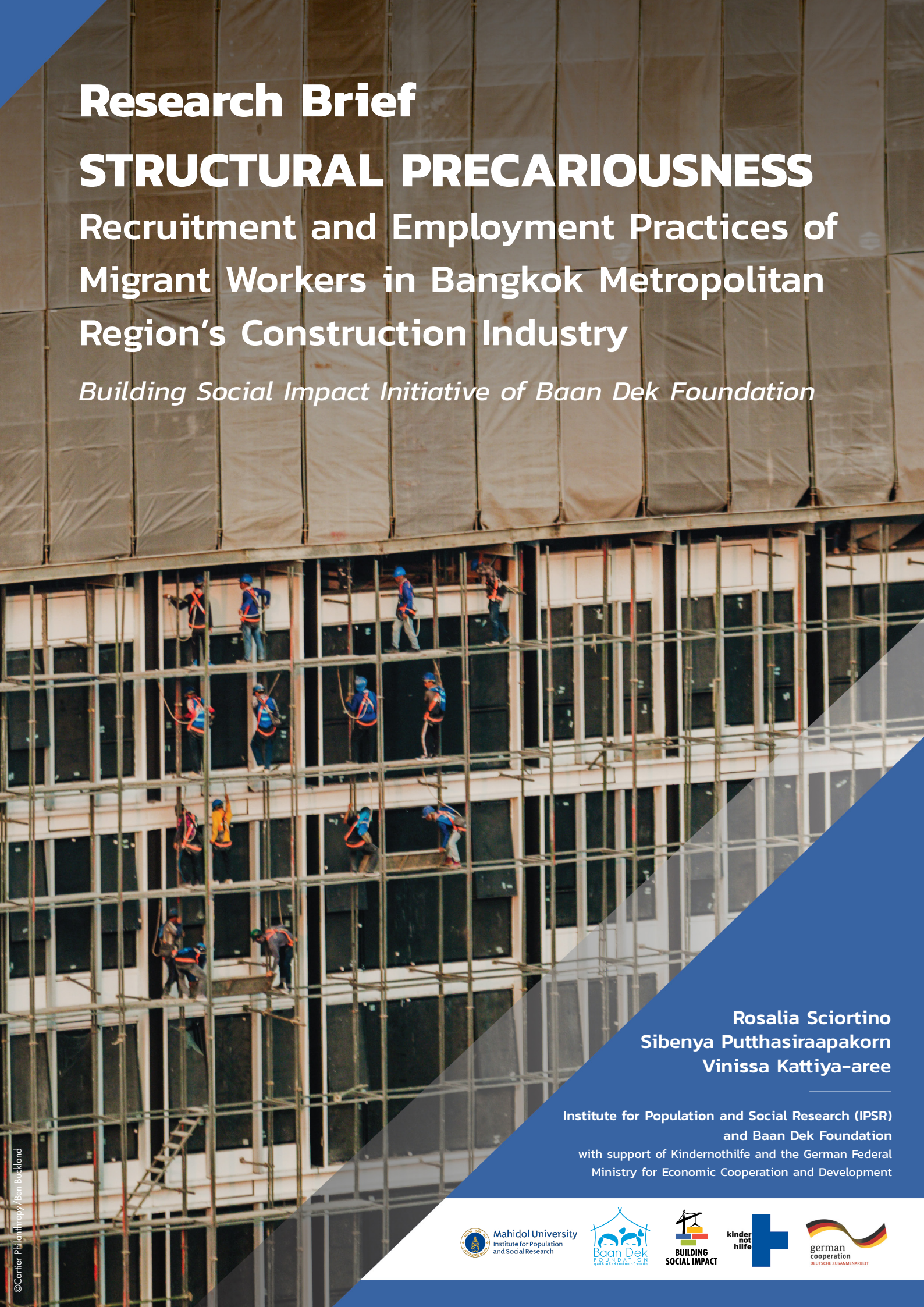
Research Brief

STRUCTURAL PRECARIOUSNESS

Recruitment and Employment Practices of Migrant Workers in Bangkok Metropolitan Region's Construction Industry

Building Social Impact Initiative of Baan Dek Foundation



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with support of Kindernothilfe and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development

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Key Message

Migrant workers are essential to Thailand's construction industry, yet restrictive immigration policies, extensive subcontracting, gaps in accountability, and the absence of independent complaint mechanisms undermine their migration and occupational well-being as well as their potential to fully contribute to the industry. These conditions also weaken the industry's capacity to recruit and retain workers.

Research shows that migrant workers generally migrate irregularly and when feasible seek amnesty once in the country. For their non-working spouse and children irregular migration is the only option due to the lack of family union provisions. Irrespective of their legal status, they face widespread irregularity and violations of labour rights, especially substandard wages and delayed or withheld payments, resulting in repeated changes of employers. They also lack adequate safety measures in the camps and access to legal and social protection. All this affects their safety and their physical and mental well-being, with women and children at heightened risk.

"When issues are passed down the chain, those at the bottom fall through the cracks."[1]

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[1] Interview with CSO representative #CSOR6.

Project Background

The collapse of a Bangkok high-rise after an earthquake in Central Myanmar, with nearly 100 feared worker fatalities, served as a stark reminder of migrant labour's vital yet precarious role in Thailand's construction sector. The disaster also raised pressing questions about the status and conditions of migrant workers and sparked debate on compensation to victims and their families. The government's stated position that compensation would be provided only to migrants with proper registration documents was challenged by non-governmental actors, given the nature and scope of the disaster and the widespread undocumented status of migrant labour. Difficulties identifying migrant workers, hired on a daily or part-time basis through subcontractors and therefore not included in the company's official registry, further exposed systemic risks.[2] This ongoing debate frames and underscores the research findings presented in this report on the interrelation between recruitment and employment practices in the construction sector in Thailand and the resulting risks for migrant workers from Myanmar and Cambodia and their children.

Research Framework and Methods

A qualitative study, conducted by the Institute for Population and Social Research or IPSR from June 2024 to June 2025, examined contracting patterns at two construction sites in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR), along with insights gathered through in-depth interviews with migrants and key stakeholders.[3] The study focused on the labour subcontracting chain, highlighting the multi-tiered network of contractors and subcontractors and their hierarchical relationships as well as the management challenges and potential vulnerabilities stemming from current recruitment and employment practices. Understanding the impacts of such practices on migrants' living conditions and access to services is essential to identify measures to improve their welfare and address and reduce eventual negative impacts.

[2] Thai PBS (2025).
[3] The team members included Sibenya Putthasiraapakorn and Vinissa Kattiya-aree.

In generating this evidence, the study feeds into the Baan Dek Foundation's (BDF) Building Social Impact (BSI) initiative, strengthening its efforts to enhance the conditions and rights of migrant workers and their children living in construction sites in the BMR. Implemented with the support of Kindernothilfe (KNH) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), BSI works with major real estate developers and construction companies to promote a 12-point framework to improve infrastructure, welfare and services, healthcare, and education. Launched in 2022 and currently being scaled up, the BSI offers free training and toolkits to help companies apply the framework across their supply chains, benefiting businesses, workers, and their families.

Methods included a literature review (2021-2025), participatory observations in two construction camps, and 94 key informant and in-depth interviews with migrant workers and children, government officials, companies, civil society, subcontractors, brokers and recruiters. The review examined post-COVID-19 and post-coup changes in migrants' conditions and recruitment practices. Purposive sampling and tailored semi-structured interviews ensured balanced representation across groups.

Findings

Thailand's Precarious Migrant Workforce

Thailand is a major migration hub in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), primarily serving as a destination country for low-wage migrant labour from Cambodia, Laos, and, especially, Myanmar. As of March 2025, more than 6 million non-Thai persons were estimated to be living in Thailand, nearly 5 million of whom were migrant workers from neighbouring countries, with approximately 3.15 million holding regular status.[4] This represents a significant increase compared to 2019, surpassing pre-COVID-19 levels, primarily attributable to the growth in mixed migratory flows from Myanmar, driven by economic crisis and conflict in the country (Table 1).

[4] These estimates, based on the authors' updates of the 2023 data presented by Syed Zwick and Gonzalez (2024), incorporating the most recent available information from the DOE (March, 2025) whenever feasible. should be viewed as indicative of current trends only.

Table 1: Number of Migrant Workers from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, by Regularisation Channel and Nationality, 2019- March 2025[5]

Country	Process	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025 (March)
Cambodia	MoU	303,971	223,622	153,030	117,287	152,337	176,025	192,188
	BP	39,896	-	-	14,941	34,352	48,988	32,150
	CR	342,562	230,753	302,446	387,534	214,665	284,466	283,033
	Total	**686,429**	**454,375**	**455,476**	**519,762**	**401,354**	**509,479**	**507,371**
Laos	MoU	183,460	156,672	116,372	95,756	157,564	198,078	274,320
	BP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	CR	97,502	50,616	96,831	139,229	75,073	93,237	92,610
	Total	**280,962**	**207,288**	**213,203**	**234,985**	**232,637**	**291,315**	**366,930**
Myanmar	MoU	518,321	416,616	324,869	351,183	282,516	261,010	263,427
	BP	26,095	-	-	7,507	5,117	8,741	7,129
	CR	1,276,512	1,024,033	1,138,066	1,623,049	1,426,223	2,002,770	2,001,863
	Total	**1,820,928**	**1,440,649**	**1,462,935**	**1,981,739**	**1,713,856**	**2,272,521**	**2,272,419**
Vietnam	MoU	96	248	137	131	112	-	-
	BP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	CR	-	-	-	1,573	1,275	3,664	3,660
	Total	**96**	**248**	**137**	**1,704**	**1,387**	**3,664**	**3660**
Total	MoU	1,005,848	797,158	594,271	564,226	592,529	635,113	729,935
	BP	65,991	-	-	22,448	39,469	57,729	39,279
	CR	1,716,576	1,305,402	1,537,343	2,149,812	1,717,236	2,384,137	2,381,166
	Total	**2,788,415**	**2,102,312**	**2,131,614**	**2,736,486**	**2,349,234**	**3,076,979**	**3,150,380**

MOU = Memorandum of Understanding; BP= Border Pass; CR Cabinet Resolution

Migrant workers fill manual labour gaps across all major economic sectors in Thailand, particularly in labour-intensive industries. As of March 2025, the largest number of regular migrant workers were employed in agriculture, followed by the industrial sector (specifically manufacturing and then construction), services, and food and beverage processing. Overall, they are estimated to make up over 10 per cent of the total labour force and contribute an estimated 4.3- 6.6 per cent of GDP.[6] This contribution is expected to grow further due to demographic change in Thailand and persistent economic and political instability in the region.

Despite their essential role in Thailand's current and future economic growth and long-term presence in the country, cross-border migrant workers are treated as temporary labour, with policies that limit integration, career development, and long-term retention. Under a two-tier migration system, they can access only three restrictive temporary regularisation pathways: formal migration through Bilateral MOUs on Cooperation in the Employment of Workers or the Border Passes scheme, and periodic in-country amnesties under Cabinet Resolutions.

Although government efforts have been made to promote overseas recruitment exclusively, Thailand's MOU system remains unpopular due to high costs, complexity, and delays, whereas the Border Pass scheme is limited by short validity and restricted mobility. Moreover, neither allow family union or reunification, while registration under Cabinet Resolutions permits children as dependents, albeit it still excludes spouses and young adults over 18, who must apply for separate work visas.

[5] Updated from table in Syed Zwick and Gonzalez (2024) by the authors with most recent data from DOE (2025).
[6] ILO and OECD (2017).

As a result, Cabinet Resolutions have become the primary pathway to seek legal protection once arrived in the country, as Table 1 clearly shows, especially in sectors characterised by high levels of informality and casualization. As of March 2025, those registered under Cabinet Resolutions were employed primarily in construction, followed by agriculture and manufacturing (See Table 2). Although these measures grant some degree of temporary lawful status to migrants, they are widely regarded as unsustainable, burdensome, and lacking in integration measures. For Myanmar workers, the ongoing crisis has further impeded access to essential documentation for any form of regularisation.

Consequently, migration to Thailand is increasingly defined by two intersecting trends: fluctuating legal status due to inconsistent in-country registration and rising irregularity. These policy challenges both contribute to, and are compounded by, poor working and living conditions for migrant workers and their families.

Table 2: Top Five Sectors according to Migrant Workers' Regularisation Channel, March 2025

Ranking	MOU	Total	BP	Total	CR	Total
1	Agriculture and livestock	191,892	Agriculture and livestock	22,073	Construction	554,098
2	Manufacturing and Trade	139,728	Manufacturing and Trade	6,694	Agriculture and livestock	504,247
3	Construction	114,956	Services	4,522	Manufacturing	424,716
4	Food and Beverage Production	99,796	Construction	2,512	Services	256,693
5	Services	68,442	Food and Beverage Production	856	Food and Beverage Production	207,628

MOU = Memorandum of Understanding; BP= Border Pass; CR Cabinet Resolution

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Fragmentation of Construction Labour via Subcontracting and Outsourcing

Thailand's construction sector contributes significantly to the economy, accounting for an average of eight per cent of GDP from 2019 to 2023. After the COVID-19-related downturn, the construction sector began to recover in 2024, driven mainly by public sector infrastructure projects, with continued growth expected in the coming years.[7]

The sector comprises approximately 117,000 registered companies, with only a few large-scale firms and a large majority made up of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Many of these MSMEs operate as subcontractors when not working independently in renovation and repair work.[8] In addition, numerous unregistered operators are active in the sector. The resulting multi-tiered supply chain of suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, contractors, and subcontractors, each with specific characteristics and responsibilities, encourages the down-sourcing of tasks, including workforce management.

Now, labour outsourcing is widespread, often involving extended subcontracting chains and firms that are not always direct employers. This arrangement enables project owners and prime contractors to access flexible, lower-cost labour—a valuable advantage amid rising material and fuel prices.

The role of subcontractors as labour providers has expanded in the context of chronic worker shortages, driven by sectoral growth and an ageing Thai workforce. As younger Thai workers increasingly avoid construction jobs because of low pay, poor conditions, safety risks, and project-based employment insecurity, companies are turning to subcontracted migrant labour as a practical solution to fill labour gaps and control costs.

[7] Lunkam (2024).
[8] Lunkam (2024).

Under-Regularized Migrant Construction Workforce

As of March 2025, Thailand's construction industry employed 671,566 regular migrant workers[9] in low-wage and heavy-duty jobs—up from the pandemic low of 405,261 in May 2021.[10] Most (69%) were from Myanmar. Women accounted for 36 per cent of the migrant construction workforce, compared to 45.34 per cent of the overall regular migrant population. While still underrepresented, their participation is notable, both relative to Thai women in the sector (around 15%) and above global averages of 9-15 per cent (Table 3).[11] Their significant presence also contributes to the sizable population of migrant children living in construction camps.

Regarding regularisation pathways, most regular workers (82.5%) were registered under Cabinet Resolutions. Although exact figures are unavailable, irregularity remains widespread, as this research confirms, due to the casualised and informal nature of employment, the dominance of MSME subcontractors, and the misalignment between industry's features and regularization pathways.

Table 3: Regular Migrant Workers Employed in the Construction Sector by Sex and Regularisation Channel, March 2025[12]

	Total			Cambodia			Laos			Myanmar			Vietnam		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
MOU	78,667	36,289	114,956	30,649	22,178	52,827	8,796	5,762	14,558	39,222	8,349	47,571	0	0	0
BP	1,565	947	2,512	1,521	943	2,464	0	0	0	44	4	48	0	0	0
CR	343,162	210,936	554,098	72,707	53,454	126,161	5,278	3,702	8,980	265,110	153,743	418,853	67	37	104
Total	423,394	248,172	671,566	104,877	76,575	181,452	14,074	9,464	23,538	304,376	162,096	466,472	67	37	104

MOU = Memorandum of Understanding; BP= Border Pass; CR Cabinet Resolution

[9] DOE (2025) in Table 6.
[10] Sumano and Aneksomboonphon (2021).
[11] Derived from NSO (2024, p. 19, Table 3.6); Kaewsri and Tongthong (2012); Ferreira Regis (2019).
[12] Source DOE, Foreign Workers Administration Office (2025).

Migrant construction workers in the study sample—21 migrants from Myanmar and 10 from Cambodia—reflect broader migration patterns. They entered through Thailand's long and porous borders. Migrants from Cambodia's provinces of Banteay Meanchey, Siem Reap, and Battambang typically followed an east-to-west route, crossing into Thailand via Chantaburi and nearby districts. Migration from Myanmar follows more recent conflict-driven routes, with migrants travelling from distant provinces before crossing, primarily at Mae Sot.

As Table 4 shows, migrants from both countries relied on friends and relatives in Thailand for information, though recent arrivals from Myanmar depended more on brokers, suggesting weaker social networks. Most used brokers for the journey and secondly support from friends and relatives. All but one crossed the border irregularly, without documents or through misuse of Border Passes or other papers. This included two children and three youth, as no formal family reunification pathways exist from abroad. While the sample is not representative of the broader migrant construction worker population, these findings align with the high levels of irregular migration to Thailand and the limited—and declining—use of MOUs.

The costs of broker service varied by timing. Migrants from Cambodia, who arrived over a decade ago, reported paying 2,000-4,000 THB, whereas recent migrants from Myanmar paid 15,000 -30,000 THB. These fees were seen as necessary for safe passage, with 14 out of the 19 migrants who used brokers, borrowed money to cover the costs.

Costs are also a significant consideration for regularisation once in Thailand, since migrant workers must cover all processing fees. The two groups differed sharply in legal status: most Cambodian migrants eventually regularised (except two youth), whereas nearly all Myanmar migrants, including children, remained irregular. Beyond subcontractor differences, factors influencing regularisation included job continuity, the need to recoup migration expenses, length of stay, and stronger incentives to regularise among those with families in Thailand. Stakeholders noted that regularisation costs, now averaging THB 20,000, had increased since COVID-19, creating a growing barrier.

Table 4: Sources of Migration Information, Support Networks, and Migration Channels by Migrant Workers' Nationalities and Sex

Nationality	Myanmar			Cambodia			Total		
Sex	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
	10	11	21	3	7	10	13	18	31
Main Source of Migration Information									
Self-search	1		1				1		1
Relatives in Thailand				2	6	8	2	6	8
Broker	3	4	7				3	4	7
Friends in Thailand	6	6	12	1	1	2	7	7	14
Subcontractor		1	1					1	1
Migration Channels and Support in Travel and Border Crossing									
Migrated irregularly on his/her own	2	2	4	1		1	3	2	5
Migrated irregularly with friends		2	2	1		1	1	2	3
Migrated irregularly with broker	8	7	15	1	3	4	9	10	19
Migrated irregularly with relatives					3	3		3	3
Migrated regularly under MOU channel					1	1		1	1


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Outsourcing the Recruitment of Migrant Workers

The construction industry uses two primary methods to hire migrant workers: direct employment by the prime contractor or project owner, and, more commonly, employment through subcontractors. Direct hiring tends to involve formal, longer-term arrangements as company employees, while subcontracting is often informal and project-limited. In such cases, migrant workers are technically employed by subcontractors or "employment agencies" that act as "fronts" for smaller operators. Camp leaders may also recruit daily workers locally through word of mouth. In practice, despite regulations to the contrary, the migrant construction workforce includes independent and casual workers who, while operating informally, are nonetheless integrated into the system.

Larger construction companies formalise ties with subcontractors and licensed recruitment agencies through written recruitment agreements, often referred to as MOUs,[13] with subcontractors receiving taxable fees based on the number and type of workers supplied. However, most subcontracting remains informal and reliant on verbal commitment. The coexistence of formal and informal practices has resulted in a dual employment structure that enables both regulated and, more commonly, unregulated employment of migrant workers.

Contractors favour the use of subcontractors as it allows them to avoid the costs and time involved in directly hiring workers, while also relieving them of labour and immigration obligations towards subcontracted workers—whom they regard as undeserving the same oversight and entitlements afforded to directly employed staff. By delegating responsibilities, contractors can distance themselves from complex legal requirements and potential penalties for non-compliance, thereby creating an accountability gap in the construction industry.

Companies acknowledge that balancing legal requirements and practical solutions remains challenging, citing misalignment between immigration policies and construction practices, the industry's entrenched informality, widespread labour casualisation, and pressure to suppress costs. Weak oversight of fragmented subcontracting chains with highly mobile workers further undermines compliance, contributing to the prevalence of informality, irregularity, and precariousness among migrant workers. As one CSO leader observed: "When issues are passed down the chain, those at the bottom fall through the cracks."[14]

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[13] Please note that these are contracts between the company and the contractor and do not refer to MOUs to import labour.the company and the contractor and do not refer to MOUs to import labour.

[14] Interview with CSO representative #CSOR6.

Informal Recruitment and Biased Recruitment Criteria

Subcontractors and recruiters prefer hiring migrants already in Thailand because they are immediately available and cheaper to recruit, turning to cross-border hiring only when specific labour demands arise. Recruitment relies largely on personal connections and social media, considered practical and cost-effective.

Employment practices heavily prioritise physical strength, favouring men aged 18 to 45. Women face discrimination due to employer concerns about family responsibilities, safety, and maternity-related costs. While recruiters and employers claimed that women were hired (and paid) only for "light and detailed tasks," this research found that they performed the same work as men. The same recruiters also expressed a preference for single men, contradicting the evident presence of couples and families in construction camps. Although child labour is officially discouraged, young people often work on-site with relatives without being registered with authorities as required by law.

Most migrant workers described recruitment as relatively straightforward with no formal applications, interviews, or vetting required. Jobs were secured through recommendations from relatives, friends, or brokers, allowing migrant workers to start work shortly after arrival. Once in the sector, migrant workers remained in construction, even when changing jobs or locations. Irregular migrant workers reported little difficulty changing jobs due to extended social networks and the absence of regulatory constraints. In contrast, regular migrants experienced restricted mobility because of their legal dependency on the employer. This undermines the growing global recognition of job mobility as a fundamental right that protects workers from exploitation and supports a more efficient labour market.

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Substandard working conditions

Image 1 Safety instruction in a Construction Site at Ekamai

Migrant construction workers felt the basic information they received about the work before migrating to be sufficient, though some underestimated its physical demands and a few were misled about wages and payment schedules. None received written contracts, regardless of status, leaving employment based on verbal agreements with no legal protection.

Unlike Thai workers, migrants were drawn to the construction sector due to steady demand, the acceptance of undocumented workers, and some job mobility. Despite heavy work and irregular pay, they stayed because the income is necessary and exceeds that in their home countries. Typical working hours run from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with a one-hour break. Cambodian workers reported Sundays off, but Myanmar workers did not. Daily hires reported periods with insufficient workdays to earn a living wage.

Most workers were general construction labourers, followed by cleaners, painters, and cement workers (Table 5). A few held basic specialised roles (e.g. rod buster or rebar workers), while only two Cambodian workers were foremen; higher-skilled finishing tasks were reserved for Thai workers. Women were more concentrated in domestic work, but also performed the same physically demanding jobs as men. They further bore primary responsibility for unpaid care, limiting their working hours and indirectly subsidising employers by maintaining the living quarters. Children contributed through caregiving or, if over 15, by engaging in manual labour.

Daily wages ranged from 310 to 350 THB, below 372 THB minimum wage for BMR, with only two long-serving foremen earning up to 450 THB. Pay did not vary significantly by gender, status or length of employment. Workers reported delayed or withheld wages and had little access to legal redress, often changing jobs instead. Safety was another concern: although a five-piece PPE set is standard (Image 1), most received only helmets, and occasionally boots.

Table 5: Type of Work and Daily Wages of Migrant Construction Worker Sample by Nationality and Sex

Nationality		Myanmar			Cambodia			Total		
Sex		Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
		10	11	21	3	7	10	13	18	31
Type of Work	Daily Wages									
Cleaner and housekeeper	325-350 THB	1	3	4		3	3	1	6	7
Electrician assistant	340-350 THB		1	1		1	1		2	2
General construction labourer	310-350 THB	4		4	1	3	4	5	3	8
Foreman	450 THB				2		2	2		2
Rodbusters and Rebar workers	320-350 THB	2	2	4				2	2	4
Scaffolder worker	200 THB	1		1				1		1
Concrete and flooring worker	300-350 THB	1		1				1		1
Painting and cement worker	350 THB	1	5	6				1	5	6

Inadequate Labour and Social Protection

Thailand has several labour protection laws relevant for the migrant workers, foremost the Labour Protection Act, which applies equally to all workers regardless of nationality. In practice, however, a wide gap persists between legal provisions, the normative narratives they produce, and actual conditions in the construction sector. The study shows that enforcement was often discriminatory, and non-compliance widespread in relation to contracts, wages, safety, and benefits. Irregular status further exacerbated vulnerability, exposing migrant construction workers to fines, detention, or deportation, while limiting access to complaint mechanisms and services.

In addition to workplace grievances, migrant construction workers lived in overcrowded, hot, and poorly ventilated facilities for which they are unduly charged. Women were particularly affected by the lack of privacy and childcare, with children living in the camps reporting a lack of shade and playgrounds.

Access to health care and social protection was elusive to both regular and irregular workers interviewed. Knowledge of social health insurance was minimal, and even those eligible for social security were not enrolled, as neither they nor their employers were willing to pay the required contributions. As a result, they relied on personal savings or loans to cover self-treatment, alternative medicines, private clinic fees, or had to forego treatment altogether.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Looking ahead, Thailand will likely remain a major destination for migrant workers from neighbouring countries due to its ageing population, unmet labour demands, and growing regional mobility spurred by economic disparities and humanitarian crises, particularly the post-2021military coup conflict in Myanmar. Migrants will continue to play a vital role in sectors like construction, which many Thai nationals avoid because of its physically demanding, low-status, and insecure project-based employment.

Urgent structural reforms are, however, needed to retain this workforce and make construction more attractive to domestic workers, while also addressing widespread gaps in compliance with national laws and Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) obligations. Such reforms are also necessary for Thailand to uphold its commitments to enhance corporate responsibility and migrant workers' rights in global supply chains; comply with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) as a Global Compact for Migration (GCM) Champion country; and advance its Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) membership ambitions by 2030. To begin, four key actions deserve consideration:

- Reassess migration governance to expand pathways for regular, long-term, and flexible migration, which enable fair recruitment and greater autonomy for migrant workers;
- Formulate measures to strengthen accountability in labour outsourcing and subcontracting practices within the construction industry;
- Make wage concerns a priority for enforcement of employment standards already enshrined in law;
- Develop gender- and age-sensitive approaches to improve living conditions for migrants and their families, and to ensure equitable access to health and social protection systems, regardless of status.

The report details targeted interventions in each of these four areas, whose synergic impact aims to foster safe migration and create a more equitable and sustainable environment for migrant workers and their families in Thailand's construction sector.


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