

# Use of smugglers on the journey to Thailand among Cambodians and Laotians

This snapshot examines the use of smuggling<sup>1</sup> among Cambodians and Laotians on their journey to Thailand. It examines respondents' reasons for leaving their country of origin, access to smuggling services, and protection incidents experienced en route, as well as the involvement of state officials in smuggling between Cambodia-Thailand and Lao PDR-Thailand.

This snapshot is produced in the context of a partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#).



## Key findings

- Almost all Cambodian respondents (96%) and most Laotian respondents (84%) used smugglers to facilitate their migration to Thailand.
- Laotian respondents primarily migrated in pursuit of economic opportunities (99%). Economic reasons were also prominent among Cambodian respondents (72%) in addition to other factors such as lack of rights and freedoms (31%) and a 'culture of migration' (24%).
- Smuggling dynamics vary significantly between Cambodian and Laotian respondents: Cambodians primarily used smugglers due to a lack of knowledge of alternatives

(79%), while most Laotians were motivated by the perception that using smugglers would be easier (63%).

- Laotian respondents' journeys with smugglers were more organised and indicated active involvement of employers in Thailand in organising the smuggling of prospective Laotian employees.
- Cambodian respondents more often reported the involvement of state officials in smuggling (63%) than Laotian respondents (13%).
- Protection incidents were commonly experienced among Cambodian respondents (particularly women), while few Laotian respondents (2%) reported any dangers.

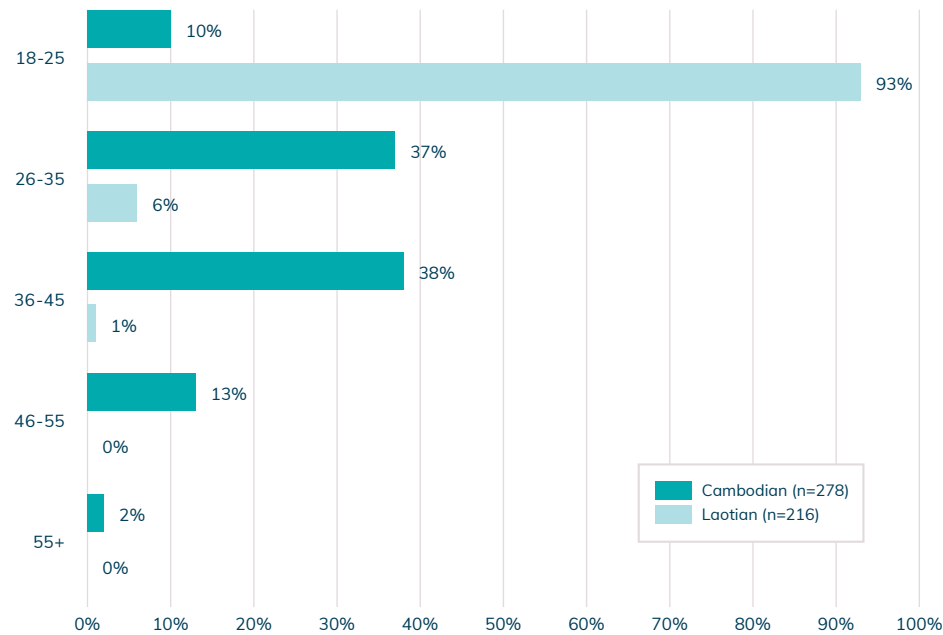
## Profiles

This snapshot draws on data from 494 4Mi surveys collected across Thailand between January and June 2023 among migrants and refugees from Cambodia (n=278) and Lao PDR (n=216). The surveys covered various regions in Thailand. Laotian respondents were distributed across Nakhon Phanom (82%), Nong Khai (8%), Loei (2%), Kalasin (2%), and other regions (6%), while Cambodian respondents were in Bangkok (62%), Pathum Thani (17%), Samut Prakan (6%), Chonburi (6%), Nonthaburi (4%), and other regions (5%). Recruitment of respondents was mainly done through referrals by acquaintances or friends (62%), community leaders (28%), or through other means (10%). The main criterion for recruitment was respondents' time of arrival in Thailand – with all respondents having arrived within the last three years.

Approximately half of Cambodian respondents were male (51%) with a majority (75%) aged between 26 and 45 (see Figure 1). 33% of Cambodian respondents were undocumented, while 31% were in possession of or had applied for a permit / visa, 15% were asylum seekers and 12% were refugees. Among Laotian respondents, 65% of respondents were male and the majority of respondents (93%) were aged 18-25. Almost all Laotian respondents (96%) were undocumented.

1 MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', one which encompasses various activities — paid for or otherwise compensated by refugees and migrants — that facilitate irregular migration. These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation, and accommodation. This approach reflects refugees' and migrants' perceptions of smuggling and the facilitation of irregular movement. Our interpretation is deliberately broader than the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants definition. However, this does not imply that MMC considers all activities it includes in its broad understanding of smuggling to be criminal offences. MMC prefers to use the term 'human smuggling' instead of 'migrant smuggling' as smuggling involves both refugees and migrants. This publication is produced in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#). The Observatory uses the word 'smuggler' when it can reasonably be assumed that the crime of migrant smuggling is constituted, as per Article 3 of the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, while the word 'facilitator' is used whenever the elements of (a) irregular entry and/or (b) financial or material benefit, could reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence.

**Figure 1. Age distribution by nationality**



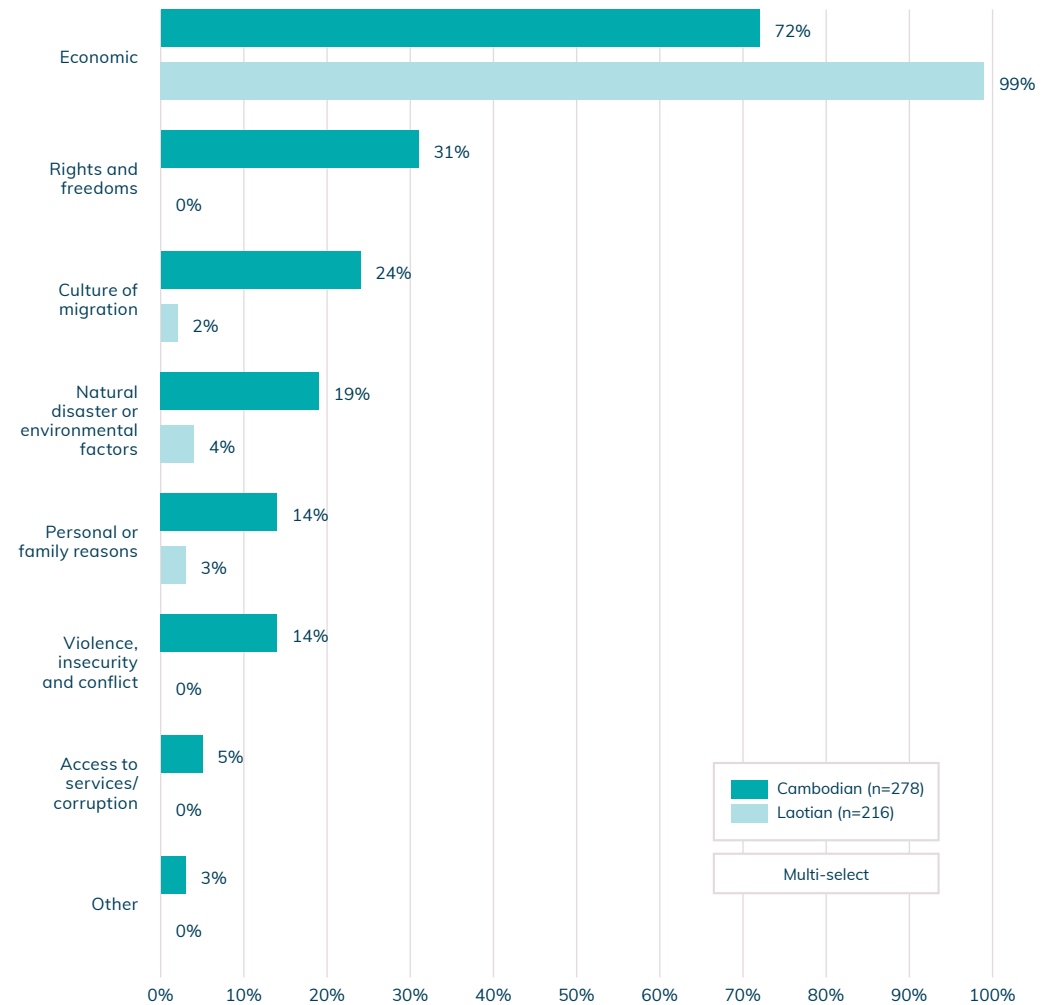
## Economic drivers dominate, however Cambodians also leave for other reasons

There is a long history of labour migration into Thailand from neighbouring countries, including Cambodia and Lao PDR.<sup>2</sup> Thailand provides economic opportunities in the agricultural, construction, manufacturing and service industries, with relatively higher wages attracting migrants and refugees from Cambodia and Lao PDR who are grappling with rising levels of poverty, high inflation, and declining income levels in their countries of origin. The challenges of COVID-19 have only exacerbated these difficulties.<sup>3</sup>

Almost all Laotian (99%) and a majority of Cambodian (72%) respondents cited economic reasons for leaving their country of origin (see Figure 2), in line with this analysis. Cambodian respondents reported a more diverse range of reasons for leaving compared

to Laotians, including a lack of rights and freedoms (31%), a 'culture of migration' (24%), natural disasters or environmental factors (19%), personal or family reasons (14%), and violence, insecurity and conflict (14%). The variety of reasons for leaving among Cambodian respondents also corresponds with the diversity of immigration status, mentioned above.

**Figure 2. For what reasons did you leave your country of origin?**



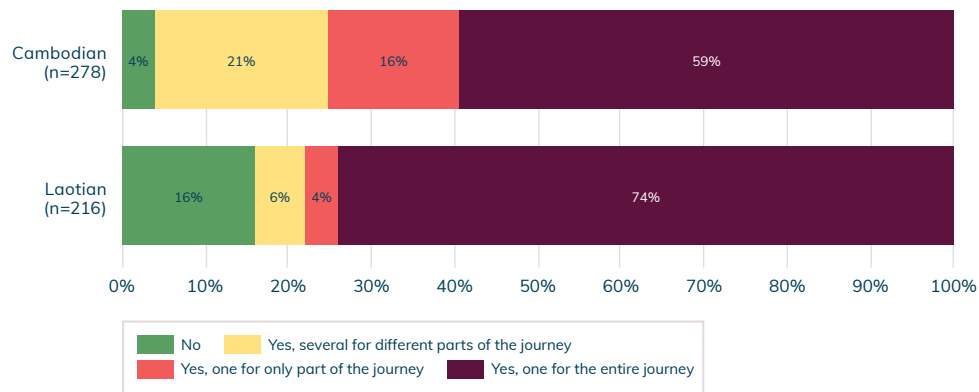
2 IOM (2021) [An Analysis of Migration Trends of Lao Migrants for Lao People's Democratic Republic in Two Selected Provinces: Savannakhet and Xayaboury](#); IOM (2018) [Assessing the Potential Changes in the Migration Patterns of Cambodian Migrants and their Impacts on Thailand and Cambodia](#).  
 3 The World Bank (2022) [New Financing to Support Cambodia's Economic Recovery and Long-Term Resilience](#); The World Bank (2023) [Lao Economic Monitor, May 2023: Addressing Economic Uncertainty – Key Findings](#).

## A majority of respondents used smugglers, for a range of reasons

Despite the existence of MoUs on labour migration between Cambodia, Lao PDR and Thailand, regular migration pathways into Thailand remain expensive, inaccessible and lengthy, resulting in the large majority of Cambodians and Laotians migrating into Thailand via irregular means.<sup>4</sup> 96% of Cambodian and 84% of Laotian respondents reported using smugglers to facilitate their journey to Thailand (see Figure 3).

The motivation for using smugglers differed between Cambodian and Laotian respondents. Cambodian respondents primarily used smugglers because they were unaware of alternative means to migrate (79%), while most Laotian respondents opted for smuggler services because they thought it would be easier (63%). In both cases, friends' or family's recommendations played a role, with 38% of Cambodian respondents reporting the use of smugglers on the recommendation of friends or family in the diaspora, and 31% of Laotian respondents received similar recommendations from friends or family in Lao PDR.

**Figure 3. Did you use a smuggler?**



4 Domingo, P. & Siripatthanakoso, K. (2023) [Labour migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking and labour exploitation in Southeast Asia: An analysis of Thailand](#). ODI and Xayamoungkhoun, S. & Harkins, B. (2023) [Precarious pathways: Migration patterns and service needs of Lao migrant workers](#) ILO.

## Laotian respondents were most commonly contacted directly by smugglers; Cambodians were introduced by friends or family

Smuggling dynamics appear to differ between journeys from Lao PDR and Cambodia. More Cambodian respondents used smugglers for only portions of the journey (Figure 3) and 72% established contact with their smuggler through friends or family members (see Figure 4). This aligns with research which indicates that Cambodian migrant workers rely on friends and family present in Thailand for information on jobs and connections to recruitment agents and brokers.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, more Laotian respondents used one smuggler for the entire journey, and the majority (71%) were approached directly by smugglers (via phone). This trend could be attributed to the travel arrangements for Laotian migrant workers, which typically occur after they have secured employment opportunities in Thailand through their contacts, including brokers, family or friends in Thailand.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, after the worker and a prospective employer in Thailand have reached an agreement, the employer may arrange the smuggling journey for the migrant, as noted by one respondent:

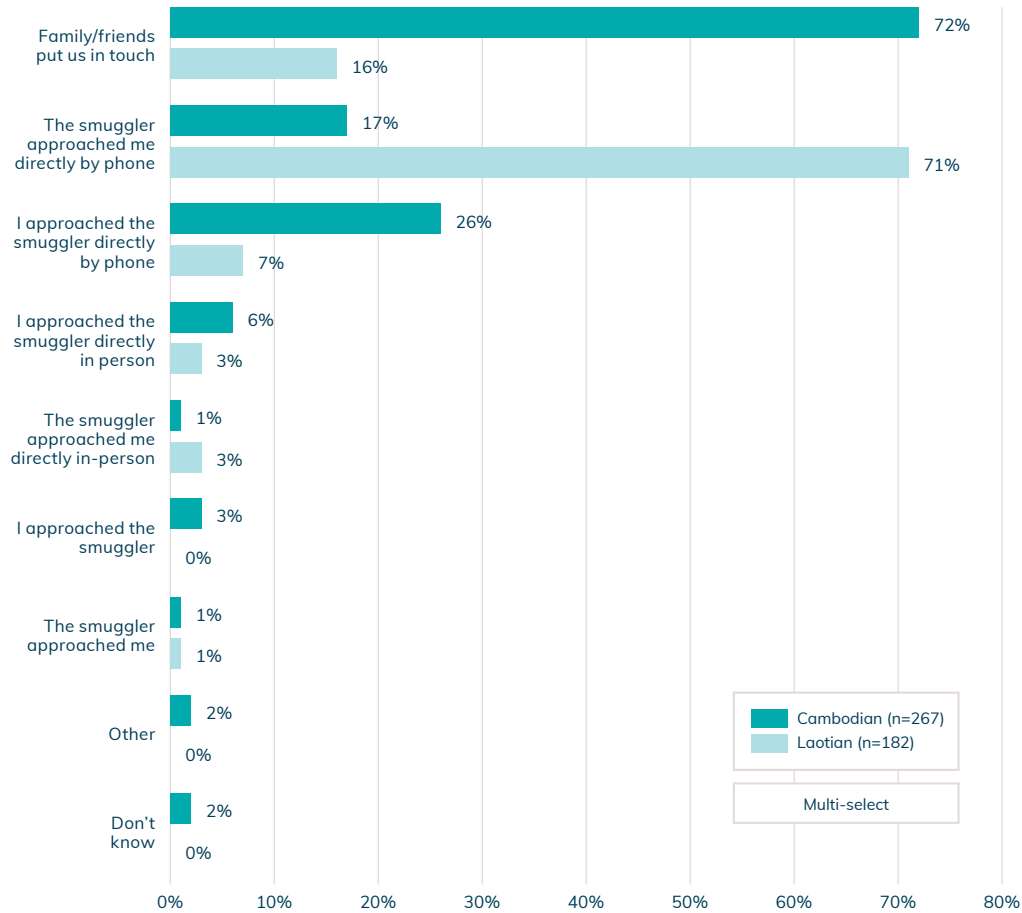
*"My sister worked on a tobacco farm in Thailand. She said the employer will arrange for my journey to Thailand, and I can start working on the farm too. I did not have to organise anything. The smuggler contacted me."*

**Female Laotian respondent, 36 years old, interviewed in Thailand**

5 Chairattana, S. & Khanawiwat, T. (2020) [The Report on the Route of Migration from Myanmar and Cambodia to Thailand](#) Plan International Thailand.

6 Xayamoungkhoun, S. & Harkins, B. (2023) [Precarious pathways: Migration patterns and service needs of Lao migrant workers](#) ILO.

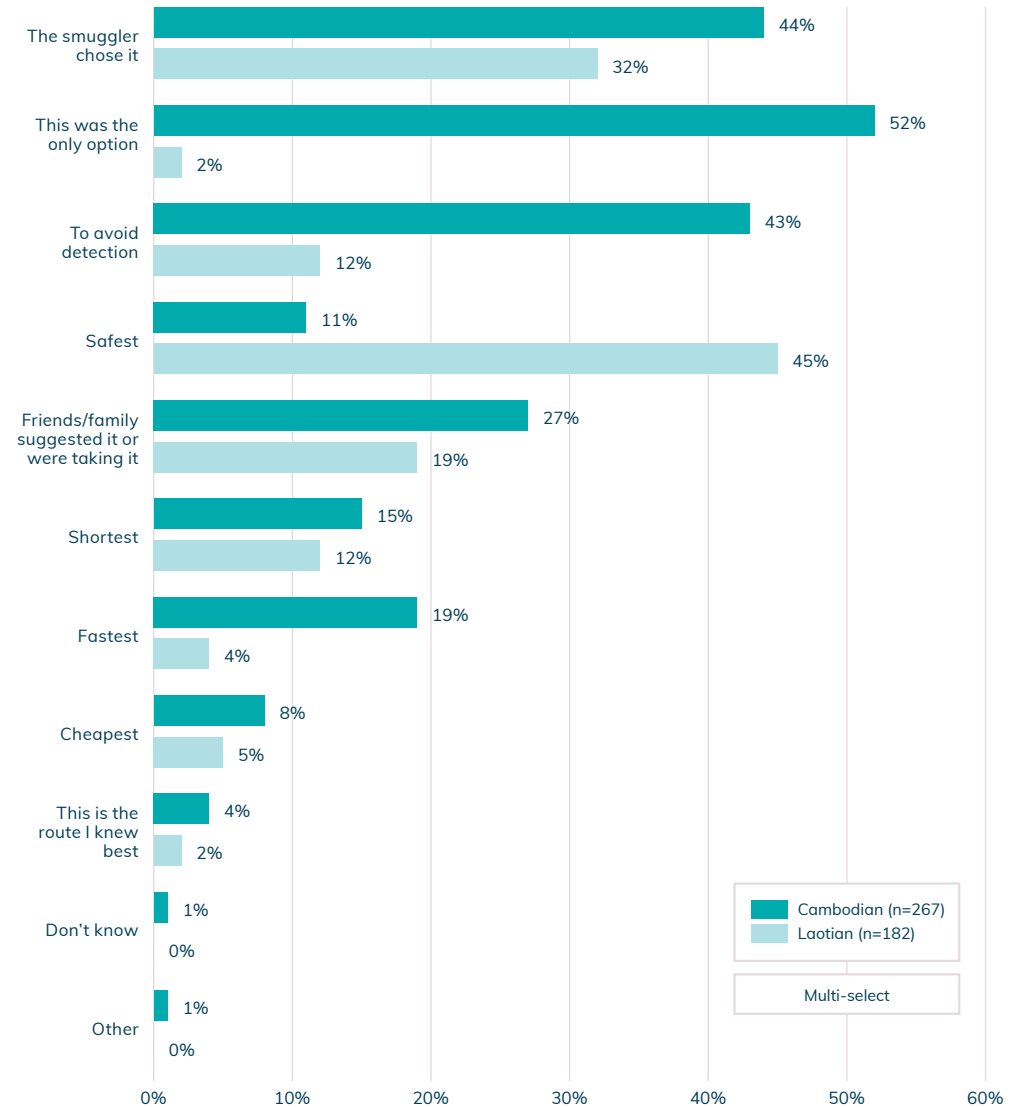
**Figure 4. How did you get in contact with your initial smuggler?**



## Smugglers are influential in route selection

Reasons for choosing migration routes varied between Cambodian and Laotian respondents. Smugglers played a significant role in selecting the migration route, with this reason coming second among both Cambodians (44%) and Laotians (32%). Cambodian respondents also reported choosing a route because it was the only option available to them (52%), and to avoid detection (43%), among other reasons. On the other hand, safety (45%) was the most frequently cited reason among Laotian respondents (see Figure 5). This indicates that Laotian respondents had a higher degree of agency in route selection.

**Figure 5. Why did you choose this route?**

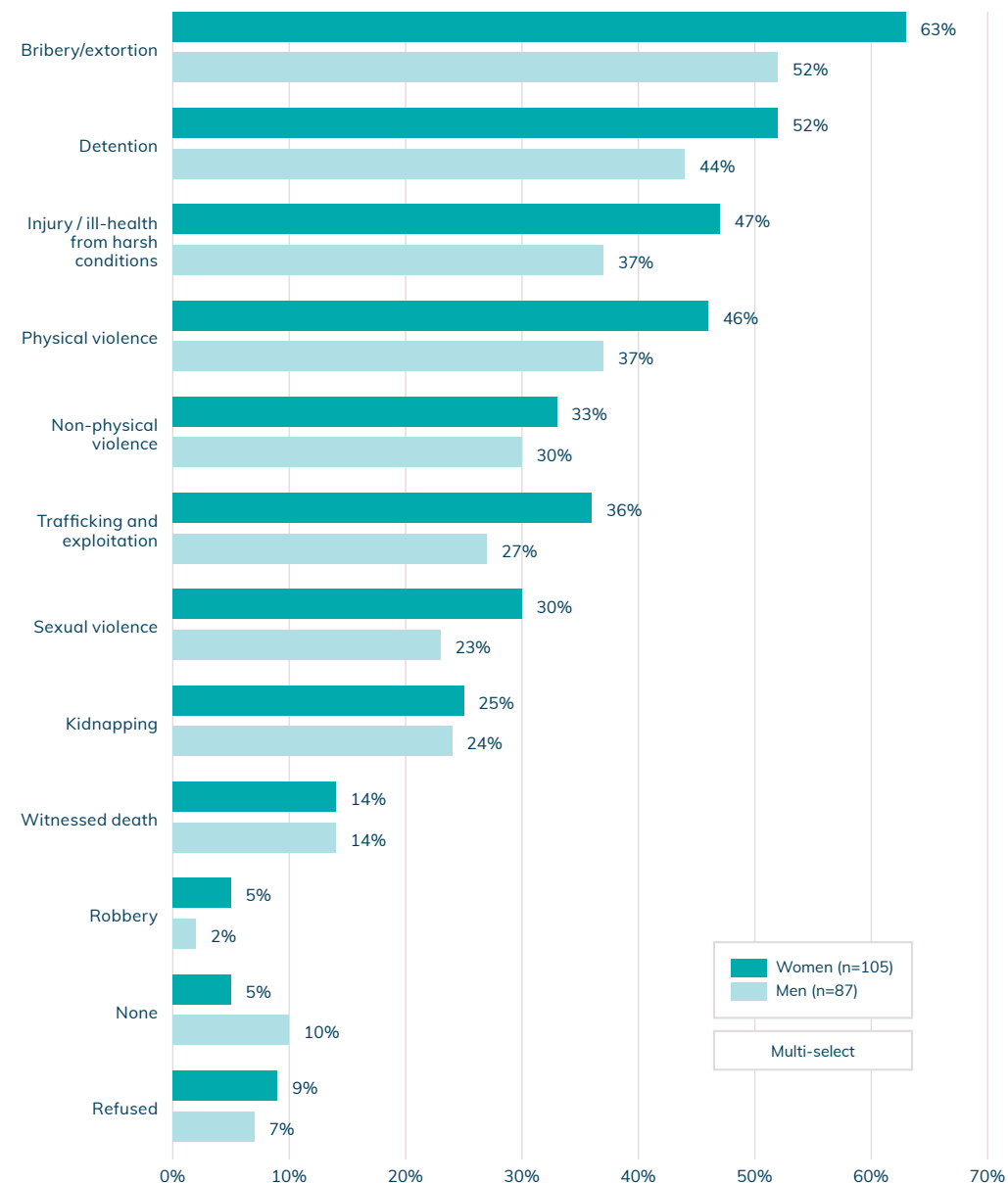


## Protection incidents are common among Cambodian respondents, but rare among Laotians

More than two-thirds of Cambodian respondents (69%, n=192) reported encountering dangers while en route to Thailand. Among these respondents, 57% had personally experienced bribery or extortion en route (see next section). Detention (47%), injury or ill-health from harsh conditions (42%) and physical violence (41%) were also frequently reported. It is worth noting that a higher proportion of women said they experienced all protection incidents as compared to men (see Figure 6).

In contrast, Laotian respondents rarely reported experiencing or witnessing protection incidents – 98% did not report any dangerous location on their journey. Among those who did (n=4), two respondents reported being detained en route and two respondents reported experiencing protection incidents but declined to specify further. This result among Laotian respondents contrasts with evidence among other migrant populations that using smugglers is linked to increased risk of protection incidents,<sup>7</sup> and is worthy of further exploration.

**Figure 6. Have you personally experienced any of these types of incidents on your journey? (Cambodian respondents)<sup>8</sup>**



7 Mixed Migration Centre (2021) [Smuggling, risks, and abuses: smuggler services and links to abuses](#); Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Protection risks among Afghan, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Chin and Rohingya people in Malaysia](#).

8 Only respondents who report dangers on the route are asked whether they experienced incidents. Only four Laotian respondents reported incidents en route, so their experiences were presented in the text.

## The majority of Cambodian respondents report state officials' involvement in their smuggling

The majority of Cambodian respondents (63%) reported that state officials were involved in or facilitated the smuggling of migrants during their journey, in comparison to only 13% among Laotian respondents, and 57% personally experienced bribery or extortion. Corruption of border guards, police and other officials at the Cambodia-Thailand and Lao PDR-Thailand borders is widespread.<sup>9</sup> Among Cambodian respondents who were in contact with public officials (45%), only 6% did not pay a bribe. Most reported paying a bribe to military guards (53%), police at a border crossing point (49%), passport and visa officials (8%), other police (not at a border crossing point, 7%).

In comparison, only 4% of Laotian respondents (n=8) reported being in contact with public officials. Among them, two reported paying a bribe to police (not at a border crossing point), and one respondent reported paying a bribe to other immigration officials. Given the possibility that corruption facilitates smuggling of migrants at the Lao PDR-Thailand, the payment and acceptance of bribes happens through smugglers, without the direct involvement of migrants and refugees.

## Conclusion

Although most respondents across both groups used services of smugglers to facilitate their migration into Thailand, the dynamics of smuggling appear to be very different. In the case of Cambodians, a higher proportion reported engaging several smugglers throughout their journey, with friends and family members playing an important role in initiating contact between them and smugglers. Smugglers more often chose the migration route. Cambodian respondents came into contact with officials more frequently throughout their journeys and were more exposed to instances of bribery, extortion, and the involvement of state officials in smuggling, compared to Laotians. The journey proved to be more dangerous for Cambodians, in particular Cambodian women, with a variety of protection incidents cited including bribery, extortion, detention and injury or ill-health from harsh conditions.

In the case of Laotians, smugglers more frequently initiated contact and respondents most often travelled with one smuggler for the entire journey. This may be linked

to the lack of respondents' contact with officials and lack of reporting bribery. While some said the smuggler chose the route, many also said they chose the route based on what was safest. Notably, the selected route was relatively safe, with few reporting protection incidents en route. In sum, it appears that the Laotian respondents' journeys with smugglers were more organised, with the smuggler playing a very active role, and indications of the active involvement of employers in Thailand in organising the smuggling of their future Laotian employees.



## 4Mi data collection

[4Mi](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at:

[www.mixedmigration.org/4mi](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)

<sup>9</sup> UNODC (2017) [Trafficking in Persons from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar to Thailand](#).