



**IJM**

## ***Unsafe in Lockdown: Migrant Laborers, Already Vulnerable to Modern Slavery, Now Dangerously Exposed***

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*“I wasn’t ready. There was no sign. We were doing our job in the morning, and then we were told to leave the factory later that afternoon. Our supervisor told us because of the pandemic, the factory will be closed until further notice.”*

This Myanmar woman, who lived in Thailand and worked in a textile factory, joined the tens of thousands of migrants who flooded Thai border crossings in March before they abruptly closed. Like the throngs of others, she was out of work and desperate to return home.

Over a month after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic, nations and economies all over the world have slowed to a near-standstill. Few can escape the impact of today’s public health crisis, but for those already at risk of violence and exploitation—uniquely vulnerable due to poverty, nationality or immigration status—the pandemic is causing a sharp surge in vulnerability.

### **Violence and Exploitation a Daily Threat for those Living in Poverty**

For those already living on the margins, violence and exploitation is a part of daily life. This reality is exceptionally true when it comes to the [estimated 40.3 million people living in modern slavery](#).

Modern slavery largely occurs and thrives in countries where law enforcement and justice institutions are underfunded and overburdened. “Restraining opportunistic traffickers and exploiters in these countries is challenging at the best of times,” shares Peter Williams, Principal Advisor on Modern Slavery at IJM. “To this harsh reality is now added the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating terrible conditions for people already enslaved and increasing opportunities to exploit those who are economically or environmentally vulnerable.”

Across the Asia Pacific region, migrant workers make up a large portion of these vulnerable populations, as industries like fishing, agriculture, manufacturing, construction and domestic service are heavily reliant on laborers migrating from impoverished countries to find work. Nearly five million migrants are living in Thailand, for instance—80% of whom come from lower-income, neighboring countries of Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR and Vietnam, according to the International Organization on Migration (IOM).<sup>1</sup>

While COVID-19 has triggered an unprecedented exodus of migrants, those unable to leave remain in peril due to limited access to public health infrastructure and high rates of unemployment. Many are forced to live in crowded conditions where social distancing is impossible, and are unable to access healthcare or other social protection or support. One stranded fisherman, who had come to Thailand to work in the country’s vast fishing and seafood industry, shared, *“We don’t have enough money to sustain our family staying indoors for so long. Lockdown at home for people with jobs mean [they can] chill and relax. But lockdown for us is being caged with no food and water. I don’t know how long we have to endure.”*

A [recent assessment conducted by IOM](#) also cited that, in Thailand, 76% of respondents reported that they have heard concerns from non-Thai populations about not having enough food to eat; and a majority agreed that non-Thai nationals face the risk of losing necessities like water, shelter and medical expenses.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> IOM, 2019. *Thailand Migration Report, 2019*.

<sup>2</sup> IOM, 2020. *Rapid Assessment: COVID-19 Related Vulnerabilities and Perceptions of Non-Thai Population in Thailand*.

**The urgent problems plaguing migrants in the Greater Mekong Subregion amid the COVID-19 pandemic—like unemployment, growing debt and improper documentation—are proven drivers of many forms of modern slavery and labor exploitation.**

Williams continued, “With the shutting of borders, increased economic pressure on suppliers, new government budget pressures adding to already overburdened police and court systems, and lack of social protection for migrants, COVID-19 is a breeding ground for exploitation on new and horrifying levels.”

**Bolstering Measures for Worker Protection in the Greater Mekong Subregion**

IJM has been working to protect vulnerable people from violence and exploitation for over two decades, and we have seen [transformative results](#) in the fight to end modern slavery. Today, IJM is working in the Greater Mekong Subregion to protect the large workforce of migrant laborers crossing borders to find work across a range of industries. Our intervention model aims to protect vulnerable people from human trafficking, forced labor and debt bondage by supporting governments to consistently and effectively implement laws designed to protect workers, relying on collaboration with both public and private actors—from police, courts, social services and community leaders, to businesses, other non-governmental organizations and civil society.

IJM partners on individual cases of abuse, trains and mentors frontline responders and service providers, leverages data to track criminal networks and applies insights and learnings from our global teams. Ensuring protection for the most vulnerable requires consistent, committed, long-lasting actions from a spectrum of dedicated actors—especially the justice systems in both source and destination countries who are responsible for protecting their citizens.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, IJM remains committed to partnering with the governments of Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar to support the consistent identification of victims, enforcement of anti-trafficking laws and engagement of victim support services at the community and local levels. Mechanisms for cross-border collaboration were critical before the current crisis—now, even more so—to create safer pathways for migration in the recruiting corridors that feed into host countries, and to enable swift and effective interventions to protect migrants.

IJM also remains committed to our civil society partners across the Greater Mekong Subregion, who are serving the very real and urgent needs of migrant workers—both those who have returned home, and those who were unable to or chose not to. One fisherman in Southern Thailand whom we spoke with shared, *“We are thankful that there are people who provide us food and drink. We have no job right now, but we are glad there are people who are willing to help us get through this.”*

**IJM urges our partners to coordinate across public, private and civil society actors to provide timely and effective relief. In addition to providing for health, education and livelihood needs, protection of unemployed and vulnerable people at significant risk for exploitation should be prioritized, bolstering systems that safely identify victims, prosecute criminals and support survivors in accordance with the law.**

We stand together with our partners, ensuring this public health crisis doesn’t breed further abuse and exploitation.