

**BUILDING RESILIENCE FOR A
SUSTAINABLE COVID-19 RECOVERY FOR
VIETNAMESE INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT WORKERS**

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This report was published under the IOM regional Corporate Responsibility in Eliminating Slavery and Trafficking (CREST) Project in Asia with support from the Government of Sweden. The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the Government of Sweden.

Publisher: International Organization for Migration

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This publication has been issued without formal editing by IOM.

This publication has been issued without IOM Publication Unit (PUB) approval.

Cover photo: Migrant workers on a construction site © Nguyen Minh Tuan/Unsplash

Required citation: International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2023. *Building Resilience for a Sustainable COVID-19 Recovery for Vietnamese International Migrant Workers*. IOM, Viet Nam.

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SAMPLE SIZE AND METHODOLOGY

Study locations	Hai Duong (Binh Giang, Tu Ky districts) Bac Giang (Lang Giang, Luc Nam, Yen Dung districts) Thanh Hoa (Cam Thuy, Dong Son, Hoang Hoa districts) Nghe An (Dien Chau, Nam Dan, Nghia Dan, Hung Nguyen districts and Vinh city) Ha Tinh (Can Loc, Loc Ha, Thach Ha, Cam Xuyen districts)
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The study reached the total number of 1,293 Vietnamese international migrant workers who returned to Viet Nam during the COVID-19 pandemic, between March 2020 to July 2022 (hereby referred to as international migrant workers¹ throughout the report), including both regular and irregular migrant workers.² Convenience sampling was used due to the mobile nature of the migrant workers, as well as the absence of a full list of returned international migrant workers in the selected localities. The study included women and irregular migrant workers in the sample group to reflect the gender and status-specific needs and experience of international migrant workers.

The survey further used qualitative data collection, including key informant interviews (n= 76) and focus group discussions (n= 82) with representatives of national, provincial and district level from the Government, civil society organizations, United Nations agencies, recruitment agencies, returned international migrant workers and their family members. The use of both qualitative and quantitative data helps to cross-check the reliability and provides further insight to the assessment findings. However, certain information that reflects the personal opinions of respondents has not been validated with all relevant stakeholders.

LIMITATIONS

This study only reflects the experience of surveyed returned international migrant workers, in several districts, of the five provinces in North and North Central region of Viet Nam. Findings are therefore not necessarily representative of the overall population of returned Vietnamese international migrant workers. Moreover, the study was conducted between March 2020 to July 2022, and heavily focused on the experiences of returned international migrant workers in the context of COVID-19. It may no longer represent their current situation since COVID-19 has eased. These limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings.

¹ In this report, international migrant workers refer to both regular and irregular migrant workers who have returned to Viet Nam (also used interchangeably with returned international migrant workers).

² A migrant who is not authorized to enter, to stay and to engage in a remunerated activity in the State of employment pursuant to the law of that State and to international agreements to which that State is a party. [IOM Glossary on Migration](#).

INTRODUCTION

Viet Nam is one of the major countries of origin of migrant workers. Prior to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, between 100,000 and 150,000 regular Vietnamese migrant workers³ went to work abroad every year (ILO, 2022a). By 2022, it was estimated that over 600,000 regular migrant workers were working across 40 countries and territories. According to statistics from Viet Nam's Department of Overseas Labour (DOLAB) of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), the top three destination countries/territories for regular migrant workers are Japan, Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea. From 2018 to 2020, over 90 per cent of all regular migrant workers travelled to these three destinations (ILO, 2022b). Fifty-three per cent of migrant workers engaged in processing and manufacturing, 13 per cent in construction, and under 10 per cent in accommodation, food and beverage services; the latter accounted for the highest share of women international migrant workers (51%) (ILO, 2022a).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the income of international migrant workers participating in this study was relatively stable, and workers could earn an average of 200 million Vietnamese dong (VND) per year (that is, about 8,470 United States dollars, USD),⁴ equivalent to approximately VND 16.6 million (USD 706) per month. However, this figure is lower than that of the General Statistics Office (GSO) of Viet Nam and the International Labour Organization (ILO) research, where the average first month salary of Vietnamese international migrant workers is VND 22.4 million (USD 949) (ILO, 2022a). The salaries of regular migrant workers are significantly higher than those earned by workers working in the same industries in Viet Nam. For example, regular migrant workers working in the electronics sector earn VND 26,000,000–40,000,000/month (USD 1,101–1,694) in the Republic of Korea and VND 28,000,000–35,000,000/month (USD 1,186–1,482) in Japan, whereas they earn VND 8,000,000–12,000,000/month (USD 339–508) in Viet Nam.

On average, between 2012 to 2022, international migrant workers sent an estimated USD 10 billion of remittances to Viet Nam every year (Nguyen, 2022). These remittances provided a major source of income for families in Viet Nam for household expenses, investments and savings.

After COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic in March 2020, countries/territories of destination issued a series of public health measures and movement restrictions. International migrant workers, especially those with irregular status, were amongst the most vulnerable populations and were often the first to be let go from their jobs without proper compensation. The impacts of the pandemic on international migrant workers included loss of income and reduced remittances, which increased their inability to repay loans/debts incurred to facilitate their migration before COVID-19. The virus spread quickly among migrant worker populations, at dormitories and workplaces, and was exacerbated by the lack of access to health services, protective gear and accurate information about the pandemic. These factors led to many international migrant workers, including those participating in this study to choose to return to Viet Nam. In 2020, DOLAB registered the return of 10,000 regular international migrant workers; followed by 15,000 returns in 2021 (DOLAB, 2022).

This report presents key findings of the study on socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international migrant workers based on the experience of survey respondents who returned to Viet Nam. It presents the profiles of international migrant workers and their migration experiences during the pandemic (including recruitment, employment and return); as well as gender-specific vulnerabilities, the significance of debt, and the needs for reintegration support. The last section presents evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and state-management agencies to further promote safe migration and protection of Vietnamese international migrant workers, particularly through building resilience for a sustainable COVID-19 recovery.

³ Regular migrant workers are Vietnamese citizens who meet all the requirements prescribed by the laws of Viet Nam and of receiving countries/territories to go work abroad, in accordance with Law No 72/2006/QH11 (law 72). This law was recently replaced by Law No.69/2020/QH14 (Law 69), effective from 1 January 2022. However, it is noteworthy that many Vietnamese international migrant workers who initially migrated regularly may stayed on after their contract expired thus become irregular migrant workers.

⁴ All reference of VND to USD is based on the exchange rate dated 8 February 2023.

PROFILE OF SURVEYED INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT WORKERS

A larger proportion of international migrant workers are men, accounting for 68.6 per cent from 2018 to 2021 (ILO,2022a), which reflects the gendered nature of the industries that recruit Vietnamese workers in countries/territories of destination. In this study, almost two thirds of all international migrant workers were men (men: 62.6%, women: 37.4%). Most were aged 31–40 years (41.8%), followed by 20–30 years (35.2%). While the gender difference between workers aged 20–30 years was fairly equal, a higher proportion of men (48.2%) than women (31.2%) was observed for those aged 31–40 years. International migrant workers aged 41 years and older were more likely to be women (32.4%) than men (17.3%).

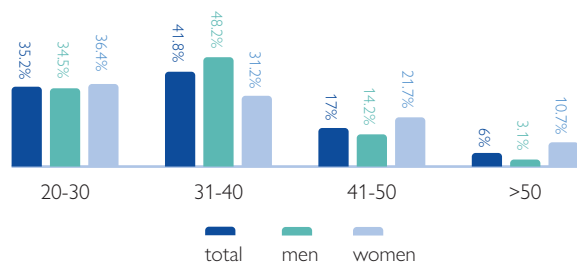


Figure 1: Age of international migrant workers, by sex

contracted workers) generally held a higher level of education compared to those without contracts. Among workers with vocational qualification (8.0%), men were more likely to be educated in the livestock, mechanical and automotive sectors, while women were educated in childcare, accounting and healthcare. For tertiary education (10.4%), men were trained on electrical, electronics, manufacturing, automotive, transportation, and construction skills, while women had skills in nursing, tourism, hotel management, childcare and accounting.

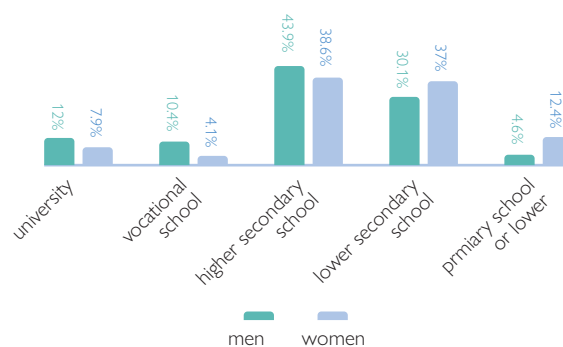


Figure 2: Education level of international migrant workers, by sex

EDUCATIONAL AND OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND OF SURVEYED INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT WORKERS

The majority of surveyed international migrant workers (59.8%) held a high school-level education. This figure is significantly higher than the educational attainment rates in 2019 in Viet Nam (pre COVID-19 pandemic),⁵ where only 36.6 per cent of the population had completed high school or higher-level education (GSO, 2019). In the study, women held lower educational qualifications than men, while a higher proportion of men held qualifications from high school, vocational schools or universities. Concurrently, international migrant workers who held an employment contract while working overseas (hereby referred to as

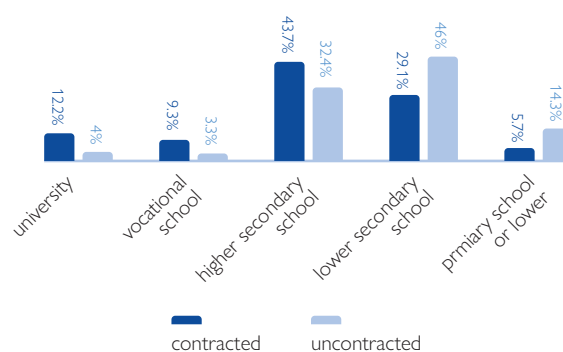


Figure 3: Education level of international migrant workers, by contractual status

⁵ The analysis is on people who went abroad before the pandemic, hence the reason the study compares migrants' educational level with 2019 data.

Prior to migration, 79 per cent of surveyed international migrant workers were employed, while 21 per cent were not participating in the labour force.⁶ A higher number of women (25.6 %) were unemployed compared to men (18.2%). Among those who were employed, the majority were salaried workers in the private sector (43.8%), self-employed (35.3%), daily labourers (17.9%) or civil servants (2.9%). A higher proportion of women (48.3%) were self-employed compared to men (28.2%); while men were more likely to be daily labourers than women (men: 24.2%, women: 6.4%). Sectors that workers were engaged in include manufacturing/factory (28.9%), agriculture, forestry and fishery (24.6%), and construction (20.7%); most women were concentrated in the agriculture, forestry and fishery industries, and men in construction. However, 37.3 per cent of employed workers reported that they were underemployed.⁷

Table 1: Occupation of international migrant workers prior to migration, by sex

	Men (%)	Women (%)	Total (%)
Agriculture/forestry/ fisheries	14.7	42.8	24.6
Construction	42.8	2.2	20.7
Manufacturing/ working in factory / mechanical repair workshop	24.6	28.9	28.9
Trading	30.8	8.1	6.1
Others ⁸	20.6	18.0	19.7
Total number of respondents	662	360	1,022



Vietnamese international migrant workers boarding a repatriation flight after the outbreak of COVID-19. © Viet Nam Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020

⁶ Unemployed or not working for other reasons, i.e. stay-at-home partner.

⁷ Under-employment refers to those who are unable to find jobs that match their skill level, owing to, for example, the lack of skills recognition, informality of employment relations or discrimination.

⁸ This includes education, food processing, hospitality and restaurants; health and social work activities; mining and quarrying; other services (laundry, hairdressing, other beauty treatment, cleaning); and transportation (e.g. grab/delivery/truck and bus driver).

MIGRATION AND RECRUITMENT EXPERIENCE OF SURVEYED INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT WORKERS

RECRUITMENT CHANNELS AND COSTS

Most respondents were contracted international migrant workers (79%), with men more likely to hold contracts while working abroad than women (men: 82%, women: 73%). Over 90 per cent said their reason for leaving Viet Nam for overseas work was to earn a higher income. In total, 73.5 per cent of surveyed international migrant workers were recruited through service enterprises licensed by MOLISA.⁹ Men were more likely to use official recruitment channels (86.2%) than women (73.1%). This finding could be linked to the destination countries/territories, where a higher number of surveyed women workers migrated to Macao Special Administrative Region of People's Republic of China and Thailand for work than men; these are countries/territories closer to Viet Nam and thus may be easier to be crossed into using irregular pathways through informal intermediaries. The findings further indicate that workers who migrated through unofficial channels are less likely to acquire an employment contract while working overseas (Table 2). This shows that irregular migration exacerbates the risks for international migrant workers, especially women, to labour exploitation and lack of protection under Law 69/2020/QH14 (Law 69).

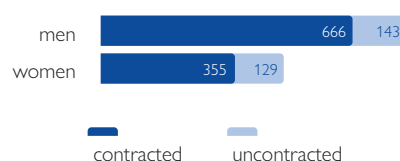


Figure 4: Contract status of international migrant workers by sex

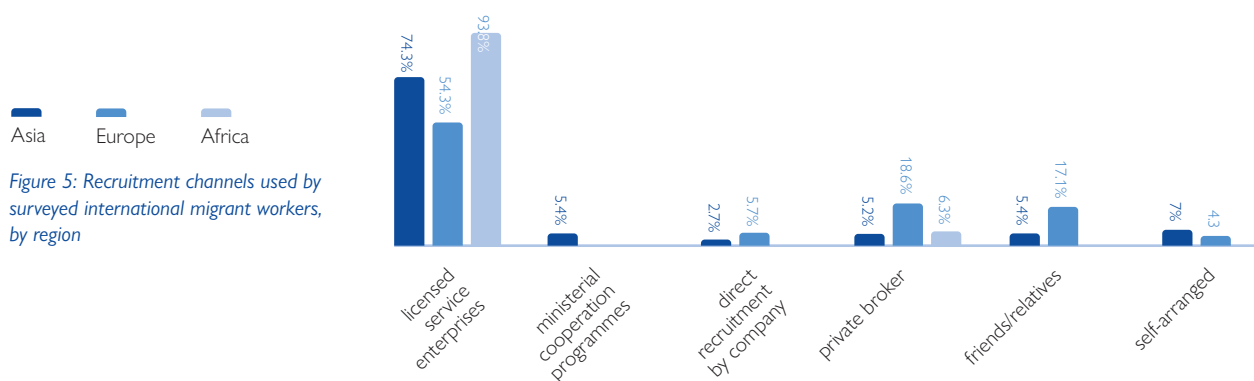
The use of official or unofficial recruitment channels varied significantly between countries/territories of destination. Among the surveyed participants, 74.3 per cent of international migrant workers who migrated to work in Asia (1,206 respondents, 20 countries/territories) used official recruitment channels. In comparison, 93.8 per cent of the workers who went to work in Africa (16 respondents, 3 countries) used official recruitment channels, and 54.3 per cent of those employed in Europe used official recruitment channels (71 respondents, 8 countries). This may be linked to the fact that European countries have more restrictive working visa regimes.

Almost half of the respondents (43.5%) worked overseas continuously for three to six years, 36.5 per cent between

Table 2: Contractual status of international migrant workers by recruitment channel

		Official channels			Unofficial channels		
		Direct recruitment by company	Ministerial Cooperation programmes	Licensed service enterprises	Self-arrangement	Friends/relatives	Private brokers
Having contract or not	Yes	81.1%	93.8%	91.8%	19.5%	24.7%	29.5%
	No	18.9%	6.2%	8.2%	80.5%	75.3%	70.5%
Total		37	65	948	87	77	78

⁹ Service enterprises refer to recruitment agencies providing recruitment services to international migrant workers as specified under Article 10 of Law 69/2020/QH14. The figure presented in this report is high in comparison with the GSO and ILO report where only 36.2 per cent of international migrant workers applied for a job through licensed service enterprises (ILO, 2022a).



one to three years, and 20 per cent for more than six years. Women tended to work abroad for longer periods, with 58 per cent working overseas between three to six years.

Almost all respondents (94.3 %) had to pay recruitment fees and migration-related costs to facilitate their overseas employment. The most commonly cited fees and costs were travel documents including passports, visas and health certificates (86.9%); travel expenses (86.6%); and recruitment fees (80.7%), which include job application fees, payments to subagents, middlemen and service enterprises in Viet Nam and destination country/territory, and deposits. The average cost of migration was VND 118 million (USD 4,997) while the average monthly salary of surveyed international migrant workers while working overseas was VND 18 million (USD 760).¹⁰ This implies that international migrant workers generally needed to work for seven months to recuperate their migration costs. The recruitment costs to Japan, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan Province of the People’s Republic of China are among the highest for international migrant workers. According to the surveyed respondents, the cost to migrate to Japan was on average VND 191 million (USD 8,300), followed by the Republic of Korea with VND 137 million (USD 5,802), and Taiwan Province of the People’s Republic of China with VND 124 million (USD 5,274). Furthermore, the survey found that the average migration costs for recruitment via official channels were often higher than those of unofficial channels. This is mostly linked to the fact that workers migrating through official channels were required to make a deposit payment,¹¹ for example VND 12 million (USD 510) for employment in Taiwan Province of the People’s Republic of China, which will be returned to workers after they have completed the contract and returned to Viet Nam. As well, international migrant workers often use the service of private brokers at the community/provincial level before being formally recruited by licensed service enterprises in the cities; thus, they had to pay additional costs for informal intermediaries

such as private brokers. However, it is noteworthy that the revision of Law 69, effective from January 2022, has removed the obligation for international migrant workers to pay brokerage commissions for recruitment services in destination countries/territories, and explicitly forbids service enterprises to pass these costs on to workers.

These findings coincide with the GSO-ILO report, where the recruitment cost was highest for international migrant workers who used official migration channels via a service enterprise licensed by MOLISA, worth eight months of workers’ salary or remuneration used, compared to 5.7 months for those who migrated unofficially through family members/relatives/friends (ILO, 2022a). However, lower costs for migration through unofficial channels come with higher risks of unethical recruitment and labour exploitation, particularly when international migrant workers do not hold regular status in destination countries/territories, which further place them in vulnerable situations.

DESTINATION COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES, AND SECTORS OF EMPLOYMENT

Prior to returning to Viet Nam, surveyed international migrant workers worked in 34 countries and territories across Asia, Europe and Africa. Asia was the most popular region of destination among international migrant workers (93.3 %), with workers concentrated in Taiwan Province of the People’s Republic of China (30.1%) Japan (23.4 %), the Republic of Korea (12.5 %) and Thailand (9.0 %). Women migrant workers tend to migrate within Asia, while more men went to Europe and Africa. The difference in geographical preferences between genders can be attributed to the sectors of employment in countries and territories of destination. For example, more men were employed in Japan and the Republic of Korea in agriculture, fisheries, construction and manufacturing (metal factories) sectors.

¹⁰ In addition to the mentioned fees and related costs, many international migrant workers reported that they were also required to pay a monthly brokerage fee to brokerage agencies. Some workers also noted that the brokerage fees they paid were higher than what was written in the initial recruitment agreement.

¹¹ A payment collected to ensure execution of obligations according to the employment contracts as prescribed by Vietnamese regulations or agreement with foreign employment receivers.

Women were more likely to work in Taiwan Province of the People’s Republic of China and Saudi Arabia, which employ more domestic workers and caregivers – sectors that are generally dominated by women.

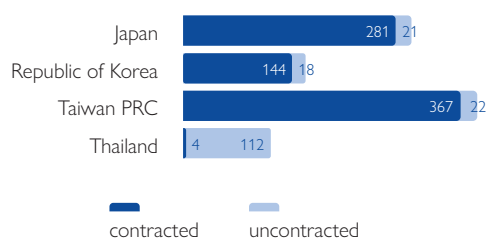


Figure 6: Contractual status of international migrant workers in key countries/territories of destination

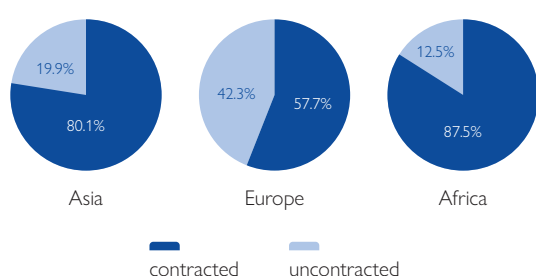


Figure 7: Contractual status of international migrant workers by destination region

As mentioned previously, most surveyed international migrant workers (79%) had contracts while working overseas (men: 82 %, women: 73%); with a higher number of men working in formal employment than women. This finding is likely because women were more likely to be self-employed in family/friend’s businesses while overseas than men (men: 14.2%, women: 24%). Although the most common sectors of employment for both genders were manufacturing and factory work (men: 49.4%, women: 31.6%), women were more concentrated in domestic work (24.8 %) while men were more concentrated in construction and quarrying industries (26%).

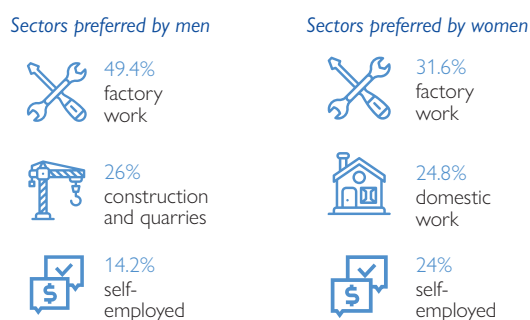


Figure 8: Top three sectors that employed international migrant workers, by sex

INCOME AND REMITTANCES

On average, 46 per cent of surveyed international migrant workers earned less than VND 18.1 million per month (USD 767); however, there was a significant variation between destination countries/territories. The highest earning was reported for those who worked in the Republic of Korea, where they earned between VND 26 million/month (USD 1,101) and VND 44 million/month (USD 1,863).

Men were more likely to earn higher income than women, as the findings revealed that men’s salaries earned could be as much as 4.7 times higher than women’s.

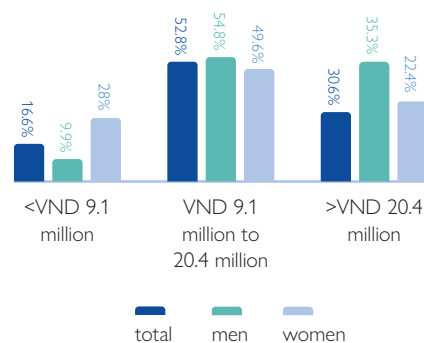


Figure 9: Average monthly remittances, by sex

Concurrently, contracted international migrant workers reported higher incomes than migrant workers working without a contract. Among workers earning less than VND 18.1 million/month (USD 767), the percentage of workers without a contract (73.9%) was almost double that of contracted workers (39.2%) and within this range, the percentage of women without a contract (64.3%) was much higher than that of men (35.8%).

Almost all the respondents (94.1%) sent remittances back home to their families, where 52.8 per cent remitted between VND 9 million (USD 381) to VND 20.3 million (USD 860) each month.¹² Men sent higher remittances compared to women, and contracted international migrant workers sent higher remittances than those working without a contract. This difference is due to higher income received by men and contracted workers compared to women and uncontracted migrant workers.

¹² Correlation analysis indicates that international migrant workers who did not send remittances were either aged 50 years and older, widowed, having no work contract, working in Thailand or Lao People’s Democratic Republic, and/or those who migrated for a period of less than a year.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SURVEYED INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT WORKERS

The pandemic exacerbated the economic vulnerabilities of international migrant workers, and pressured workers to return home prior to the completion of their contracts. A combination of return factors was reported by respondents, including common factors such as family circumstances (49.5%); reduced income or working hours (30.5%); fear and uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic situation (30.1%); and contract expiration (23 %). Despite wanting to return home due to these factors, during the focus group discussions international migrant workers shared that they were facing considerable psychological stress caused by the difficulties in arranging return travel to Viet Nam.

Forty-one per cent of international migrant workers said their job in destination countries/territories was affected by the pandemic. This was more prevalent among workers without contracts (50%) compared to contracted workers (38.6%). A higher number of workers without contracts had not received their last month's salary before returning to Viet Nam (uncontracted: 20.9%, contracted: 6.5%).

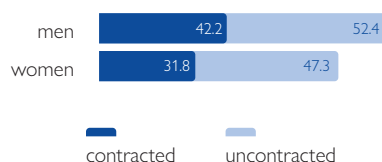


Figure 10: Percentage of international migrant workers reporting that their jobs were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, by sex and contractual status

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“I returned to Viet Nam because I didn’t have any work, faced difficulties due to COVID-19 and had no money to stay. I had to borrow money to buy an air ticket to return home. I was worried about COVID-19. My family also wanted me to go home because I was out of work and because I was afraid that the pandemic would affect my life.”

- Male forklift driver from Nghe An who worked in Taiwan, Province of the People’s Republic of China



Migrants working on a construction site in Thailand. © Etienne Girardet/Unsplash

ACCESS TO ASSISTANCE AT DESTINATION

Only one third of the respondents received information about COVID-19 in their destination country/territory: 26 per cent had access to State health-care services, and 18 per cent were provided with personal protective equipment. Contracted international migrant workers were more likely to access information on health, personal protective equipment, and health-care services compared to workers without an employment contract. This may be because uncontracted workers often avoid State health services due to fear of detention or deportation, as they are more likely to be working irregularly.



had access to information on COVID-19

33%



had access to healthcare services

26%



were provided with measures to ensure health safety at their workplace and residence

23%



received personal protective equipment

18%

With regards to support provided by the employer, a higher number of contracted international migrant workers (36.1%) have received support compared to uncontracted migrant workers (24.4%). Vietnamese international migrant workers employed in construction, mining and quarrying reported the highest rate of employer support (42.7%). Among those who received the support, cash support to facilitate their return arrangements was the main form of assistance (69.6%), while only 8.1 per cent of international migrant workers who lost their jobs received support for accommodation and food while waiting for repatriation. However, since the support for return was limited, most international migrant workers (83.8 %) had to fully or partially pay for their own return to Viet Nam. Sixty-three per cent of workers reported paying the full amount of their return – and this situation is more prominent for uncontracted workers (74.6%) compared to contracted workers (60.9%).

During the pandemic, governments in destination countries/territories also established policies to support international migrant workers. These policies included cash subsidies for workers whose jobs were affected by COVID-19, extension of visas, work permit and employment contracts and support for the return air tickets. For example, the Government of Japan subsidized workers who had to temporarily stop working due to reduced production of enterprises with an allowance of 6,815–8,330 Japanese yens (JPY) per day (USD 52–63/day); and workers who lost their jobs due to the company’s bankruptcy with a subsidy of JPY 6,815–8,330/day (USD 52–63/day) for 90 to 150 days depending on age. In the Republic of Korea, the Government allowed migrant workers whose contracts and visas had expired but who could not return home, to extend their stay for an additional 50 days.

RETURN AND REINTEGRATION IN VIET NAM

EMPLOYMENT, LIVELIHOOD STATUS AND SUPPORT UPON RETURN TO VIET NAM

Almost half of the respondents (47.3%) reported facing difficulty in accessing employment upon return to Viet Nam. At the time of the survey, only one third of returned international migrant workers had obtained full-time employment, with more men (30.5%) than women (26%) having done so, whereas another one third reported that they were underemployed (men: 33.5%, women: 24%).

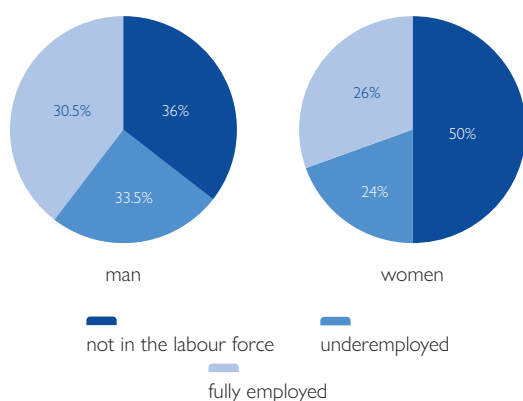


Figure 11: Current employment status of respondents, by sex

The most common sectors of employment for returned international migrant workers were agriculture, forestry and fishery (26.8%). Among the respondents, 24.6 per cent indicated that they were employed in the same sectors prior to their migration. Since most international migrant workers were employed in processing, manufacturing, construction and services while working overseas; the findings show that their acquired skills and experience were not used upon return to their home communities. This result coincides with the challenges highlighted by the returned respondents in finding jobs in the local market that match their skill profiles post-migration.

During the time of the survey, almost 95 per cent of respondents reported a decline in household income after their return to Viet Nam. The drop in household income was severe for many, with almost half reporting that their household income was reduced by more than 60 per cent. In addition, one third of respondents' households were classified as being within or below Viet Nam's multidimensional poverty line, which is VND 1,500,000 per person/month (USD 64) in rural areas and VND 2,000,000 per person/month (USD 85) in urban areas.¹³ These factors are linked to the decline in household income and the lack of fulltime employment of international migrant workers upon return. Among the respondents who faced difficulties in finding a job in Viet Nam, the most common reason

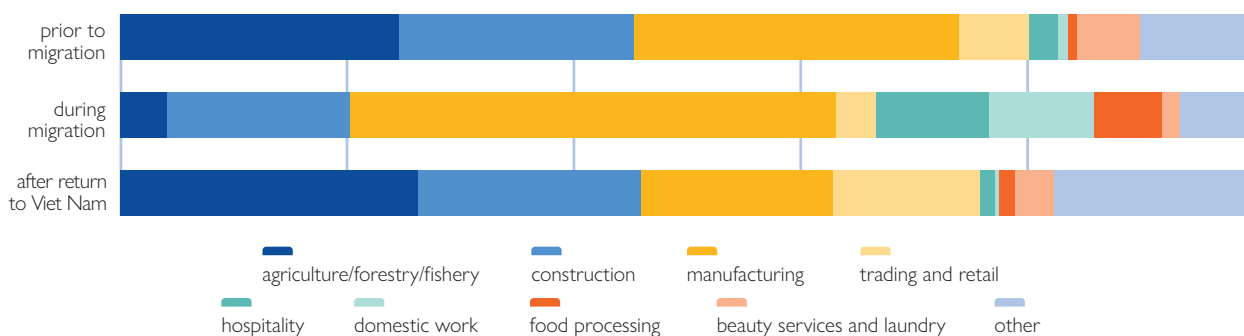


Figure 12: Sectors of employment prior, during and after migration

¹³ Household living standards are calculated according to the multidimensional poverty standard (measured by the per capita income/month in urban/rural areas, the degree of lack of social services including employment, health, education, housing, water and sanitation information). According to Decree No. 07/2021/ND-CP dated 27 January 2021.

cited was that they were unable to find jobs that met their expectations (40.2%), especially with regards to the salary. A number of women respondents indicated additional obstacles in finding jobs upon return due to their health conditions, including unfit to work after returned from overseas employment, and household commitments such as housework and childcare.

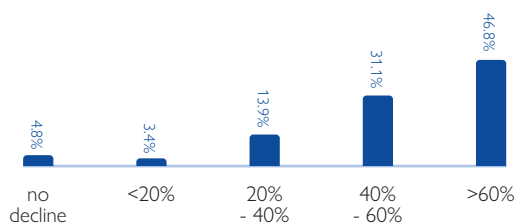


Figure 13: Decline in Vietnamese international migrant worker household income after return

Regarding support upon return to Viet Nam, 85.5 per cent of respondents reported that they did not receive any kind of support from government agencies, social organizations or service enterprises. Twenty-five per cent relied on assistance from friends and families, while only 10.5 per cent of international migrant workers or their families were eligible and able to access some forms of state assistance such as COVID-19 relief packages, social insurance or unemployment support.

DEBTS INCURRED DURING AND POST-MIGRATION BY SURVEYED INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT WORKERS

One fourth of respondents said their households incurred additional debt as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among those in debt (n=314), 61 per cent reported that the loans were taken out, either by themselves or their family, while they were working overseas; whereas the rest took out loans upon return. Notably, the rate of workers who are in debt is higher among the group that has worked abroad only for one year or less (52.3%) compared to workers who have worked abroad for more than six years (18.3%). The main contributor to this finding is that those who have worked abroad for less than one year have invested a significant amount of money or savings to migrate (which could be in the form of loans) but did not get to stay for the entire contractual period or receive income as expected from working abroad due to the economic downturns of COVID-19. Higher debt ratio can also be observed among respondents who migrated through unofficial channels than the group that migrated through official channels (42.1% versus 21.4%). This is because international migrant workers with irregular status earned lower income and were the first group to lose their jobs during the pandemic,

as they did not hold employment contracts in destination countries/territories.

The average debt incurred was VND 89 million (USD 3,769), with a higher amount for men (VND 101 million, USD 4,277) than for women international migrant workers (VND 72 million, USD 3,049). Most respondents borrowed money from family/friends (56.4%) and public banks (31.5%) – which they claimed are sources with no or low interest rates. The percentage of workers borrowing from sources with higher interest rates such as private banks and informal lenders is low (4.5% and 5.1% respectively). Over half of international migrant workers who were in debt planned to refinance their debts by borrowing from family or friends.

NEEDS FOR REINTEGRATION SUPPORT OF RETURNED INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT WORKERS

Twenty per cent of all returned respondents noted an interest in attending training courses to improve their skills. This includes upskilling or reskilling to provide them with a better chance of employability in local areas, and potentially skills needed for remigration (for those who are interested in remigrating). Respondents aged 39 years and younger were more interested in obtaining training than those aged 40 years and older. Of those who are interested, the majority want the training to be in-person, on technical skills such as technology, mechanics and management, and soft skill such as communication, language and information technology; free-of-charge; and for a period of less than three months.



“Since my return, I have not yet reintegrated in the sector where I worked previously because there are many changes compared to when I left. I will have to get used to it. Currently I have to find out business relationships in the village, district and surrounding areas. I have to get used to the living and working environment and the climate again”

- Former construction worker, man from Thanh Hoa

Another type of support identified by the surveyed returned international migrant workers was loans from credit institutions. Approximately 60 per cent of the respondents reported not having capital for business development upon return. Of those who wanted to start self-employed/

family business but have no capital (n=284), 43.3 per cent see the need to obtain loans from credit institutions. The percentage of men who wanted to take out loans from credit institutions was higher than that of women (51.4% versus 29.9%).



“I want to get loans to open a milk tea shop. I don't want to continue working away from home anymore because after working abroad for many years, now I want to stay at home to take care of family and children. I will open a milk tea shop in my hometown because before returning, I took a milk tea making class in Taiwan, Province of the People's Republic of China”

- Woman factory worker in Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China, from Hai Duong.

INTENTION TO REMIGRATE

More than 40 per cent of surveyed international migrant workers intended to remigrate for work, of which 36.7 per cent wanted to remigrate overseas and 6.8 per cent to other cities within Viet Nam. Men were more willing to remigrate than women. The main reasons for remigration are difficulties in finding a job in local communities, higher income in destination countries/territories and debt repayment. Returned international migrant workers younger than 40 years, as well as those with upper secondary education or below, were more likely to migrate internationally. The preferred countries and territories in Asia include Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Singapore (in descending order); outside of Asia, countries include Saudi Arabia, the Russian Federation, Cyprus and Romania. For those who indicated an interest to remigrate within Viet Nam, provinces with many industrial parks such as Bac Ninh, Binh Duong, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are the preferred destinations.

Among the respondents who wanted to remigrate internationally, the preferred industries are manufacturing (42.8%); construction (18.6%) and hospitality (9.7%). Those who wished to remigrate internally were more likely to find jobs in manufacturing (42.5%), trade and retail (11.3%), domestic work (11.3%) and construction (10%). Generally, a higher number of women preferred jobs in domestic work, food processing and trading/retail business (self-employed) than men, whereas a higher number of men wanted to work in construction, manufacturing and factory-related jobs.

Table 3: Expected occupations during remigration (%)

	Internal remigration		
	Men	Women	General
Agriculture/Forestry/Fisheries	1.7	0	1.3
Construction	13.8	0	10.0
Domestic work	0	40.9	11.3
Food processing	0	4.5	1.3
Tourism/Restaurant/Hospitality	5.2	4.5	5.0
Health care and social work			0
Manufacturing/working in factory/repair workshop (e.g. motorbike, automobile)	48.3	27.3	42.5
Trading and retail business	10.3	13.6	11.3
N	58	22	80

	International remigration		
	Men	Women	General
Agriculture/Forestry/Fisheries	4.4	1.4	3.4
Construction	24.0	1.4	16.8
Domestic work	0	15.1	4.8
Food processing	4.1	10.1	6
Tourism/Restaurant/Hospitality	5.1	19.4	9.7
Health care and social work	0.3	5.0	1.8
Manufacturing/working in factory/repair workshop (e.g. motorbike, automobile)	50.7	25.9	42.8
Trading and retail business	5.1	10.8	6.9
N	296	139	435

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides insights on the profile and experiences of surveyed international migrant workers who returned to Viet Nam during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most international migrant workers who participated in this study were younger than 40 years old, and almost two thirds were men. Respondents displayed higher education attainment rates than the national average in Viet Nam, with the majority holding at least a high school degree. Japan, Taiwan, Province of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea were the most popular destination for international migrant workers, and manufacturing remained the most common sector of employment for both men and women migrant workers.

Most surveyed international migrant workers migrated through official recruitment channels, via service enterprises licensed by MOLISA. Almost all respondents funded their own migration, and the average cost was VND 118 million (USD 5,019), where the most notable costs were for travel documents, travel expenses and recruitment fees including job application fees, payments to subagents, middlemen and service enterprises in Viet Nam and destination country/territory, as well as deposits. This implies that surveyed international migrant workers generally needed to work for seven months to recuperate their migration costs. The survey found that the average migration costs for recruitment via official channels was often higher than those of unofficial channels. However, the lower costs for migration through unofficial channels come with higher risks of unethical recruitment and labour exploitation, particularly when international migrant workers do not hold regular status in destination countries/ territories, which further places them in vulnerable situations.

Regarding employment rights and entitlements in destination countries/territories, there were clear differences between contracted migrant workers and those working without an employment contract. In addition to earning less than their contracted counterparts, international migrant workers without a contract sent fewer remittances and were exposed to higher risks of dismissal and labour and

human rights abuses. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a higher number of contracted international migrant workers received COVID-19 related support from their employers and governments in destination countries/ territories than those without a contract.

The pandemic had a direct socioeconomic impact on international migrant workers and their families. The loss of income caused by reduced working hours, temporary work suspension and dismissal prevented international migrant workers from repaying the initial debts incurred to facilitate their migration before the pandemic. This led to further indebtedness among many surveyed returned international migrant workers, especially those who have migrated for less than one year. Upon return, nearly half of the respondents acknowledged difficulty in finding employment in Viet Nam, especially jobs that match their skill profiles post-migration and salary expectations. Consequently, almost 95 per cent of the surveyed households experienced a reduction in income, where half reported that their household incomes were reduced by more than 60 per cent, causing some households to fall within or below Viet Nam's multidimensional poverty line. The vast majority of returned international migrant workers in this study or their families did not receive any support from the government or local authorities, while a small number of workers (10.5%) received government assistance in the form of COVID-19 relief packages, social insurance or unemployment support.

The study also highlights the gendered patterns of migration and the challenges faced by women international migrant workers. This study found that women were overrepresented among those who opted to seek employment overseas through unofficial recruitment channels, which placed them at a higher risk of exploitation during recruitment, employment and return. Compared to men, the number of surveyed women migrant workers presented in the lowest income group was high, largely due to the sector of employment (caregivers, domestic workers and services), and because many women were employed in informal sectors including self-employment. Last, upon return to Viet Nam, the levels of unemployment and underemployment were higher among women respondents than among men.

Many returned international migrant workers expressed their intention to remigrate, both internationally and internally within Viet Nam. This linked to several factors including the prevalence of debt among the surveyed returned international migrant workers, as well as difficulties in finding jobs that match their salary expectations and skills acquired from overseas employment. Those who wanted to migrate internationally preferred jobs in sectors such as manufacturing, construction and hospitality, while those who wanted to migrate within Viet Nam favoured manufacturing, trade and retail, domestic work and construction. Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea and Japan remain the key destination countries/territories for international migrant workers whereas Bac Ninh, Binh Dong, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi are the preferred destinations for those interested to remigrate within Viet Nam.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief provides evidence-based recommendations for concerned policymakers and state-management agencies to further promote safe labour migration and protection of Vietnamese international migrant workers, particularly through building resilience for a sustainable COVID-19 recovery. The recommendations are divided by migration stages as follows.

Recruitment

Strengthen regular labour migration pathways as prescribed by Law 69, as well as enforcement and monitoring of fair and ethical recruitment practices, by aligning to the [ILO's General Principles](#) and [IRIS Ethical Recruitment Standards](#) to ensure better protection of migrant workers during recruitment through:

- Reviewing existing bilateral labour cooperation agreements between Viet Nam and major destination countries and territories including Taiwan Province of the People's Republic of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea to add provisions on Employer Pay Principles into future bilateral labour agreements and memoranda of understanding.
- Taking measures to prevent illegal collection of fees from migrant workers in exchange for employment. This includes strengthened monitoring of recruitment processes of service enterprises to avoid multiple layers of fees charged by informal intermediaries and brokers at community level.
- Promoting pathways for aspirant international migrant workers to connect directly with service enterprises licensed by MOLISA.

- Delivering outreach campaigns targeting aspirant migrant workers and their families to promote safe and regular migration pathways through regular channels; as well as inform them about the potential risks associated with the use of unofficial recruitment channels and irregular migration, their rights and protections in the jurisdiction of employment, and how to access assistance and grievance mechanisms for labour rights violations.

- Evaluating the feasibility of developing and maintaining an online information hub for international migrant workers that contains relevant legislation governing recruitment and employment issues in Viet Nam, for example Law 69, and key destination countries/territories, as well as relevant policy updates and other information on services to which international migrant workers are entitled to.

Employment

Strengthen cross-border dialogues and the role of relevant organizations in key destination countries and territories to implement support measures for Vietnamese international migrant workers while working in destination countries/territories, including during crisis and emergency situations, through:

- Convening policy dialogues between MOLISA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Vietnamese embassies and consulates in destination countries and territories, and governments of key destination countries and territories to:
 - Review and revise the current government cooperation agreements to allow Vietnamese international migrant workers to change employment while working abroad, especially when the employment is affected by situations such as a pandemic, to avoid migrants becoming irregular.
 - Mainstream gender in policies discussions to better protect women international migrant workers while working abroad, especially those employed in informal sectors such as domestic work.
 - Strengthen available grievance mechanisms to enable access to Vietnamese international migrant workers.
 - Advocate for a more systematic crisis preparedness and response (compensations, social support schemes, accommodation, food, extension of stay and work permit and return arrangements) that is more inclusive of migrants, including Vietnamese international migrant workers, during employment in crisis and repatriation.

- Building the capacity of consular officials in key destination countries and territories (Labour Management Boards, Vietnamese embassies and consulars) to provide timely information on available social and health care services for Vietnamese international migrant workers when needed; as well as provide effective legal aid or referral support to workers if their rights have been violated, and repatriation support in case of crisis and emergency situations.

Return and Reintegration

Strengthen support programmes for returned Vietnamese international migrant workers that are gender-equal and accessible by all workers regardless of their migration status in destination countries/territories and respond to their needs including:

- Enhancing social security programmes for returned international migrant workers, inclusive of irregular migrant workers, to ensure better reintegration of returnees affected by crisis. Support programmes should include:
 - Cash and basic necessities assistance;
 - Health-care and psychological support;
 - Legal aid and referral mechanisms in case of contractual violations with service enterprises licensed by MOLISA, and/or employers in destination countries/territories;
 - Loan extension schemes for banks/ credit institutions for returned international migrant workers who have incurred debts while working abroad.
- Strengthening the existing national database on population and other databases, by adding a database of all returned international migrant workers (both regular and irregular), focusing on information such as gender, skills, work experience and sectors of employment. This would help to develop evidence-based reintegration support programmes that consider skills and experiences that returnees accumulated from overseas employment.
- Facilitating effective and timely nation-wide job-matching for returned international migrant workers by linking them with businesses in Viet Nam. This includes adding returned international migrant workers as beneficiaries of Subproject 3 “Supporting decent work” under the National Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty Reduction, 2021-2025. Attention should be paid to mainstreaming gender in job matching for both men and women, as well as recognition of skills and experience gained from overseas employment.
- Considering low-interest loan programmes for returned international migrant workers impacted by emergency or crisis situations, for example through credit institutions, to support economic development upon return.

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ANNEX: INCOME LEVELS OF VIETNAMESE INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT WORKERS RESPONDENTS, BY SEX AND CONTRACT TYPE

Monthly income	Men	Women	Contracted	Uncontracted	Total
Less than VND 18,120,000	35.9 %	64.3 %	39.1 %	73.9 %	46.5 %
VND 18,121,000 – 26,036,000	33.6 %	25.8 %	35.2 %	14.0 %	30.7 %
VND 26,037,000 – 44,148,000	23.6 %	8.5 %	20.1 %	9.9 %	17.9 %
Over VND 44,149 000	6.9 %	1.4 %	5.6 %	2.2 %	4.9 %
N	809	484	1,021	272	1,293

