

# ▶ Research Brief

June 2021

## Public attitudes towards migrant workers in Thailand

### ▶ Summary

At the end of 2019, Thailand hosted a total of 2.9 million registered migrant workers, comprising at least 7.6 per cent of the workforce (Ministry of Labour, 2019). With an ageing population, the high demand for migrant workers is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Migrants were responsible for 4.3 - 6.6 per cent of Thailand's GDP in 2010 (ILO and OECD, 2017). Though migrant workers contribute to Thailand's development socially as well as economically, the general public attitude towards migrant workers tends to be negative. As this report has shown, negative attitudes are expressed through discriminatory actions, such as limiting or denying entry, exclusion from access to services, and public support for laws that enshrine social exclusion of migrant workers and deny equal wages on par with nationals.

In order to understand the overall level of public support towards migrant workers, the ILO and UN Women Safe and Fair and the TRIANGLE in ASEAN programmes conducted a four-country study of public attitudes in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. The full report can be found at: [https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS\\_732443/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_732443/lang--en/index.htm). This brief highlights the main findings in Thailand.

The study explores public support and attitudes related to labour market shortages, migration and crime, social and cultural threats, equal treatment with nationals, and violence against women migrant workers. The research also inquires specifically about the domestic work sector. The survey targeted Thais aged 18-65 years, covering all major regions, and a gender quota was applied ensuring representativeness with regard to men and women across regions.<sup>1</sup> In total, 1,034 Thais were surveyed.

### Key Policy Recommendations

#### Promote inclusion and community engagement with migrant workers through policy and practice

Ensure that women and men migrant workers are able to fully access rights and freedoms in line with international labour and human rights standards.

Design policies that facilitate platforms and community events where migrant workers and the public can meaningfully interact.

Promote social inclusion by avoiding separation of migrant workers' accommodation through city planning.

#### Raise awareness among general public

Design campaigns to raise awareness by providing accurate and positive information about migrant workers and their contribution to the national economy.

Complement and reinforce public campaigns with targeted interventions directed at "influencer" groups such as schools and news media.

<sup>1</sup> For the detailed methodology, refer to the full report: ILO and UN Women. *Public Attitudes towards Migrant Workers in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (Bangkok, 2019).



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This 2019 study follows an earlier ILO study on public attitudes, applying the same methodology, and finds that positive attitudes toward migrant workers have declined since 2010. The study also confirms that people who know and engage with migrant workers on a personal level are more likely to be supportive of migrants and have a positive attitude towards them. Polarization in views has increased, and people with limited or no interaction with migrant workers are less supportive than before. Alarmingly, in Thailand as in other migration destination countries, Thai respondents who employ domestic workers in their homes have also displayed a decrease in positive attitudes, despite the frequent interaction that Thai employers have with migrant domestic workers.

However, the study finds that positive public support exists for policy initiatives aimed at supporting women migrant workers, especially in relation to ending violence against women and improved working conditions for domestic workers. This tends to show that focused attention toward a particular group of migrant workers and toward specific issues concerning these migrant workers can help generate more public support.

The findings suggest that programmes and policies must further encourage interaction and community engagement with migrant communities, and must discourage exclusion, isolation, and discrimination.

### Leverage the positive public support for women migrant workers

Design policies to address violence against women migrant workers and to ensure that pregnant women migrant workers have access to maternity leave.

Design and enforce regulations aimed at improving the working conditions of women migrant domestic workers, as well as ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189).

### Address declining attitudes of employers of women migrant domestic workers

Conduct a coordinated and evidence-based publicity campaign on the social and economic value of domestic work, and on the rights of domestic workers, involving all stakeholders, including governments, employers, trade unions, and domestic workers' groups.



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## ► Findings

### Public support for migrant workers

#### Labour market shortages: Need for migrant workers

Population demographics are changing in Thailand. The population is ageing and there are fewer workers as a percentage of the population. There is therefore a need for more workers to maintain labour forces, and to provide care to the elderly. Despite labour market shortages, as well as the economic gains to be made from labour migration, not all of the Thai public are convinced of the need for migrant workers in Thailand (see figures 1 and 2):

- 53 per cent of the Thais surveyed say the country does not need low-skilled migrant workers.
- 40 per cent believe that migrant workers are a drain on the economy.
- 38 per cent believe that migrant workers have an overall negative effect on the economy.

#### Migration and crime: Unfounded fears

There is little evidence to back up the claim that migrant workers are more likely to commit crimes than the rest of the population. For instance, in Thailand's Tak province, an analysis of the incidence of different crimes showed that migrants were less likely to commit crimes than nationals (Sirikarnjana, n.d. as cited in Paitoonpong, 2012). However, a majority of Thais still have the impression that that migrant workers do commit more crimes (see figures 1 and 2):

- 72 per cent of Thai survey respondents say that migrants commit a high number of crimes.
- 77 per cent think crime rates have increased due to migration.

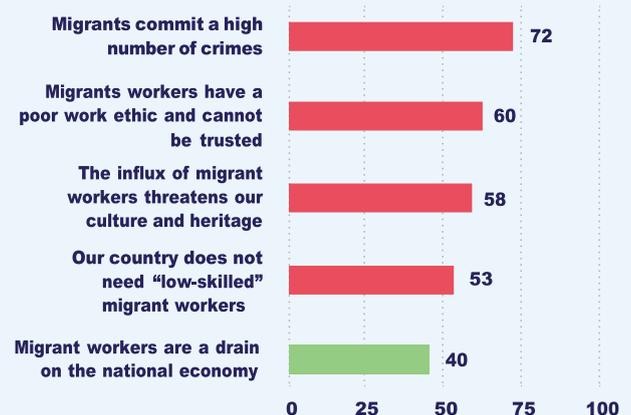
#### Social inclusion versus social and cultural threats

The study found that a majority of the Thai public tends to believe that migrant workers threaten the country's culture and heritage, and say migrant workers have a poor work ethic and cannot be trusted (figure 1). These high figures suggest that trust building in Thailand should be a particular target of any interventions to

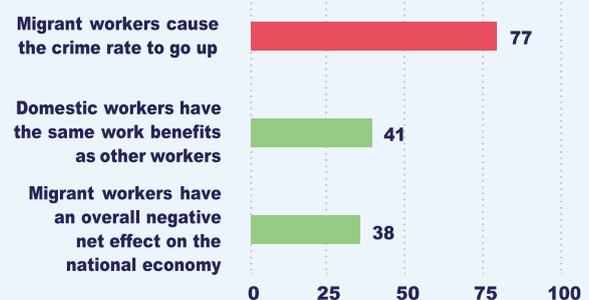
increase positive attitudes towards migrant workers. However, on a more positive note, when measuring public behaviours of inclusion, the survey found that:

- 74 per cent of the Thai public had or would help a migrant worker integrate into their community or get ahead in their work.
- 58 per cent said they had spoken or would speak out against someone who was saying offensive things about migrant workers.

**Figure 1. Attitudes about migrant workers - Support for the following statements (%)**



**Figure 2. Misconceptions about migrant workers - Support for the following statements (%)**



## Equal treatment of migrant workers

Equality of treatment is enshrined in international human rights instruments and labour standards. This study showed that belief in equality of treatment is not the norm in terms of public attitudes towards migrant workers.

The majority of Thais surveyed are of the view that (see figure 3):

- Migrant workers should not have any rights at work if in irregular status (76 per cent).
- If migrant workers are exploited, they have themselves to blame (57 per cent).
- Migrant workers should not receive the same salary and benefits as national workers (52 per cent).

These attitudes indicate that many Thais hold a fundamental view that migrant workers should be treated differently. Discrimination is therefore a problem that needs to be tackled through law enforcement as well as through efforts to influence social norms and attitudes.

However, public attitudes on migrant workers joining a union and receiving the same work conditions as nationals are mostly positive, with a minority holding the following views (see figure 3):

- Migrant workers should not receive the same work conditions as national workers (38 per cent).
- Migrant workers should not be able to join a union (41 per cent).

While the Thai Labour Relations Act B.E. 2518 (1975), only allows Thai nationals to form a union or serve on a union's executive council, migrant workers may join existing unions.

## Treatment of women migrant workers

When asked whether women migrant workers specifically should have equal wages with women nationals doing the same job, a majority in Thailand supported this (see figure 4).

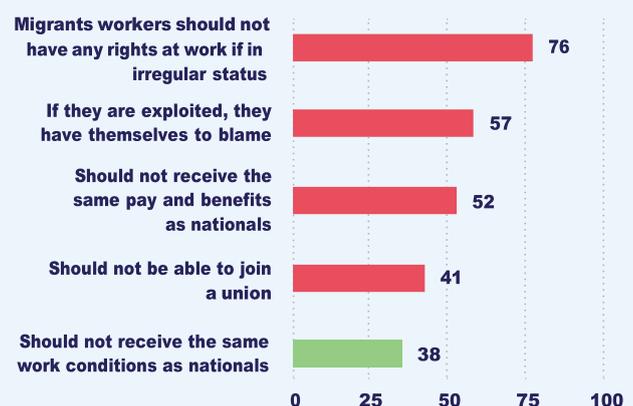
Thailand has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); Section 41 (Chapter 3), and Section 59 (Chapter 5) of the Labour Protect Act B.E. 2541 (1998) provides maternity protection to all workers regardless of their nationality. Further, dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy or of being on maternity leave is prohibited. The Thai Government offers prenatal and postnatal care to pregnant workers from Cambodia, the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic, and Myanmar, provided Thai employers have enrolled them in Social Security.

Once born, their children are also eligible to remain in Thailand and by law can access medical care and enjoy the right to free basic education.

Nonetheless, in practice, maternity leave for women migrant workers is not the norm, and dismissing women migrant workers (and indeed women nationals) from work upon pregnancy is not uncommon.

A majority of the public do support offering maternity leave to women migrant workers. Yet, on the other hand, only a minority of Thai survey respondents support women migrant workers being allowed to work while pregnant, a contradiction in sentiment, and a contradiction to national labour law (see figure 4).

**Figure 3. Attitudes on equal treatment of migrant worker - Support for the following statements (%)**



**Figure 4. Attitude on treatment of women migrant workers - Support for the following statements**



## Violence against women migrant workers

As outlined in the United Nations' 2017 Report of the Secretary-General on Violence against Women Migrant Workers,

Migration can foster women's empowerment and, through new opportunities and personal expansion, improve their agency and autonomy, yet the feminized, informal sectors in which many migrant women work are characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, limited labour and social protections, and exposure to physical and sexual violence.

Prevention of violence against women migrant workers was the issue to which Thai survey respondents gave their strongest support. Strong majorities of Thai respondents support women migrant workers having access to shelters if they experience violence and stronger law enforcement to reduce violence against women migrant workers (see figure 5).

**Figure 5. Addressing violence against women - Support for the following statements**



Harnessing this strong public support for freedom from violence for women migrant workers and turning it into law and action is imperative, especially at a moment when governments, trade unions, and employers, with the full support of CSOs, around the world have come together to adopt new international instruments to counter violence. The June 2019 International Labour Conference adopted the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) and its associated

Recommendation (No. 206), which recognizes the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

Whether migrating through regular or irregular channels, women migrant workers can face the risk of violence and abuse from intermediaries and employers, as well as from partners and others. They experience intersectional forms of discrimination based on multiple identities, including job sector, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, legal status, age, pregnancy status, marital status, and language, among others. Women migrant survivors of violence face multiple challenges while seeking justice or accessing essential services. Because of little access to protection and support services, the absence of protection orders, limited referral networks and coordination mechanisms, a lack of language interpreters, and fear of deportation or of losing their jobs, many migrant women suffer in silence.

Therefore, services must be available regardless of migration status, and in sufficient quantity and quality, and these services need to respond in ways that integrate human rights, cultural sensitivity and respect for survivors' choices. Key components of response are high-quality, accessible, survivor-centred (e.g., non-judgmental) services by health actors, police and justice, and social services, as well as effective coordination, as services cannot keep survivors safe and support healing when they work in isolation.

One challenge facing migrant workers who experience violence is that they often do not report it. The survey found that some Thai respondents were aware of this problem (35 per cent). Women migrant workers may struggle to access services due to perceptions around their respectability or due to victim blaming. Pervasive negative attitudes can also further isolate migrant women, restricting their movement and preventing them from seeking support due to fear of reprisals.

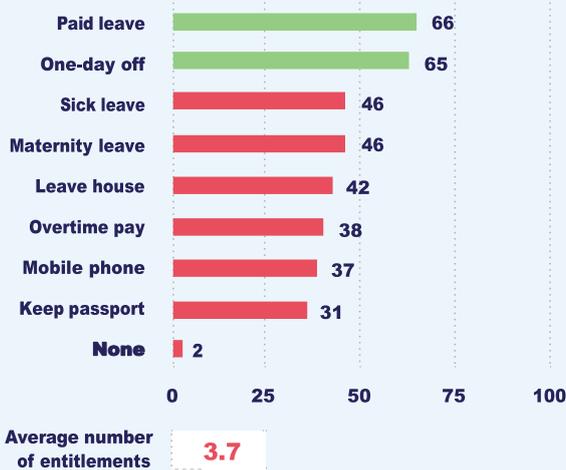
## Domestic workers: Same treatment, better protections

The Thais surveyed also strongly support improved labour conditions for domestic workers; however, Thai respondents who employed migrant domestic workers were less supportive. Overall figures show that 80 per cent of the public in Thailand support better labour conditions for domestic workers, and 83 per cent also support recognition of care work as a formal profession.

This public support does not appear to translate, however, into decent work conditions and provision of work entitlements. The survey asked Thai respondents if they employ a domestic worker in their home, and if so, asked them about working conditions they provide to their workers. When Thai employers were presented

with a list of eight entitlements they might provide to domestic workers (such as paid leave, overtime pay, ability to hold their passports or a phone, or a day off per week), and based on their responses it appears that Thai employers provide an average of roughly four entitlements to their employees. The most commonly provided entitlements are paid leave and one day off per week, and the most denied entitlements are that workers can hold their own passports and have access to a mobile phone (see figure 6).

**Figure 6. Work entitlements provided to migrant domestic workers by surveyed employers (%)**



Base: Thai employers of migrant domestic workers, n=166

## Factors that correlate with public support for migrant workers

### Interaction with migrant workers

The study explores whether demographic variables correlate with public support for migrant workers and finds that they are not strongly associated. Instead, frequency and quality of interaction with migrant workers are strong predictors of support for migrant workers generally.

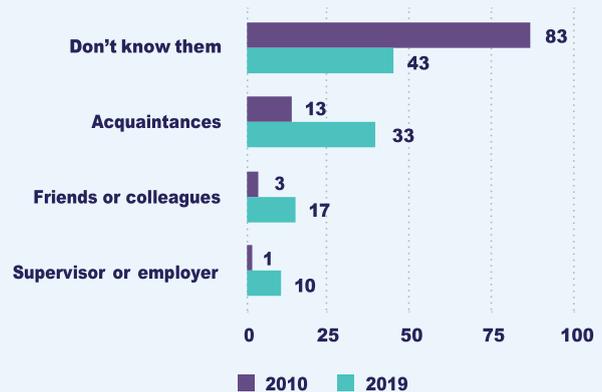
In line with the trend of increasing levels of migration, interaction with migrant workers has increased in Thailand since the 2010 ILO study on public attitudes (figure 7). Personal contact with migrant workers is substantially higher, with only 11 per cent of Thai

respondents never encountering migrant workers – versus 43 per cent in 2010. However, despite 89 per cent reporting interaction with migrant workers, much smaller proportion of Thai respondents report knowing migrant workers personally, and in most cases, they are just acquaintances (see figure 8). A significant minority, 43 per cent, report that they do not know any migrant workers they have interacted with personally (see figure 8).

**Figure 7. Frequency of interaction with migrant workers, 2010 and 2019 (%)**



**Figure 8. Type of relationship with migrant workers (%)<sup>2,3</sup>**



### Role of news and media

Based on evidence that the media shapes opinion about migration and drives behaviour, Thai survey respondents were asked about the number and type of media sources they consume.

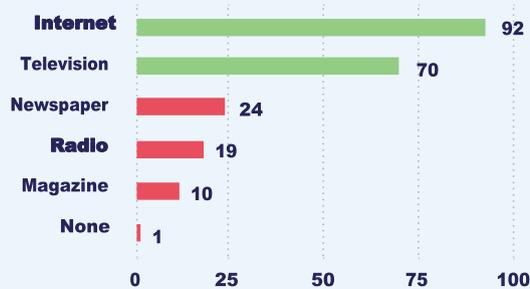
<sup>2</sup> Only includes respondents who reported interactions with migrant workers (n=920).

<sup>3</sup> Due to rounding, percentages may not precisely reflect the absolute.

Thai survey respondents reported regular use of mass media, with the internet being the most popular medium (see figure 9). Television is commonly consumed, with 70 per cent reporting regular viewing; while newspapers are less commonly consumed, with 24 per cent reporting regular readership (see figure 9). Facebook is the most popular social media platform and YouTube is a consistent second, followed by Instagram and Google+. The number of social media platforms used by Thai respondents stands at 4.4 per person, on average. Also, the average number of news media sources consumed per person in Thailand was found to be higher than in the other countries in the study.

The study findings suggest that the more news media sources people consume, the more supportive they are of migrant workers, irrespective of the type of media source. Media, specifically news reports, social media, and TV programmes, remains the most prominent source of information about migrant workers. But it should be noted that social media has risen to a strong second place since the 2010 study, surpassing television programming.

**Figure 9. Regular use of mass media (%)**



Base: n=1,034

## Changes in public support for migrant workers from 2010 to 2019

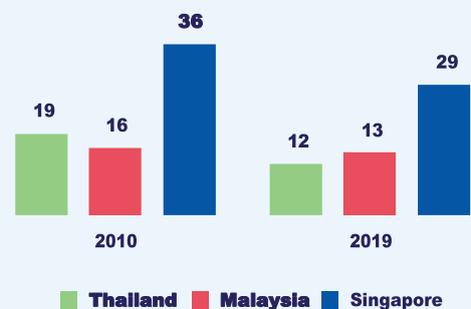
For the 2010 ILO study on public attitudes, an index of questions on knowledge, attitudes, and practice (KAP) was compiled, with scores summed to explore correlative factors. The “KAP Index” questions used in 2010 were also used in the 2019 study. On a scale of 0 to a 100, the KAP Index reflects how supportive people are

towards migrants. The higher the KAP Index,<sup>4</sup> the more supportive people are.

Comparing results for Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand from 2010 and 2019, figure 10 reflects a modest decline in the KAP Index in all three countries, meaning overall support for migrant workers declined to some degree between 2010 and 2019. Both Singapore and Thailand had a seven-point drop in the index, whereas Malaysia had a more marginal decrease of three points. Despite the drop, Singapore’s score is highest among countries surveyed, an indication that support for migrant workers remains relatively stronger in Singapore than in Malaysia and Thailand.

Looking at the KAP Index scores for 2010 and 2019 in Thailand, the KAP Index is rather low (see figure 10). In both years, this score shows that migrants do not receive a lot of public support. The results suggest that most people in Thailand have limited knowledge about migrant workers, hold many negative attitudes towards them, and are unwilling to engage in practices or behaviours that would support migrants.

**Figure 10. KAP Index**



Note: KAP Index is a composite score of 15 questions about knowledge, attitude, and practice.

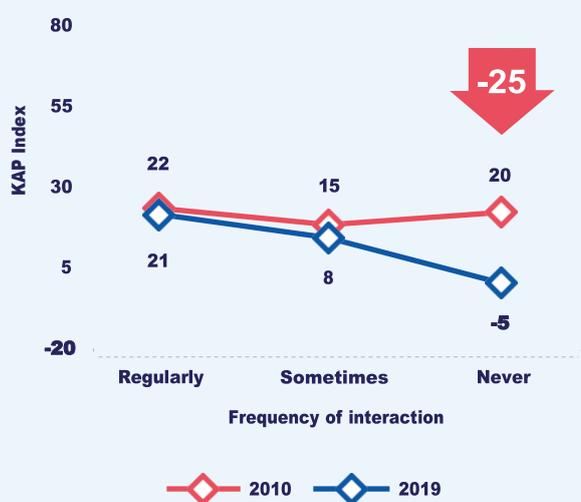
Despite the correlation of a higher KAP Index with increased interaction with migrant workers, support for migrant workers declined over the period. This is due to a greater KAP Index decline<sup>5</sup> - by 25 points - among Thai respondents with no interaction with migrant workers (see figure 11). The KAP Index did not change much for Thai respondents who have regular interaction with migrant workers, which suggests an increased polarization in support between persons exposed to migrant workers and persons who are not. There was

<sup>4</sup> KAP Index is an indicator in which knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour measures have been aggregated at the individual level and indexed, expressed as a range from zero to 100.

<sup>5</sup> To make the KAP Index more sensitive to incremental changes, the total index range is from 0 to 200. Based on past studies, 95 per cent of all results have fallen within the range of 60 to 160, and the scale was therefore adjusted (with tails cut off before 60 and beyond 160) to show a zero to 100 range for more common understanding. The theoretical index can therefore be negative or exceed 100. Please refer to full study.

also a marginal decline among Thai respondents who had had occasional interaction with migrant workers. Together, these declines may explain why the support for migrant workers has diminished over time.

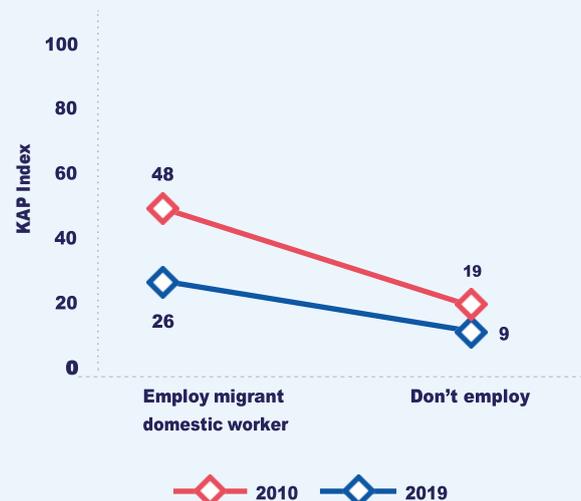
**Figure 11. KAP Index, by frequency of interaction with migrant workers in Thailand, 2010 and 2019**



A strong, positive relationship was found in 2010, where Thai respondents who had hired migrant domestic workers had a considerably higher KAP Index; meaning Thai employers were generally more supportive of migrant workers than the general public were. In 2019, the results remained largely unchanged in Singapore. However, employers of migrant domestic workers in Malaysia and Thailand appeared significantly less supportive of migrant workers generally, declining by 25 points and 22 points (figure 12), respectively.

It is critical, therefore, to encourage more interaction between Thai communities and migrant workers. Decreasing the distance between nationals and migrant workers requires a multi-pronged approach including city planning, workplace inclusion, community platforms, and changes to laws and policy to ensure there are no exclusions or “special rules” that keep migrant workers from enjoying fair and equal treatment.

**Figure 12. KAP Index, by Thai employers of migrant domestic workers in Thailand, 2010 and 2019**



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## ► Recommendations

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### 1. Promote inclusion, social interaction, and community engagement with migrant workers in destination countries, including through changes to policy and practice.

- 1.1 Stimulate attitude changes on specific issues to tackle discrimination and barriers that prevent the fair treatment of migrant workers, especially women, and social inclusion.
  - Ensure that women and men migrant workers are able to fully access rights and freedoms in line with international labour and human rights standards.
  - Adopt policies, regulations and operating procedures that support social inclusion, including access to services, social security, schools, and health facilities, including those specialized in addressing violence and abuses.
  - City planning can promote social inclusion by avoiding separation of migrant workers' accommodation. Physical distance is a barrier that hinders migrant workers from integrating into the local community and encourages segregation and discrimination.
  - Ensure that labour migration mechanisms are accessible, affordable and not time consuming. Across all four countries, respondents said that migrant workers with regular status can adapt better than those without.
- 1.2 Design, support and deliver policies that facilitate platforms and community events where migrant workers and the public can meaningfully interact and demonstrate the positive impact of migrant workers on societies and economies.
- 1.3 Encourage inclusion in the workplace by working with employers and trade unions to promote the rights of migrant workers. Trade unions could promote solidarity and encourage inclusion by accepting and supporting migrant workers to join as members.
- 1.4 Avoid dehumanizing terms to refer to migrants and migrant workers in legal texts and other official documents.

### 2. Conduct awareness-raising activities with the general public.

- 2.1 Design campaigns to raise awareness by providing accurate and positive information about migrant workers and their contribution to national economy. The study identified that the majority of the respondents had limited knowledge about the important contributions

migrant workers make to destination countries. Information campaigns can help to inform the public, ideally by working on shifting social norms and shared values. It is important to focus on specific sectors and problems so that the public can relate to the messages in a more personalized way.

- Promote campaigns that address the root of negative attitudes towards migrant workers. Strive to develop a personal connection between the public and migrant workers by focusing on specific migrant work sectors as well as interactions among nationals and migrant workers within those sectors.
  - Promote evidence of beneficial impacts of migrant workers to strengthen positive attitudes, while at the same time debunking common myths about them, such as the characterization of migrant workers as criminals, as taking jobs from nationals, or as having a negative impact on the economy. Promote messages about the empowerment that can result when women in particular have positive migration experiences.
  - Tackle stigma and raise the status of roles and work sectors in which migrant workers work. Undervaluing the work of migrants has negative consequences and can lead to discrimination and social exclusion. Promoting the importance of decent work, equal opportunities, social protection, gender equality, and inclusion are essential.
  - Take care to ensure that messaging does not promote migrant workers - especially women migrant workers - as "victims" or inherently vulnerable. This can feed into narratives that migrant workers are weaker and powerless, and through emphasizing difference, undermine their claims to the same rights at work as nationals.
- 2.2 Complement and reinforce public campaigns with targeted interventions directed at influencer groups.
    - Encourage governments, in partnership with international organizations and other relevant actors, to encourage schools to promote positive behaviour towards migrant workers and members of their families. The study highlighted a general lack of knowledge about migrant workers' rights. But public education on prejudice and diversity can shape attitudes towards migrant workers as well as change

discriminatory social norms and stereotypical behaviors.

- Implement interventions to encourage more balanced and inclusive reporting, as well as non-discriminatory terminology used by the news media when reporting stories about migrant workers. News media are influential and impact the public's attitudes as well as policy-makers' agendas. Terms such as "undocumented" and "irregular" can be used rather than "illegal"; and "migrant" rather than "alien". At all opportunities, humanize the individual representation of migrant workers and avoid descriptions that overemphasize the number of migrant workers or depict the migrant population as degrading the dominant culture.

23 Continue to track shifts and trends in public support for migrant workers in Thailand. Doing so will allow ongoing campaigns and other interventions to adjust to any changes in public attitudes. More frequent tracking of attitudes can also enable studies to identify causation of changes in public support for migrant workers.

### **3. Harness the opportunities available given the high degree of public support for women migrant workers, including opportunities to address violence against women.**

3.1 Leverage the positive public support for ending violence against women migrant workers. Respondents showed high levels of support for access to shelters for women who experience violence and for stronger enforcement against violence. It is recommended to work with governments, trade unions, and NGOs to ensure the availability of shelters and comprehensive services designed to meet the needs of women migrant worker survivors of violence.

- Ratify the Convention Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, 2019 (No. 190).
- Governments, employers, trade unions, and NGOs should run campaigns to end violence and harassment, including against migrant women and other marginalized groups, in the world of work. Awareness-raising and campaigning should form an important part of combined strategies linked to prevention of violence and harassment in the world of work.
- Governments, employers, trade unions and CSOs should make sure information on available VAW services, including shelters, are available and widely disseminated.
- Governments, trade unions and CSOs, including labour migration organizations should make sure to have tools and capacities to refer

survivors of violence and abuse to available VAW services through established referral pathways.

- 3.2 Leverage the public support for women migrant workers to receive maternity leave. Policy change and/or enforcement is needed in Thailand to ensure women migrant workers have de jure and de facto access to maternity leave within broader social security schemes, and that they are not discriminated against on the grounds of pregnancy at work, or during recruitment.
- 3.3 Support governments and employers to actively promote gender-sensitive policies and practices that tackle gender stereotypes and occupational segregation. Strong gender segregation of occupations in the region is the result of stereotypical perceptions of what women can or cannot do as well as the consequence of gender-differentiated barriers in access to specific job opportunities.

### **4. Address declining attitudes of employers of domestic workers.**

- 4.1 Governments, trade unions, and other stakeholders, including domestic workers groups, should conduct a coordinated and evidence-based publicity campaign on the social and economic value of domestic work, and on the rights of domestic workers. Domestic work is often undervalued, and often not fully considered as work, either by employers or through the lack of full inclusion in national labour laws.
- 4.2 All stakeholders, including and especially media, should use respectful terms to describe domestic workers. They should avoid terms such as "servant", "maid", and "helper", and instead use "domestic worker", which squarely shows that domestic workers are workers, and not servile or part of the family.
- 4.3 Leverage the positive public support for domestic workers to design and enforce regulations aimed at improving the working conditions of women migrant workers, as well as ratification of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). Respondents showed high levels of support for recognition of care workers, improvement of the working conditions of domestic workers, and equal labour rights for domestic workers on par with nationals. Thailand has not yet ratified Convention No. 189.
- 4.4 Conduct further research to understand the knowledge, attitudes and practices (work entitlements provided) of employers of migrant domestic workers. Such a study is critical in light of the fact that employers today appear to show less support for migrant workers than before.

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### This study was supported by the following projects:

- Safe and Fair Programme as part of the Spotlight Initiative – a global, multi-year partnership between the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. Safe and Fair is jointly implemented by ILO and UN Women, in collaboration with UNODC, with the overriding objective of ensuring that labour migration is safe and fair for all women in the ASEAN region. The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the EU.
- TRIANGLE in ASEAN is a partnership between the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and the ILO. TRIANGLE in ASEAN delivers technical assistance and support with the overall goal of maximizing the contribution of labour migration to equitable, inclusive and stable growth in ASEAN. This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

This brief is based on research for the Safe and Fair and TRIANGLE in ASEAN programmes conducted by Rapid Asia. The brief was written by Swathi Jakkula and edited by John Maloy and Rebecca Napier-Moore. It was designed by Florian Saint-Aubin. It has been reviewed by Nilim Baruah, Deepa Bharathi, Anna Engblom, Anna Olsen, Andreas Schmidt and Valentina Volpe.

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