



# COUNTERING TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

Understanding  
target audiences  
for communication  
strategies



**USAID**  
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TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH MEDIA  
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## Context

Thailand remains a key source, transit and destination country for trafficking in persons, despite increased efforts by the government to counter the issue.<sup>1</sup> Thailand's relative prosperity attracts migrants from neighbouring countries who meet the demand for low-skilled labour and seek a better life for themselves and their families. Trafficking in persons is affected by deep-rooted social discrimination against migrants, as well as a lack of regulations or enforcement around their rights.

## Project background

The USAID Thailand Counter Trafficking in Persons initiative is designed to reduce trafficking in persons and better protect the rights of trafficked persons in Thailand.<sup>2</sup> It aims to do this by reducing demands and incentives for using trafficked labour, empowering at-risk people in sectors such as agriculture, fishing and construction to safeguard their rights, and strengthening protection systems for trafficked persons.

As the initiative's media and communication project partner, BBC Media Action aims to help influence changes in behaviour in order to reduce trafficking in persons. It will do this by supporting new media and communication strategies to improve awareness of, and change attitudes towards, trafficked labour, and to increase awareness and understanding of the needs and rights of at-risk migrant people.

To design effective communication it is important to understand the issues, priorities and information needs of the target audiences. BBC Media Action conducted formative research to understand more about the target audiences – trafficked persons or those at risk of trafficking in Thailand, and Thai people in key transit and destination provinces.

## Research methodology

BBC Media Action conducted its formative research between June and August 2018. This 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.<sup>3</sup> The research aimed to understand attitudes towards migrants among Thai people, as well as migrants' experiences of life in Thailand, their key information needs and their understanding of their rights.

A further 13 in-depth interviews were conducted with media practitioners in Bangkok to explore their understanding of laws and regulations related to this issue, as well as their experiences of reporting on migrant issues, including trafficking. These media respondents were from local radio and television stations and media production houses. Some were field reporters or senior reporters, some were radio station hosts, and others were associate editors or news editors.

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (2018). *2018 Trafficking in Persons Report* (online). Available from: <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/countries/2018/282764.htm> [Accessed on 27.12.2018]

<sup>2</sup> Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. USAID (2013) *Counter-trafficking in persons field guide* (online). Available from: [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2496/C-TIP\\_Field\\_Guide\\_Final\\_April%205%202013.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2496/C-TIP_Field_Guide_Final_April%205%202013.pdf) [Accessed 25.03.2019]

<sup>3</sup> These provinces have high levels of agricultural, fishery and construction migrants and are a mix of destination and transit areas for migrants. In the eastern provinces of Trat and Sa Kaeow, migrants are mostly Cambodian but in all other provinces they are normally a mix of Burmese, ethnic Burmese and Laotian.

Migrants who are at risk of trafficking are a vulnerable group. The research methodology was therefore designed to be sensitive to their concerns, ensuring that they felt comfortable and able to participate. For example, researchers did not ask them whether they were formal or informal migrants.

Interviews with migrants were either conducted in a language that they spoke – for example, Khmer, Thai, Laotian or Burmese – or a translator was provided. Respondent recruitment was coordinated with local civil society organisations in each province, and local authorities gave approval for the fieldwork. All interviewees gave written consent for their inclusion in this study. To help people open up in interviews and talk more freely in focus group discussions, respondents were shown pictures, media clips and articles. Using such stimuli was also to gauge respondents' attitudes and understanding of these issues.



Focus group discussions conducted by the research team

## Understanding at-risk migrant populations

### *What are their concerns around migrating to, and living in, Thailand?*

#### **Migrants to Thailand are seeking a better life**

The prospect of better-paid employment was a key reason why migrants had decided to move to Thailand. Respondents talked about how they could not make enough money in their home country to cover day-to-day material needs, such as food and housing, or pay off debts. They often perceived migrating as the only option and sometimes as a risk worth taking. Others hoped to earn enough money to pay for education, so that their children will have a better life than them.

**“I want to send money home because I want my kids to have a good education. I don't want them to come to work in Thailand like I do.”**

*Surat Thani, female, from Myanmar*

In some cases migrants had moved to Thailand with their families. Many others came alone, either to “escape”, in the words of one respondent who was living in Bangkok, or to send money back to the families they had left behind.

### **Migrating to Thailand is risky without the right knowledge and support**

Respondents explained that they could not be sure who they could trust, and did not always know how to go about things when they arrived in Thailand. They perceived networks as vitally important to migrating safely, having support and being well informed about life in Thailand. They viewed travelling to Thailand with an agent – an option used by many migrants as both more expensive than and inherently riskier than travelling with family.

**“I wanted to earn money and I trusted my aunt. If it was not my aunt who invited me, I wouldn’t dare to come to Thailand.”**

*Trat, female, from Cambodia*

Some migrants also explained how they had entered Thailand with family members and friends but later became separated from them and lost contact altogether.

### **Getting documented is important, expensive and difficult**

Whether they had travelled to Thailand legally or illegally, migrants reported that without documentation they could not access the life that they were hoping for. Not having the right documentation forced people to work in hidden and informal ways, and meant that they always felt at risk.

**“I feel like if I want to live like this, I have to run away all of my life.”**

*Sa Kaeo, female, from Cambodia*

The process of getting documented could be very expensive and cancel out the potential gains of moving to Thailand. However, not having documentation could also be very costly and result in migrants not being able to access services, such as education and healthcare, that form part of the “better life” they sought in Thailand.

### **Migrants feel they cannot defend their rights**

Once they are employed in Thailand, migrants reported feeling vulnerable because they cannot voice concerns or challenge their employers. Participants in Surat Thani mentioned needing to “keep a low profile” and do what they were told, so that they did not get into trouble with fellow workers or Thai locals.

Even when they found themselves working longer hours and for less pay than expected, many migrants did not feel able to take action and could not afford to leave their employment.

**“When I didn’t receive the wage, I don’t say anything. I just kept working.”**

*Bangkok, female from Cambodia*

### **What information do migrants need to be less vulnerable to trafficking?**

#### **Clear and consistent information about how to register for work**

It is clear from the research that migrants do not have enough clear and reliable information before they leave their home country about how to register for work in Thailand. They described being given incorrect information before they left, and only found out the correct procedure after arriving in Thailand. This

could mean that they did not always have the necessary documentation upon arrival in Thailand, making them more vulnerable to people offering them hidden or illegal ways to stay.

**“To work in Thailand, you have to proceed with legal procedures. Now if you don’t have a card, an employer will not accept you. Passport is important.”**

*Sa Kaeo, female, from Cambodia*

Migrants reported receiving information mainly from their own networks (for example on what they needed to do to get work in Thailand).

### **Reliable information about life in Thailand**

Migrants to Thailand tend to move to improve their lives and prospects and have expectations about what life will be like in their new country. They talked about how, before leaving for Thailand, they had thought the general standard of living in Thailand would be higher than at home, that working conditions would be better and that they would be able to earn more there. Only when they arrived could they assess whether the life they were seeking might be possible. Respondents cited a range of examples of life in Thailand not meeting their expectations, including salary levels being lower than expected and feeling trapped as a result.

Migrants therefore need lots of information about life in Thailand before they begin their journey. This information needs to be from reliable sources, and to be based on facts and accurate reporting of the lives of migrants already established in Thailand.

**“I don’t want to recommend this to anyone... If I recommended this to someone they would suffer because the earnings are equal to earnings in Cambodia. It is better to stay in Cambodia.”**

*Trat, male, from Cambodia*



Migrant workers from Myanmar pull ropes



### **Support to make a plan**

In order to migrate safely, migrants need to plan in advance how they will get to Thailand, find work and stay safe. For example, migrants in Surat Thani reported travelling without a clear destination or employment plan. Migrants in Trat reported needing information about how to travel safely and how to save money. A lack of clear plans leaves people vulnerable to traffickers or agents, who offer risky or uncertain options.

Respondents from the migrant groups said that people should be encouraged to prepare for their trip by ensuring they have the correct documentation and saving enough money for the journey and their first few weeks. This enables them to secure the permits they need without getting into debt or running out of money for basic living expenses.

### **Information about their rights and who can help**

Once they arrived in Thailand, many migrant workers became aware that they were at risk. Migrant respondents in Bangkok reported changing jobs rather than having to confront unfair work practices. Migrants described needing clear information on the employment protections, and health and education benefits they are entitled to, in order to protect their rights. Some workers in Surat Thani were already receiving this information through a non-governmental organisation (NGO) but others were not getting any such support.

Migrants also wanted to know how to complain if they are not being treated fairly or if their safety is threatened. In Chiang Rai respondents were aware of an information centre where they could report this kind of treatment but others had no idea how to get help – or whether they could trust the people they were talking to.

**“ Sometimes policemen can help but... if they don't like us, they wouldn't help. ”**

*Chiang Rai, male, from Myanmar*

### ***What is the best way to reach migrants with this information and what do they want from media programming?***

#### **Migrants consume a wide range of media**

Migrants in Thailand were accessing media both online and offline, through channels as diverse as television, telephone, broadcasting towers, social media, newspapers and face-to-face communication. They were most likely to access media first thing in the morning, before starting work, or in the evening after their working day has ended, as they may not have good media coverage at work. However, some managed to listen to the radio during the day.

Male migrants and those who were better-off had greater access to online media through smartphones. Women and the poorest migrants are therefore likely to be harder to reach through online channels.

#### **Well-used media does not mean well trusted**

Although social media such as Facebook and YouTube were well used by migrants, especially those who could afford to have a smartphone, they are not trusted channels. People were very aware of the amount of fake news circulating on Facebook and were naturally suspicious about information they encountered there.

**“ It [Facebook] is 50% reliable because there is both truthful information and fake news. ”**

*Chiang Rai, male, from Myanmar*

Migrants were much more likely to trust television. They believed that any information broadcast on television had to be verified first so it would be a much more effective medium than social media to inform them on issues around migration. Family and friends were also seen as reliable sources of information, as were employers. These networks could be leveraged to increase the spread of information, perhaps building on and supporting content broadcast through television. In some areas, such as Pa-long in Chiang Rai province, migrants mentioned local authorities as a source of helpful information.

### **Migrants want programming that connects with their lives**

Migrants were looking for media that engages with their lives and aspirations. This could be at an emotional level – for example, they enjoyed watching Thai and Indian soap operas and dramas that reflected their day-to-day struggles, their family relationships and the inequalities they experienced. This was true even though these programmes were in Thai rather than their native language. One Thai reality show that was popular among migrants was ‘Mic on, Debt off’ (a singing competition to win a debt pay-off) because it reflected people like them who were struggling for money.

**“ Sometimes, watching dramas makes me cry.  
It’s exactly like my life. ”**

*Surat Thani, female, from Myanmar*

They also felt engaged by television news shows that explore practical issues such as labour rights and work permits, explaining facts and processes that are relevant to migrants’ daily lives.

## **Understanding the Thai population**

### ***What are Thai people’s attitudes towards migrants and what informs these views?***

#### **Thai people see migrants as posing a risk**

Thai respondents expressed concern that migration into their country was creating more competition around employment. They felt Thai people might lose out on jobs because migrants were prepared to work for less, and that this was driving down wages for Thai people. They also reported feeling that their access to basic services was threatened by migrants, some of whom might have more money than Thai people.

Thai respondents expressed a fear that migrants might bring infectious diseases into the country, or might increase the crime rate. In that sense, the existence of migrants in their community made them feel unsafe.

**“ Some of them who have money, they receive better services. For example, at the district hospital, the doctor would serve Lao people before us. ”**

*Chiang Rai, male, from Thailand*

As well as perceiving specific risks posed by migrants, Thai people felt a general lack of trust towards migrant populations. In the Sa Kaeo region, where attitudes seemed to be particularly negative, this was expressed through racist attitudes towards migrants from Cambodia.

**“ Khmers [Cambodians] have the ugliest look compared to other nationalities, I think. ”**

*Sa Kaeo, male from Thailand*

### **Not all attitudes are negative**

Some Thai respondents cited migrants' positive characteristics, explaining that they were hardworking and diligent. People in Bangkok seemed most positive in their views of migrants, generally seeing them as a welcome presence with some positive influence on the Thai population.

**“ These people are hardworking. Thais are lazy... ”**

*Bangkok, male, from Thailand*

Thai respondents did show some sympathy for migrants, who they could see had come in search of a better life. They could empathise with their experience and appreciate that they had not always wanted to leave their home country.

**“ I feel sorry for them as they were not willing to come, and things are not what they expected. ”**

*Surat Thani, female, from Thailand*

Many Thais felt some affinity with migrants because of shared religious and cultural values. Sharing a religion with their migrant neighbours gave some Thais a shared understanding and a common language to describe what was important in life. It also brought them into contact with migrants through local religious events.

### **Thai people lack knowledge about migrants and their needs**

Many Thai respondents had little interaction with migrants, a situation exacerbated by language barriers. This contributed to their attitudes towards migrants, and also to their lack of awareness and knowledge about migrants' experiences and rights. In general, Thai business owners who employed migrants were better informed about their rights.

Thai people did have a general understanding that there was a difference between documented and undocumented workers, and that migrants needed the right paperwork to work legally and have their rights protected.

**“ It is unclear whether an employer will accept them if they are illegal workers. ”**

*Surat Thani, female, from Thailand*

In Chaing Rai and Bangkok, Thai respondents were aware of the types of jobs that migrants might be able to take up. They had some awareness of the migrant groups who were particularly vulnerable, such as women and fishermen (migrant workers are often vulnerable to being deceived and coerced by brokers and recruitment agencies and forced to work on board fishing vessels under the threat of force or by means of debt bondage).

### **Thai people do not see migrant issues as their concern**

Thai respondents reported having sympathy for migrants being vulnerable to exploitation by employers but were hesitant to help. They generally felt that such issues were none of their business or that getting involved would put themselves at risk. They were more likely to help when they knew that a migrant was documented. But some respondents in Trat were particularly concerned about falling foul of local authorities or powerful local interests if they tried to intervene.

**“ If they enter the country illegally, when we offer help, we are at risk of breaking the law as well. ”**

*Chiang Rai, male, from Thailand*



In general, Thai people saw migrant rights as the concern of migrants themselves and the government, not of the Thai population as a whole.

### ***What role is the Thai media playing in covering migrant issues?***

#### **Thai media covers some issues around migration and trafficking**

Information on migration and trafficking could be found on television news, Facebook and posters in Thailand. However, some of the stories tended to focus on negative angles such as crimes committed by migrants.

Media practitioners involved in this research had covered stories on migrant issues such as child labour, registration in Thailand, renewing labour registration, the rights and social welfare of labourers, arrests, smuggling and deaths of migrants, and labourers being cheated or exploited by employers.

For example, one media practitioner reported having covered a story on Cambodian children being smuggled into Thailand by gangs and forced to work as beggars. Another had covered a story on long hours worked by migrant fishermen. Thai media practitioners also discussed the types of content they would like to cover on migrant issues, such as stories to promote understanding of migrants, more detail on migrants' motivations for travel and details of their lives, and more on cases of trafficking and corruption.

**“ There is news... calling for the rights of Burmese labourers in Samut Sakhon in Mahachai for not getting paid and being forced to work on things they didn't sign up for. ”**

*Bangkok media practitioner, male*

#### **Barriers limiting media coverage of migrant issues**

Thai media practitioners reported challenges in reporting on trafficking in persons, including limited understanding of both migrant rights and of laws and regulations relating to migrant labour. Some practitioners felt in danger when reporting on trafficking because of powerful individuals, physical risks (for example in going out to sea to cover a fisheries story) and/or a fear of prosecution. They also reported not knowing where to go for sources or how to cross-check information. They perceived NGOs as helpful because they were a good source of information on trafficking issues, but perceived the government as less helpful.

When the media did report on migrant issues, certain industries (such as fishing and sex trafficking) received more coverage than others (such as rubber plantations), meaning that some sectors were poorly covered and little understood.

**“ I think that for the government, to be frank, if they find that there's a problem with a certain issue, they'll not be very willing to reveal anything to us. They rarely tell us anything. The reason is about the government's image; they do not want to fix or solve anything. ”**

*Bangkok media practitioner, male*

According to the media practitioners involved in this research, one of the most significant barriers to covering migrant issues in the media is that Thai people are not interested in hearing about migrant workers, and do not want to acknowledge that the country needs them. This reflects the responses of Thai interviewees. Media practitioners cited examples of radio programmes designed specifically for migrants, including one created by the Department of Employment.

## Implications

### Thai and migrant communities could be better informed

Migrants wanted to have information about life in Thailand and their rights. By reaching migrants with informative and reliable content, but also engaging and emotionally resonant, media practitioners can enable them to be less vulnerable and better able to protect their rights and well-being.

Thai communities did not have much understanding of the role that migrants play in their country, and therefore did not feel a sense of engagement with migrants' lives. As such, if Thai people received accurate information from the media, that might help to break down some negative attitudes and stereotyping of migrants, or indeed feel able to take action if they saw migrant workers being abused or treated unfairly.

**“The fact that we need migrant workers is not being acknowledged by Thai people.”**

*Bangkok media practitioner, male*



Thai workers walking to a building construction site

### NGOs are well equipped to help

Both media practitioners and migrants reported that they trust local NGOs, who they see as a source of accurate information on migration and trafficking issues.

**“We have to go into the field. If not, it would take us a long time to get the information; the issue might have already been resolved. We need to coordinate with the NGOs because that will help to gain access to information and they are ready for this kind of thing. Working on this requires a lot of time. NGO staff can connect to where the information is.”**

*Bangkok media practitioner, female*

Building closer relationships between NGOs and local media organisations in Thailand could help to increase the accuracy of reporting on, and lead to more comprehensive media coverage of, migrant and trafficking issues. Local media organisations are more likely to report on an issue if they can quickly get up-to-date information on it and direct access to sources that can inform their content.

Media outlets and practitioners would benefit from learning from civil society organisations that already have a strong track record on migration and trafficking issues.

### **Support for local media could help produce more balanced reporting and engaging programming**

For media coverage to reflect migrants' needs and experiences, media practitioners need a better understanding of key issues affecting migrant communities. They also need to be more informed about relevant laws, regulations and migrant rights, and more confident to report on trafficking issues.

By understanding these issues better, Thai media practitioners may be more likely to feel that they play a vital role in the national conversation around migration. This engagement needs to extend beyond news and current affairs into all programming, including television and radio drama, reality formats and quiz shows.

Migrants need:

- Practical information that boosts their economic resilience, including how to save money and make a plan before travelling to Thailand
- To know how to register and stay connected with loved ones once they are in Thailand
- Specific guidance on their rights around work
- Information on their rights to – and how to access – healthcare and education
- Advice on how to stay safe.

All of this information needs to be accurate and up-to-date.

### **Communication strategies should focus on shifting attitudes**

Much media work in Thailand around trafficking in persons has focused on awareness-raising but this is unlikely to bring about a sustained change in attitudes. Effectively influencing positive behaviour change begins with a deep understanding of relevant audience members, though research like this formative study.

This research has informed the development of a communication framework. Specifically, this is a plan that enables project implementing grantees to have shared communication objectives, strong coordination and synergies between communication activities at all levels (including online and offline media, community-based and interpersonal communication).

Media strategies to tackle trafficking in persons in Thailand must go beyond awareness-raising. They should focus on shifting Thai people's attitudes towards migrants and tackling deep-rooted norms and beliefs about them. Only by adopting this type of approach will the media start to shift Thai attitudes from viewing migrants as 'other' towards seeing them as valued and essential members of society.

Strategies to get Thai people to care for and protect vulnerable migrants in their community should aim to improve their understanding of the rights of migrant workers and to reduce stigma and discrimination. This will require tackling barriers such as many Thai people's fear of, lack of trust in, and lack of understanding and information about migrant workers.



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