

# LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

## RETURNING MIGRANTS SURVEY

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM)

DISPLACEMENT TRACKING MATRIX (DTM)



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From  
the People of Japan

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# MIGRANTS IN QUARANTINE FACILITIES

## BACKGROUND

Labour migration is one of the most important livelihood options for the Lao workforce. It was estimated that 0.9 million Lao nationals lived abroad in 2019.<sup>1</sup> The most common destination country for Lao migrants is Thailand, where they are mostly employed in domestic work, construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and entertainment work.<sup>2</sup> Historically, most of them moved irregularly across borders, either on their own or through informal brokers who transported them and organized employment.<sup>3</sup> Today, many still lack legal status.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak began, more than 200,000 Lao migrants are reported to have crossed the border from Thailand to Lao People's Democratic Republic.<sup>4</sup> The economic shock due to COVID-19 is adversely impacting the flow of remittances and could push as much as 214,000 people into poverty. Around 9 per cent of households receive remittances from abroad, and remittances constitute 60 per cent of their household income. This implies a significant reduction in recipient household income.<sup>5</sup>

The loss of livelihoods for migrants have left many to be vulnerable to exploitation and some have found themselves compelled into employment or accommodation with conditions that increase their exposure to COVID-19 and other diseases, as well as increase their vulnerability and susceptibility to exploitation.

Since April 2020, the Skills Development and Employment Department (SDED), Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare accepted the support and assistance from IOM to respond to COVID-19, specifically in the areas of 1) Coordination and Partnership, 2) Risk Communication and Community Engagement, and 3) Surveillance.

This report highlights the impact of COVID-19 on returning Lao migrants. The wave of returning migrants is likely to alter the local economic landscape, as more than 50 per cent of surveyed returning migrants indicated they have no plans to leave Lao People's Democratic Republic for work again or are not sure of their plans. About 36 per cent were willing to upskill for better opportunities.

## METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS







Under the COVID-19 Response Project, together with the SDED, IOM team interviewed migrants staying in Quarantine Centres (QCs) at six (6) provinces: Vientiane Capital, Champasak, Salavan, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Khammouan. A total of 326 returned migrants were interviewed, over the months of June to September 2020. IOM team also provided direct assistance and Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials to migrants at QCs. Convenience sampling was applied.

Three (3) limitations to be noted for this report:

- i. Given the time and movement constraints imposed by the government for visits to QCs, the study employed convenience sampling based on accessibility and willingness of migrants to be interviewed. As such, the findings of this study should be taken as anecdotal and not representative of all returning migrants.
- ii. The location of the interview (inside QCs) and the social status of the enumerators (government and IOM officials) may have influenced the returning migrants' responses and may reflect a social desirability bias.
- iii. This report does not apply weighted estimates in relation to proportion of respondents by QCs. As such the means or proportions by geographical locations are biased estimates of the corresponding population quantities.

## 326 TOTAL RESPONDENTS

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS BY LOCATION OF QCS

<b>Khammouan</b> <b>143</b>  respondents	<b>Savannakhet</b> <b>104</b>  respondents
<b>Vientiane Capital</b> <b>49</b>  respondents	<b>Luang Prabang</b> <b>11</b>  respondents
<b>Salavan</b> <b>10</b>  respondents	<b>Champasak</b> <b>9</b>  respondents

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs. (2019). *International Migration 2019: report*.

<sup>2</sup> *Migration: TRIANGLE in ASEAN – Lao People's Democratic Republic*. (2019). Retrieved September 16, 2020, from [https://www.ilo.org/asia/projects/WCMS\\_622431/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/projects/WCMS_622431/lang--en/index.htm)

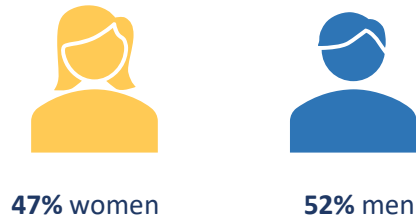
<sup>3</sup> *Criminalizing Irregular Migrant Labor: Thailand's Crackdown in Context* | *migrationpolicy.org*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 16, 2020, from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/criminalizing-irregular-migrant-labor-thailand-crackdown-context>

<sup>4</sup> *Thousand of Lao Laborers Working in Thailand Return Home - Laotian Times*. (2020). Retrieved September 16, 2020, from <https://laotiantimes.com/2020/03/23/thousands-of-lao-laborers-working-in-thailand-return-home/>

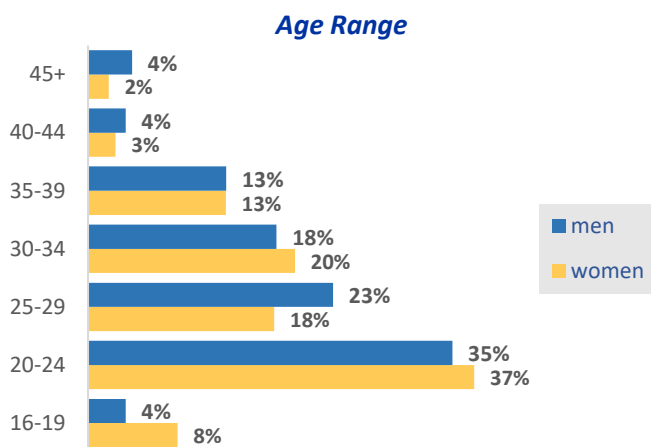
<sup>5</sup> *The employment and welfare impacts have been severe*. (2020). Retrieved September 16, 2020, from <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/795311589971908248/Lao-LEM-Main-Findings-Final-20-May-2020.pdf>

## PROFILES OF RETURNING MIGRANTS

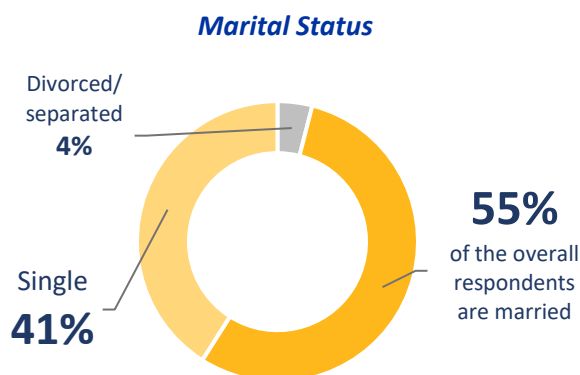
The proportion of men (52%) respondents was slightly higher than women (47%) respondents.



More than 50 per cent of migrants of both genders were within the age range of 20 to 29 years. The average age of respondents was 28. Men migrants were slightly older on average than women migrants, with an average age of 28 and 27 accordingly.

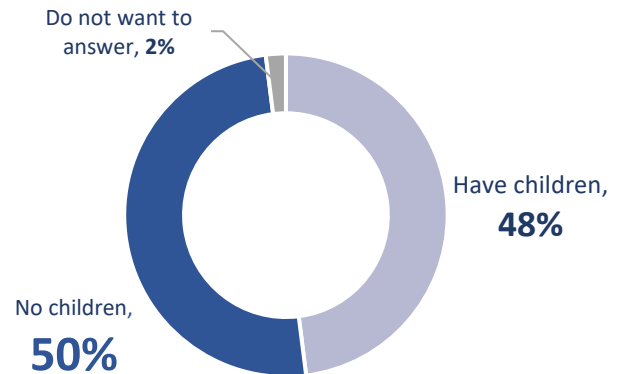


More than half of the respondents were married/engaged/in a civil union (55%), the rest were either single (41%) or divorced/separated (4%).

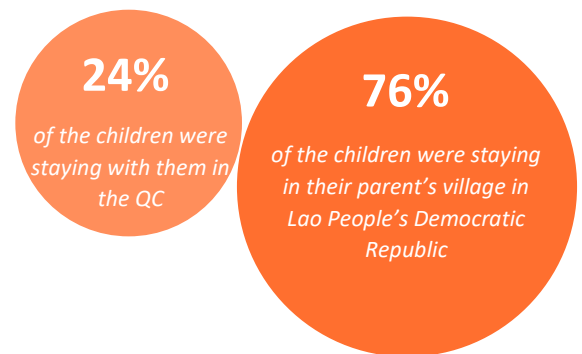


Of all the respondents, 48 per cent had children. Among those with children, 24 per cent had their children staying with them in the QC, while the rest reported that their children were staying with spouses, grandparents or relatives in their villages in Lao People's Democratic Republic.

### Proportion of Interviewed Migrants with Children



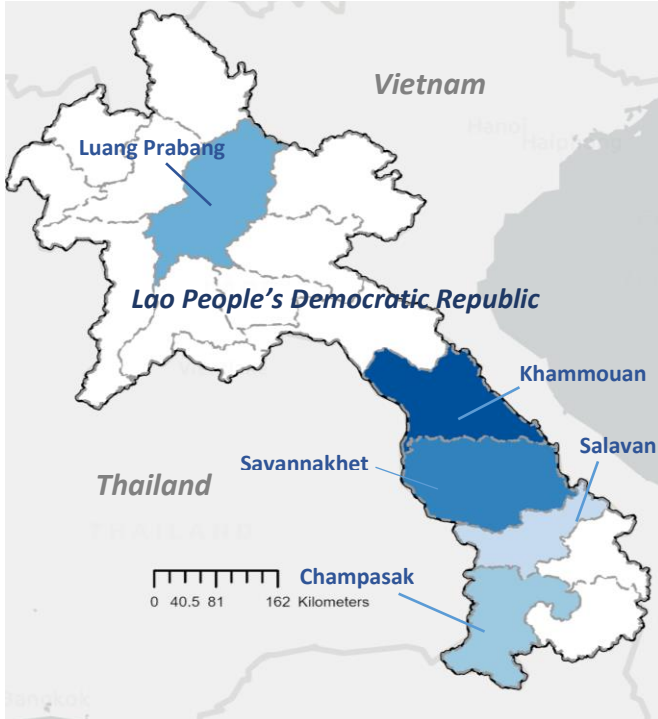
### Among Migrants with Children



### Ethnicity

Khmu	38	Lao Loum	239
Phouthay	29	Other/Unknown	20

**Top 5 Province of Destination (Lao People's Democratic Republic)**

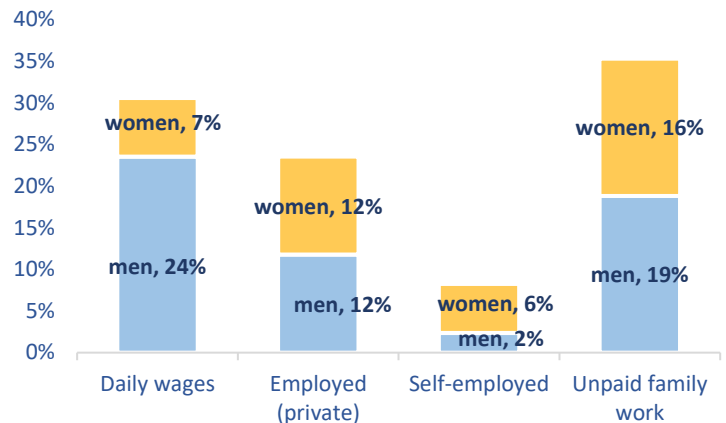


The boundaries and names shown, and the designation used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM  
Data Source: Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) and IOM

**LEGEND**



**Employment Status in Lao People's Democratic Republic**



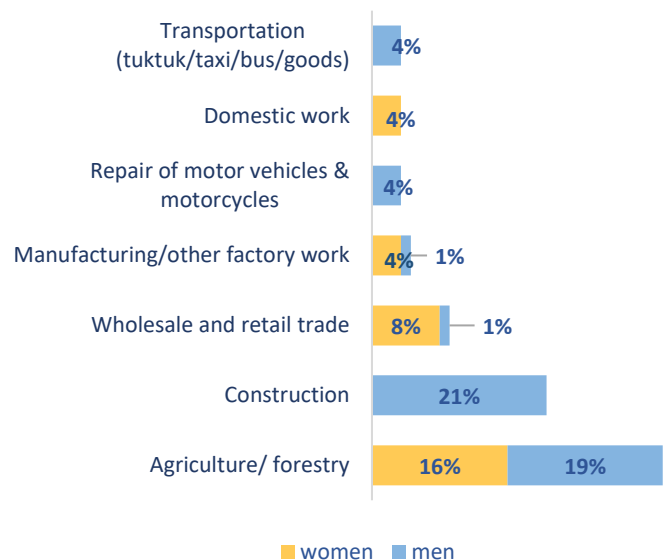
Occupational sectors also shifted after the respondents' migration journey. Prior to migration, agriculture/forestry (19%) and construction (21%) were the most common occupational sectors among men, whereas agriculture/forestry (16%) and wholesale and retail trade (8%) were more common among women. The driving factor of migration is due to the lack of foreign investment and choices, which creates relatively low paying job offers that are between 500,000 -1,000,000 LAK per month (55 – 110 USD); an amount that can barely accommodate family expenditures and living costs, particularly in Savannakhet.<sup>6</sup>

**EMPLOYMENT**

Prior to migration, the primary form of employment was unpaid family work (35%), followed by daily wages (31%), being employed in the private sector (25%) and self-employment (9%). Women are more commonly reported to be doing unpaid family work (16%) and employed by private sector (12%), whereas men are more commonly reported to be working as daily wage earners (24%) and unpaid family work (19%).

Among those who reported to be daily wage earners, both men and women, 69 per cent of them were in the construction sector and the rest are spread across domestic work, food processing, manufacturing, retail and support services.

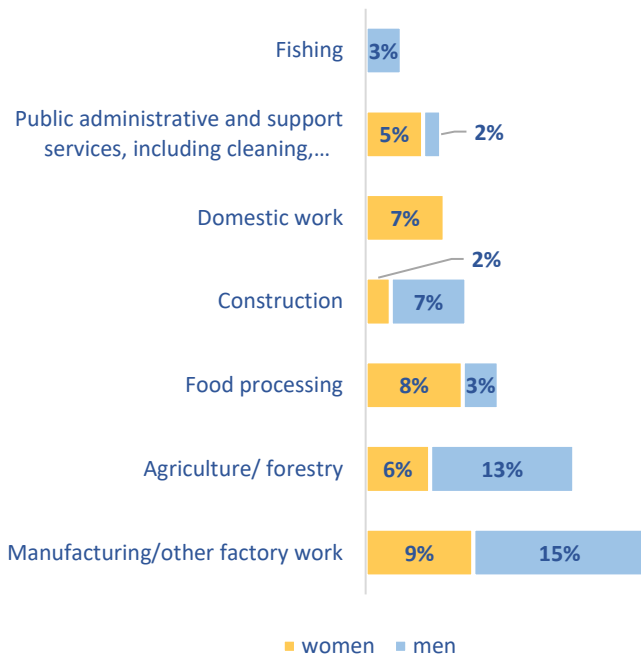
**Sector of Employment prior to Migration (in Lao People's Democratic Republic)**



<sup>6</sup> An Analysis of Migration Trends for Lao People's Democratic Republic in Two Selected Provinces: Savannakhet and Xayaboury (2020), International Organization for Migration, report.

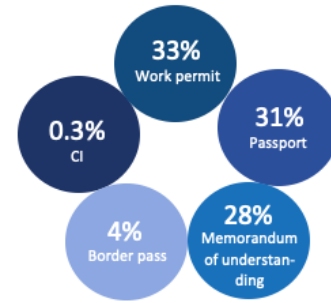
After migration, manufacturing/other factory work (15%) and agriculture/forestry (13%) were the most common occupational sectors in Thailand for men whereas, manufacturing/other factory work (9%) and food processing (8%) were the most common for women. Food processing, public administrative and support services, and fishing were new trades which migrants acquired when they worked in Thailand.

### Sector of Employment after Migration (in Thailand)



Only 28 per cent of respondents (n=326) reported that they had the memorandum of understanding (MoU), which is the legal work document, to work in Thailand. Many migrant workers lack knowledge on social security benefits and rights, some were not paid the last salary by their employers prior to departure, very few of them have received the social security fund which they are entitled to from the destination country. The most common document used to work in Thailand was work permit (33%) and passport (31%) which were insufficient to be able to work in Thailand and therefore meant they were working irregularly.

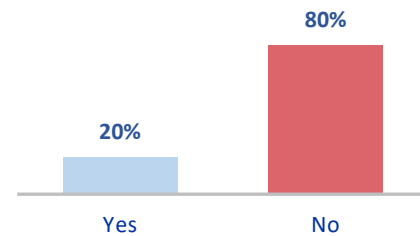
### Document used for work



\*CI: Certificate of Identification

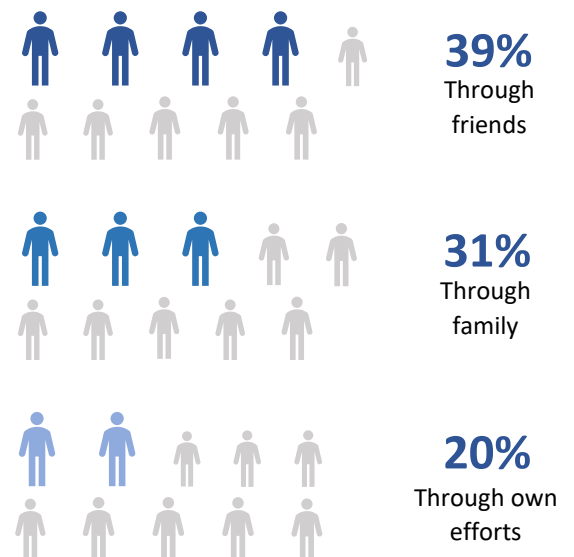
Only 20 per cent of respondents (n=326) entered Thailand with the support of a job recruitment agency.

### When asked if entered Thailand with a job recruitment agency



Respondents were also asked how they found their jobs. The three most popular channels of finding jobs were through friends (39%), family (31%) and through their own efforts (20%).

### Job Searching Channels



**Top 5 Provinces of Origin (Thailand)**



The boundaries and names shown, and the designation used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM  
Data Source: Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) and IOM

**LEGEND**



The top five provinces in Thailand with most Lao migrants were Bangkok (27%), Nakhon Ratchasima (12%), Chanthaburi (11%), Nonthaburi (6%) and Rayong (6%).



IOM staff providing information relating to COVID-19 and Safe Migration, August 2020. ©IOM

**MIGRATION JOURNEY**

Wide-ranging business closures took place in Thailand starting on 21 March 2020 as announced by the Governor of Bangkok. Subsequently, a State of Emergency was declared on 26 March 2020 by the Prime Minister. This triggered mass movement of migrants from Bangkok and other provinces, in Thailand to migrant home provinces, as well as across borders to home countries in Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Myanmar. The influx of returnees was slowed down by the inter-provincial travel bans in Thailand. With the easing of restrictions in the past months, Lao migrants continued to return to the country through land border-crossings. The border is open for returning migrants, truck drivers, and diplomatic personnel who has entry-authorization from the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the COVID-19 Taskforce.

The top three reasons cited for returning to Lao People's Democratic Republic by surveyed returning migrants during this period, were because they were worried about COVID-19 (32%), their family wanted them to come back (18%), and they were told to leave Thailand by their employer because of COVID-19 (11%).

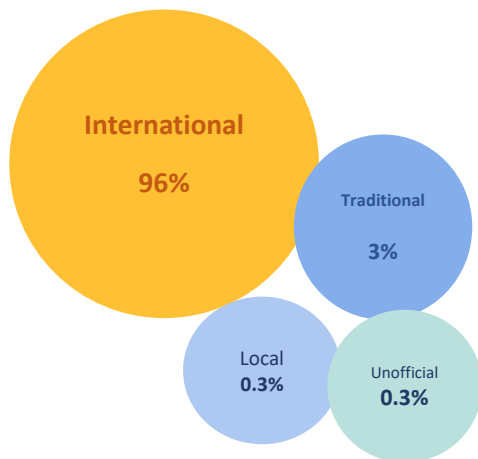
**Reasons for returning**

- 32%** I was worried about COVID-19
- 18%** My family asked me to return because of COVID-19
- 11%** I was told to leave Thailand by my employer because of COVID-19

Majority of the migrants returned home travelling by international border checkpoints (96%) and a small minority travelled through local (3%), unofficial (0.3%) and traditional (0.3%) checkpoints.



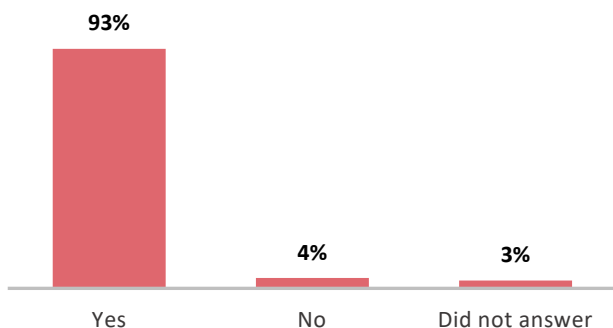
**Border checkpoint used to return to Lao People's Democratic Republic**



Due to a lack of protection mechanisms, many migrant workers experienced multiple challenges such as exploitation by third parties, insufficient information about border crossings, quarantine and regulations, as well as high living cost and accommodation when waiting at border check points. The reason for the long waiting time was because of the limited capacity at temporary quarantine centres (QCs), which could only take in new residents after discharging previous residents. All of which make them financially vulnerable.<sup>7</sup>

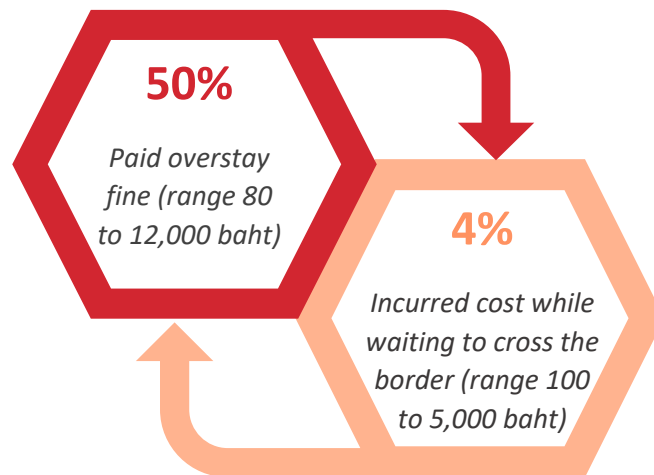
While most respondents received their final salary before returning home, 4 per cent of returning migrants were not able to do so and 3 per cent chose not to respond.

**Received final salary before return**



For those who returned home, half of them had to pay overstay fines or costs, ranging from 80 to 12,000 Thai Baht (USD3 to USD386)<sup>8</sup> when leaving Thailand.

Amongst 4 per cent of the respondents, a cost was incurred while waiting to cross the border, ranging from 100 to 5,000 Thai Baht (USD3 to USD161).



**QUARANTINE CONDITIONS**

There are 42 active government quarantine centres (QCs) across Lao People's Democratic Republic<sup>9</sup> - of which there are three types of QCs: provincial, district, and community level. The provincial centres are often equipped with the most resources and have better infrastructure. Majority of the respondents were staying in provincial facilities (97%), with the rest staying in community facilities (3%).



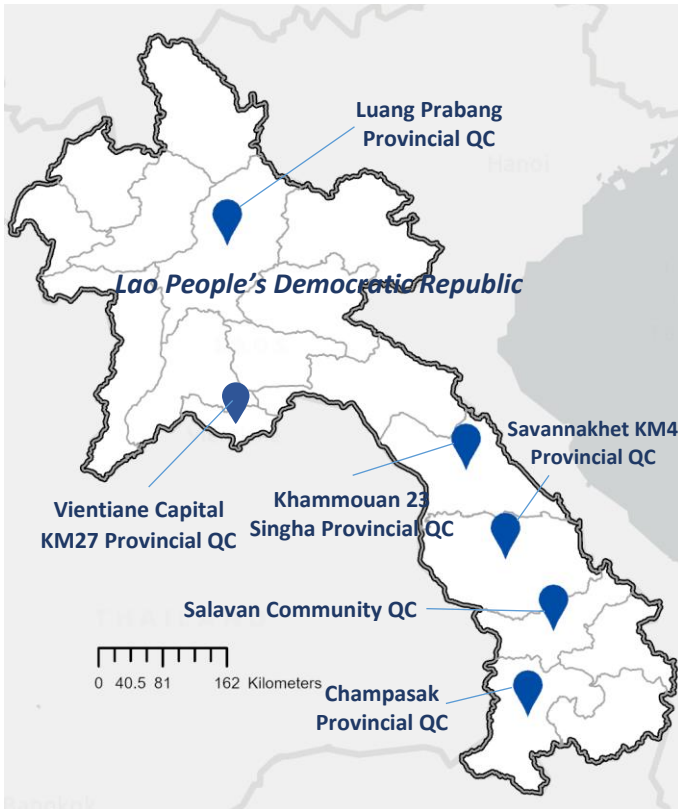
Community QC in Salavan (old temple), August 2020. ©IOM

<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> 1 USD = 31.15 Thai Baht (Mission and Year Rates – September 2020 Mid-Month)

<sup>9</sup> Lao Migrants Returning from Thailand Stuck in Overflowing Quarantine Camps. (n.d.). Retrieved September 16, 2020, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/migrants-07152020212152.html>

### Location of QCs visited



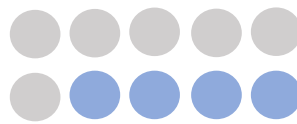
The major quarantine centres across the country are the Luang Prabang Provincial QC, the Savannakhet Provincial QC, the Champasak Provincial QC, Khammouan Provincial QC, and Vientiane KM 27 Provincial QC.

■ Respondents in community facilities  
■ Respondents in provincial facilities



**30%**

of respondents in community facilities brought food and water

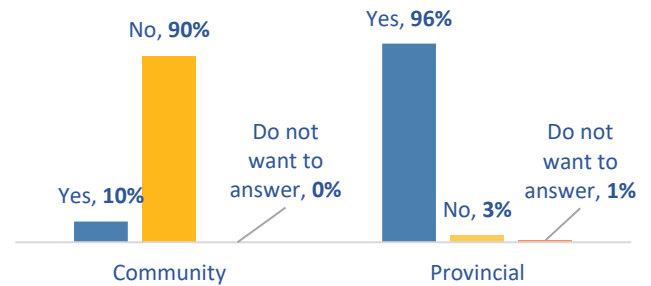


**44%**

of respondents in provincial facilities brought food and water

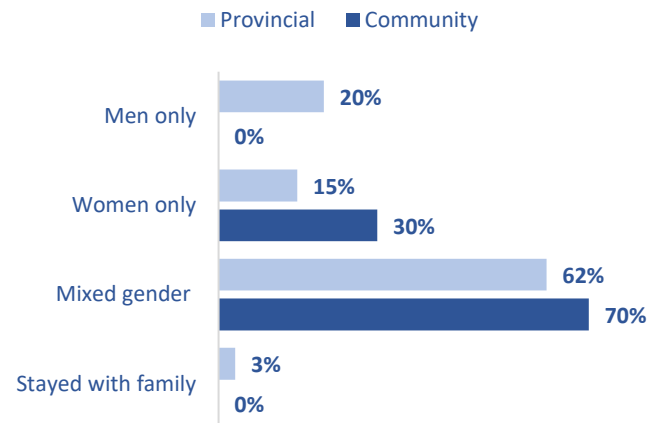
Less than 50 per cent of the migrants brought food and water to QCs at both community and provincial level – and migrants staying in community QC faced more critical food and water shortage. Compared to provincial quarantine facilities, less migrants brought their own food and water in community facilities.

### Migrants received adequate food and water by QCs



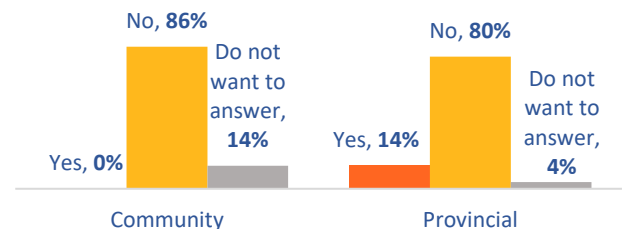
There were four types of accommodation that returning migrants could stay in. Most migrants stayed in mixed gender rooms, in both provincial and community facilities. All men and women respondents in community facility stayed in a mixed gender room, while 20 per cent of men respondents from provincial facilities stayed in men-only rooms. A small minority (3%) of those in provincial facilities stayed with their family.

### Type of Accommodation



While most respondents staying in mixed gender room felt comfortable, some of the respondents who stayed in provincial facilities reported that they felt uncomfortable (14%). At the community QC, respondents shared that they were more fearful of ghosts as the place was an abandoned empty temple in a rural village.

### When asked if staying in a mixed gender room made them feel uncomfortable



Those who stayed in community QC reported that they usually have access to water and sanitation facilities, whereas among those living in provincial QCs, 6 per cent did not have access to water and sanitation facilities. The commonly cited reasons for not having access to these facilities were that water and/or electricity was not always available (3%) and bathrooms were overcrowded, small and/or dirty (3%).

**6%** of those living in provincial facilities did not have access to water and sanitation



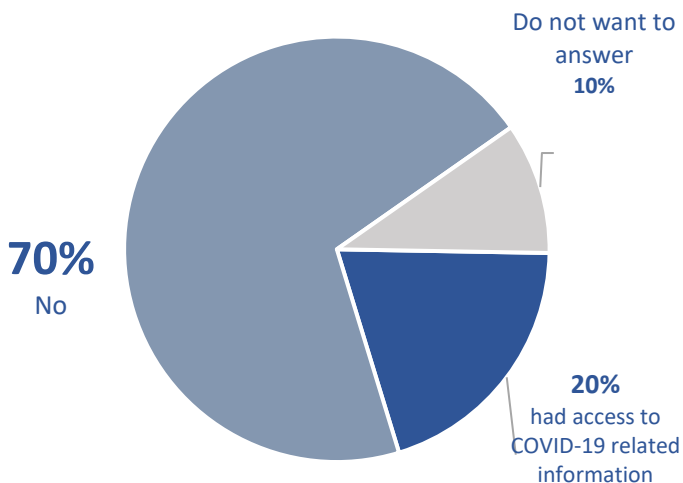
3% reported that water and/or electricity was not always available



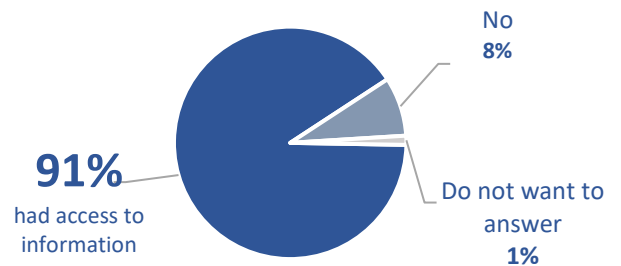
3% reported that bathrooms were overcrowded, small and/or dirty

Respondents from community and provincial facilities had a notable difference in the information they had access to. Only 20 per cent of those who stayed in community facilities had access to COVID-19 information either over loudspeaker broadcast or printed materials. In comparison, 91 per cent of returning migrants who stayed in provincial facilities had access to information.

**Respondents' access to information (community facilities)**

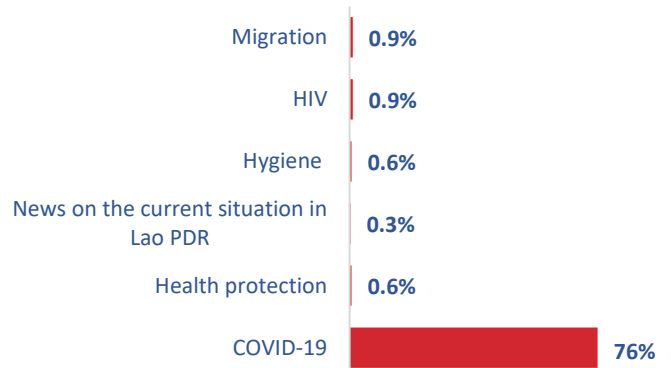


**Respondents' access to information (provincial facilities)**



While majority of the information was related to COVID-19 (76%), they also had access to other information related to migration (0.9%), HIV (0.9%), hygiene (0.6%), news on the current situation (0.3%) and health protection (0.6%).

**Access to information by types in provincial facilities**



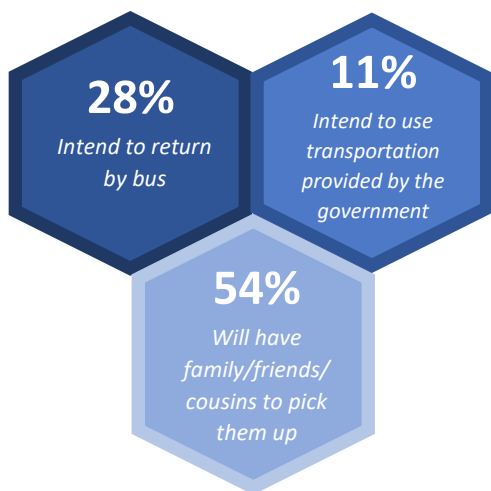
Provincial QC in Savannakhet (stadium), August 2020. ©IOM

## Travel Arrangements

Almost all returning migrants intended to return to their village after their quarantine stay (98%). Only a minority of respondents (2%) indicated that they were either undecided or were not planning to return to their villages as they were unsure about the quarantine exit process.

Amongst those who intended to return to their village, more than half would be picked up by their family and friends to return to their village. About 28 per cent of them intended to return by bus and 11 per cent planned to use transportation provided by the government.

**98%** of returning migrants will return to their village upon finishing their quarantine



## Knowledge of COVID-19 Symptoms

**100%** of returning migrants were aware of the compulsory 14-day quarantine before returning to Lao People's Democratic Republic

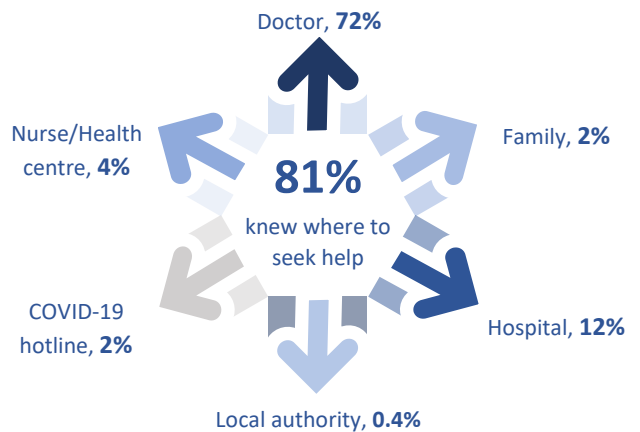
Most returning migrants were aware of COVID-19 symptoms (74%), whereas 22 per cent of migrants, or one in every five migrants, reported that they were unaware, after which information sheets were distributed and explained to them. Among those who were unaware of the COVID-19 symptoms, 34 per cent of them are women and the rest are men.

Up to 81 per cent of respondents indicated that they knew where to seek help. The listed points of contacts included doctor (72%), hospital (12%), nurse/health centre (4%), family (2%), COVID-19 hotline (2%) and local authority (0.4%).

### Respondent's knowledge of COVID-19 symptoms (fever, cough, difficult breathing)

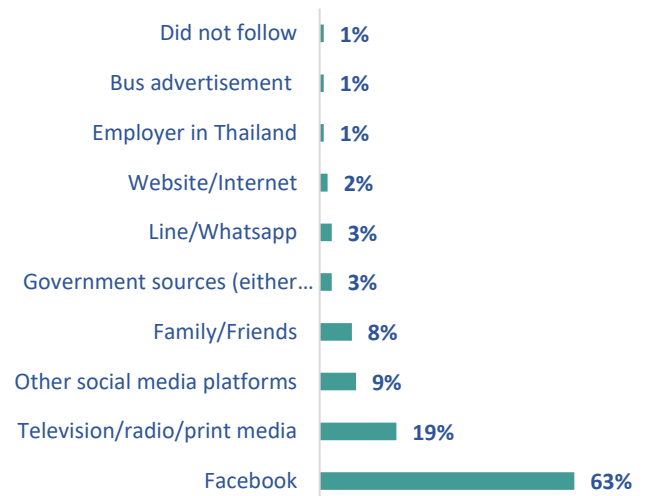


### Knowledge of where to seek help



The two most popular sources of COVID-19 information were Facebook (63%) and television/radio/print (19%).

### Sources of COVID-19 information



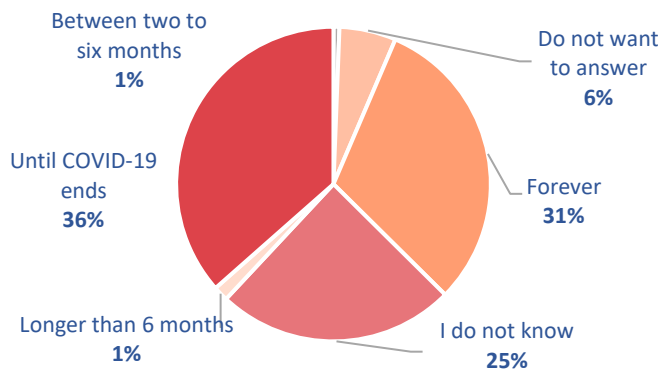


Villagers in Salavan, August 2020. ©IOM

## FUTURE PLANS

When asked how long they planned to stay in Lao People's Democratic Republic, more than one third or 36 per cent of them indicated that they would stay until COVID-19 ends. More than 33 per cent of them planned not to work outside Lao People's Democratic Republic again and 25 per cent were still not sure.

### Intended Length of Stay



Migrants' primary challenge on returning to their community was finding a job (46%). A small number were worried about the negative reaction towards their return from the host community (2%), the 14-day quarantine (2%) and repayment of debts (1%). A positive 36 per cent of them reported that they did not expect any challenges.



**36%**

of returning migrants do not expect to face any challenge upon returning to their community

### Expected Challenges



Amongst returning migrants, 36 per cent indicated their interest in vocational training. The most sought-after skills were vehicle mechanic (19%), sewing/tailoring (12%) and cooking (10%). Of these respondents, majority were willing to undertake the test/exam to obtain the certificate of skills.

### Respondents' interest in vocational training



### The most sought-after skills



Vehicle mechanic

**19%**



Sewing/tailoring

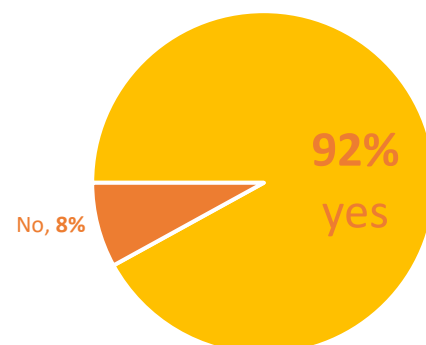
**12%**



Cooking

**10%**

### Respondents' willingness to undertake the test/exam to obtain the certificate of skill



## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Collaboration between agencies with the government to provide child-friendly environment, including guidance for QC's staff on communication, referral pathways and special measures to protect children, including unaccompanied and separated children as well as to ensure they have access to appropriate food supplies.
2. Provide information about recruitment process through Facebook and recruitment agencies to ensure that migrants have access to legal documents so that both Thailand and Lao People's Democratic Republic authorities could protect their rights as labour migrants.
3. As the Lao-Thailand border is not open all the time, updates about the status of the border should be shared through all social media outlets possible so that migrants can plan their travel accordingly and not risk spending additional money on accommodation, if the border happens to be closed when they arrive there.
4. Set up information counters or regular sessions within QCs to ensure that migrants are fully informed about the period of stay in QC, restriction, physical distancing, hygiene practices and exit process after 14 days.
5. Establish safe feedback mechanisms to provide responses in ensuring access to services within QCs are being taken care of, including referral pathways for victims of violence, exploitation and abuse.
6. Have gender-segregated accommodation and bathroom facilities at quarantine centres for women and men and/or include presence of women staff and/or special provision of accommodation measures to protect vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, women, unaccompanied and separated children from possible violence, exploitation and abuse.
7. Register interested migrants when they are still staying in QC and link them up (or provide information) with their province of destination on their rights to social security benefits, including access to opportunities for vocational training and/or employment within Lao People's Democratic Republic. Specific referral pathways could be set up for those who are suspected victims of trafficking for better support.
8. Ensure equitable distribution of resources to provincial, district and community QCs so that migrants' basic needs are taken care of – food and water, physical and mental health, as well as access to different types of information.
9. Of every three (3) migrants surveyed, at least two (2) indicated their intention to stay and work within the country until COVID-19 ends. As such, one of the long-term policy responses to this pandemic challenge should certainly focus on recovering jobs and providing new employment opportunities, through funding job creation and job-matching, and helping to retrain workers for new jobs, in areas where there is increasing demand for labour, as well as improving structural conditions for low-skilled workers.



Migrants at provincial QC in Savannakhet, August 2020. © IOM

## VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING

## BACKGROUND

The Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic has made tremendous efforts to fight against trafficking in persons and has been upgraded from Tier 2 Watch List in 2019 to Tier 2 this year, reflected in the 2020 US Trafficking in Persons Report<sup>10</sup>. This upgraded rank has shown that the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic has increased significant efforts to tackle trafficking in persons through its implementation and prioritization to address key recommendations across the 3Ps (Protection, prevention and prosecution). The socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are exacerbating vulnerabilities in our societies, including systemic issues related to health care, social security, security of employment or working conditions. As in times of economic crisis, increased insecurity, poverty and marginalization induced by diseases outbreaks can be key drivers of human trafficking.

Among the migrants surveyed, 40 of them were identified as victims of labour trafficking. They were referred by the Thai Division of Anti-Trafficking in Persons to their counterpart, Lao National Anti-trafficking in Persons Committee under the Ministry of Public Security, they were then referred to the care of the Lao Women's Union (LWU). Their working conditions did not match what was mentioned in the employment contract, specifically:

- Being paid a daily wage even though they were supposed to receive a monthly salary with employment benefits;
- No overtime compensation after a 40-hour working week;
- Not receiving any salary at all.

The data for this report was collected in collaboration with the LWU who received the victims at their shelter upon referral from the QCs. IOM also provided direct assistance to these victims.

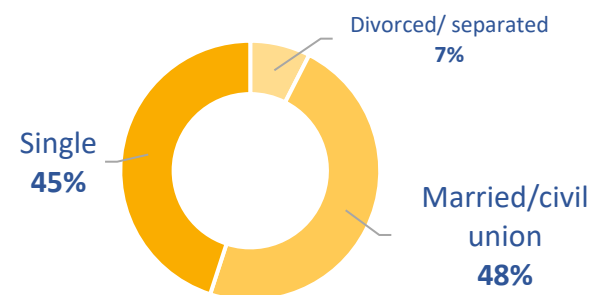
## PROFILE OF VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING

The proportion of men (55%) victims were slightly higher than women (45%) respondents. The former was slightly younger on average than the latter with an average age of 27 and 28 accordingly. Slightly less than half of the victims were married/engaged/in a civil union (48%), the rest were either single (45%) or divorced/separated (7%).

### Profile of Victims of Labour Trafficking

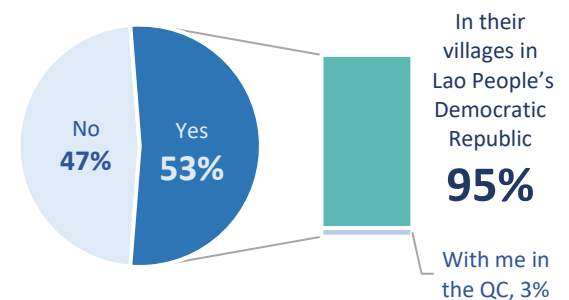


### Marital Status



Among the victims, 53 per cent had children. Among those with children, 5 per cent had their children with them in the QC while the rest reported that their children were staying in their village in Lao People's Democratic Republic.

### Victims with children and their current locations



### Ethnicity of Victims

<b>Khmou</b> <b>20</b> respondents surveyed	<b>Lao Loum</b> <b>15</b> respondents surveyed
<b>Phouthay</b> <b>1</b> respondent surveyed	<b>Other/Unknown</b> <b>4</b> respondents surveyed

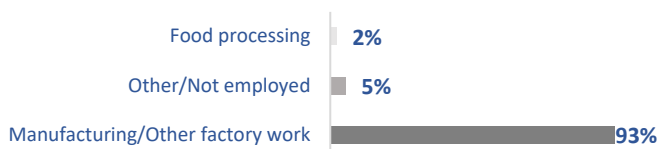
<sup>10</sup>2020 US Trafficking in Persons Report, (2020). Retrieved October 13, 2020, from: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/laos/>



## EMPLOYMENT

Among the victims of labour trafficking, up to 90 per cent of them (n=40) had reported to be doing unpaid family work prior to migration. Most of them, 93 per cent, were reported to be in manufacturing/other factory work in Thailand. Qualitative interviews revealed that they were working in poultry processing factories in Nakhon Ratchasima, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Pathum Thani and Surat Thani, Thailand.

### Occupational Sector of Victims



Interestingly, all victims entered Thailand with the support of a recruitment agency whereas only 70 per cent of the victims (n=40) had an MoU with the employer, highlighting the importance of the legal document to ensure protection of the migrants' rights as it allowed the Thai police to pursue their case with the employer.

**100%** of victims entered Thailand with a job recruitment agency

### Among the victims, work documents held were



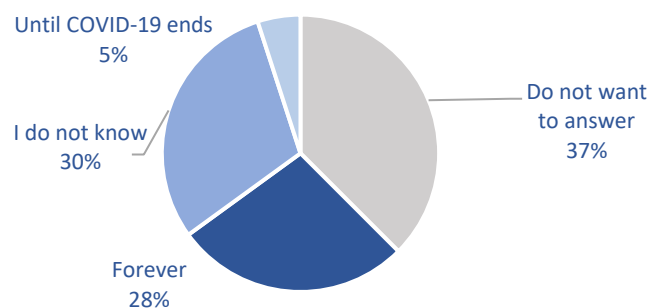
Among all victims (n=40), 90 per cent were working in Nakhon Ratchasim province with the rest spread across Nakhon Si Thammarat (n=1), Pathum Thani (n=1) and Surat Thani (n=1).

## FUTURE PLANS

Among the victims, only 5 per cent of them intend to wait for COVID-19 to be over and return to Thailand. The rest do not intend to leave again (28%), do not know (30%) or do not want to answer (37%).

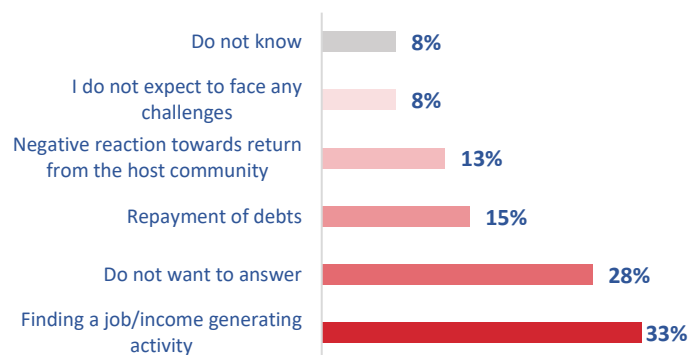
Due to their negative experience, several of them shared that they missed their family and wished to return home as soon as possible, whereas some of them expressed anger and wanted the authorities to hold the recruitment agency responsible to compensate for their losses.

### Intended Length of Stay



Compared to the rest of the migrants, victims tend to have less optimistic outlook upon their return - only 8 per cent do not expect to face any challenges. Close to 40 per cent either did not know or did not want to answer, whereas the rest expected to have difficulties in getting a job (33%), difficulties in repaying their debts (15%) and negative reaction from their host community (13%).

### Expected Challenges



Only 20 per cent indicated an interest in vocational training – in sewing/tailoring (10%) and cooking (10%), whereas the rest did not want to think about it.

### The most sought-after skills



Sewing/  
tailoring

10%



Cooking

10%



Do not know

10%



**DTM**

IOM DISPLACEMENT  
TRACKING MATRIX