SAR of China, experienced increased workload; more than 20% of FMDWs got less rest days than what they should be given; and the same percentage among them did not go outside their employer's house for a month.

While the governments of all three countries provided financial support to their nationals who suffered job losses during the grim times of COVID via either cash payments, workers' insurance schemes or social security, such schemes did not cover migrant workers. In Malaysia, the Wage Subsidy Schemes, which were meant to help employers to cover workers' salaries, apply only to Malaysian nationals. In Thailand, while the Social Security fund provides unemployment benefits to members who regularly contribute payments to the fund, the provision of assistance to migrants was made as an exception and suffered from practical barriers, leaving few migrants able to access unemployment benefits. Accessing these benefits is also in conflict with immigration policies which require unemployed migrants to leave the country within two weeks of becoming unemployed – before the benefits can be processed.

Similar to Hong Kong, SAR of China and Thailand, in Malaysia, not all foreign migrant workers lost their jobs. Yet, similar to the predicament of foreign migrant workers in the other two countries, those who were kept by their employers had their working hours or number of workdays reduced, which consequently reduced their salaries too. In Malaysia it was clearly stipulated that – in the event of retrenchment and or downsizing, the migrant workers are the ones that have to be separated from the job first, and only thereafter that the 'last in, first out' policy is enforced. Some industries that provide essential products and services, like health, food, and security, were exempted from the MCO-related rules, hence work continued for migrants in these sectors. One of the most problematic sectors was rubber-glove manufacturing. As Malaysia produces 65% of the world's supply, these factories were exempted from the MCO, and workers experienced conditions of forced labor.

Regardless of how they coped with their predicaments, most, if not all migrants affected by the economic situation, faced the same issues in all three countries, i.e., not being able to

send money back home, the inability to pay their debts back home and in their host country, and having no funds for their basic needs. Some who remained under the same employer, even when not engaged in regular work or with no work at all, were constrained to obtain a loan from the employer to defray their daily expenses and pay off maturing debts, which in turn made them further indebted. The loan was usually in the form of an advanced salary for a year or half a year; hence, they were spending their salary before it was earned, leaving them vulnerable to becoming indentured labor. This was, however, one of the few, and limited means they could avail to survive. As a result, most of those who borrowed money fell deeper into the debt trap. Tapping into their savings was a means for some to get by daily, while obtaining a loan at usurious interest rates was the recourse of those without savings. This further perpetuated debt, and further elevated their precarity.

Prevention and Access to Protective Equipment

Generally, migrants' safety and ability to prevent being infected with COVID was an afterthought by governments, and considered an unwelcome additional financial burden for employers. Masks and sanitizers were distributed to migrants by employers, but often in inadequate quantities, or else migrants had to purchase masks themselves.

In Hong Kong, SAR of China, it was reported that about 11-14% of FMDWs did not receive enough protective equipment (masks and/or sanitizers) from their employers. Also, most FMDWs felt that they got fewer protective equipment than other members of the household, while more than one-third of FMDWs needed to buy their own protective equipment in the first waves of the pandemic. While these products were generally available in the market, more than 85% of FMDWs considered the prices prohibitively expensive.

In Malaysia, provision of PPE by employers varied among the different nationalities present, but was generally low. At the workplace, about 60-75 percent of respondents wore face masks and had regular temperature checks, but very few reported having received PPE from their employers. Additionally, less than half of the Pakistani respondents indicated that they wore face masks, and that the provision of PPEs by the employer was poor or limited. The exception was Filipino domestic workers, who were fully supported by their employers.

In Thailand, migrants complained of not being provided masks and gel by employers or the government. They had to supply masks themselves, including making their own, or purchase them out of pocket. Hotels provided Thai staff first. After Thais in the community had been reached, local municipalities started distributing. Other than that, NGOs were the main source.

Some information was made available in migrants' languages by the government but the efforts were not consistent between the countries. For instance, Hong Kong, SAR of China's government had relevant health education materials with the latest information on COVID-19 translated into around 10 different languages and put on to Websites and Facebook. Thailand made efforts to convey information in migrant languages through local PR broadcasts, but when it came to direct outreach by Health workers, some migrants did not feel the efforts were very sincere or concerned, but rather they read what they had to and left. Malaysia's government response showed the least effort, with no programs reaching migrants with language specific information, and no translation available at medical facilities.

Substandard Living Conditions

One consequence that befell foreign migrant workers in Malaysia who lost their jobs was having to live in substandard or undignified living conditions after moving out of the quarters provided by employers. On the other hand, in Thailand, some migrant workers negotiated with landlords, some of whom were also their employers, about lowering the rent and paying once they have the money. Some sympathetic landlords decided to reduce the rent for a couple of months. Unfortunately, many migrants were already in debt that had been running for 3-4 months, so they had to borrow from friends to pay their rent. Hence, to save on accommodation expenses, many migrant workers decided to move into smaller rooms with family members, including in-laws or friends. Some lived with up to six family members in single rooms meant for one or two persons, and some had young children who were confined to the space as well. In Hong Kong, SAR of China, FMDW reported not being allowed to leave the residence of their employer for months at a time, which means they were forced to endure usual living conditions which are known to be poor – commonly, only makeshift rooms that do not provide privacy.

In Thailand, the first lockdown took place during the hot season, and most of the rooms migrants inhabited had inadequate ventilation and no air conditioning. In one location, a camp

for construction workers had sixty shanty rooms beside each other, occupied by workers with family members and additional occupants who may have moved to save money in each room. Besides crowded or limited living space, bathrooms were also shared by many occupants, and there was no one to maintain cleanliness, leaving unsanitary living conditions.

Mental Health and Well-Being

Foreign migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, SAR of China felt that their quality of life had been negatively affected. They had mental and physical stress and they felt tired. They were also frustrated because they could not go back to their home country. A survey conducted in May 2020 (Yeung, Huang, Lau, & Lau, 2020) found that low COVID-19 information, increased workload, insufficient protective equipment, and worries about being fired if infected with COVID-19 potentially contributed to domestic workers' anxiety.

In Thailand, COVID's economic and social impact has been profound and unprecedented. While in the first year, Thailand was able to control the spread of the disease, yet it was not able to do the same with the impact on the economy. Thais and migrants were all severely affected by the sudden loss of income. While Thais found accessing assistance difficult or insufficient, migrants felt outright abandoned, isolated, fearful, and anxious. Additionally, those who stayed in Thailand found they were unable to return home to visit family for fear of not being allowed back into the country.

Similarly, in Malaysia, migrants were anxious trying to avoid being arrested at any cost, afraid of deportation because they bore heavy unpaid debt for their recruitment fees, and afraid of detention because of the awful conditions. In order to remain in the country, Indonesian domestic workers reportedly faced abuse and forced labor.

Discrimination

The impacts of the pandemic on foreign migrants working in Hong Kong, SAR of China cut across different subgroups and sectors. Many migrant workers in Hong Kong, SAR of China experienced being treated as if they were virus carriers. For the foreign migrant domestic workers, besides the loss of job and livelihood for some, and increased workload for those who retained their jobs, many of them experienced discrimination, exclusion, stigmatization, insufficient PPE supply from employers, shorter rest days, and being prevented from going outside their housing accommodation or employer's house for months.

When Malaysia implemented its Movement Control Order or MCO, foreign migrant workers started to face a difficult time, and this remains to be so until the present. Foreign migrant workers faced the same consequences faced by Malaysians - the loss of income, jobs, and health risks, yet migrants do not have the safety nets available to nationals, and they suffered discrimination by being targeted by enforcement agencies, such as the police and immigration. Unlike Malaysian nationals, foreign migrant workers who violated the MCO-related laws faced deportation; and an undocumented migrant who tested positive for COVID-19 would be quarantined, treated, and then deported.

Many foreign domestic workers in Malaysia who are Indonesian nationals and without proper documentation, were in a precarious situation. They experienced discrimination, lack of support and protection, and worse. Many were forced to leave the homes of their employers, and subsequently, some of them had to do difficult jobs in order to survive. Those who decided to go back to their country after being fired were stranded at the airport.

In Thailand, workers complained of government officials and employers distributing PPE to Thais first, and only then giving it to migrants. This meant migrants had to purchase their own PPE at first. When accessing health services, although the health personnel did not reject them, they said bad things to them like, "migrants come to the country and make trouble."

Abuse of Labor Rights and Conditions of Forced Labor

In Malaysia, there were also reported cases of extreme abuse involving foreign domestic workers, and subsequent rescue. What aggravated their circumstances was that Malaysia has no specific regulations on domestic workers, so their basic labor rights are not adequately protected, as there is no relevant provision under the labor law. In particular, it seemed that Indonesian women domestic workers were subjected to conditions of forced labor. They managed to stay at their employers' homes during the Movement Control Order (MCO) and did the usual domestic work, but received little to no pay at all.

Moreover, the opportunity for Indonesian domestic workers to earn even on a part-time basis, such as cleaning different houses, was constrained by the MCO, in addition to the hesitation of house owners to invite an outsider to do the chores (because of fear of COVID). Many of these domestic workers found themselves stuck in the country without work, deprived of being with their families for a long time.

Working and living conditions at Malaysia's rubber glove factories, which were already known for being poor, reportedly deteriorated with the increase in orders and the reduction in workers. The conditions were described as being tantamount to forced labor, and these reports contributed to the country's downgrading to Tier 3 on the US TIPs report.

In Thailand, the working conditions of migrant workers became a burden with extra work and responsibilities being heaped onto fewer workers than usual. Those who were able to retain their jobs were put under a lot of stress and pressure. While the workload increased by almost fourfold, employers also became unreasonably demanding, and those who could not bear the situation had to leave or were told to leave. Some employers vented out their frustrations about the business by hurling abusive language at their workers, making them the object of their emotional outbursts. Yet, when they ended up having fewer workers than needed, the employers would recall the same employees. Some respondents even reported that with the increased workload, they could not even find time to eat. Meanwhile, some respondents from the agricultural sector shared that their employers warned them not to work anywhere else,

even if they could not provide them the work they needed, and threatened them that they would call the police to arrest them.

Harassment

In Thailand, there were reports of migrants enduring Thai people's frustrations. Some workers in the agricultural sector were threatened by Thai neighbors amidst conflict over using the public water (in open irrigation). The village headman managed the situation by prohibiting the Burmese workers from using the water for their farm. Additionally, police did not let up in their scrutiny of migrants' documentation status and continued to take advantage of their vulnerability by harassing, extorting, and arresting them for minor infractions. The police arrested workers every day and would look for any reason to extort money from them, i.e., incorrect information on occupation indicated on registration card, incomplete documents, any little offense or minor infraction, etc.

Some respondents in Thailand indicated that there seemed to be sexual harassment against women migrants in the workplace, where both employers and other male workers were complicit in lascivious acts, i.e., unwanted touching, verbal teasing, or sexual innuendos, etc. While it was uncertain how pervasive this behavior was, there were observed incidents. Additionally, there were incidents of domestic violence against migrant women that were reported to the village headman, yet the headman was observed to always side with the male perpetrator and to be unfair to women.

On the other hand, various labor investigators and auditors in Malaysia have also produced reports indicating abuses of migrants in detention centers. Other than this, harassment in Malaysian and also in Hong Kong, SAR of China were not reported in this research, but it is assumed that employers were most likely that perpetrators in these countries. Harassment also includes intimidation - with the threat of loss of employment or documentation status held as a regular, looming threat. In Hong Kong, SAR of China, foreign domestic workers were restricted by their employers from leaving the residence, and reportedly worked excessive hours; although it was not reported, it can be assumed there was increased harassment due to the extended amount of time together with the employers. In Malaysia, a substantial number of migrants reported that they

faced some form of abuse or rights violations by various actors during the MCO. In particular, this was experienced most by women migrant workers and domestic workers, and those in detention centers.

Impact on Access to Health Services

For health screening purposes, the Malaysian government provides subsidies to workers via the National Security Plan. Unfortunately, this does not cover undocumented foreign migrant workers. Those who were diagnosed to be COVID-19 positive and did not have their relevant migrant workers' documents, were quarantined, detained, and subsequently deported. This, in effect, acted as a threat to undocumented, and even documented migrant workers, to come forward for testing. Instead, migrants went into hiding or went home using irregular channels. However, most of the participants from Bangladesh indicated that they had access to medical care during the MCO. Most of the Indonesian respondents informed the researcher that they received medical attention during the pandemic and for those who were not able to avail, the predominant reason given was the distance of the medical center from where they stayed. Similarly, 95% of the survey respondents from Nepalese migrant workers indicated that they had access to medical care during the MCO while the remaining 5% revealed that they did not have access due to issues of documentation. Filipino respondents, on the other hand, are all domestic workers, which suggests that they live close to their employers, if not in the same house or in the same compound. Due to the nature of their work, they inevitably come into contact with their employers, and this translates to regular levels of access to medical care provided to them by their employers during the pandemic.

Unfortunately, Pakistani migrant workers are in a more difficult predicament. Forty percent (40%) of interview participants among the Pakistani community reported that they did not have access to medical care during the MCO, and documentation and limited monetary resources were cited as reasons. It has to be understood that the majority of Pakistanis in Malaysia are those who left their country for fear of persecution, and many of the respondents were from religious minority sects that are marginalized in Pakistan. This predicament of Pakistani migrants makes them the 'margin of the margins' and hyper precarious. Many are on UNHCR status, which limits employment opportunities for them.

In Thailand (Mae Sot), before the major outbreak which started at the end of 2020, migrant workers had to be examined for COVID-19 before working in the factory and had to pay test costs themselves. Some Burmese migrants who were infected with COVID-19 in the first year were able to access health services with relative ease, but were in quarantine facilities for 14 days. However, some of them also reported that they experienced being insulted by medical nurses or doctors, telling them that they came to Thailand to cause trouble.

While concern over migrants' already limited ability to access health services was quite widespread during the spread of COVID, in some cases in Thailand, migrants were pleasantly surprised by the commitment health officials showed in ensuring patients received their medicines. In the case of HIV-infected migrant workers, health officials ensured that they regularly received their medicine. Hospitals also delivered medication to people with diabetes. A migrant worker who got paralyzed was rendered treatment at a public hospital, in accordance with his rights under the state health insurance. A mother who is HIV+ had to buy her own medication because she was undocumented and could only buy on a monthly basis with prescription, but during the outbreak, the hospital provided her medicine for two months.

On the contrary, in Hong Kong, SAR of China, foreign domestic workers who are living with HIV could not avail the usual services provided by NGOs, i.e., free HIV counseling, testing, HIV- prevention and reproductive health services. Attending clinic appointments to receive their medication for treatment was also not possible since their employers prevented them from going outside during lockdown, even on days off, usually Sunday. This left FDWs who have not disclosed to their employers their HIV status out of fear they will be fired because of it, in a difficult predicament.

Documentation Requirements Related to Migrant Workers' Status

In Thailand, there was also a large group of migrant workers whose main concern was their registration documents which had expired or were about to expire. The last regular registration was in March 2020, but not all were able to process their registration. Hence, another registration was scheduled in November 2020 to give a chance to those who have fallen out of the system to re-enter. However, registering was not simple, as the process required an

employer, but migrants who had lost their job could not find employers willing to take on the responsibility of hiring a migrant full time as a prerequisite to register them. This then forced the migrant workers to hire brokers, who took advantage of their predicament by charging exorbitant fees for doing a host of tasks to assist with registration, such as, but not limited to, paying the registration online, paying other fees such as the COVID-19 test fee, general health examination fee, and work permit fee. For those without an employer at the time of registration, they had to pay a broker to vouch as an employer – a cost in addition to the ones mentioned.

In Malaysia, the Movement Control Order (MCO) caused many public service centers to close, hence, accessing essential services became extremely difficult. This caused workers' visas to expire, which brought many other complications, such as postponement of court cases and missed opportunities to return home.

Impacts Particular to the Country

Besides the impacts of COVID-19 which are common among migrant workers from the three countries that were part of this study, some impacts were unique or peculiar to each of the three countries. These unique experiences were associated with the context: the foreign migrant workers' employment landscape in a particular country, the government policies relevant to foreign migrant employment, and the type or sector of work that migrant workers were in, among others. These issues and concerns specific to foreign migrant workers in a particular country are presented below:

HONG KONG, SAR OF CHINA

Foreign migrant domestic workers who were temporarily homeless before the pandemic, due to labor, immigration, criminal, or health-related issues, which resulted in premature termination of their employment contracts, had the processing of their cases halted due to the pandemic. Subsequently, this prolonged stay of foreign migrant domestic workers in shelters resulted in overcrowding. This proved to be problematic during the outbreak of the pandemic

and increased their chances of being infected due to the transmissible nature of the virus. Their ineligibility to be employed also led to other problems such as lack of income.

It was also found that there was an increase in the cases of pregnancy among the migrant community in Hong Kong, SAR of China during the first year of COVID-19, pointing to an even more vulnerable subgroup – new born children of mothers who are either migrant workers or dependents of migrant workers. The border restrictions brought about by the pandemic strained the demand for shelters provided by NGOs, as the suspension or delay of birth registry due to the pandemic resulted in the need for prolonged assistance, and meant mothers and children needed to stay in shelters longer. For mothers able to return home to safely settle their babies with family members, the prohibitive cost of quarantine when returning to Hong Kong, SAR of China for work puts many at risk of losing their employment – ironically, a lifeline for their new born and other family members.

As events unfolded over time, several respondents identified a few positive consequences of the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown. Some expressed that the pandemic gave them “more time to communicate with family and children in the home country via social media apps.” But one major positive consequence of the pandemic on foreign migrant domestic workers is the prospect of being paid a higher salary when offered a new contract. This is because Hong Kong, SAR of China employers did not want to hire foreign domestic workers from overseas because of prohibitive costs related to COVID precautions. This made the market more competitive for foreign migrant domestic workers who are currently situated in Hong Kong, SAR of China, and meant they could demand higher wages. Despite this possible positive aspect, there is one respondent who complained that the employment agency also charged higher fees in processing the new contract.



MALAYSIA

One major issue that significantly affects the migrant workers in Malaysia is the Cultural Competency Gaps, where safety and security information targeted at migrant workers usually does not reach them. This creates a communication and information gap among the migrant, the employer, and all other actors involved in the recruitment and employment of migrants.

The language barrier also affects the doctor-patient relationship with foreign migrant workers. The lack of translators makes it difficult for foreign migrants to comprehend the instructions on how to prevent COVID-19, identify symptoms or share with health personnel their medical history and current health conditions. Misinformation and or the lack of information due to the language barrier can contribute to the spread of coronavirus, as can hesitation by workers to come forward for testing.



THAILAND

In Mae Sot area, there were teachers from Migrant Learning Centers, which had been closed due to COVID, who felt the pinch, but their dedication prevented them from giving up. They continued to go into the field and teach after the lockdown had been lifted but schools were closed. Being volunteer teachers, they had to spend for their transportation and food and snacks for the children from their own pockets. There was no financial aid from the donors who had assumed that Migrant Learning Centers had closed down. Hence, the donors were unaware of the initiative of the volunteer teachers to carry on educating migrant children via informal outreach at personal expense.

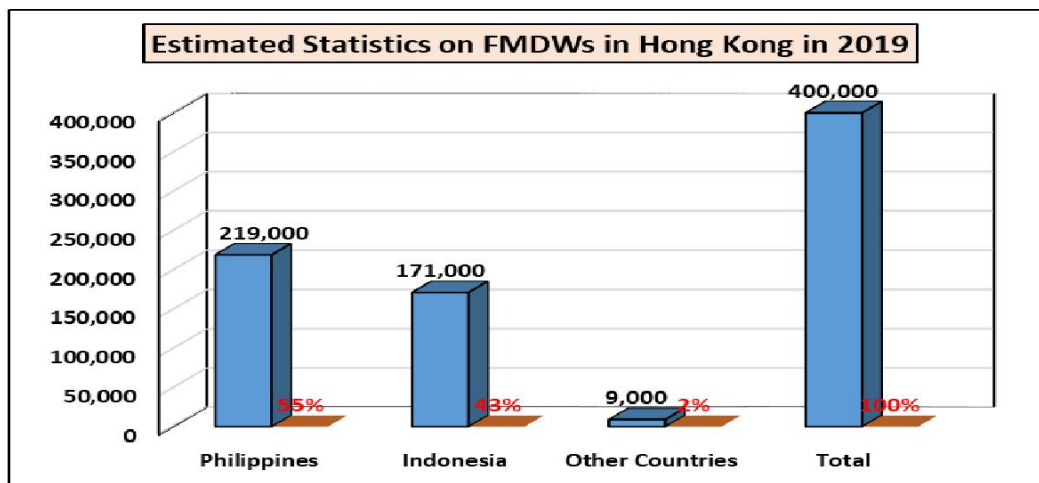
NATIONAL REPORTS

Hong Kong

Recent Statistics on Foreign Migrant Workers

Hong Kong, officially the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, is a city and special administrative region of China on the eastern Pearl River Delta in South China. Hong Kong, SAR of China, is known for its diversity, and it is known to have many foreign migrant workers. In 2019, there were 41,289 employment and investment visas issued for the use of professionals and investors to work in the SAR (Special Administrative Region) (Immigration Department, 2019), and due to this visa being valid for 1-3 years, the number of visa holders today could be more than 100,000 people. There are also documented foreign migrant workers with short-term visas, though this number would only be about several thousands. Being an undocumented worker in Hong Kong, SAR of China, runs the risk of heavy penalties for both the workers and the employers. Due to this, the exact numbers of undocumented foreign migrants are unknown and are estimated to only be about several thousands. These people are usually “asylum seekers” or workers who entered on short-term visas.

Figure B-1: Estimated Statistics on FMDWs in Hong Kong, SAR of China, in 2019



In 2019, there were about 400,000 Foreign Migrant Domestic Workers (FMDWs) in the territory, comprising five percent of Hong Kong, SAR of China's population. Among them, about 219,000 (55%) were from the Philippines, 171,000 (43%) were from Indonesia and only about 9,000 (2%) were from other countries. About 98.5% of them are women. (Census and Statistics Department, n.d.) FMDWs represent 9% of the overall workforce and are found in 11% of local households (Research Office Legislative Council Secretariat, 2017).

Laws in Hong Kong, SAR of China allow FMDWs to only stay in the territory under a renewable, 2 year standard contract which can be terminated by either party to provide full-time, live-in domestic services at a specific employer's residence. The contract outlines the obligations of the employers, such as to pay the FMDW no less than the Minimum Allowable Wage, provide suitable accommodation within their residence and food. The contract specifies the FMDW is entitled to at least one rest day per week, get the same legal protection as other employees in Hong Kong, SAR of China such as holidays, and vacation back home at the end of a contract period, etc., but this does not mean that FMDWs are not in a disadvantageous predicament. The number of FMDWs in Hong Kong, SAR of China had gone from 386,075 in 2018, to 399,320 in 2019, to 373,884 at the end of 2020 and the first year of COVID-19. (DATA.GOV.HK, n.d).

Experiences of Foreign Migrant Workers Prior the Pandemic

Life for foreign migrant workers in Hong Kong, SAR of China was different before the pandemic. It can be said that it was easier for them to handle their ordeals. Before the pandemic, HIV tests were more accessible to those who needed them, migrant shelters had the necessary capacity, and foreign migrant workers could manage their finances more easily. However, this does not mean that they were spared from discrimination and abuse. Being foreigners, many are unaware or unfamiliar with the customs of the country, which can be seen as disrespectful by their native counterparts. Foreign migrant workers, specifically domestic workers, are most vulnerable to discrimination, as they are seen as a subject of their Hong Kong, SAR of China employers, and therefore treated as second-class citizens. This is borne out by peaceful protests which have been held by domestic workers over the years calling for improved treatment.

Experiences of Foreign Migrant Workers during the Pandemic

The lives of people around the world changed drastically during the pandemic, with foreign migrant workers especially affected. There were hundreds of articles that commented on the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the lives of FMDWs in Hong Kong, SAR of China. It became a polarizing issue on the internet, as there were articles that accused FMDWs of not obeying government orders, and on the other side, there were articles that called out the discrimination against FMDWs during the pandemic. One example of this was a New York Times article, “For Hong Kong’s Domestic Workers during COVID, Discrimination Is Its Own Epidemic,” which were stories of how the government and local citizens discriminated against the FMDWs (Wang, 2021).

According to the ‘online Survey on the Situation of Migrant Domestic Workers during COVID-19 outbreak’ (Asian Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB), 2020) conducted in March 2020 (during the early period of the COVID-19 outbreak), about 11-14% of FMDWs did not receive enough protective equipment (masks and/or sanitizers) from their employers. Also, most FMDWs felt that they got fewer protective equipment than other members of the household. In this survey, it was found that 25% of the respondents slept less and 10% of the respondents had fewer rest days. Additionally, 23% did not go outside their employer’s abode for an entire month, and to those who were able to go outside, 25% of those participants were told to come back earlier than usual. Another survey conducted by Yeung, Huang, Lau, & Lau in May 2020, found that there was a lack of COVID-19 information literacy, an increased workload, insufficient protective equipment, and worry of being infected with the virus, were the main concerns of FMDWs.

There were also qualitative studies that revealed how difficult FMDWs' lives were. One qualitative study with data collected from two employers and five FMDWs between February and June 2020, showed that the FMDWs experienced more hardships and struggles in both the home country and host country during the COVID-19 crisis. There was a power struggle between the two parties, where there was a sudden rise of control of their employers, whilst the agency of the FMDWs decreased. This made FMDWs resist hardships in more passive terms, which had negative effects on their physical health and mental wellbeing. Another qualitative study by Lui et al., showed that FMDWs faced a dual-country experience of the pandemic.

They were both concerned about the risk of infection in Hong Kong, SAR of China, and worried about the family members in their home country. They also reported their current working situations had changed, such as how their employers treated them. FMDWs also considered there was a lack of support from the Hong Kong, SAR of China government.

Foreign business owners were another subgroup of foreign migrant workers that were heavily affected. One case that highlights the difficulties is Ms. “X,” who is a female of ethnic minority. She is the owner of a shop that sold food, snacks, and drinks to FMDWs. She reported that due to the COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing, very few workers came to her shop. Another case is of Mr. “Y,” who is an African man who owns an electronics item trading store. His main customers were other Africans who traveled to Hong Kong, SAR of China as visitors, which became problematic, as entry restrictions severely affected his business. Fortunately, being a permanent resident, he received financial support from the Hong Kong, SAR of China government.

Experiences of Foreign Migrant Workers after the First Year of the Pandemic

Finding jobs was hard for foreign migrant workers during the first year or so of the pandemic, and it was still this way after the first waves of the pandemic receded. As operations slowly restarted in the SAR, there were questions about vaccination for migrants, with many scared of being vaccinated.

Despite all the challenges the migrant workers have experienced, some good came out of the pandemic. Many FMDWs had their monthly salaries raised as the demand for foreign migrant workers already in the territory increased, as employers preferred people who were already present in the country due to convenience and safety reasons.

Malaysia

Recent Statistics on Foreign Migrant Workers

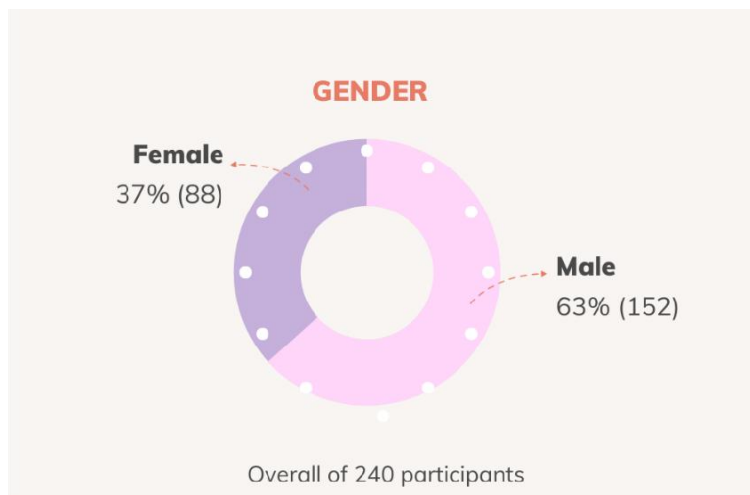
Malaysia is a Southeast Asian country occupying parts of the Malay Peninsula and the island of Borneo, and hosts up to seven million migrants from South and Southeast Asian countries. Around two million are formal labor migrants, while an estimated five million are irregular or undocumented migrants. The World Bank has estimated that about 30% to 40% of Malaysia's labor workforce consists of migrant workers.



Participants in the Study

Migrant workers from different communities of the following nationalities: Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Malaysians, participated in a study on the migrant workers' concerns during the pandemic. The sample did not represent migrant workers from all sectors in Malaysia; however, the data gathered provided a general picture of the situation of migrant workers. The graph below shows the distribution according to the gender of the participants involved in the study.

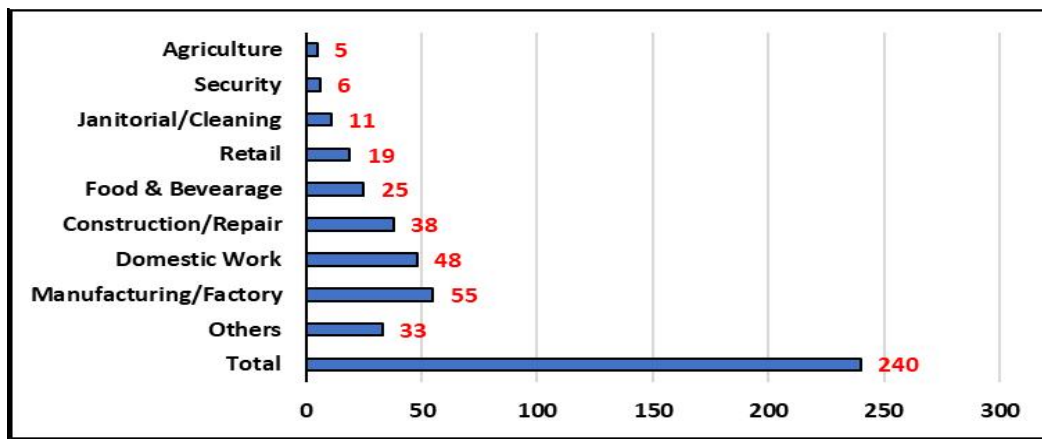
Figure B-2: Distribution of Participants Based on Gender



The total sample size of the survey was 240, with forty workers participating from each community / nationality. The participants consisted of 88 women and 152 men. This means that over one-third of the participants were women, while the remaining two-thirds were men. Additionally, 46 percent of the participants were in the age range of 18 to 30.

Out of the 240 respondents, about 55 work in factories, 48 are engaged in domestic work, 38 work in construction, 25 work in the food and beverage sector, 19 work in retail, 11 work in cleaning jobs, 6 work in security, and 5 work in agriculture. The remaining 33 work in other sectors that are not specified.

Figure B-3: Distribution of the Participants Based on Occupation



The table below shows the six migrant communities' access to healthcare during the MCO.

Table 1: Statistics on Access to Healthcare by Migrant Workers during the Movement Control Order (MCO)

Access to Healthcare During the MCO		
	Had Access	No Access
Bangladeshis	37	3
Indonesians	27	13
Malaysians	36	4

Nepalese	38	2
Pakistanis	26	14
Filipinos	39	1
Total:	203	37

As shown in Table 1, almost all of the Filipino respondents, 39 of 40, indicated that they had access to healthcare during the MCO. In more or less the same proportion, of the forty respondents from Nepal, thirty-eight reported that they had access to healthcare during the MCO and only two indicated otherwise. Malaysian and Bangladeshi respondents come close in terms of ratio of those who had access and those who had no access to healthcare during the MCO. On the other hand, more than one-third of the respondents from the Pakistani and Indonesian worker communities were not able to access healthcare during the MCO due to a host of reasons, i.e., documentation problems, lack of money, and distance.

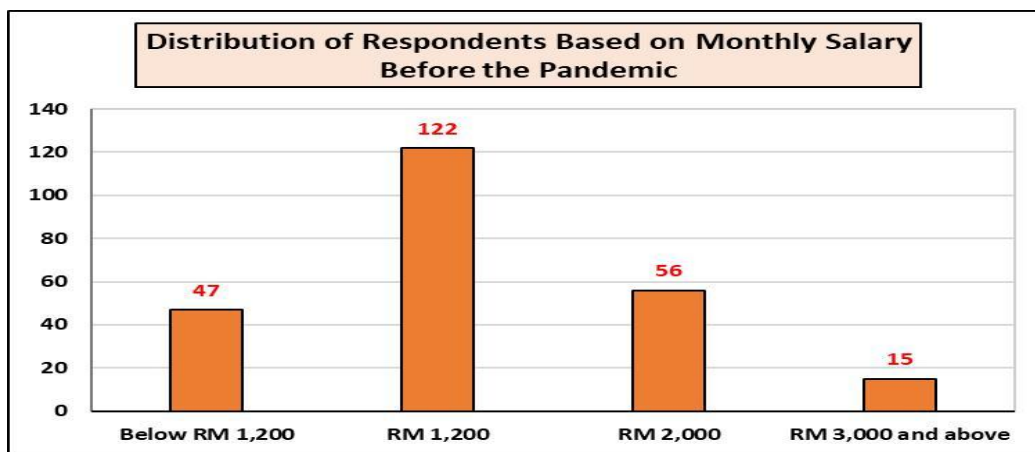
Experiences of Foreign Migrant Workers Prior To the Pandemic

Malaysia, in part due to the poor working and living conditions and problematic recruitment systems and immigration policies, has been categorized as a Tier 2 Watch List country in America's Anti Trafficking in Persons Report for 3 years in a row, from 2018 to 2020. This means that before the pandemic, migrant workers were already treated as second-class citizens, and had experienced many difficulties and patterns of abuse. It can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation.

Even before migrants left their country, they were placed in a high-risk situation, possibly even amounting to forced labour and debt bondage, contrary to the standards on recruitment as stipulated in the ILO's general principles and guidelines for fair recruitment. Generally, they experienced cost-related and bureaucracy-related difficulties that incurred debt. Some workers paid up to USD 5,000 to come to Malaysia. There were also cases of deception.

Before the pandemic, participants utilized numerous ways to raise money to pay for their recruitment. Many migrants borrowed from their families while some tapped into their savings, while some obtained loans from loan sharks to finance their travel to Malaysia. Once they arrived in Malaysia, many of those who found work in the country only had meagre salaries to pay their debt and help their families back home. The chart below shows the basic salary of migrant workers before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure B-4: Distribution of Respondents Based on Monthly Salary before the Pandemic



The survey shows that about forty-seven respondents (almost 20 percent) have a monthly salary of below 1,200 Malaysian Ringgit (RM), which is what the minimum wage was as of February 2020. On the other hand, 122 of the 240 respondents, or 50.83% make exactly 1,200 RM a month, which is the legal minimum wage. Fifty-six (56) of the respondents make 2000 MR per month. Lastly, only fifteen respondents earned more than 3,000 MR monthly. Based on these figures, the average monthly salary of the participants is 1,200 RM or 283 US Dollars (USD).

Experiences of Foreign Migrant Workers during To the Pandemic

Migrants in Malaysia faced a difficult time during the Movement Control Order (MCO), and still experience difficulties today. Even prior to the pandemic, many migrants had ended up without proper documentation, forcing them to work as undocumented migrants. If the workers were relatively new, still in the first few years of their contract, they would not yet have paid off their recruitment debt, leaving their families at risk, and hence, if they lost their job, they felt forced to enter into unfavorable labour conditions just to remain. With the pressure to pay

back debt and with jobs being lost due to COVID-19 related MCO, many workers were forced to become undocumented to avoid leaving Malaysia.

Undocumented migrants found themselves in extremely risky situations. About 30% of COVID-19 patients were migrants. When infected by the virus, migrants were quarantined, treated, and then deported. The government provided aid to its citizens during the MCO, but migrant workers were not given any aid and, in fact, were neglected during the first months of the pandemic.

As the MCO caused many public service centers to close, it made access to essential services difficult for everyone. Migrant workers' visas expired and there were many other complications, like postponement of court cases and missed opportunities to return home. Health services were still available during the pandemic, but migrants were afraid to come forward in fear of potential arrest by enforcement agencies. There was also the issue of losing jobs, which was heightened during the MCO. Some industries like essential service sectors such as health, food, and security were exempted from the MCO related rules, and hence work continued for migrants in these sectors. Workers in other sectors were not exempted and were affected by the spontaneous closure of businesses.

Migrants faced many concomitant problems. For one, migrant housing conditions were substandard yet were also expensive, to the point that some could not afford housing in the country and either became homeless or were forced to return to their home country. A new law on Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990 (Act 446), was passed in 2019 but was not yet enforced by the Ministry of Human Resources until Dec. 2020.

For those who remained in their workplaces, Malaysia implemented Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for workplaces. However, out of 240 respondents, thirty-seven workers expressed that they had no SOPs or provision of PPEs in their workplace, which put these people at increased risk of being infected. Other than the thirty-seven workers that reported that they had no PPE provisions, the remaining participants said they needed to wear facemasks and that some workplaces provided their workers PPE, but overall, it was inadequate. On the other hand, about 90% of the respondents in the Filipino group, mostly all domestic workers, said that they needed to have

a temperature check every time they went to work and had a relatively high access to masks and hand sanitizers.

The research revealed that Malaysian internal migrant workers were negatively affected by the pandemic, however, their circumstances as nationals provided them a buffer. Their migrant worker counterparts experienced more problems connected to their migration status. For example, Indonesian women domestic workers who managed to stay at their employers' homes during the MCO experienced what can be considered forced labor – having received little to no pay during that period.

Experiences of Foreign Migrant Workers after the First Year of the Pandemic

Foreign migrant workers are still dealing with the issues they faced during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Forced labor is still an unresolved issue, and government policymaking has been too slow for any improvements in migrant policy to occur soon. Living and housing conditions remain subpar, and the connections between enforcement agencies and the healthcare system are still a real threat. Unemployment remains, with some migrants opting to return to their home countries.

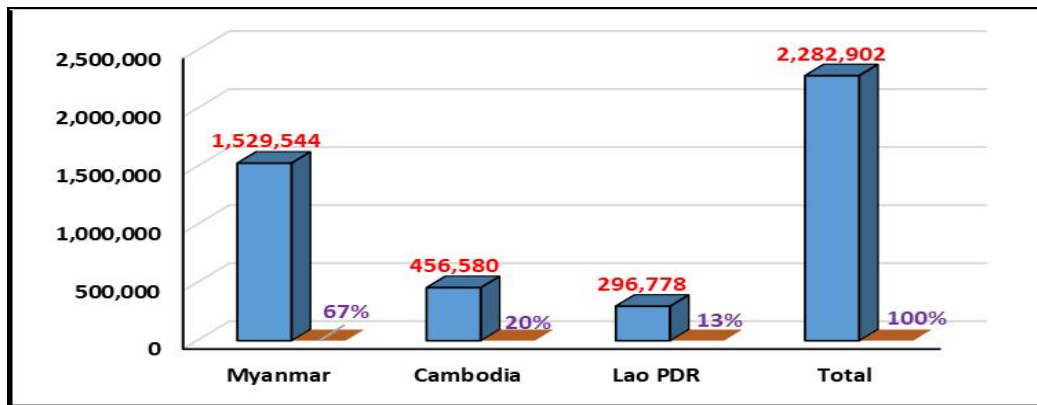
Thailand

Recent Statistics on Foreign Migrant Workers

Thailand is a main receiving country for neighboring Southeast Asian countries, most notably Myanmar. Based on 2019 statistics, there were 3.1 million migrants registered with work permits (67% from Myanmar), of whom 850,000 obtained their work permits through the MOU, which is the formal/regularized channel with a full passport. The remainder had various other levels of documentation including temporary passports, Certificates of Identification, and

border passes. It was also estimated that there were possibly at least 800,000 undocumented migrants in Thailand (Harkins, B., United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand, 2019).

Figure. B-5: Estimated Statistics on Documented Migrant Workers in Thailand as of April 2021



The most recent statistics show that there was a significant drop in the number of migrants registered with work permits since the COVID pandemic started. From 3.1 million in 2019, it was reduced to 2,282,902 migrants with work permits in April 2021. (Office of Migrant Worker Management, Dept. of Employment, Ministry of Labor Thailand, April 2021) Approximately 45% were women and 55% men; two-thirds were from Myanmar, another 20% from Cambodia, and the remainder from Lao PDR. There was a final amnesty-style extension during the period of this research held between January 15, 2021, and February 13, 2021, which gave those who applied a two-year extension.

Experiences of Foreign Migrant Workers Prior the Pandemic

“Before COVID, life was normal – we had daily work, a regular income, and could even send money home regularly. Families could live self-sufficiently, have savings, and be able to pay rent and bills. The children go to school and are happy.”

The interview participants were in Northern Thailand. There were a total of 26 participants (12 men / 14 women), most of whom had families and had been in Thailand for over ten years.

They shared about their lives before the COVID-19 pandemic. As foreign migrant workers, they had varying living conditions. Some lived in a house with friends and shared rent. Some lived in single room studios in apartment buildings or in row rooms, often with family members. Some factory workers took the option of living in dorms within factories, but most opted not to due to the cost, unsanitary conditions, as well as limited freedoms. Workers in the agricultural sector rented land from their employer and made their houses from spare wood, sharing the living space with their family or with other workers. For some, their employers provided rental houses, but the workers had to pay the rent from their earnings and were not safe from police. Construction camps had free rent but had to build their own room and pay for utilities.

Experiences of Foreign Migrant Workers during the First Year of Pandemic

As the pandemic was first unfolding, around 45,000 workers returned to Myanmar for the New Year festival held in April. Others left because of the looming threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and rumors of a lockdown. By September, at least 114,000 migrants had returned voluntarily to Myanmar. Those who returned to Myanmar found themselves in an inconvenient situation when Thailand's borders were indefinitely closed. On the other hand, many migrants from Myanmar chose not to return to their country due to the potential loss of benefits such as their children's education, lack of health care, and generally poor economic conditions. As difficult as it would be, they believed that staying in Thailand was a more practical option.

In Thailand, there was close to a month's long lockdown in April 2020, which resulted in numerous workers getting laid off. Facilities and services shut down to compel people to stay home and to mitigate the spread of cases. After the first waves of the pandemic receded and after the lockdown was lifted in May 2020, migrants had a general feeling of unease and uncertainty going back to work. For factory workers, most factories were either temporarily closed or shut down completely, and they could not find a new job for about 2-5 months. These workers were not paid compensation and their employers refused to pay wages during the temporary work stoppages. Workers in other sectors also expressed that they had a challenging time finding new jobs, with many becoming day laborers to make ends meet after the lockdown was lifted.

Those who retained their jobs in other occupations had to work part-time, with reduced hours, remain “on call” or run the risk of losing their jobs, which would also mean losing their documentation status. Many workers experienced restricted mobility, mostly as a measure to prevent the spread COVID-19, which also resulted in limited work opportunities. Dorms and workplace housing had COVID-19 preventative measures, but workers felt uneasy and had limited freedoms.

During the first year of the pandemic, participants in the study expressed that they had to be resilient to make ends meet. Many found jobs they had never done before, which were more strenuous, like hotel workers doing manual labor. Work had been irregular for many. Construction workers were unphased, at first, as they were in a bubble and were able to continue to work until supply chain issues bit into their construction supplies, and they finally had work stoppages as a result. Migrants who had savings ate through it to survive, in order to pay for regular expenses like rent, utilities, and food. But not many people had savings, and these savings were mostly depleted by the end of the first wave of the pandemic. Teachers in Migrant Learning Centers used their own money to make up for the lack of sponsors during the pandemic so they could continue to reach out to the children and teach.

Registration for work permits also became a problem, as workers had to pay 10,000-15,000 Thai Baht in the middle of the pandemic, with fees to brokers accounting for 2-7,000 Baht. The government tried giving people another window to get their permits registered in November 2020, with the condition that the worker has an employer, but this proved to cause more problems, as brokers used the opportunity to take advantage of desperate migrants who could not find an employer and charged extra for acting as an employer.

In Thailand, many agricultural workers became unemployed, and unscrupulous employers took this opportunity to reduce their wages significantly, knowing that the workers had no choice but to accept it. On top of this, workers from the agricultural sector in Thailand paid the police what they call a ‘supervision fee,’ that costs 200 Thai Baht per month. During the lulls of the COVID-19 outbreak, agricultural workers struggled to find daily work. One thing that complicated the predicament of some agricultural workers is that their salary is paid on an annual basis, and during the outbreak, they had no income. So, to defray daily expenses, they took advanced salaries from their employer. This resulted in employers forbidding, and even

threatening, migrants not to work anywhere else or they would report them to the police for arrest.

Construction workers' earnings were also affected; their work had been reduced by half to around 10-15 days a month. Similarly, they also had to pay the police or their employer a 'supervision fee' of 200 Thai Baht.

After losing their employment and their income, migrant workers in Thailand used up their savings to pay fixed expenses like rent and utilities. To manage, they moved in together into cheaper, smaller housing where the conditions were cramped and unsanitary; they conserved resources by eating dry and canned food, went into debt, and took daily work as they could find it. Some employers, as their way of responding to the needs of their workers, decided to forego charging rent for accommodation, but migrants still had to take care of their utility bills. Migrants changed employers regularly, following the work that was available.

As the spread of COVID in Thailand was managed and reduced, an ad-hoc migrant policy was announced in early August 2020, which only allowed migrants who were in the country and whose names were on the list from March 2020, to register with a new employer by the end of October 2020. The same policy also applied to those whose work permits had expired after the March deadline, provided their ID (passport or CI) was still valid. The intention was to allow half a million migrants to remain legally in the country until the end of May 2022. However, many of them had lost their jobs, could not find new work, and could only find daily wage work from different employers. Subsequently, as their finances got drained, the registration fees became unaffordable to them. Some of them resorted to paying agents to act as their employer even if it is illegal, just to 'protect' themselves. Many migrants had to obtain further loans to pay for the registration, which perpetuated their indebtedness.

Some migrants remained registered with their original employer, but only worked part time, while also being hired out by others or rotated to other work sites by the same employer at the same time, making them vulnerable to arrest. Their tenuous status made them susceptible to harassment and extortion by the police. There was an amnesty on deporting migrants that lasted until the end of the October registration period, and that is when the extortion ramped up. Police and immigration were reported to inspect construction sites and seize everyone's ID cards, and put them in detention, subsequently making the employers have to secure their release.

“The police arrest workers every day. Even if I have all the documents, [the police] will find something, such as driver's license, occupation incorrect on the card, or any little offense to collect money. If no offense, try to sell ‘merit slip’ for two hundred Baht.”

Lastly, migrant workers expressed a lack of provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) by employers.

“Did not receive any protective equipment. Protection equipment mostly had to buy ourselves - a cloth mask. Not allowed to sew ourselves. We had to purchase, which is an added expense.”

Some expressed that they were given PPE by local government and CSOs.

“Only ever heard the name MAP. Came many times and gave many cloth masks – can wash and use them many times. The Red Cross also came and distributed.”

Lastly, migrant workers’ life plans were negatively affected or completely disrupted because of the pandemic. Some expressed disappointment and frustration that they had to start over due to the pandemic; some complained about having to pay unnecessary debt brought about by the pandemic; while others viewed the pandemic as a lesson to save money in case they encounter another scenario like this in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS



HONG KONG

SAR OF CHINA

- ✚ It was apparent that during the first year or so of the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrant workers in Hong Kong, SAR of China experienced discrimination, exclusion, and stigmatization as if they were a channel of virus transmission.
- ✚ The experience of increased workload and insufficient protective equipment was also common. For example, in the early months of the pandemic, more than 20% of FMDWs got less rest days than what they should be given, and a similar percent of them did not go outside their employer's house for a month.
- ✚ For the NGOs, the services they provide to the foreign migrant workers were disrupted, and they have been finding ways to overcome these difficulties.
- ✚ Migrant workers are excluded from employment insurance, which means they do not have any social protection benefits.

- ✚ Formulate and promote a campaign that fights discrimination against migrant workers and that educates employers about abuse and discrimination of employees, and the repercussions. This initiative should be supported by the government.
- ✚ Provide workers with free protective equipment (PPE) to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.
- ✚ Create a compromise with employers that allows FMDW to have more rest days - a 'workday and rest day' scheme can be arranged and worked out between the two parties. If rest days are not feasible, there must be incentives, such as a significant raise in salary or other compensation.

- ✦ The government must aid NGOs to mitigate the disruption in services caused by the pandemic, as well as allow NGOs to have more leeway in responding to their clients' needs.
- ✦ Insurance companies should make changes to their policies to include migrant workers, to help when the migrant worker experiences an emergency or is in a crisis. This is also taking a step closer to placing migrant workers on equal footing with Hong Kong, SAR of China workers.



MALAYSIA

PROBLEMS

- ✦ There is a lack of policy protecting the welfare of Malaysia's foreign migrant workers. This lack of policy is what causes the lives of migrants to be hard as their employers can easily abuse them in various ways.
- ✦ Migrant workers are not allowed to join labor unions, and those that are in unions do not get a voice on matters.
- ✦ There is a communication gap and indifference of Malaysians to other cultures/nationalities, which is another root cause of migrant discrimination, and stunts relationships between employees and employers.
- ✦ Migrants are treated harshly by both the healthcare system and enforcement agencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✦ Propose a national comprehensive policy for migrant workers as a solution to fight the systemic oppression and exploitation of foreign migrant workers in the country.
- ✦ Urgently request Trade Unions to welcome migrant workers as members and strategically cooperate with each other, as their struggles and concerns are also valid.

- ✦ Malaysia should improve their Cultural Communication Competency to improve communication gaps between migrant workers and Malaysian employers, and also with service providers, notably medical, among others.
- ✦ Enforcement agencies should address the unfair deportation of infected migrant workers and promote changes that aid these workers instead of making them suffer further.



THAILAND

CHALLENGES

- ✦ There is discrimination towards foreign migrant workers, and they are marginalized by society. Events such as pandemics and national disasters highlight this discrimination.
- ✦ The Thai government is notorious for its arduous registration process for migrant workers, and foreign migrants commonly must shoulder registration fees and expenses for agents who assist with the registration process.
- ✦ Migrants struggled to get any social security benefits during the pandemic, as compared to their Thai counterparts. This is problematic as migrant workers increasingly have been contributing to the social security fund. At the same time, they were also denied any cash handouts from the Thai government during the pandemic.
- ✦ Although not denied service, there are instances of discrimination towards migrant workers in the healthcare system.
- ✦ Extortion by Thai authorities is also a problem that foreign migrant workers have regularly experienced.
- ✦ The government of Myanmar lacks measures to assist their citizens beyond their borders. For example, the services from labor attaches are left to be desired, as they can be inconsistent, or absent.



(Note: These recommendations were made just before the coup d'état in Myanmar in Feb. 2021)

- ✚ When Thai and Burmese workers suffer from various disasters, the Thai government should help workers in all sectors without separating or discriminating by ethnicity or nationality.
- ✚ The Thai government should reduce the procedure to make it easier for migrant workers to register, extend the time for registration and the duration of registration, reduce registration fees so they are suitable to the current situation, including not charging additional fees for COVID testing or any other related expenses, and provide flexibility in requirements for registering with employers.
- ✚ Migrants should receive their proper Social Security benefits according to their contribution; and the state should allocate funds to help migrants without Social Security with measures like cash handouts.
- ✚ Migrant workers in Thailand should receive the same health care and treatment as the general population, including non-discriminatory health services, free COVID-19 testing and treatment, and free vaccination with the vaccine of choice.
- ✚ The governments of Myanmar and Thailand should have a policy to facilitate inexpensive, safe migration during the COVID-19 situation, to receive people who want to migrate by providing safe transportation with COVID prevention measures, and providing transparent job placement, while eliminating extortion by brokers in both Thailand and Myanmar.
- ✚ When policies or regulations related to labor migration are made, the government should seek out and accept inputs from workers.
- ✚ Labor attaches should assist workers in all areas, such as exercising the power to bring workers back to Thailand and helping those who are in need and already in the country. The government of Myanmar should provide the embassy and consulate with measures to assist in extending the duration of travel documents or issuing proper documents for migrants, including expediting verification of identity documents, and reducing the cost of documents and registration for migrants.

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