



# Under the shadow: Forced labour among sea fishers in Thailand



Supang Chantavanich<sup>a,\*</sup>, Samarn Laodumrongchai<sup>a</sup>, Christina Stringer<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Asian Research Center for Migration Institute for Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

<sup>b</sup> Department of Management and International Business, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

Thailand's fishing industry relies almost exclusively on migrant workers to fill its hazardous, low-paying jobs. Recently, the industry has come under increased scrutiny due to the prevalence of forced labour and illegal fishing practices. This paper discusses the findings of a large-scale survey ( $n=596$ ) undertaken with fishers – Thai, Cambodian and Myanmar – in four coastal provinces in Thailand. The majority of fishers worked on short-haul vessels in the wild-capture sector. Using the indicators developed by the International Labour Organizations Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour, 16.9% ( $n=101$ ) of respondents identified as being victims of forced labour for human trafficking. The survey results give important insight into the existence of deceptive and coercive recruitment practices, exploitative working conditions, and forced labour in the fishing industry. A concerted approach by governments and buyers is needed to eliminate forced labour practices.

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## 1. Introduction

In June 2015, the *Daily Mail* reported on how Myint Naig, a Burmese fisherman, had spent 22 years forced to work on a Thai fishing boat in Indonesia, during which time he suffered extreme mental and physical abuse. The story was eerily reminiscent of media coverage of other Burmese and Cambodian fishers, also forced to work on Thai boats catching shrimp, squid, tuna, and other fruits of the sea. On board these vessels, many migrant fishers were subjected to frequent beatings, and who were starved, denied wages and on sold. Some fishers were killed or thrown overboard [7,14,26,34,]. Such abuse is not solely targeted at migrant workers as Thai fishers themselves have also been victims of forced labour abuses [20].

Thailand's seafood industry makes a key contribution to its economic development. Thailand produces in the vicinity of 3.8 million tons of seafood every year; 71% of which is destined for export markets [12]. Over the last four decades, the industry has experienced significant growth and today ranks third after China and Norway in terms of exports of fish and fishery products [13]. However, the majority of exports are aquaculture products or fish products, which are imported for processing and then re-exported. The wild-capture sector is characterized by over-fishing as well as illegal fishing practices, which has resulted in the degradation of

fish stocks. Fishing operators are increasingly catching low value or juvenile fish to feed, in part, the demand for the aquaculture sector. Faced with reduced revenues, operators continually seek to reduce operating costs and according to the Environmental Justice Foundation ([11], 6) “the collapse of fishing stocks in Thailand's marine capture fisheries has directly contributed to the widespread use of modern slavery”. The industry relies almost exclusively on irregular migrant workers-especially those from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar – to fill its hazardous, low-paying jobs. The working conditions many migrant workers experience in Thailand's fishing industry are such that fishers are often referred to as victims of human trafficking for forced labour. Phil Robertson, the Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch's Asia Division, views forced labour as being systemic in the industry, and the relationship between migrant fishers and the Thai boat captains who buy them as “predatory” [14]. In recent months, Thailand's management of its fishing industry has come under increased international scrutiny due to the prevalence of forced labour as well as illegal fishing practices.

While media reports, importantly, capture readers' attention, they are not a substitute for in depth empirical research. Such reports do not unpack the frameworks within which the working conditions and labour exploitation occurs and do not provide sufficient and robust empirical data to inform policies in the fishing industry on how to minimise or eradicate the abuse of fishers. This is the purpose of this empirically-motivated paper. The paper presents the findings of a large-scale survey detailing the employment practices and working conditions in the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [chansupang@gmail.com](mailto:chansupang@gmail.com) (S. Chantavanich), [Samarn.L@chula.ac.th](mailto:Samarn.L@chula.ac.th) (S. Laodumrongchai), [c.stringer@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:c.stringer@auckland.ac.nz) (C. Stringer).

commercial fishing sector in four coastal provinces in Thailand. The findings are based on a joint research project between the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Asian Research Center for Migration at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand [18].

The paper is set out as follows: the Section 2 discusses the trajectory to forced labour in the fishing industry. This section is followed by an overview of research methods. In total 596 fishers were surveyed, the majority of whom worked on short-haul vessels operating in Thailand's waters. The key findings of the study are then presented in Section 4 where the recruitment of the fishers along with working conditions on board the vessels are discussed. There is evidence that forced labour is occurring particularly in the long-haul sector. Section 5 comprises a discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Forced labour practices in the fishing industry

Increased global competition within the fishing industry due, in part, to over-fishing and declining fish stocks has resulted in fishing operators reducing operating costs in order to remain competitive. Further, commodity-oriented global value chains (GVCs), such as fishing, are dominated by lead firms, who pressure suppliers to maximise supply and who “can transmit commercial pressures on conditions of price and supply along the length of value chains” ([24], 251). Many fishing operators “consider cost savings on crews from developing countries to be a legitimate lever in achieving competitive rates” ([19], 24). Such pressures can exacerbate conditions for labour. In Crane's [6] view “primary industries that have become uncompetitive because of low market prices ... might perceive the necessity of coerced labor brought as close as possible to zero cost to survive”. Fishing companies across the globe are increasingly relying on migrant labour from developing countries, particularly in Asia. Thailand is no exception.

According to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2011) forced labour is prevalent in labour-intensive stages of production in industries incorporated into GVCs, including fishing. In recent years there has been an emerging body of research into forced labour practices in the fishing industry (see for example: [8,17,27,29,30–32,36]). The ILO Convention No. 29 (1930) defines forced labour as “all work or service that is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily” (Article 2(1)) ([16], 5). There are two key components to this definition: (1) menace of penalty; and (2) lack of consent. The ILO recognises that “many victims enter forced labour situations initially out of their own choice, albeit through fraud and deception, only to discover later that they are not free to withdraw their labour” ([16], 6).

### 2.1. Trajectory to forced labour

Forced labour can take different forms and can occur at different stages within the labour chain: for example at the entry stage, during the labour process, and/or at the exit stage [3,29]. A feature of contemporary labour practices is the use of labour brokers at the recruitment stage – this can involve multiple layers of networks including formal and informal or unregistered intermediaries accessing a cheap and ready source of labour in developing countries. According to Verite ([35], 4) the use of “labor brokers brings with it troubling issues of fragmented and opaque social accountability” thereby increasing the risk of workers entering into forced labour chains. In the fishing industry, the employment arrangement is often facilitated by brokers who supply labour to the fishing vessels. The brokers require workers to pay a recruitment fee and many migrant workers enter into debt

bondage in order to pay this fee; a situation described by O'Neill [22] as “compulsion by necessity”. They borrow from a variety of sources, including the broker themselves, and agree to pay the debt over time. Robertson [25] highlights “a direct connection between this kind of “travel now, pay later” system and the trafficking of men onto fishing boats.”

While there are labour brokers who abide by regulations and acceptable standards and practices, there are also those who are perpetrators of labour abuses. The latter will typically target inexperienced and vulnerable individuals to work on fishing vessels [21]. The labour supply chains are such that fishers can be hired through a cascade system of unscrupulous intermediaries, which “provides space...to extract economic rent from vulnerable workers through coercive practices involving debt bondage and entrapment” ([2], 4). Robertson [25] found that due to the difficulty in recruiting workers willing to work in the fishing industry “many of the brokers involved in recruiting fishermen are also involved in human trafficking”.

Work in the industry can be extremely hazardous. Officers will use abuse and coercion in order to maximise labour productivity. Severe human rights abuses – physical, psychological and sexual – are common in many aspects of the fishing industry [8,19,21,27,36]. Crew members can be subjected to substandard living conditions, including the lack of basic necessities such as drinking water, food, clean bedding and hygienic facilities. Long working hours are common, with extreme shifts being reported; and commonly fishers are only permitted short breaks of 3–4 h [9,27].

While fishers may voluntarily enter into an employment agreement, they can subsequently find they were deceived and in actuality are in a forced labour situation. Once employed, they can be threatened with a “runaway insurance” being imposed if they leave their employment before the completion of their contract [29,32]. Their ability to leave is often “precluded by the continual and overriding threat of destitution” ([24], 247) or through violence or threats of violence which “can be considered a ‘menace of penalty’ under the definition of forced labour, because they instill fear into people to remain at work” ([23], 84). Thus deception, coercion and vulnerability can occur along the labour chain from recruitment through until the exit stage [22,28,29]. Importantly Barrientos et al. [3] contends that it is the “unfreedom at the point of exit” that is critical to understanding the nature of forced labour (see also [24]).

### 2.2. Forced labour practices in the Thai fishing industry

The most widely reported cases of forced labour practices in the fishing industry globally have occurred in the Thai fishing industry. Such cases have most often been reported in the media (cf [1,5,14]) or in studies undertaken by researchers for inter-governmental organisations (IGOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (cf [4,8,10,15,17,23,25,33]). Thailand is a major destination country for migrant workers – both documented and undocumented – of which many migrate under extremely precarious conditions that make them vulnerable to forced labour intermediaries ([4,18,23]). Pearson [23] found that the majority of migrants enter Thailand through the use of informal agents and are thus classed as undocumented migrants. Robertson [25], in an International Organization for Migration (IOM) report, detailed the recruitment, living and working conditions of fishers in the Thai fisheries industry and their trajectory into forced labour. Each of these authors described forced labour practices in the Thai fishing industry that occur on a continuum from recruitment through to rescue.

However, with few exceptions, in-depth academic research on migrant fishers in Thailand is limited. A notable exception—in

terms of both depth of ethnographic detail and theoretical framing of the issue—is a paper by Annuska Derks [9] on Cambodian fishers working on Thai boats. Derks documents the experiences of Cambodian migrants working as fishers in Thailand arguing that

the portrayal of these individuals as “victims of trafficking” or “victims of forced labour” misses the complexity of migrant worker mobility and employer relations, which are bound by different circumstances at each stage of employment on a fishing

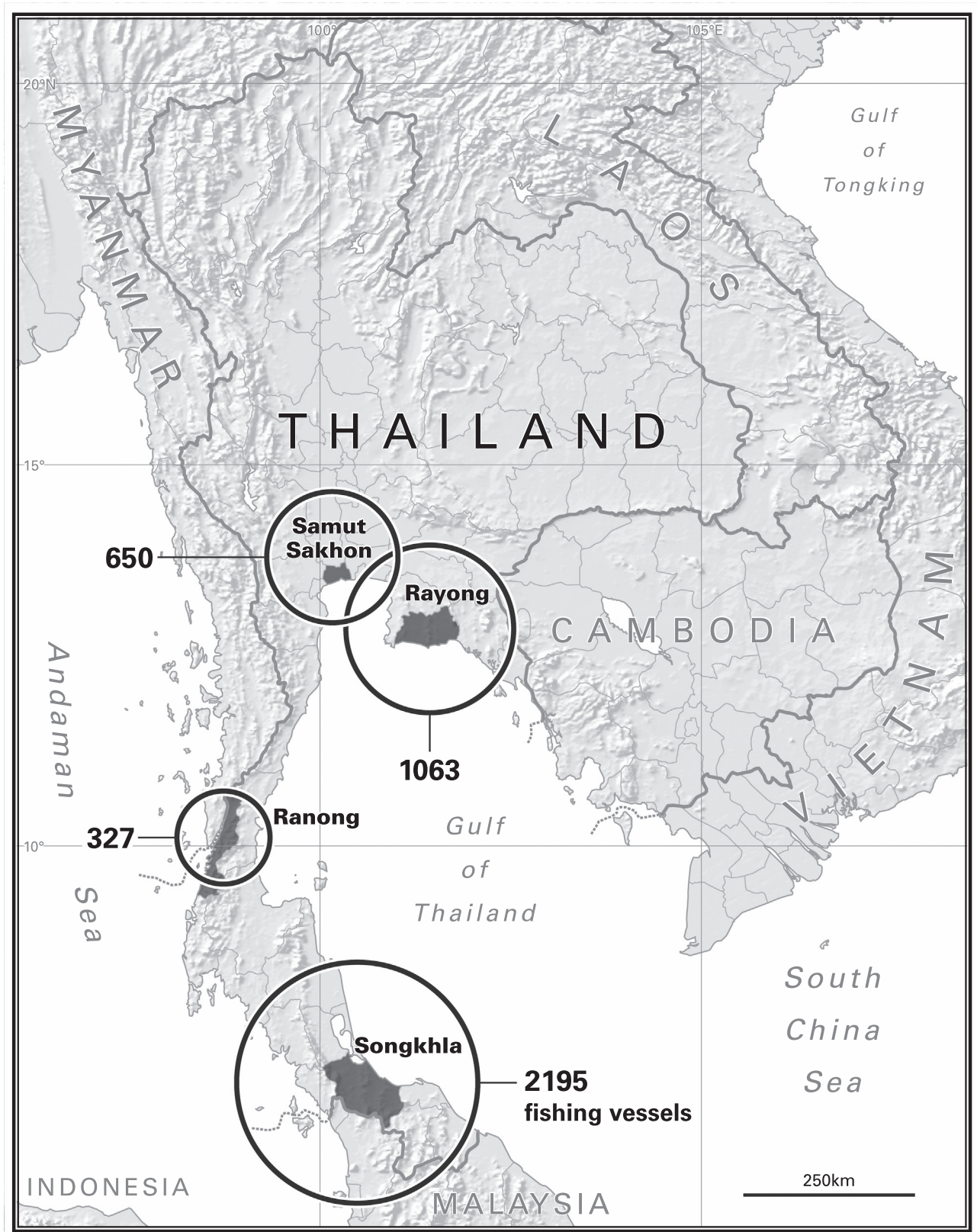


Fig. 1. Data collection sites.



boat. Her research illustrates the opposing tensions that lead to the “immobilization” of such migrants within a competitive system, given both the costs and shifting mechanisms for official registration of migrant workers in Thailand and the need for an employer to establish control over their movements so as to maintain a productive workforce. Whereas migrants may tend to be transient in an industry characterized by harsh and dangerous working conditions, employers who have invested in them (e.g., via sponsorship for temporary work permissions in Thailand or arranging for protection from police raids) may utilise control of movement, withholding of pay, and confiscation of identity documents as means to ensure a consistent labour force with minimal trouble from authorities. Through this lens, Derks argues for a more nuanced interpretation of labour in the fishing industry, framing the starting point of analysis to that of “bonded labour” rather than making an immediate leap to “human trafficking” or “forced labour”. The next section discusses research methods.

### 3. Research methods

A questionnaire developed by researchers at the Asian Research Center for Migration at Chulalongkorn University, in collaboration with the ILO's Bangkok Office, was used to interview the fishers. The research was undertaken in consultation with number of stakeholders including the Thai Ministry of Labour, the Department of Fisheries, the National Fisheries Association of Thailand, the Thailand Overseas Fishing Association. The questionnaire was administered to Myanmar, Thai and Cambodian fishers, in four coastal provinces in Thailand: Rayong, Samut Sakhon, Ranong and Songkhla (see Fig. 1). In total 596 fishers were interviewed and completed the survey. The fishers were selected using stratified, accidental sampling according to province and nationality to ensure coverage of the composition of major groups of migrant and Thai fishers in the industry. Rayong is a fishing town near the Cambodian border where Cambodian migrant sea fishers are employed predominately in fisheries. Samut Sakhon, Ranong and Songkhla provinces are host to more migrant fishers from Myanmar as they are situated near the Myanmar border. Workers from both short-haul ( $n=490$ ) and long-haul ( $n=106$ ) fishing boats were included in the sample.

The fishers were surveyed between March and July 2012, with additional data collection through December 2012. In total, 306 Myanmar, 241 Cambodian, and 49 Thai fishing crew were interviewed. Fishers were recruited from docked fishing boats and around dock areas. The interviews were conducted in private (e.g., at nearby coffee shops or at private residences), away from the influence of others on the vessel, and in the interviewee's native language with the help of interpreters. Further, ten in-depth interviews were undertaken with government officials from the Ministry of Labour, National Police, Ministry of Transport and other related ministries. Civil society groups who work to protect workers' rights and representatives of Sea Fisher Associations were also interviewed. The researchers used the qualitative responses primarily to give depth and comparison to the quantitative data.

The study faced a key limitation. It proved difficult to access fishers from the long-haul vessels due to the long periods they spend at sea and the fact that their schedules for returning to shore are uncertain. Thus more fishers from short-haul fishing boats were interviewed. Moreover, when the long-haul boats do reach shore, officials are not necessarily notified, as these boats are not always members of Thailand Overseas Fishing Association or the National Fisheries Association of Thailand. It is likely that those fishers at sea for longer periods are more likely to be in exploitative working conditions because of limited interactions with

others and limited opportunities to complain or escape. These are perhaps the most vulnerable of the workers.

### 4. Employment practices in Thailand's fishing industry

In this section, the profile of the fishers is presented before a discussion on recruitment strategies and working conditions on the vessels. The section then analyses the findings in terms of deceptive and coercive labour practices, which can be considered indicators of forced labour.

#### 4.1. Profile of fishers

The type of work performed by fishers in the Thai fishing industry can be broken down into short-haul fishing, which occurs near the coast with typically less than one month spent at sea, and long-haul deep sea fishing, wherein the vessels are at sea for more than a month. Over 80% of the respondents were short-haul fishers, nearly two-thirds (63.7%) of whom worked on purse seine net boats. Nearly half of the long-haul fishers worked on single or twin-trawlers. More than half (55%) of the fishers interviewed possessed no documentation, while 34% had begun the process for regularisation which entails a nationality verification process needed to apply for a work permit. The remaining migrant fishers held a temporary travel document. Of the 55% of migrant fishers who possessed no documents, the primary explanation was that their employers had not registered them, or would not allow them to register as boat owners were reluctant to pay the costs of registration due the high turnover of crew members. 15% of those with no documentation, who *had* attempted to register with the government, had been unable to do so before the registration deadline.

Over half of all the fishers (51%) were between the ages of 18–28 years old, thus reflecting the physical nature of the work being performed. Only 15% of the fishers were over the age of 40. Migrant workers formed a sizeable majority in all age groups. The study found 33 cases of child labour – those 17 years and younger – according to Thai law and the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188). Seven of the fishers were younger than 15 years and the remaining 26 aged between 15 and 17 – this age category represents a grey area in regards to child labour. Thailand's Ministry of Labour's Ministerial Regulation No. 10 on Sea Fisheries Work (1998) stipulates that persons under 16 years of age may only work on fishing boats if either accompanied by or having the written consent of a parent or guardian. The majority of children were from Myanmar.

The vast majority of the fishers interviewed were deck hands ( $n=493$ , 82.7%), with the remaining 17.3% holding senior crew positions. All semi-skilled or senior positions were held by Thai nationals. Job mobility in the fishing sector was very high – over two-thirds of all fishers had worked for their current employer for less than one year. Just over one-third of the respondents had worked in fishing for less than one year and 32% had one to five years of experience working in the industry. Only 10.7% of fishers had worked in the industry for more than ten years; senior crew made up the majority of these fishers (57%).

#### 4.2. Recruitment of fishers

There are three methods through which fishers are recruited. First, through brokers in the migrant's country of origin or in Thailand. The brokers either charged an upfront fee or deducted a recruitment fee from the fisher's wages until the amount owed was paid in full. Fees varied from THB2000 to 20,000 (US\$660–6660). Furthermore, brokers received a commission from the

**Table 1**  
Recruitment practices.

| Recruitment method             | Total (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Broker in home village         | 26.4      |
| Friend in home community       | 13.1      |
| Broker in Thailand             | 3.2       |
| Friend in Thailand             | 4.6       |
| Found work by himself          | 37.4      |
| Came with family/employer/crew | 12.1      |
| No response                    | 3.2       |
| Total                          | 100.0     |

employers for recruiting workers. Second, employers recruit through brokers and bear the cost of recruitment (as opposed to the migrants) themselves. Third, migrants find work through social networks including friends and acquaintances who have worked in the fishing industry.

Our findings show that brokers and social networks play a central role in the recruitment of fishers. While 37% of fishers found employment by themselves, nearly 30% were recruited through brokers (see Table 1). The majority of fishers who used broker services (72.5%) paid their brokers up front, with only 24% having the recruitment fees deducted from their monthly wages. For one fisher his wages were fully withheld until the broker's debt was paid. For 69 of those fishers who paid the brokers fee up front, making this up front payment was only possible through securing a loan. The majority obtained loans from their employer (40.6%) and a smaller number turned to family (24.6%) and brokers (15.9%). Such arrangements with employers and brokers may be indicative of debt bondage situations, depending on the terms of repayment.

#### 4.3. Working Conditions

The findings showed that fishers usually worked long hours on both long-haul and short-haul boats (see Table 2); thus corroborating Derks' [9] earlier study. A quarter of fishers reported working 17–24 h per day and almost half of the fishers (41.1%) had indefinite working hours. According to local law and the ILO Convention No. 188, workers on board vessels fishing for more than three days should receive a minimum of 10 h rest in any 24-h period, and 77 h in any seven-day period. The Convention allows for some flexibility in cases where fishing operations must continue, but time worked must be compensated. Over one-third of fishers (36.6%) were typically allowed less than five hours of rest in each 24-h period. At the other end of the scale, 37.1% reported resting for indeterminate periods of time each day.

Sea fishing is not included under Thailand's Labour Protection Law due to the unique characteristics of the industry. The mean wage of fishers in the study was US\$216 per month. Nearly half of the fishers (47.7%) received a monthly salary of less than US\$167, which in turn is less than half the average monthly salary for Thai nationals of US\$417 (in 2010) (National Statistical Office, 2012). While the Thai minimum wage does not apply to fishing, the minimum wage in the four provinces during the study period was,

**Table 2**  
Working hours.

| Amount    | Long-haul (%) | Short-haul (%) | Total (%) |
|-----------|---------------|----------------|-----------|
| < 5 h     | 10.8          | 4.7            | 9.7       |
| 5–8 h     | 8.2           | 5.7            | 7.7       |
| 9–16 h    | 15.7          | 15.1           | 15.6      |
| 17–24 h   | 25.3          | 28.3           | 25.8      |
| Irregular | 40.0          | 46.2           | 41.1      |

**Table 3a**  
Conditions of pay.

|                                | Thai  |    | Cambodian |     | Myanmar |     | Total |     |
|--------------------------------|-------|----|-----------|-----|---------|-----|-------|-----|
|                                | %     | N  | %         | N   | %       | N   | %     | N   |
| Share of catch                 | 46.9  | 23 | 58.9      | 142 | 26.5    | 81  | 41.3  | 246 |
| Basic wage plus share of catch | 49.0  | 24 | 36.9      | 89  | 57.2    | 175 | 48.3  | 288 |
| Basic wage                     | 4.1   | 2  | 4.2       | 10  | 16.3    | 50  | 10.4  | 62  |
| Total                          | 100.0 | 49 | 100.0     | 241 | 100.0   | 306 | 100.0 | 596 |

as a point of comparison, between THB246–300 per day (or US \$246–300 per month). 43.3% of the fishers received US\$167–333 per month while only 4.9% received between US\$333–667 per month and 1% received over US\$667 per month.

Most wages are calculated as a proportion of the sale of the catch (41.3%), or else as basic wage plus a proportion of the catch (38.9%). A small proportion of fishers received only the basic wage (10.4%). Employers use a “share of catch” to motivate the workers while at sea, as well as to provide a modest salary to retain workers. By nationality, more Myanmar and Thai workers were paid by a combination of salary and a share of catch (57.2% and 49% respectively), whereas Cambodian migrants were more likely to be paid by share of catch alone (58.9%) (see Table 3a). The difference in the systems of payment between Cambodian and Myanmar fishers is because many Myanmar fishers, in contrast to Cambodian fishers, were aware of wage exploitation and refused the catch share option.

Thailand Ministerial Regulation on the Protection of Sea Fishers (2014) states that wages should be paid on an at-least monthly basis, unless it is in the interest of the fisher to do otherwise. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (63.4%) received payment monthly, while 12.9% received quarterly payments, and for 12.2% payment was received at the end of the voyage (see Table 3b). More of the long-haul fishers surveyed received monthly payments – their employers transferred payment to the fisher's or family member's bank account as a means of support for the family. Thai workers were far more likely to receive payment on a monthly basis (81.6%) than the migrants surveyed (61.8%). There was very little difference in the regularity of pay among senior crew members and labourers.

The practice of wage withholding reflects Derks' [9] findings that employers are concerned with worker retention, and fear that if they pay short-haul fishers monthly the crew will leave after being paid. Nearly 15% of the short-haul fishers in the study were paid quarterly. These were crew from vessels fishing in Thai territorial waters, which were out at sea for weeks at a time. By offering payment every two, three, or six months, the captains sought to retain crew members for multiple voyages. Captains also would withhold a percentage of wages for up to one or two years. If the fisher left the vessel early, the balance of payment was withheld (interview with NGO, Rayong). These findings were corroborated by representatives of local agencies, who said the

**Table 3b**  
Frequency of wage payments.

|  | Total % |
|--|---------|
| Monthly  | 63.4    |
| Every two months                                   | 2.3     |
| Every three months                                 | 12.9    |
| Every six months                                   | 3.7     |
| Every 2 days receive THB100 (primarily short haul) | 3.5     |
| Paid before going to sea                           | 1.8     |
| The end of each voyage                             | 12.2    |

problem they hear most often from employers concerned with workers reneging on work agreements after having received an advance. This is considered a considerable hardship for larger vessels crewed by 40 to 50 workers. Some fishers would disappear after receiving their advance while others jumped ship when the vessel was docked in port. When this occurs, the vessel may not be able to head back out to sea due to insufficient crew on board (interview with Marine Police of Samut Sakhon; interview with Fisheries Association, Songkhla).

#### 4.4. Forced Labour Practices

In order to analyse forced labour practices, the 11 indicators developed by the ILO's Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL) were used. The indicators are: (1) abuse of vulnerability; (2) deception; (3) restriction of movement; (4) isolation; (5) physical and sexual violence; (6) intimidation and threats; (7) retention of identity documents; (8) withholding of wages; (9) debt bondage; (10) abusive working and living conditions; and (11) excessive overtime. The set of indicators was designed to cover all possible aspects of forced labour. The presence of a single indicator may imply that an individual is in a forced labour situation however, in most cases it is the combination of several indicators together that indicate forced labour (ILO SAP-FL, 2005). The questionnaire used in this study covered 8 of these 11 indicators (see Table 4). Additionally, the ILO considers a subset of forced labour indicators to be reflective of human trafficking for forced labour. These indicators are marked with an asterisk in Table 4.

Some of the questions asked pertaining to forced labour included: (1) Are you working in the fishing sector against your will?; (2) If not willingly, why are you working in the fishing sector?; and (3) What types of obstacles or threats made you unable to leave your employer? The findings show that 101 fishers (16.9%) identified as being victims of human trafficking – they were working against their will and could not leave their employer because of the menace of penalty. Of these 101 fishers, 78% had entered into the fishing sector by choice, while the remainder were deceived or coerced either by a broker in their home village or in Thailand. More long-haul fishers (25%) in comparison to short-haul fishers (15%) reported being in a forced labour

situation. All the Thai fishers were working willingly in the fishing sector ( $n=49$ ) whereas migrant fishers from Cambodia (9% ( $n=22$ )) and Myanmar 26% ( $n=79$ ) were working against their will.

A key reason why fishers could not leave their employment was due to financial penalties ( $n=72$ ); which included not being remunerated fully for work they had performed. While the catch share system is widely practiced in the fishing industry and hence for many fishers, there are delays in receiving wages, it is the intentional withholding of workers' pay in order to constrain their mobility that is considered indicative of forced labour. For 12% of respondents, the financial penalty was too great and hence a constraint on their freedom. The second key reason was fear of physical violence ( $n=18$ ). A 14-year-old, deceived by a broker in his home village, tried to escape because he was homesick, however, he could not leave because of the threat of physical violence. Other penalties included threats of denunciation to the authorities ( $n=5$ ), threats against family members ( $n=1$ ), withholding of assets ( $n=3$ ), withholding of documents ( $n=1$ ), and other forms of punishment ( $n=1$ ). Twenty-four respondents (Thai 3; Cambodian 3; Myanmar=18) had previously been sold or transported without their permission to another vessel. This was predominately occurring in the long-haul sector where victims stay at sea indefinitely.

The ILO describes abuse of vulnerability as “a means of coercion where an employer deliberately and knowingly exploits the vulnerability of a worker to force him or her to work” (ILO SAP-FL, 2005). This can include threats of denunciation to the authorities. While the study did not measure abuse of vulnerability directly, the results show that the majority of migrants (55.3%) did not have identity documents and 16.8% had employers who did not allow or support the worker's registering for identity documents, thus placing them in a vulnerable situation; the latter being an indicator of human trafficking.

Various forms of abuse, including physical abuse, intimidation, and the lack of adequate food and drinking water were identified. Myanmar fishers were more likely to have been severely beaten (16.3%) than Thai (8.2%) and Cambodian fishers (6.2%). Myanmar fishers are less fluent in speaking Thai; this could be a cause of poor communication and inability to follow orders leading to abuse. Further, more Myanmar than Cambodian fishers work in the long-haul sector where exploitative situations are more likely to occur.

Samboon (not his real name) was a victim of forced labour – he was subjected to deceptive recruitment practices, exploitative working conditions, and the inability to freely exit. Working at a petrol station in Bangkok, Samboon was approached by a stranger about working as a fisher. He was promised good wages and was told he would return to shore every 15 days. Samboon first worked on a boat transferring supplies to deep-sea vessels and returning with catch. Shortly afterwards he was transferred to a deep-sea fishing boat where he was required to work for two years before being allowed to return to shore. On board he was assaulted by the captain and beaten with the tail of a stingray. Samboon worked on the boat for approximately two months before being transferred by the captain to another vessel and subsequently to a third vessel. He was physically abused and threatened on all three boats. He escaped when the vessel was docked in Malaysia and was subsequently repatriated by the Thai Embassy to Thailand.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The survey results give important insight into the existence of deceptive and coercive recruitment practices, exploitative working conditions, and forced and child labour in the fishing industry. For

**Table 4**  
Forced labour findings.

| Indicators  | Total (%) |
|---|-----------|
| <b>1. Abuse of vulnerability:</b>                                   |           |
| • No identity documents   | 55.3      |
| • Employer did not allow/support registering for identity documents | 16.8*     |
| <b>2. Deception:</b>  |           |
| • Deceived about the nature of work                                 | 4.9       |
| <b>3 Physical abuse:</b>  |           |
| • Physical violence/threats of violence (beaten on board)           | 3.8*      |
| <b>4. Intimidation and threats:</b>                                 |           |
| • Financial penalty for leaving                                     | 12.1*     |
| <b>5 Withholding of wage:</b>                                       |           |
| • Wage payment at the end of each voyage                            | 12.2*     |
| • Wage deduction for debt incurred from wage advances               | 15.4*     |
| <b>6. Debt bondage:</b>   |           |
| • Must work to pay debts  | 2.5       |
| • Sold or transferred against worker's will                         | 4.0       |
| <b>7. Abusive working and living conditions:</b>                    |           |
| • No adequate food and drinking water                               | 11.0      |
| • Had serious accident and were injured while working on board      | 20.6      |
| <b>8. Excessive overtime:</b>                                       |           |
| • Long working hours (17–24 h and undefined)                        | 66.9      |

Note: \*ILO indicators of trafficking for forced labour.



16.9% of our respondents, the trajectory to forced labour began with the recruitment process and continued through employment at sea to the exit stage as fishers were unable to freely leave their vessels. On board the vessels the migrant fishers, viewed as a cheap and flexible labour force, are controlled through abusive practices, fear of violence and the withholding of wages. While these are important findings, the number of fishers surveyed ( $n=596$ ), despite being the largest quantitative study to-date, is too small to lead to representative conclusions as could be derived from a national survey.

In order to eliminate forced labour in the fisheries supply chain, governments and buyers both play a key role. The severity of forced labour abuses was highlighted in 2015 when migrant fishers walked off their Thai vessels, while in Indonesian waters, requesting that they be rescued. High level consultative meetings were held between the governments of Thailand and Indonesia to address the issue of forced labour and human trafficking as well as illegal fishing and preservation of maritime resources. Prior to this consultation, and in recognition of the severity of forced labour occurring in the industry, the Thai government established 28 Fishery Coordinating Centres in coastal provinces of Thailand including all the four provinces under study. The purpose of these centres is to oversee the registration of all fishing vessels and their fishing license, the use of Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) among the deep sea fishing vessels, the procedures of Port In-Port Out control and the implementation of the revised regulations on sea fisheries. These initiatives are critical to undertaking a systematic reform of the industry in order to Combat Forced Labour. There is also the need to draft new legislation to regulate the recruitment of migrant workers. Other governmental responses include the US State Department downgrading Thailand in its 2014 annual Trafficking in Persons Report to Tier 3, the lowest tier, and in early 2015 the European Commission issued Thailand with a yellow card for not doing enough to combat illegal fishing. Both responses have the potential to lead to trade sanctions. In addition to government initiatives, it is important that buyers sourcing from Thailand continue to advocate for stricter regulatory standards to prevent and eliminate forced labour from occurring within Thailand's seafood oddslot supply chain. A concerted approach by governments and buyers is needed to eliminate forced labour practices.

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