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EFFECT OF THAI PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF MIGRANT WORKERS ON EXPLOITATIVE LABOR PRACTICES AND FORCED LABOR



USAID THAILAND COUNTER TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

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List of Acronyms

CTIP	Counter Trafficking in Persons
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
USAID	United States Agency for International Development



INTRODUCTION

This Learning Paper Series was developed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Thailand Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) project with the overall aim to learn from previous and current programming to better inform future work. Winrock International is the lead implementing partner of the USAID Thailand CTIP project.

The USAID Thailand CTIP project seeks to reduce trafficking in persons (TIP) and better protect the rights of trafficked persons in Thailand by reducing the demand and incentives for using trafficked labor, empowering at-risk populations to safeguard their rights, and strengthening protection systems for survivors. The project works mainly with migrant and informal workers in Thailand's agriculture, fishery, and construction industries. The intervention is conducted in cooperation with the Royal Government of Thailand. The USAID Thailand CTIP intervention poses the Theory of Change that, if we reduce opportunities for trafficking in workplaces and supply chains; and if we equip at-risk populations with skills, information, and access to support, then trafficking in Thailand will be reduced and prevented. In addition, if we can identify those already trafficked and have improved access to strengthened support systems, survivors will live free and dignified lives, and the likelihood of human trafficking will decrease.

Based on the wealth of experience within USAID Thailand CTIP, this Learning Paper Series was developed to highlight crucial learnings to be widely disseminated to USAID, Winrock staff, and other stakeholders working in CTIP that want to ensure high quality program design and delivery.

The papers in this series are meant to be limited in scope, tackling specific areas of concern in the general programming models. In the future, CTIP partners can better address identified shortcomings and ensure that program activities are evidence-based and impactful for survivors.

The learning question explored in this paper is, **"If the perception of the Thai population toward migrant workers changes, will exploitative labor practices that lead to forced labor decrease?"** This paper approaches the question from two different perspectives: 1) perception changes leading to prevention of exploitative practices, and 2) perception changes leading to intervention in support of migrant workers and victims of trafficking. The two related sub-questions are: "How do attitude shifts among the Thai population actually affect and/or prevent exploitative labor practices?" and "How do attitude shifts actually affect how the Thai population assists victims of trafficking or forced labor through concrete interventions?"

This paper provides an answer to the learning question and sub-questions through an exploration of three key learnings:

LEARNING 1

Regular exposure to migrants is an important driver of Thai support for migrants, and it encourages them to take direct actions to counter exploitative labor practices.

LEARNING 2

Positive media portrayal of migrant workers effectively changes the Thai public's mindset regarding support for migrant rights and the prevention of exploitative labor practices.

LEARNING 3

Employer information sessions on labor rights and labor law improved Thai employers' perceptions of migrant workers and encouraged employers to voice commitments to comply with Thailand's labor laws.

METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this learning paper are based on data collected through a survey on attitudes towards migrants in Thailand, key informant interviews, and a desk review of USAID Thailand CTIP project documents. A full explanation of the methodology can be found in the endline report produced by Rapid Asia.

The population survey was conducted in the six USAID Thailand CTIP target provinces (Bangkok, Chiang Rai, Phuket, Sa Kaeo, Surat Thani, and Trat) with a sample size of 1,080 people ages 18 to 54 years old. The survey data was collected through an online access panel.¹ Because access panels are not representative, screening criteria and sample quotas were used to extract a sample which reflects the general population. The final sample was weighted based on sex, age, and geographic area to ensure an equal representation between men (n=524) and women (n=556) across regions (Bangkok n=666 and up-country n=414).

The online panel survey also included a Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice analysis. The findings from this analysis were critical to answering the learning question since the method provided insight into some of the existing beliefs, motivations, and actions among the Thai public.

Key informant interviews were conducted with 29 stakeholders, including project management staff, civil society organizations, sectoral experts, private sector actors, and representatives of migrant workers.

OVERVIEW OF USAID THAILAND CTIP INTERVENTION

Some of the USAID Thailand CTIP interventions relevant to the learning question are outlined below.

Inside Khonnok (ข้างในคนนอก) campaign: This national-level online campaign targeted young people to “open dialogue and challenge discrimination against migrants in Thailand as well as to amplify migrant voices” to change public perception. The campaign included 148 young journalists and youth trained in four media trainings and three panel discussions to encourage more balanced and positive media coverage of migrant issues. Ultimately the campaign reached more than 2.2 million people through various online platforms.

Formative research on the attitudes of the Thai population towards migrants: The objective of this formative research study was to understand the information and communication needs around the following key areas: media portrayal of migrants and trafficking issues, audiences knowledge of trafficking issues, attitudes towards migrants and people at-risk of trafficking, awareness and information of trafficked persons’ rights, and trafficked persons’ confidence in accessing services they are entitled to. The research included 40 focus group discussions with Thai people and 51 in-depth interviews with migrants vulnerable to trafficking (specifically from Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos) in the project provinces of Surat Thani, Chiang Rai, Trat, Sa Kaeo and Bangkok. Thirteen additional in-depth interviews were conducted with media practitioners in Bangkok to explore their understanding of laws and regulations related to this issue and their experiences reporting on migrant issues, including trafficking. This formative research initiative explored the attitudes of the Thai population towards migrants, including an analysis of what may inform these views. The research also examined the media habits of the Thai population and migrants located in the target provinces. The research identified a mix of negative and positive attitudes, and barriers, such as limited Thai media coverage of migrant issues. The formative research findings were presented in a report titled “**Countering Trafficking in Persons: Understanding target audiences for communication strategies**” and were used to inform project activities.

Communications Framework and targeted outreach to media professionals and influencers: As part of the Inside Khonnok campaign, a Communications Framework was developed, which included a targeted approach to engaging local media professionals and influencers, both formally and informally. This targeted approach involved reaching out to media professionals and working with them to create bespoke work plans surrounding the media’s narrative about migrants living in Thailand.

Public events to encourage interaction and socializing between migrant workers and other Thai stakeholders: Events such as football matches and celebrations were organized to encourage interaction and socializing between migrant workers and other Thai stakeholders. Key Thai stakeholders included Thai employers, fishing vessel owners, industry associations, government officials, and members of civil society organizations. These events were instrumental in building good relationships between key stakeholders and migrant workers to open dialogue and build trust and understanding, which should in turn reduce exploitative labor practices and human rights violations through improved labor relations. For example, in 2021, five local government officials and seven Thai employers attended sporting events with migrant workers in the fishing sector.

¹ Quantitative data on the general public is collected through a well-established access panel, a group of pre-screened respondents who have expressed a willingness to participate in surveys.

LEARNINGS

LEARNING 1

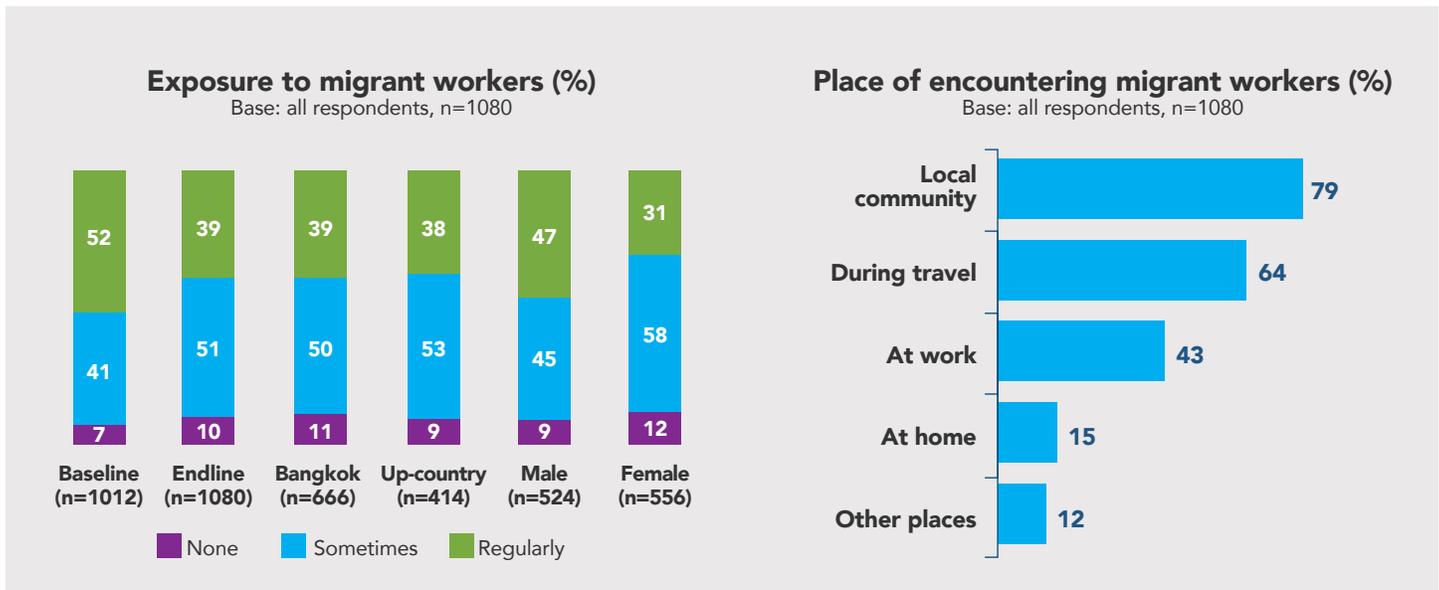
Regular exposure to migrants is an important driver of Thai support for migrants, and it encourages them to take direct actions to counter exploitative labor practices.

*“Team building and icebreaker activities between migrant workers and employers, for example, playing soccer, employee one-on-one meetings, and workshops [could improve negative perceptions towards migrant workers]. These activities will break down the barriers that exist in a workplace through its hierarchy, organization chart, and wrong assumptions.”
(Staff from Winrock)*

Our research found that Thai people who were regularly exposed² to migrant workers had significantly greater knowledge of and positive attitudes towards migrants than those with limited or no exposure.

Survey data show that the proportion of the Thai public supportive of equal labor protection for migrants and forced labor workers increased from 44 percent at the baseline to 58 percent (Figure 1). This increase is despite a decrease in regular exposure of Thai communities to migrant workers from 52 percent at baseline to 39 percent in 2022, due in part to COVID-19 lockdowns.

FIGURE 1 EXPOSURE AND PLACE OF ENCOUNTERING MIGRANT WORKERS IN THAILAND



Thais who reported having regular exposure to migrants were found to have greater knowledge and more positive attitudes towards migrants. Those who reported having regular exposure to migrants had increased awareness of the importance of migrant labor for Thailand’s economy. They also had greater empathy for the circumstances pushing migrants to work in Thailand and the challenges they face when they arrive. This group also had greater awareness that disinformation is sometimes used to perpetuate stereotypical narratives about migrants, such as the myth that migrants disproportionately commit crimes. Survey data on the knowledge and attitudes of Thai survey respondents are outlined below in Figures 2 and 3.

² In the survey, regular exposure refers to having encountered migrants frequently under normal circumstances. Survey respondents self-identified their level of “exposure” to migrants by placing themselves in one of three categories: regular, sometimes and none.

FIGURE 2 KNOWLEDGE BY THE LEVEL OF EXPOSURE

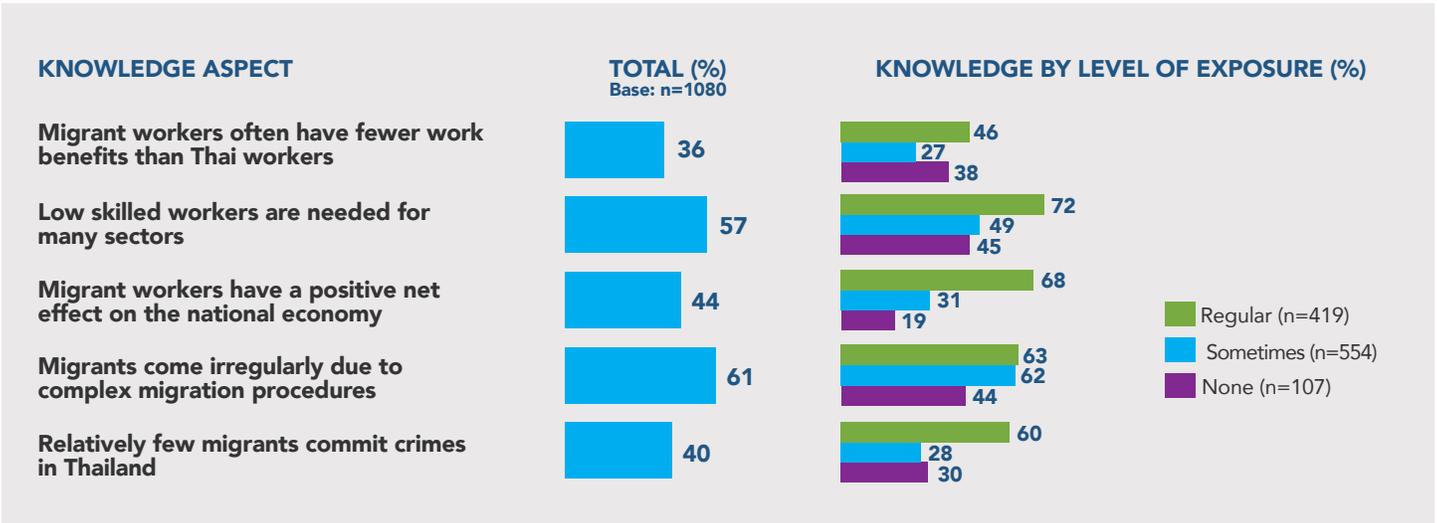
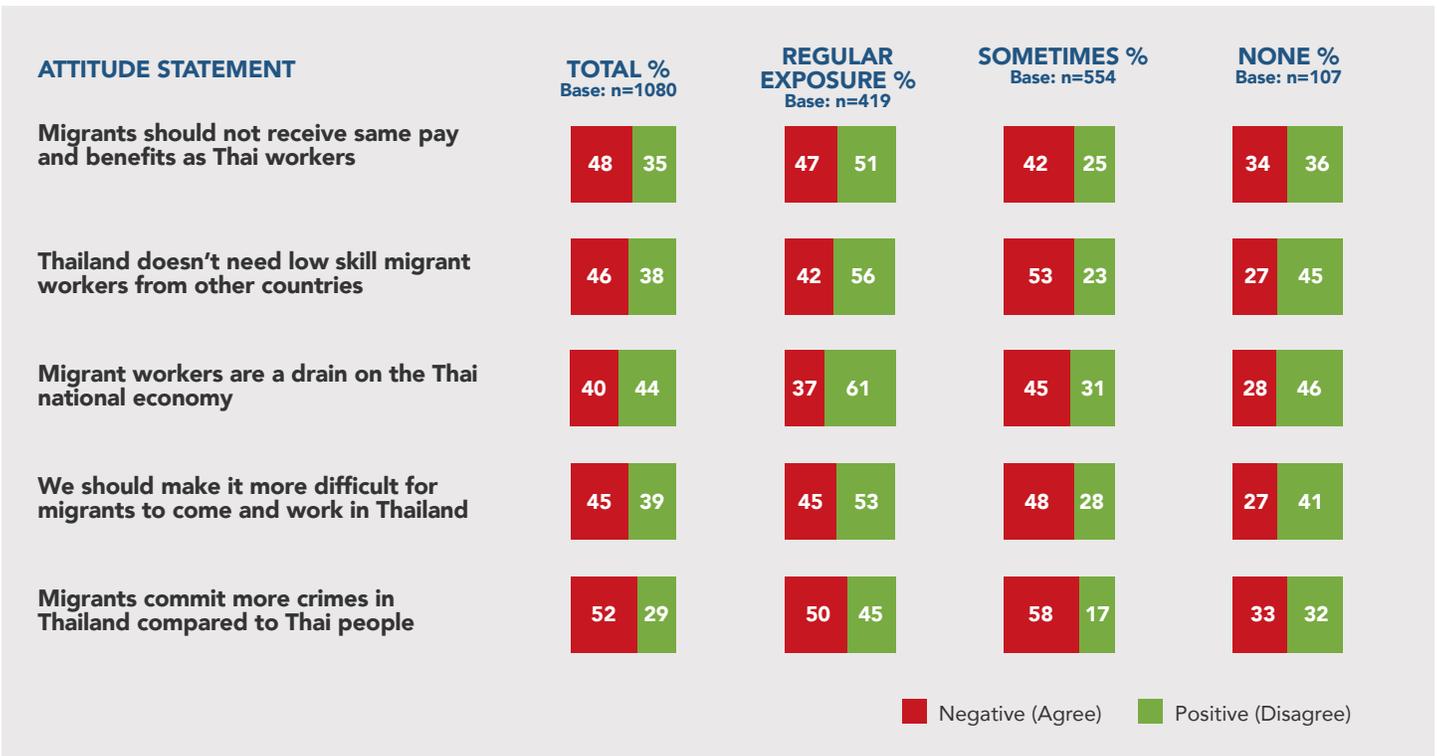


FIGURE 3 ATTITUDE BY THE LEVEL OF EXPOSURE



Importantly, regular exposure to migrants appeared to have a positive connection to Thai respondents' intentions to take actions directly supporting migrant rights and countering exploitative labor practices. For example, they were more likely to say they would take direct actions in support of migrant rights. Such actions could include helping migrants integrate into the community, encouraging friends to pay for work permits for their domestic workers, and reporting an employer who uses migrant child labor.

Overall, these findings indicate that prioritizing initiatives that increase regular interaction, both in person and online, between the Thai public and migrants may increase support for migrants' rights and encourage more people to take action towards ending exploitative labor practices.

LEARNING 2

Positive media portrayal of migrant workers effectively changes the Thai public's mindset regarding support for migrant rights and the prevention of exploitative labor practices.

"The perceptions and practices of Thai people towards migrant workers have improved in the past few years. Compared to the past, Thai citizens have more emotional responses and empathetic comments to news content related to migrant workers. A high level of use of social media among the young generation is a factor that contributed to the change." (Staff from Winrock)

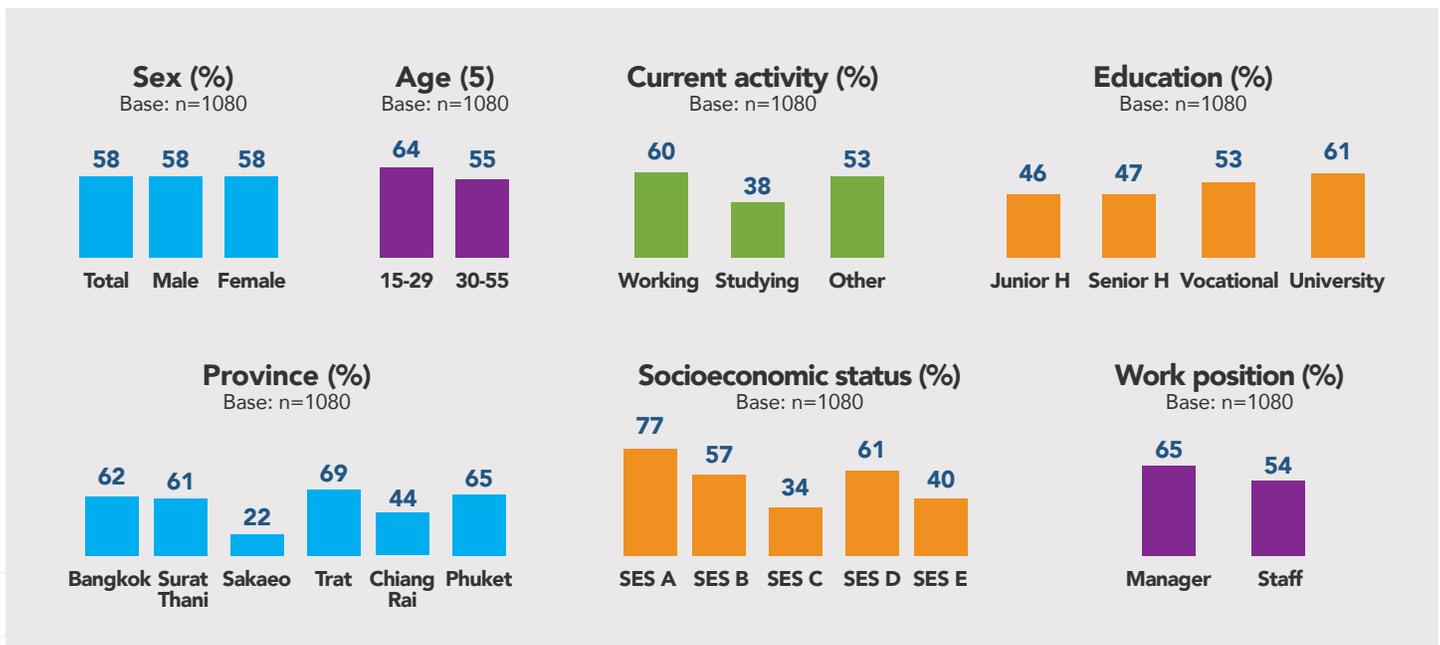
The research found that, during the 5-year USAID Thailand CTIP project period, Thai perceptions of migrants have improved, based on data from the baseline and endline surveys. The endline survey found that 58 percent of Thai respondents reported support for equal labor protection for migrants and forced labor workers (Figure 4), an improvement of 14 percentage points from the baseline. A disproportionately higher percentage of respondents from the younger age group agreed with the statement (64 percent that shifted 21 percentage points from the baseline). Positive shifts were also found among those studying compared with working (up 14 percentage points from the baseline) and those with university education (up 15 percentage points). According to key informants, this positive result may be partly attributed to USAID Thailand CTIP's awareness campaigns targeting young people and using new media platforms like Instagram.

Key informants stated that the USAID Thailand CTIP project's outreach to media professionals effectively increased TIP-related media coverage, including coverage of exploitative labor practices that lead to forced labor. Outreach activities included trainings on how to understand and report on TIP and vulnerable migrants, and how to create positive social media content that portrays the real-life struggles of migrants.

Key informants stated that the increased and high-quality media coverage of TIP-related issues, in turn, led to increased discussion of these issues among the Thai public.

The USAID Thailand CTIP project's online Social and Behavior Change Communication activities, such as the Inside Khonnok campaign, were identified as effective in capturing the attention of the Thai public and stimulating online discussion and engagement.

FIGURE 4 PERCENTAGE OF THAI PUBLIC REPORTING AGREEMENT WITH EQUAL LABOR PROTECTION FOR MIGRANTS AND FORCED LABOR WORKERS



“Comments are a fundamental factor in stimulating the obligation of Thais and increasing levels of acceptance on migrant workers.” (Communication Specialist at Winrock)

The Inside Khonnok campaign reached over 2.2 million people through various online engagement strategies, including sharing stories and messages via videos, collaborating with social media influencers, and hosting live Facebook panels.

“Digital activities captured a lot of audiences, successfully raising awareness of migrant rights to the Thai public and generating more audience engagement online. Participants and crew had increased awareness, as well as a stronger desire to create more content to advocate for migrant workers in the country.” (Staff of Love Frankie organization)

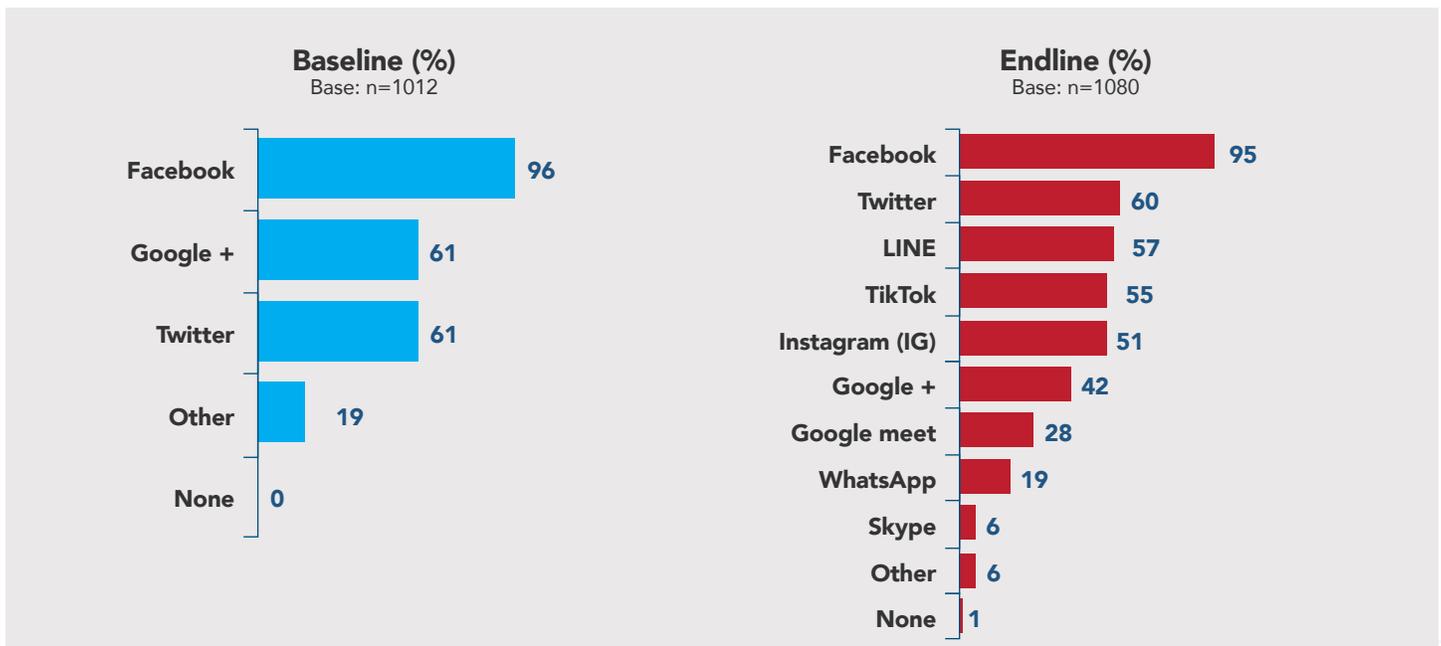
The Inside Khonnok campaign advocated for the Thai public to change the language and terminology they use to talk about migrant workers. For example, the phrase ‘migrant worker’ was encouraged instead of the derogatory phrase ‘alien worker’. Key informant interviews suggested that this small change is an example of how campaigns and the media can positively influence perceptions and shift the mindset of the general Thai public.

“The change from word ‘alien worker’ to ‘migrant worker’ exemplified how media has influenced mindset shift.” (Communication Specialist at Winrock)

The survey found that media usage trends for women and men were quite similar, although men reported higher use of TV, newspapers, and magazines. In contrast, women reported higher use of podcasts and traditional radio and social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Whilst TV is an important source,³ the research found that the internet and social media have in recent years become increasingly important sources of information about migrant workers for the Thai public.

Facebook remains the dominant social media platform in Thailand, with nearly 95 percent use among survey respondents (Figure 5). Despite Facebook’s dominance, the survey suggested additional online platforms are also widely used by Thai respondents. However, the study did not investigate if there were differing levels of trust in different media sources and may require further research. How media is used raises questions about where USAID Thailand CTIP can most effectively direct resources.

FIGURE 5 USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA SITES AMONG THAI PUBLIC (BASELINE AND ENDLINE)



3 The COVID-19 pandemic likely had an impact on the media access and internet use behavior of the Thai public, although an examination of this factor is beyond the scope of this paper.



LEARNING 3

Employer information sessions on labor rights and labor law improved Thai employers' perceptions of migrant workers and encouraged employers to voice commitments to comply with Thailand's labor laws.

Thai employers of migrant workers are key stakeholders who are well-positioned to take concrete actions to prevent exploitative labor practices and assist victims of trafficking or forced labor. While employers represent a small subset of the Thai public, they are an important group of stakeholders, given that positive interactions between Thais and migrants can happen in the workplace.

Thai non-governmental organization (NGO) Raks Thai Foundation conducted outreach to employers of migrant workers through employer information sessions. These information sessions were designed to encourage discussion of labor rights issues among groups of employers and improve employers' understanding of the impact of exploitative labor practices to improve compliance with Thailand's labor protection laws.

During discussions, employers voiced support for labor rights, compliance with labor laws, and improving relations between employers and employees.

Another successful strategy to improve employer participation and compliance was including government authorities in the sessions. In 2021, a representative from the Department of Employment facilitated a session on the Royal Ordinance Concerning the Management of Employment of Foreign Workers and its relation to TIP. A Department of Labor Protection and Welfare representative also facilitated a session on the Labor Protection Act related to TIP and forced labor prevention schemes. These government-facilitated sessions had active participation from 29 employers: 20 from the agricultural sector, six from the fisheries and seafood processing sector, two from the construction sector, and one from the general services sector.

"The new Migrant Development Centre in Phuket has reached the Thai population and engaged them in a meaningful way, including Thai employers who can receive consultation and assistance concerning a complaint from the center." (Staff from Winrock)

To increase the long-term impact of these information sessions, NGOs followed-up by providing one-on-one consultations with employers.

Overall, the strategy of providing information sessions for employers, including sessions facilitated by government officials, resulted in improved employer perceptions of migrant workers. The change in perceptions was possible through building trust and positive relationships between employers, NGOs, and government authorities. It will likely have a long-term impact on decreasing exploitative labor practices that lead to forced labor.



NEXT STEPS

Expand the scope of current activities to encourage increased interaction between the Thai public and migrants to create attitude shifts supporting migrant worker rights.

The USAID Thailand CTIP project should expand the scope of current activities to encourage increased interaction and understanding between members of the Thai public and migrants. The project should expand activities that have proven successful, targeting specific Thai stakeholders, and including members of local communities where migrants live and work. The research found that the most common places where Thais encountered migrant workers were: the local community (77%) while travelling (64%), at work (43%), at home (15%), and in other places (12%). The USAID Thailand CTIP project should target interventions encouraging interaction and understanding between the Thai public and migrants in the above locations and should tailor the interventions to the different types of activities that people engage in at these different locations. Activities could include storytelling workshops and local exhibitions.

The USAID Thailand CTIP project should continue allocating project resources such as training, technical assistance, and human resources to help NGOs, local governments, and employers to implement more workplace activities to promote greater interaction

between Thai and migrant workers. Activities could take place at workplaces (on farms, factories, construction sites, etc.) or be organized by the private sector within a specific geographic area. In the workplace, team building, and icebreaker activities can effectively break down barriers that hinder interpersonal connections and relationships.

Another next step could be organizing activities encouraging increased interaction and understanding between the general Thai public and migrants.

Conduct research to better understand which emerging social media platforms the Thai public views as trusted sources of information.

The USAID Thailand CTIP Project should conduct further research to understand which media platforms provide trusted information. While Facebook is the dominant social media site in Thailand, the research identified several social media platforms with growing user bases, including Tik Tok, Google+, and WhatsApp.

The project should continue and expand existing TV and internet campaigns and consider gendered media usage trends when designing interventions.

Support local NGOs working on TIP to build and maintain long-term engagement with media professionals to continue high-quality media coverage of TIP-related issues, encouraging positive attitude changes and action among the Thai population.

Local NGOs have access to up-to-date information and connections to on-the-ground information sources, including migrant workers, employers, and local government officials. Media professionals require this information and access to these sources to create high-quality coverage of TIP issues. Media professionals have an incentive to continue relationships with local NGOs, and local NGOs should work to strengthen their relationships with media professionals.

The USAID Thailand CTIP project's media outreach interventions have successfully engaged media professionals, but maintaining long-term engagement requires additional resources and work from local NGOs. The USAID Thailand CTIP project could support local NGOs and other stakeholders to maintain long-term engagement with media professionals. Long-term engagement will ensure that high-quality TIP-related media coverage for the Thai population continues to address important issues such as ending exploitative labor practices and protecting the rights of TIP survivors.

In addition, key informants suggested expanding activities with organizations involved in media engagement, including academic institutes, government agencies, the private sector, and civil society organizations.



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