

# “Shattered Dreams; Broken Hopes” The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Migrant Workers in Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The Covid-19 pandemic has hit the world hard, and it has affected the migrant workers as well. The mitigation process of the Covid-19 by governments especially developing countries-lockdowns, shut down of public and private institutions, and border controls has further deteriorated the social and economic situation of already vulnerable migrant workers as most of them lost their jobs and faced health challenges during the pandemic. These migrant workers were dealing with pressing issues such as abuses, stigma and discrimination, with no or difficult access to health facilities, and unsafe living conditions. The objective of study was to assess the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers and their families in Asian countries and uncover migrant workers, PLHIV migrants and women migrant's issues due to the pandemic. Like other destination countries, migrant workers in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand have lost their income to support themselves and their families due to the abrupt business closures and lockdowns. CARAM Asia took the initiative to carry out research on problems of migrant workers in three countries with the help of local partners in Hong Kong, North South Initiative (NSI) in Malaysia, and MAP foundation in Thailand.

**Methodology:** This qualitative research was done by using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informants' Interviews, and Interviews of migrant workers. In the total sample of 289 respondents, 59% were male and 41% female.

**Conclusion:** It was found that migrant workers were in vulnerable condition where most of them had lost their jobs, others who were still working were facing low wages and less working hours. Living conditions were overall deteriorated with almost no social security from the government. It was found that migrant workers experienced exclusion, stigmatization as if they were virus carriers, lack of support and protection from government, and loss of jobs and livelihood. Access to health facilities for migrant workers was difficult as they were not included in the governments' social safety nets. It was also found that social and psychological distress caused depletion of living standards (20% responses in Hong Kong) and the experience of increased workload and insufficient protective equipment for combating the Covid-19 were also common. The total affected percentage of migrants who either lost their income completely or partially and socially affected due to the Covid-19 pandemic was roughly 20% in Hong Kong, 20% in Malaysia, and 65% in Thailand.

## Introduction:

Migration is a vital phenomenon where 15% of total migrant workers are from South Asia and South-East Asia (ILO, 2018). The high rate of migration from these countries is because of poverty and low economic opportunities for the large population in the region. East Asia is the most populated region, **South Asia** is the most densely populated, with a regional average of some 311 persons per square kilometer in the world (UNDESA, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has hit the world hard and it has affected the migrated workers as well. The mitigation process of the Covid-19 by governments especially developing countries-lockdowns, shut down of public and private institutions, and border controls-has further deteriorated the social and economic situation of already vulnerable migrant workers. There

were other pressing issues these migrant workers had to deal with such as abuses, stigma and discrimination, and unsafe living conditions. They had difficulties in fulfilling basic needs of life like, food, shelter, and access to health facilities. People Living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (PLHIV) were vulnerable and required special health assistance for their survival. Domestic migrant workers were depending on the employer for their living, food, shelter, and health services. Like other destination countries, migrant workers in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand have lost their income to support themselves and their families due to the abrupt business closures and lockdowns. In order to obtain in-depth knowledge about migrant worker's challenges, CARAM Asia took initiative of research for assessment of Covid-19 impact on migrant workers in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand. This was a qualitative research where main strategy was Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) along with key informants' interviews, and interviews of migrant workers. The questions cover the main

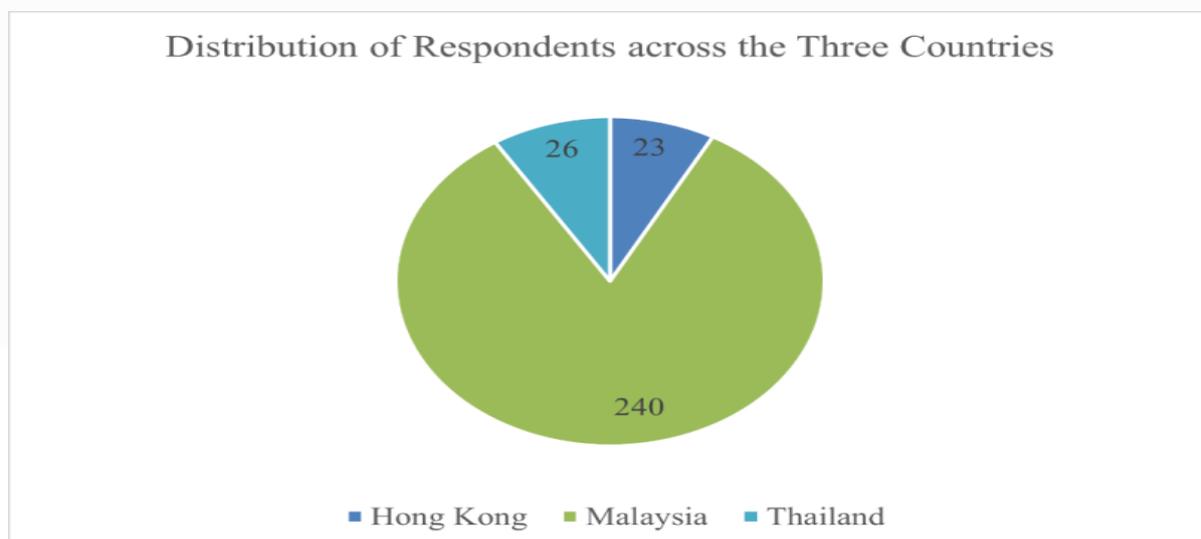
challenges faced by migrant workers during the COVID -19 situation in terms of labor, security, health, access to justice, international solidarity, cross border assistance, embassy support, solidarity and justice.

In Hong Kong, 3 FGDs with 15 Female Migrant Domestic Workers (FMDWs) were conducted. Interviews of key informants who were officials of 5 Non-Governmental Organizations' (NGOs) and one private employment service company's representative. Total participants were 23 (16 female and 7 male).

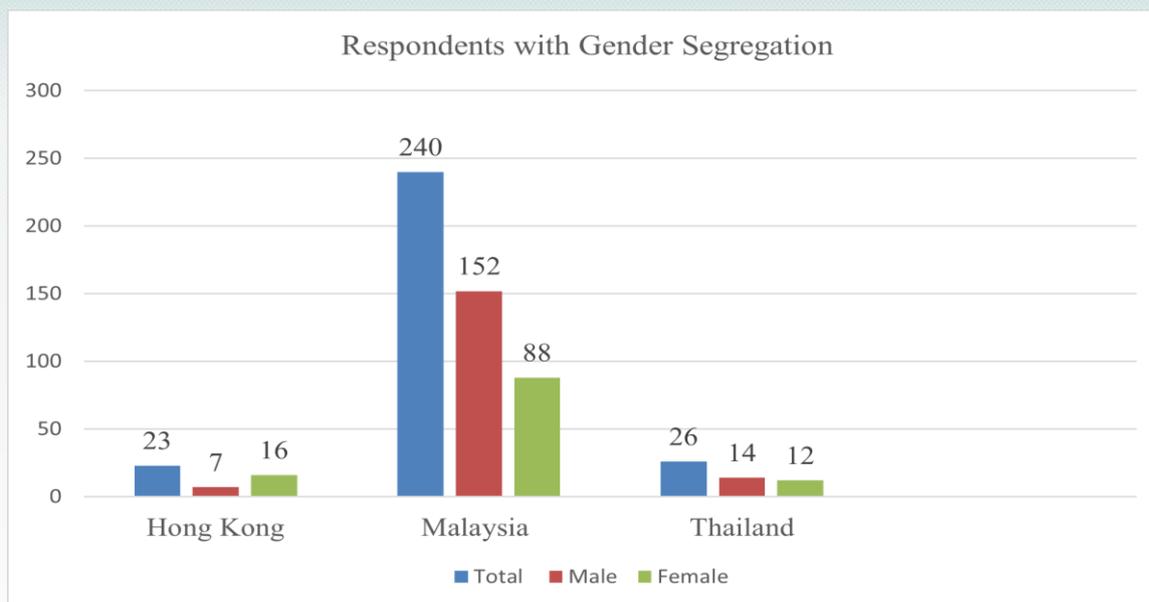
Telephone and zoom meetings were utilized to conduct these interviews due to mobility restriction during the Covid-19 pandemic. Two foreign migrant workers who run their own business in Hong Kong were interviewed face to face. There are mainly two types of migrant workers, migrant workers from Mainland China and migrant workers from foreign countries. This report only studies the experiences of migrant workers from foreign countries.

In Malaysia the study was conducted in partnership with North South Initiative (NSI). In this regard, a total of 240 respondents (88 female and 152 male) were interviewed. NSI conducted six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 60 migrant workers to assess the impact of COVID-19). These participants were provided with knowledge and information about their rights after getting answers for research questions from them. Since the Movement Control Order (MCO) implemented, all the discussions were done online.

In Thailand the research was conducted with MAP foundation, 4 FGDs were organized – two with male migrants and two with women migrants in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. In total, the four FGDs had a total of 26 participants (12 males and 14 females) with an average age of 36, where 14 are Burmese, and 12 are of Shan ethnicity. More than 75% of them were married or living with a partner and 22 out of 26 had children. All activities took place in migrants' language – primarily in Shan or Thai in Chiang Mai, and in Burmese in Mae Sot. Results were transcribed and translated into English. The distribution of respondents and is in the figure 1. Overall female representation is 40% in the three countries, where 70% female participants in Honk Kong, 37% women participants in Malaysia, and 54% respondents were female in Thailand. The gender segregation is represented in the figure 2.



**Figure 1:** Distribution of respondents across the Three Countries



**Figure 2:** The Gender Segregation of the Respondents

The objective of this study was to do an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers and their families in Asian countries, and uncover concerns and unaddressed issues of migrant workers, including those with special vulnerabilities. The results obtained from the research data for each country is discussed separately as follows.

### Impact of the Covid-19 on Migrant Workers in Hong Kong:

The Hong Kong SAR government started to respond to the pandemic in early January 2020, days after a cluster of viral pneumonia of unknown etiology was first detected in Wuhan, China. This included a series of in-bound travel restrictions. Since then, like most countries in the world, more restrictions on cross-boundaries were imposed. Mask wearing was mandated in almost all indoor and outdoor public areas. Number of people in social events and gatherings were restricted. Most of the research conducted on migrant workers during the Covid-19 was in the early time period when the pandemic started, this research was conducted to assess the impacts in the mid of 2021 (May-September). The effects and tactics to mitigate the economic and social problems during the Covid-19 pandemic might evolve over one year. This field study suggested that migrant workers experienced exclusion, stigmatization as if they were virus carriers, lack of support and protection from government, and loss of jobs and livelihood.

Two NGOs' officials were interviewed, and they stated the miserable condition of children of migrant women workers. Those mothers were in miserable condition as they lost their jobs and were unable to raise their children. Travel restrictions and delay of government services such as birth registry resulted in a prolonged assistance. Another reason for increased shelter demand was FMDWs who were homeless due to the labor issues, immigration, criminal, and health issues etc., rendering them to an early termination of employment contract. Shelter allowing them to remain in Hong Kong for the purpose of enforcing their rights. Another issue was health assistance for the migrant workers, there was no support system for them being away from family, this caused psychological problems. Other health issues of FMDWs, like workers who were HIV positive, and their employers were unaware of their disease, so they could not get medical help because employers did not allow them to leave homes due to Covid-19. FMDWs were not able to attend their clinic appointments which affects their treatment and medication (the FDWs were not willing to tell their employers about people living with HIV (PLHIV status as they were afraid that their employers would fire them). The NGO was providing free HIV rapid test, HIV prevention and reproductive health related educational workshop, outreaches and HIV self-test kits to foreign migrant workers in Hong

Kong. During Covid-19 pandemic, they stopped their outreach for more than 6 months. Interestingly, it was found that FMDWs got rise in salaries-who were working there before pandemic, as employers did not want to recruit new FMDWs-who came to Hong Kong during pandemic. The owner of an employment service company (private owned recruitment agency-which helps local Hong Kong employers to recruit migrant domestic workers told that, "since the pandemic, Hong Kong employers do not prefer hiring migrant domestic workers from overseas. They mainly want to hire those who have been currently working in Hong Kong and their contracts are going to expire with their specific employers. As demand is bigger than supply and the competition for workers is high amongst local employers, many are happy to offer higher salary to hire those whose contracts are about to expire."

Two migrants owned shops-one selling food and the other trader of electronics items-complaint of their income loss due to travel restrictions and social distancing as most of their customers were FMDWs and foreign visitors. The reduction of income reflected in the amounts he could afford to give support to his family at home, and they had to cut all expenditures to meet basic needs: food, shelter and health only. This showed that loss of income has affected the living style of families in the native countries of the foreign workers. It was also found that FMDWs had to buy Covid-19 protection kits as employers imposed on them to wear masks and use sanitizers. Mostly workers found the items expensive, and employers did not provide them with these protection items. Many workers were uncomfortable with wearing masks and they complained that mostly, it was social media and television exaggerating stories that has caused this problem. It was also found that none of the respondents had objection to Covid-19 testing and vaccination and some had already vaccinated. Most of the respondents stated that they have been using social media such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp to communicate with their family back home and their friends in Hong Kong. Now they had more time to talk with family/friends back home.

In the case of Hong Kong, life of FMDWs was affected as 20% of FMDWs got less rest days than they should be given and similar percent of them didn't go outside their employer's house for a month. Most of them felt being discriminated by issues related to COVID-19 pandemic. They felt their quality of life being deteriorated, experienced mental and physical stress. They also felt frustrated for not being able to go back to their home countries for vacations. Salary or income details are not clear as it was reported that they got salary increase during the pandemic.

### **Impact of the Covid-19 on Migrant Workers in Malaysia:**

Most of the migrant workers complained about the increase in difficulties after the lockdown, also known as the Movement Control Order (MCO) which was imposed on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020. This lockdown continued till Nov 2020, with various versions of the MCO with different degrees of rules, compliance standards, implementation and restrictions. Amongst vital aspects for looking at the conditions of migrant workers included the workers, employment conditions, housing, access to health, abuses, domestic workers rights, remittance, communications, access to information, job opportunities, safety and social security, food, visa status and access to justice. The baseline survey data from 240 workers representing 6 communities showed that conditions of migrant workers have become more precarious during the Covid-19 MCO.

Many of the workers had lost their jobs or less working hours and had to search for alternative income. Figure 3 shows their income level before the pandemic where only 6.5% participants were earning RM 3000 and above. 22.9% workers were in industry and 20% were domestic workers. The respondents earning less than RM 1200 were 20% and they got worse off after the pandemic, only those in specific essential service sectors like food, security, and health continued earning regular income. A substantial number also reported that they faced some form of abuse or rights violations by various actors during the MCO. It was found that increase in abuse particularly for the women migrant workers and domestic workers had deteriorated mental and social health of these already economically marginalized

workers. Many migrants also shared that they did not get clear information about mitigating and preventing Covid-19. MCO has caused the flow of misinformation to plague the migrant workers community. The consequences of MCO on Malaysian workers were loss of income, jobs and health risks, migrants face additional stigma from society and targeted risks as per enforcement agencies – the police, immigration and customs. Unlike Malaysians, migrants who violate the MCO related laws faced deportations. An undocumented migrant-tested positive for Covid-19-would be quarantined, treated and then deported. Some industries like essential services like health, food and security were exempted from the MCO related rules, hence work continued for migrants in these sectors. As the MCO caused many public service centers to close, it made access to essential services extremely hard. This caused workers visas to expire and many other complications like postponed court cases and missed opportunities to return home. While health services related to Covid-19 screenings were made available to the migrant workers, the stigma caused by past and present arrests and detentions by enforcement agencies made them skeptical to come forward to access those services. One of the respondents said that people became skeptic towards them as if they were carriers of the virus. Unfortunately, the discrimination at government level was found; the Malaysian government excluded migrant workers from the Workers Insurance Scheme (WIS) and the Wage Subsidy Schemes (WSS) which were meant to help employers to cover the workers' salaries during the economic down time. In any retrenchment or downsizing exercise, companies are needed to retrench first, the migrant workers, and only then Malaysians; using the Last in First Out formula. Many of the migrant workers seem to have been directly hit but the MCO. While not all the workers lost their jobs but, many had both reduced earnings and reduced working hours. Most of the respondents complained about the working place negligence on preventing measures from corona virus, as the conditions were not in compliance with the MCO rules which called for physical distancing, sanitizing facilities and safe hostels. Another issue raised by the respondents was of lack of information because of cultural competency gaps, language barrier affected the doctor-patient(migrant) relationships. Not having translators made it very difficult for migrants to understand the instructions from health personnel and describing their issues to health personnel. Miscommunications could lead to the pandemic going out of control especially if migrant workers did not understand the importance of testing and quarantine.

Impact of COVID-19 On Migrants in Malaysia

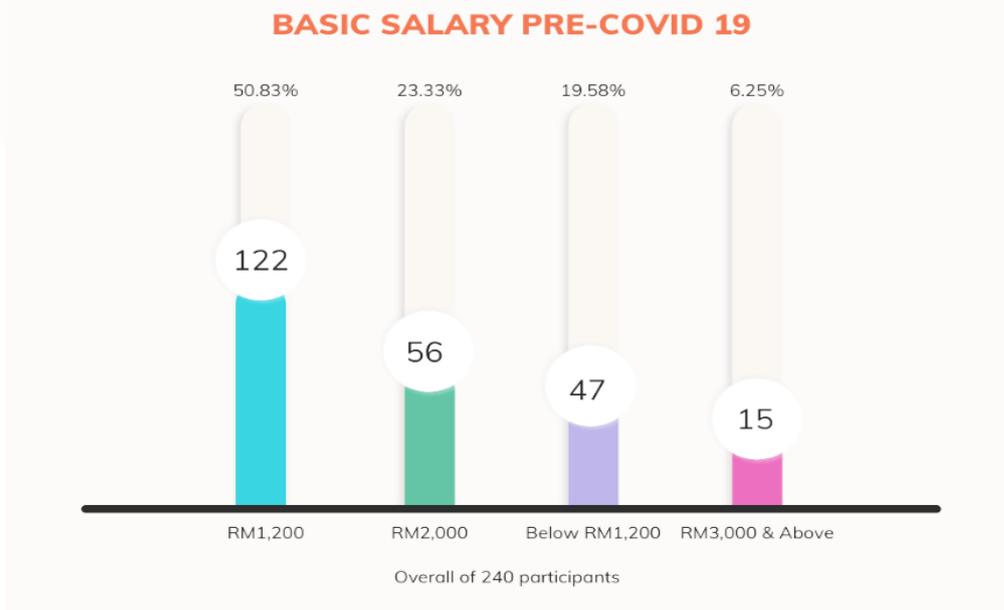


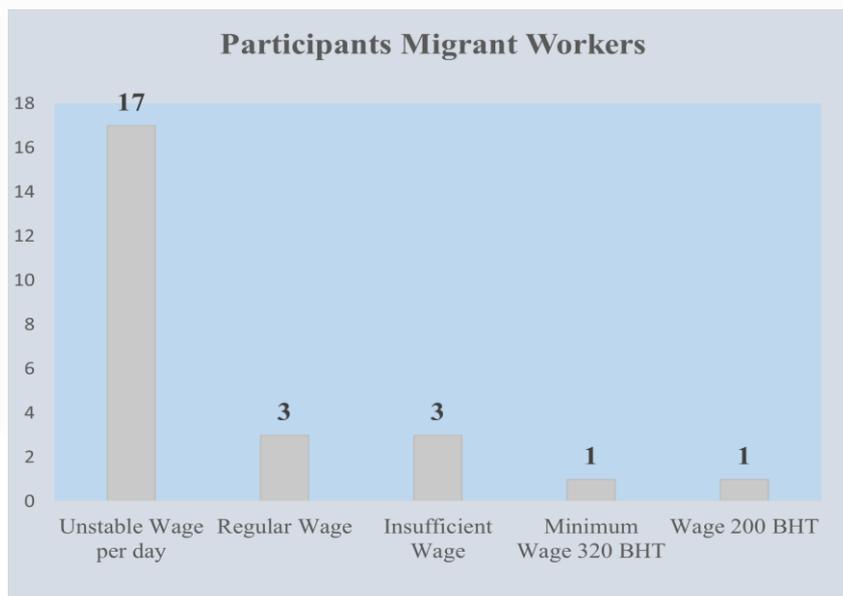
Figure 3: Basic salary of the migrant workers before the Covid-19

Many migrants lived in sub-standard or undignified conditions. This was even more critical for domestic workers who shared the house and burden with the whole family. Some migrants lost their jobs and hence, had to move out from hostels provided. The conditions of hotels were drastic and caused spread of the virus. This is most unfortunate as migrants make up around 30% of Covid-19 patients in Malaysia.

Women domestic workers were facing more challenges as compared to other migrant workers as most of the abuse complaints were from them; they were in vulnerable conditions. Domestic Work in Malaysia does not have a specific regulation and is even excluded from many basic aspects of the labor law. The loss of income from losing the jobs, put them in a very precarious situation. As for the part time cleaners, as the risks of infected themselves with the virus by cleaning became very high, many employers refused them to enter houses for cleaning, due to the MCO, they were not allowed to travel from house to house. Migrant workers in Malaysia were found to be in extremely vulnerable conditions. With multiple factors causing such vulnerability, it put migrants and their families at high risks in Malaysia in terms of their safety, work and health conditions. While migrants are respected for showing resilience and determination, this is often exploited by the local employers.

### Impact of the Covid-19 on Migrant Workers in Thailand:

Thailand has a large diaspora of migrant workers from Burma and the Shan state, they were interviewed for their problems during the Covid-19 and after the imposition of country wide lockdown in April 2020. The respondents in total 26; Most of them reported unstable and insufficient daily wages (17) that is 65% of the total respondents had unstable income, lost their jobs or they were uncertain of their daily wages, only 1 worker was having minimum wage as shown in the figure 4.



**Figure 4:** Migrant Workers' Daily Wages after the Covid-19

Living situations during the first year of Covid-19 ranged widely. Migrants reported consolidating their living conditions to save money. They moved into smaller rooms with family members, including in-laws, or friends on sharing rent. Some lived with up to six family members in single rooms meant for one or two persons. Some had young children, who were confined to the space as well. Some already rented houses or townhouses that could accommodate the increase in family members or co-workers. A camp for construction workers had 60 rooms close together with additional members in each room. Some families were isolated, living just a couple of people in a shed, in a field. Most of the respondents were staying in a row house or room. They lived outside of the workplace because dorms in

the factory are narrow, crowded, expensive and dirty, and workers' freedom is limited. Migrants negotiated with landlords, some of whom were also their employers, about lowering the rent and paying later. Some were sympathetic and reduced the rent for a couple of months, but many migrants were already in debt, owing 3-4 months.

They had a comfortable living before the pandemic, and they were sending money back home regularly. After lockdowns it was a huge loss for these migrant workers, but they did not go back to Myanmar because they could not afford the travel and quarantine expenses. Those who were having families living with them in Thailand said that it was not possible for them to go back and start their life again in Myanmar, they have accustomed to life in Thailand. One of the participants said, "My child is studying in Thailand. There is a relative in Myanmar, but I don't know what I would do if I went back."

Another worker interviewed told that, "Our child has obtained Thai nationality. In the future, we will be dependents."

The ability to stay under indefinite temporary visa extensions also encouraged respondents to stay. Some still had jobs, especially if they worked in a factory, and some migrant workers still had debts that needed to be paid off. After COVID-19, in agriculture sector, many migrant workers were unemployed. The employer took the opportunity to reduce wages again from 250 Baht per day, to only 150 or even 100 Baht. Workers accepted it because they had no income. When the first lockdown came, a lot of workplaces closed. Some respondents stayed with the same employer but there was no lacked regular work and income. One of the migrant worker-working in a shop said, "My employer informed that the shop must be closed, and he could not pay wages, I could not leave as my employer has not paid compensations or any advance notice."

One respondent at the sewing factory told, "When they have enough workers, they will tell us not to come; and if there are not enough workers, they will inform us to come and work." Some respondents had to change jobs and employers, but some workers couldn't find a new employer, their life was depending on daily work wages. One of the female participants said, "In the past, I have always worked with my employer and never changed the job or the employer. However, during the COVID-19 outbreak, the factory needed to shut down. During that time, I worked as a housemaid to earn extra income." In some situations, like in Mae Sot, workers could still work normally in the factory. However, they were not allowed by the employer to move outside of the factory due to fear of contracting the virus. Mostly migrant workers were ripped off as they received unfair wages of 180 Baht per day (minimum is 320); it was difficult to find work, so they accepted it. It was reported that even before Covid-19 employers were not paying wages as per the minimum wage rate. It was also reported by a respondent that his employer paid the wages for 15 days work only to compensate all workers and asked them to help each other by accepting half salary.

Migrants managed their food needs through assistance received from various sources, such as NGOs, CBOs, the Red Cross, local government at the municipal level, and Thai and migrant communities. Some migrants received assistance during the first wave only. Some migrants received no assistance whatsoever. Some migrants foraged for food in the forest or in canals depending on their locality, while many families stored up on dried goods when they could. There were also local food sellers who provided credit.

One of the respondents said, "We planned in order to have sufficient money for expenses for food and conserved by not buying anything unnecessary. Also followed the local news on Facebook to know information about where local food donations were and we would travel to pick it up. We also received some dry food from a local donation box in the community."

Many respondents complained about the inefficiency of government in providing no information on the Covid-19 and its prevention. Most of the awareness campaigns were conducted by NGOs. The poor segment of the migrant workers who were hand to mouth for basic needs were unable to buy personal protective kits. One of the respondents explained that NGOs and the Red Cross came and provided masks, washing gel and survival bags, including information about how to protect and prevent from the disease. Sometimes, there were volunteers who came into the community. There were no government agencies that came and helped in the community.

Health sector aided migrant workers without any discrimination and treated them free

during the Covid-19 outbreak. It was found that migrants were pleasantly surprised by the commitment health officials showed in ensuring patients received their medicines. There were also numerous cases of pregnancy and delivery had complications due to Covid-19. One respondent told that, "The hospital delivered medication for people with diabetes in the community."

Another migrant worker said, "I have a friend who is paralyzed and needs treatment. Hospital gave the person treatment according to his rights under the state health insurance (30 Baht scheme) at a public hospital."

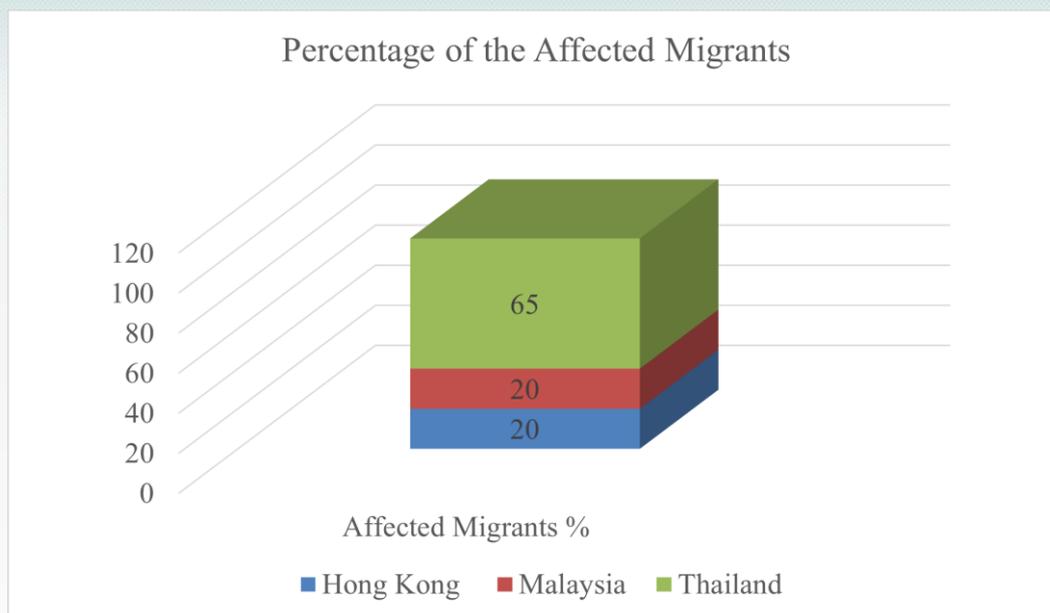
It was also found that migrant workers were struggling for their legal rights and issues related deportation and abusive behavior of employers. Migrant workers' situation was precarious during the Covid-19 as employers and agents took advantage of the situation to cheat the migrant workers. For instance, withheld their wages, agents failed to assist migrants to return home safely during sudden flight cancellation and workers were not able to contact anyone for help since agents withheld their hand phones.

### **Discussion:**

The situation of migrant workers was miserable in the three countries-Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Thailand- where the research was conducted. Economic, social, law and enforcement, living conditions, and workplace situation has deteriorated due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Malaysia has no system for migrant workers, Covid-19 has exposed the intersection of enforcement, between the health ministry and the home affairs ministry. Migrants who were Covid-19 positive and did not have their documents, were quarantined, detained and deported. As many undocumented workers and even documented workers felt threatened to come forward for testing, many went into hiding or went home using irregular channels. This led to the spread of the virus. The income lost after the Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia was experienced by 20% respondents as they were earning less than RM 1200, which deteriorated their lifestyle further after the pandemic. Similarly, 65% participants in Thailand got unstable wages after the pandemic, they were uncertain about their daily wages and economically devastated. In the case of Hong Kong, 20% of the respondents suggested the social and psychological distress showing depletion of their living standards (See Figure 5).

The experience of increased workload and insufficient protective equipment were also common. In the early months of the pandemic, more than 20% of FMDWs in Hong Kong got less rest days than what they should be given and similar percent of them did not go outside their employer's house for a month. These results are also supported by an online survey about the rest conditions of FMDWs, about 25% of FMDWs reported they slept less in this month than the month before. About 10% of FMDWs were not given any rest day at all for the past month while another 10% got less rest days than what they should get this past month. In addition, for the FMDWs who were given their weekly rest day, 23% did not go outside their employer's house in the past month (AMCB, 2020).

There was a positive impact in Hong Kong as respondents of the study mentioned the salary rise due to employers' fear of hiring new FMDWs who have just entered in the labor market and might have contacted Covid-19. The demand of already working FMDWs increased and thus employers raised the wage rate to keep them. This positive impact was not seen in Malaysia and Thailand, where migrant workers were mostly facing low income and less working hours. Many migrant workers have lost their jobs and were in debt for meeting their basic needs, food and shelter. Another benefit during the pandemic was, migrant workers had more leisure time, and they were able to communicate to their families/friends back home via Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook.



**Figure 5:** Percentage of Affected Migrants in the Countries

During the initial lockdown, migrants identified receiving assistance from NGOs, including the Red Cross, CBOs, local government and local communities in Hong Kong and Malaysia but no one said they received benefits from the Thai government. After the lockdown, migrants felt discriminated against, unable to access the same benefits as Thais, especially entitlements under social security or cash handouts. It was found that health service was helpful to surprise of the migrant workers in Thailand under the (30 Baht scheme) at a public hospital. In case of Malaysia, government strategies like MCO further deteriorate the living conditions of migrant workers. This is also confirmed by other researchers that the implementation of various phases of Malaysia's Movement Control Orders (MCOs) and the way the government addresses the situation facing migrant workers have significant negative consequences on their already precarious living and working conditions. This includes a growing number of positive COVID-19 cases found among migrant workers in May 2020 onwards (Wahab, 2020).

Economic conditions of the migrant workers further depleted as mostly employers were not paying according to the minimum wage rate law, which left migrant workers with meager savings. After Covid-19, most of the migrant workers had no income so they used up their savings to pay fixed expenses like rent. Majority of the respondents lost their jobs after the Covid-19 or income loss due to less working hours. Income loss was reported by 20% respondents in Malaysia, 65% participants in Thailand reported unstable daily wages, social and psychological distress in Hong Kong as 20% migrants told about their worsen off life after the Covid-19. To survive, they moved in together, conserved resources by eating dry and canned food, went into debt, and took daily work (any work) to earn some money. With the continued closure of the border, migrants had no choice to travel back. Even when the borders were open, they didn't travel to save money.

The situation after the world is opening again might have different impacts but the lack of data and restrictions in mobility to collect data in the migrant's community need extensive research to understand the living situation especially in health sector. During the Covid-19, there is currently no literature on disease among migrant minorities. Public health attention is required for disease control among minorities and migrants (Joob & Wiwanitkit, 2020).

The phenomenon of migrant workers and the Covid-19 Pandemic is very complicated and need extensive qualitative and quantitative studies for getting the clear idea of what is going to happen and what measures are to be taken by the governments immediately. It was evident that social, economic, security, health, and access to justice were declined for the migrant workers in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Thailand. Mostly migrant workers were unsatisfied with the government strategies which excluded migrant workers from social net.

## Recommendations:

The study pointed out various problems, it is suggested that:

- ❖ Governments should engage migrant workers for policy making process. They should help domestic workers in all sectors without separating or discriminating by ethnicity or nationality.
- ❖ Migrants should receive social security benefits according to their contribution; and the state should allocate funds to help migrants without Social Security with measures like special cash handouts and provide food and shelter.
- ❖ Migrant workers 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.

## Conclusion:

It can be concluded that migrants are major contributors to economic and social aspects of country of origin and destination. However, during the pandemic, migrant workers were very vulnerable and could barely survive. It also shows that the gaps in law, regulations and enforcement are very vital to be bridged during this critical period. Migrant workers are in extremely vulnerable conditions. With multiple factors causing such vulnerability, it puts migrants and their families at high risks in terms of their safety, work and health conditions. This field study suggested that migrant workers experienced exclusion, stigmatization as if they were virus carriers, lack of support and protection from government, and loss of jobs and livelihood. While migrants are respected for showing high degree of resilience and determination, this is often taken advantage by the local businesses. The tragedy is that the very resilience and strength shown by the migrant worker is used to normalize abuses. government's preparedness in addressing the inequalities which contribute to the spread of Covid-19, such as vaccine equity, social safety nets, jobs security and housing conditions, and as a result, would face another year of battling the spread of the disease and the related economic hardship.

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