

International  
Labour  
Organization

## *Going Back*



## *Moving On*

*A synthesis report of the trends  
and experiences of  
returned trafficking victims  
in Thailand and the Philippines*

Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

# Going Back • Moving On:

A synthesis report of the trends and experiences  
of returned trafficking victims in Thailand  
and the Philippines

**ILO - HSF Project:**

Economic and Social Empowerment of Returned Victims of  
Trafficking in Thailand and the Philippines

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# FOREWORD

When we first set out to record the views of women who had returned from trafficking-related exploitation abroad we expected a fairly predictable and universal response – one of relief at being back in their native countries and an emotional fulfilment from reunification with their families. What we discovered was that returning home carried with it a complex set of difficulties for these women – some new and some exactly the same as before they left. In fact, many had returned after years abroad, some penniless, and most facing the same set of real-life difficulties that prompted their outbound migration in the first place.

*Going back – Moving on: A synthesis report of the trends and experiences of returned trafficking victims in Thailand and the Philippines* studies the issues, obstacles and opportunities related to the return and integration of women migrants from Thailand and the Philippines. It uncovers a variety of exploitative situations abroad and the complications many women faced upon their return.

Of all the stages of the migration process, of all the research conducted into trafficking and its connection to migration, and of all the high-level meetings convened to fight human trafficking in Asia and the Pacific, the joint issues of return and reintegration remains the least subject to policy and program interventions.

Indeed, it is fair to say that there has been insufficient effort to facilitate the reintegration of returning migrants to life in their homelands in general, and especially those who faced situations of human trafficking for the purposes of exploitation at their destinations. In addition to the need for returnees to recover from the psycho-social, medical and health-related problems associated with their foreign experiences, many victims also face employment and skills-related concerns which could hamper their search for work at home.

In order to address these issues, the International Labour Organization, through the United Nations Human Security Fund and supported by the Government of Japan, conducted a project on *the Economic and Social Empowerment of Returned Victims of Trafficking*. Working with Governments and other partners across Thailand and the Philippines, our aims were to assist, empower and protect returned migrants who had experienced labour exploitation abroad, and in particular those who had endured situations brought about by human trafficking. This publication shares the experiences of the women and the lessons and practices we learned as a result.

With its labour mandate of decent work for all, the ILO advocates for and supports the implementation of a humane reintegration process of returned trafficked victims to their countries of origin. The emphasis is on provision of core social services to victims that can empower the returnees to attend to their long-term economic and social needs. This inclusive, rights-based approach for returning victims of trafficking, encourages self reliance and resilience. We have aimed to first learn their needs for psycho-social reintegration, and then assist them with the tools they required, to assure their economic and occupational aspirations would be fully recognized.

This research is based on in-depth qualitative interviews and has provided a greater understanding of the individual experiences and challenges of these migrants including their physical and psychological conditions, main concerns and aspirations before leaving home and upon their return – and how they were coping.

The interviews, conducted in Thailand and the Philippines, found that recognizing the factors that encourage, indeed trigger, migration were keys to understanding the vulnerabilities to trafficking and ultimately the exploitation faced – and endured – abroad. Those factors included

pressures due to family responsibilities, general and specific economic needs, repayment of debts, a lack of adequate job options closer to home, and a desire for a higher perceived social status and respect gained through increased affluence they thought could be achieved by working abroad.

These original ‘push’ factors, however, remained the most pressing issues to deal with upon their return – while the trauma many suffered abroad was an added burden. Supporting and caring for family members, having a job with a secure income and having enough money to avoid worrying about debt were paramount. Yet, according to the women’s responses, their abilities to try and meet these responsibilities within their communities were dependent on the extent of social acceptance or rejection by family and community. That acceptance was critical in determining how content the women would be to remain at home – or risk moving again.

Indeed, the commonly held notion that a returnee must go back to her former community in order to be ‘reintegrated’ has been challenged by the women in this study. In other words, reintegration needs to be flexible enough to respond to individual needs and future plans, without prescribing one narrow path to success or even defining “reintegration” in narrow terms of time.

Therefore, we are learning that while psycho-social assistance is a critical component, successful recovery is also reliant on one’s autonomy in making decisions about their future: in family relations, work, choice of residence, education and access to legal recourse to address pain and suffering.

Returning home to the same problems of poverty or near-poverty, family pressures, stigmatization and a loss of dignity – not to mention time wasted if returning with nothing – are the real-life realities for many returnees. This report shines a light into the darkest corners of their frustrations, but it also shines the way to a brighter future – by learning and responding to the views of returnees, and letting them recover in their own way and in their own time.

*Going Back – Moving On* is a study about regaining autonomy and control, being socially and economically empowered to make informed choices and again becoming a healthy and productive member of the society.

We hope you will find the following chapters useful.

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The overall scope and research methodology of the joint research project was developed collaboratively between Thetis Mangahas (ILO), Anders Lisborg (ILO), Sine Plambech (consultant) and the country research teams headed by Siriporn Skrobanek (Thai research team) and Agnes Zenaida Camacho (Philippine research team). Other key contributors include: Gail Haruko Yamauchi (Foundation for Women (FFW), Arnie Trinidad of the Psychosocial Support and Children's Rights Resource Center in Manila, Chortip Chaicharn (FFW), Mantana Itthinantaweerachai (FFW); Panjit Insawang (FFW), Kusumal Rachawong (ILO) and Robert Larga (ILO). Wimon Pumsavai (ILO) and Ednalyn Gulane (ILO) provided valuable administrative support.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report explores some of the issues, obstacles and opportunities related to the return and integration of women migrants who experienced exploitative situations abroad, including forced labour and human trafficking. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 59 returned victims of trafficking in Thailand and the Philippines, the report offers insight from their individual experiences and challenges, including their conditions, concerns and aspirations before and upon their return, and their way of coping after having returned to their country of origin. The report includes a critical review of assistance available and received in returning and reintegrating from the perspective of returnees. The women reflected on the kind of reintegration assistance they received, their main worries and needs upon return and their suggestions for improving the quality and effectiveness of reintegration assistance.

In interviewing returned women from Thailand and the Philippines, the research found that it is important to recognize the factors that encourage and trigger migration, such as family responsibility, economic needs and the pressure of debt, a lack of adequate job options and a desire for the social status and respect that is gained through affluence. These factors remain the most pressing factors after a woman's return. Women who had experienced trafficking and labour abuse abroad said that their greatest concern when they came back still included: supporting and taking care of their family members, having a job with a secure income and having enough money to avoid worrying about debt. Based on the women's responses, it seems that the extent of social acceptance or rejection was as crucial as economic factors in how content or not they were to stay in their home community. Their social situation influenced their confidence about the future. Women in conflict with agents who lived in the same community were angry about what happened or afraid of retribution, further complicating their social integration.

Family and community relationships continue to be extremely important to most returnees. Just as the motives for migration were seldom solely about increasing individual income or having new experiences as an individual, trafficking and exploitation were seldom solely matters of an individual being abused. Both economically and socially, the people closest to a woman who survived trafficking were also strongly affected. Shame, grief, anger and stigmatization as well as the weighing of options for a small income at home versus the risk of seeking a larger income through remigration remain long-term issues for the women in terms of their social circles, including with relatives, village members and peers. Even though the women's expectations and experiences after their return varied widely, the factors of family, money, work and social relationships were clearly intertwined and remained key to their successful reintegration.

The other primary lesson that emerged from the interviews with this spectrum of women is that the assistance offered to returning/returned migrants who were exploited should be flexible enough to respond to their individual needs and future plans, without prescribing one narrow path to success or even defining "reintegration" in narrow terms of time. Some women found themselves in essentially the same economic and social position as they were in before they left, in a relatively short time, while others said that they continued to suffer the effects of their experience even years later. Thus, the extent to which trafficking survivors can re-establish a base and move on in their lives so that the trafficking experience becomes less central an influence on their current status and concerns varies greatly.

In addition, there is a need to question the common notion that a returnee must go back to her former community in order to have successfully taken the next steps in life after her trafficking experience. Based on the women's reflections, a more appropriate goal than "reintegration" would be a successful recovery of a woman's autonomy in making decisions about her family, work, place of residence, education and legal recourse.

Trafficking is basically about losing autonomy and control. Thus, integration should be about regaining autonomy and control. It is not just about returning home to stay put but about being socially and economically empowered to make better informed choices and to become a healthy productive member of society, wherever that might be. The main objective of reintegration should be to promote self-reliance and resiliency and to empower, encourage and equip returnees to improve their own situation, based on their skills and aspirations.

Overall, the trafficking survivors interviewed for this research project conveyed that the most crucial support they have needed in their post-return life included, regardless of the geographic area in which they settled:

- assistance in building new skills and finding work
- emotional support from peers and/or professional counsellors
- legal advice about their rights and options, and support at every step if they choose to engage in legal processes to bring their abusers to justice

- financial support that can allow for more ambitious livelihood building
- compensation for abuses suffered as victims of a crime
- physical health care
- protection from traffickers' retribution.

Agencies are urged by the women to be active in their outreach towards trafficking survivors and to maintain clear and continuous communication over the long term.

It is therefore of utmost importance that efforts to support trafficking survivors after they return take a holistic approach that recognizes the equal importance and interdependence of social, physical, psychological and economic factors in a woman's life. Assisting women to take the next steps should mean—beyond providing information, resources and communication—acknowledging that it is always the women, not the service providers, who should ultimately make decisions about a woman's life. Women's plans and desires for the future, no matter what the work sector or whether they include staying at home, migrating to another province or remigrating abroad, should be respected by anyone who claims to have the woman's best interests at heart.

# ACRONYMS AND TERMINOLOGY

<b>BATWC</b>	Bureau of Anti-Trafficking in Women and Children, a division of the Department of Social Development, which is part of Thailand’s Ministry of Social Development and Human Security
<b>DFA</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs
<b>DSWD</b>	Department of Social Welfare and Development
<b>DAWN</b>	Development Action for Women Network
<b>FFW</b>	Foundation for Women, an NGO based in Bangkok
<b>HOME</b>	Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>POEA</b>	Philippine Overseas and Employment Administration
<b>SEPOM</b>	Self-Empowerment of Migrant Workers, an NGO based in Chiang Rai
<b>SMS</b>	Solidaritas Migrants Scalabrini
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>YMCA</b>	Young Men’s Christian Association; the branches in Chiang Mai and Phayao provinces are mentioned in this report

## **Reintegration:**

Reintegration in this report refers to the enabling of victims of trafficking to regain autonomy and control of their lives. “Human trafficking” refers to a situation where a person loses autonomy and control of his/her own situation and ends up exploited for someone else’s profit. The reintegration process referred to here is not just about returning back home to stay put but about being socially and economically empowered to make better, informed decisions and to become a healthy productive member of society, wherever that might be. In many cases, reintegration involves the return of a victim to his/her family and area of origin, but it can also involve integration into a new community or even a new country, depending on the needs of the victim and the available opportunities. A central aspect of reintegration is to promote self-reliance, resiliency and to empower, encourage and equip returned victims of trafficking to improve their situation, based on their skills and aspirations.

## **Returnee:**

A returned migrant; in this report, “returnees” refers to migrant women who have returned to their area of origin, either on their own or through a support programme, after having experienced a trafficking situation or otherwise being severely exploited and abused abroad.

## **Recovery:**

The process of stabilization in which a person achieves physical and mental well-being. This term is generally considered more empowering than the term “rehabilitation”.

**Empowerment:**

A process through which an individual can develop her/his ability to stand independently, make decisions and show control over his/her life.

**Service providers:**

Organizations and individuals that provide one or more of the range of services to assist victims of trafficking. These may include social workers, skills trainers, psychologists, medical staff, legal professionals from non-government, government and international organizations.

**Victim of trafficking/trafficking victim:**

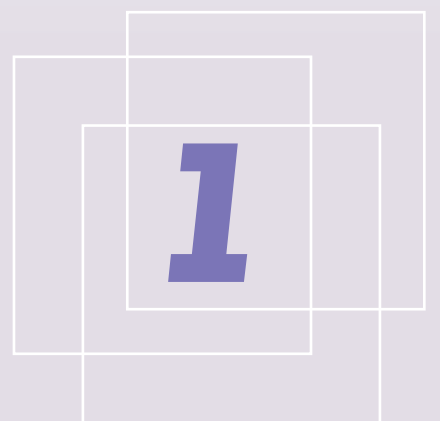
A person who has been trafficked. Because the term “victim” implies powerlessness and constructs an identity around an individual’s victimization, it might have been more suitable in this report on reintegration and empowerment to use the term “trafficking survivor”; however, from a human rights perspective, the term “victim” is important because it designates the violation experienced and the responsibility for redress. Thus, “victim of trafficking” and “trafficking victim” are used in this report and refer to a person who qualifies as a victim of trafficking according to Article 3 of the UN trafficking protocol.

**Human trafficking/trafficking:**

As defined in the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000)

# *Chapter*

**1**







# CHAPTER 1



## Introduction and Methodology

### Background

In South-East Asia, Thailand and the Philippines have been known for years as sending countries for migrants going abroad to work and increase their opportunity for a better living for themselves and their families back home. A large proportion of these migrants are women. This “feminization of migration” has increased opportunities available to many women; it concurrently also holds the potential for human rights abuses and labour exploitation. Women from both countries have been lured by promises of overseas employment, only to end up in abusive situations such as forced labour, sexual exploitation and human trafficking. While efforts are being made at different levels to prevent this situation from continuing and to protect the rights of migrant workers, the reality is that many are still being exploited at destination countries and are in need of assistance and protection.

Migrants returning home from such exploitative conditions often face a myriad of difficulties. Aside from the psychological distress some suffer and the stigma attached to being exploited, returned victims have to cope with reintegration problems with their family and community. Some experience rejection by their family who had hoped for better living conditions through the remittances. Many return home empty-handed, with inadequate savings or even heavily indebted. As much as returned migrants want to work to improve their livelihood, they often lack adequate skills or qualifications. As well, there may be a lack of local job opportunities and support to start and sustain a viable business. Compounding this situation is a sense of injustice based on an inability to file legal complaints against those who have trafficked or exploited them abroad. All of these difficulties often result in continued vulnerability to being re-trafficked or exploited at the local level.

Against this background and in the light of the current lack or inappropriateness of reintegration services available, the International Labour Organization (ILO), with funds from the Government of Japan (through the United

Nations Trust Fund for Human Security), initiated a project focusing on Economic and Social Empowerment of Returned Victims of Trafficking in Thailand and the Philippines (ILO-HSF reintegration project).

## Rethinking reintegration

The experiences of returned victims of trafficking and the challenge of successful integration often remain little explored and understood because most research studies emphasize the victim's trafficking experience and exploitation in the destination country. As a result, the responses to help returned victims of trafficking often seem inadequate, one reason being organizations' subjective understanding of the concept of reintegration. Often, returned victims of trafficking are understood and treated by external observers, such as policy makers, journalists and even involved organization staff, as one homogenous group of people sharing a common wish to go back to where they started. However, in seeing all returnees as sharing the same difficulties and wishing to go "home", crucial questions are not asked and the different needs and aspirations of returnees are not fully understood and addressed (Bakewell and Hammond in Hansen 2006:8).

To respond to this gap and to better understand the situation of abused and trafficked migrant women, their conditions before and upon their return, and how they cope after they have settled back in their country of origin, this research was initiated as a part of the ILO-HSF reintegration project. The research focused on the experiences of Thai and Filipina returned victims of trafficking and abuse.

The research for this report looked at the assistance given to exploited and trafficked migrants before and after they arrived back to their country of origin, their decision to accept or decline assistance, and the factors that influenced that decision. Overall, the research is a step in seeking a more detailed awareness of the return trends in Thailand and the Philippines and to develop a better understanding of the individual experiences and challenges of migrants who survive exploitative situations abroad, including forced labour and trafficking.

More specifically, this research report aims to answer the following questions:

- What characterizes returned victims of labour exploitation and trafficking? What are their typical socio-economic backgrounds and their migration experiences?
- When, why and how do victims return?
- How is reintegration practised and understood and how should current reintegration practices be readjusted?
- How do returned victims experience return and reintegration process, both shortly after the return and in a long-term perspective?
- What are returnees' individual concerns, fears, hopes and future aspirations?
- What kind of reintegration assistance did victims receive? What are their needs and suggestions for improving the quality and effectiveness of reintegration assistance?

The research sought to critically review the return and integration process from the perspective of returnees. In light of the reconsideration of the human trafficking phenomenon in policy as well as in academia, the time seems ripe to likewise rethink reintegration. Hence, the purpose of this research work also aimed to help rethink and adjust the concept of reintegration to emerging ideas and policies within the field of human trafficking, labour migration, return migration and repatriation.

Why is it important to look into these concepts and rethink the term reintegration? In recent years there has been a growth of migrant protection programmes, care institutions and facilities to assist victims of exploitation and human trafficking. However, that growth of institutions and programmes has not always been followed by improved quality care and services, especially in the area of long-term community-based integration and real livelihood alternatives. In many cases, reintegration programmes lead to only limited or no real positive impact on returned victims; in the worst cases, poorly designed assistance and reintegration programmes have actually harmed rather than helped returned victims. Cases have been documented in which

returned victims were confined in tightly controlled premises, restricting their autonomy and freedom rather than improving it. There have been cases in which physical and psychological punishments have been used to discipline returnees; and there have been many examples in which education and skills training provided have been inadequate—wasting the returnee’s time instead of leading to decent jobs and a sustainable livelihood. Finally, many victims of trafficking have been returned from shelters to communities without proper follow-up assistance to ensure their safety and socio-economic stability (ILO, 2006).

After years of efforts and best intentions among government institutions, non-government (NGOs) and government organizations (GOs) and United Nations agencies, and after spending millions of dollars on recovery and reintegration programmes, there is a need to raise some crucial questions:

- Why are so few victims of trafficking being assisted? By commonly used estimates, there are hundreds of thousands of victims at a global level;<sup>1</sup> however, only a fraction of them have been assisted and been part of a reintegration programme.<sup>2</sup>
- Why do so many identified “victims” of trafficking decline assistance? Is it because they don’t feel like victims and therefore do not feel well-intentioned assistance is for them? Is the assistance being offered different from assistance they prefer? Or is it because assistance programmes are limiting rather than increasing their opportunities and possibilities of socio-economic recovery?
- Why do so many victims of trafficking who initially enrolled in a reintegration programme later skip the programme designed to help them? Why do they instead decide to remigrate,

even if it means they again are vulnerable to being trafficked?

- Finally and more positively, how can those involved in providing assistance to victims of trafficking learn from previous failures and success stories—especially from returnees—to design new, alternative and better reintegration programmes?

These questions serve as an important impetus to explore the return and reintegration experiences of trafficked and abused migrants because they have implications on the kinds of policies and programmes designed to address victims’ needs. The responses can give an indication as to whether appropriate and useful programmes are responding to their needs—either actual or perceived needs.

There are a number of women, men and child victims of trafficking who have benefited greatly from reintegration programmes implemented by various institutions and organizations. Many professionals and volunteers have worked hard to ensure encouraging success stories of victims who, after getting assistance, have broken the vicious grip of vulnerability and improved their lives, both economically and socially.

However, this does not change the fact that even more victims are never offered assistance or that many of them only experience limited or no positive impact. Many victims’ protection programmes focus on the first period after a victim has been identified. This includes installation in a safe house or a shelter and ensuring a safe and dignified return (through transport, airport pick-ups, etc.) Reintegration is often focused on returning someone home and providing short-term reintegration support. While this is important, it is necessary to realize that short-term support is unlikely to lead to long-term improvements and therefore is often insufficient

1 Estimates of trafficking victims vary widely according to the definitions used by the institutions carrying out the research and due to the clandestine nature of the phenomenon. According to the ILO, there are 2.45 million victims of trafficking in the world today; the United States State Department has estimated that between 600,000 and 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders every year.

2 The International Organization for Migration, one of the leading organizations focusing on the return and reintegration process, has assisted approximately 15,000 persons since 1994 ([www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)). While this is an honorable achievement, it is only around 0.15 per cent of the number of victims estimated by the US State Department (calculation based on 700,000 persons trafficked annually and multiplied by 14 years (since 1994)) and around 0.6 per cent of the estimated figure used by the ILO. Calculations like this, which are based on estimates, naturally only give an indication, and there are many differences in figures between regions and countries. However, regional research shows the same trend. A study of trafficking in south-eastern Europe concluded that reintegration assistance was only provided to an estimated 7 per cent of trafficked women and girls (UNICEF, UNOHCHR, OSCE-ODIHR, 2002).

to prevent continued vulnerability and re-trafficking.

Although the primary focus of this research was on the return and reintegration experiences, the discussions inevitably were tied to the women's experiences of migration, trafficking and abuse. These experiences can define a woman's need for assistance, her capacity to cope after she has returned and her decision to accept or decline assistance.

## Research methodology and data collection

Altogether, 59 former international women migrants from Thailand and the Philippines who experienced trafficking and abuse while abroad were interviewed about their experiences, their return and their life situation.

In **Thailand**, 29 women migrants were interviewed; 18 from the North (Phayao: 8; Chiang Rai: 8; Phitsanulok: 1; Petchabun: 1) and 11 from the North-East (Sisaket: 7; Khon Kaen: 2; Buriram: 1; Mahasarakam: 1; Nakorn Ratchasima: 1). There were only two women who migrated for factory labour, to Brunei and to Taiwan; the others had entered into prostitution (some having been lied to and told they were migrating for other work) in Asian and European countries. In the North, interviews were conducted with women in two provinces, Chiang Rai and Phayao, with the assistance of the Self-Empowerment Programme of Migrant Women (SEPOM) and the YMCA Phayao. The Yor Ying Women's Centre, which is an ILO-supported project of the Foundation for Women (FFW), also referred women returnees who took part in its recovery programme

In the **Philippines**, 30 women migrants who had experienced trafficking and abuse were interviewed. The respondents came from Metro Manila (11) and the provinces in Luzon (9) and Mindanao (10). The Filipina women came from prostitution and various work sectors in the destination countries: domestic work, entertainment or service, or had been sold as a wife. All the women were referred to the researchers by ILO-partner NGOs and

government organizations, such as the Batis Center for Women, the Development Action for Women Network (DAWN), the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Field Office III in Pampanga and the DSWD Office in Zamboanga City, the Kanlungan Centre Foundation, the Philippines Against Child Trafficking (PACT), and the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (otherwise known as HOME but the Philippines affiliate is known as Solidaritas Migrants Scalabrini, SMS).

All the women interviewed had received assistance at one or several points of their return journey.

The ages of the women from both countries ranged from 18 to 45 years at the time of the research interview, with a majority of them aged 26–35, followed by those aged 18–25. Thus, the majority of women were still young when they first migrated, with some still children at the time of their migration and/or trafficking experience.

The research method applied a qualitative approach by interviewing women with a semi-structured questionnaire. The in-depth interviews aimed to draw out the experiences of the women in the host country, upon their return and through their “reintegration”. The interviews lasted between one and four hours. For most of the women, the interviews were conducted one on one. However, a small number of women were accompanied by a social worker from the agency providing them assistance. In one interview, some family members, who were protective of the respondent, chose to be present. The interviews were mostly done either in the respondent's home or at the office of an assisting NGO.

Interviews were only conducted once, with a follow-up phone interview in a few cases and only then because the predetermined questions were not answered during the course of the interviews or because clarifications were needed.

The researchers spent considerable time establishing relations with the respondents and also benefited from the fact that many respondents had learned to trust service providers and assistance agencies. Interviews were conducted in a non-intimidating way by gaining the trust of the respondent through sensitivity to the person's individual context and assuring the respondent that whatever she shared would not be



judged and her identity would not be revealed. As well, the researchers were chosen based on their capacity for empathy so that the respondents would feel safe with them. Ethical standards were also applied, given that the topic of the interviews was sensitive and potentially emotional.

Interviews were recorded with the women's consent and then transcribed and translated into English. In some cases in Thailand, women's northern or north-eastern dialect was first translated into central Thai and then into English. The English translator, although fluent in central Thai, is not a native Thai speaker but clarified any ambiguities by consulting the Thai researchers.

The answers of the women were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed to present a complete picture of their experiences by taking into account general patterns and the unique stories. The intention has been to capture the voices of the women and to remain as faithful as possible to the original tone and character of each person's speech; inevitably, some nuance and connotations are lost through translation and perhaps more so through a double translation (although the translation from regional dialects concerned only certain words and phrases). For this research report, the voices of the migrant women are included by quoting statements from them directly.

Key informants from select government and non-government organizations were also interviewed to map and gain a better awareness of the services available to returned women.

## Limitations and caveats

All the respondents were referred to the researchers by the service providers. Because all the women had received some sort of assistance at some point and contacts between the researchers and the interviewees were mostly made through agencies providing the assistance, the study does not address women who have never received any assistance or who have never had any contact with

government agencies or NGOs. Nor did the research look into the experiences of women who refused services offered to them. However, a few of the interviewed women did not have any contact with agencies over the first three- to five-year period of their post-return life and thus had not received any assistance in that time; their responses about post-return life reflect that time period as well.

The dependence on the agencies providing assistance with regard to establishing contact to respondents also made the research dependent on these agencies definition of trafficking. Although the research used the Palermo Protocol<sup>3</sup> definition of trafficking as the principal guide, the inherent ambiguities of the Protocol have subjected it to varying interpretations by the NGOs and government agencies in both Thailand and Philippines.

Because the women were referred by service providers, there is the possibility that they were withholding negative assessment of the services they had received out of a sense of propriety and gratitude. As well, many of the interviews took place in the offices of the services providers and that could have potentially affected the women's responses.

Finally, there is the possible issue of gate-keeping, in which service providers were more willing to refer clients who were satisfied with their services rather than those who had refused or who had stopped with the programme somewhere along the way. Thus, the research has not captured a significant segment of women migrants who have completely declined assistance and resettled or remigrated on their own. This group is scope for future research.

Most of the women interviewed returned many years earlier, and thus they sometimes could not remember exact dates, a clear timeline of changes in their feelings or the precise source and kinds of assistance that were available after their return. The women also had more to say about their experiences in their destination countries regarding the services they had received. This is

3 "Palermo Protocol" is the commonly used term for the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime because it developed in a conference that took place in 2000 in Palermo, Italy.

because they have had more opportunity to reflect on their experiences of abuse and trafficking through the retelling of their experiences with the service providers in counselling and group activities. The experiences of abuse were also more prominent than the assistance they had received; which is a possible reason why they had more to say about this than anything else.

Care was taken to protect the privacy of respondents during the interview (as well, all names have been changed); sometimes, restrictions of time and place did not allow women to speak without the possibility of family members or neighbours being nearby. Because some of the women had not shared all of their abusive experiences with family members, the lack of absolute privacy may at times have led to an unwillingness to go into great detail or to speak on every possible subject. For instance, one respondent lived next door to the agent who lured her abroad and whom she has pressed criminal charges against. This agent was at home on the day of the interview and indicated her displeasure that outsiders had come to speak to the woman. Another woman's husband has questioned the paternity of their child, born after her return and appearing to be of mixed race; he did not want to leave the home during the interview and seemed to be listening in, creating an awkward situation for the woman to talk about her experience abroad—and hinting as well at some of the effects of migration and trafficking on family members.

Although similar interview guidelines were applied in both countries, the two research teams in each country worked independently; consequently, it was not always possible to merge data and perform cross-country analysis. Thus, to the extent possible and where it makes analytical sense, data (mainly numbers and figures) from both countries was merged and analysed. However, in many cases in which there was not equal comparable data from both countries, it was necessary to analyse and present data from one country only.

Having only 59 respondents does not allow the research to generalize and claim to be representative for all women who have returned after experiencing abuse and trafficking. The generalizations that could be gathered from here would only be true to the sample. However, the data is still highly useful in that it allows us to better understand some common patterns and concerns among returnees—not at least, the challenges and the complexity of returning and reintegrating.

# *Chapter*

**2**





# CHAPTER 2



Moving on

## Out-Migration and Working Experiences

This chapter examines the processes involved in a woman’s decision to migrate, how this decision is connected to her living conditions, certain pertinent personal characteristics, her contact with recruiters or traffickers and the recruitment process, and the countries of destination. The chapter also includes a description of the working conditions and levels of exploitation many of the respondents experienced while abroad. The

background information on the experiences before and during their migration period is included to better understand the situation the women returned from, which helps to recognize what their needs were upon their return and the kinds of services that could have addressed those needs.

The women who participated in this study were sent to various destinations, mostly to other countries in Asia, followed by countries in the Middle East and Africa; a relatively small group (and only Thai women) went to Europe (table 2.1).

**Table 2.1: Destination regions for Thai and Filipina respondents**

Destination regions	Filipina migrants	Thai migrants	Total
Asia	24	18	42
Middle East/Africa	6	2	8
Europe	0	9	9

**Destination countries in each region**

**Asia:** Republic of Korea (Korea), Japan, Singapore, China (Hong Kong and Macau), Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan and Malaysia

**Middle East and Africa:** United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Togo, South Africa and Nigeria

**Europe:** Italy, Cyprus, Netherlands and Denmark

The respondents had different lines of work, as explained in the following table.

**Table 2.2: Destination countries and work sectors**

Region	Countries	Work places
<b>Asia</b>	Singapore	- Households - Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
	China (Hong Kong & Macau)	- Households - Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
	Malaysia	- Households (few) - Entertainment/Bars/Brothels (majority)
	Brunei	- Households - Factories
	Taiwan	- Factories (garments)
	Republic of Korea	- Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
	Japan	- Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
<b>Middle East/Africa</b>	United Arab Emirates	- Households
	Qatar	- Households
	Kuwait	- Households
	South Africa	- Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
	Nigeria	- Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
	Togo	- Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
<b>Europe</b>	Italy	- Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
	Netherlands	- Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
	Denmark	- Entertainment/Bars/Brothels
	Cyprus	- Entertainment/Bars/Brothels

Going Back

**The decision to migrate**

A woman’s reason for migrating is rather complex due to often various inputs and influences goading her to want to leave home and work in a foreign country. However, one of the more common reasons the women gave when asked why they wanted to migrate had to do with poverty. In the

Filipina sample, 23 of the 30 respondents (76.7 per cent) rated poverty as their main impetus for migrating (table 2.3); in the Thai sample, 17 of the 29 women explicitly said they went to support their family, while 15 cited the family’s poverty and 9 cited family debt. The respondents may not have understood “poverty” as absolute poverty and lack of basic needs but instead regarded it as relative poverty or a “feeling” of poverty.

**Table 2.3: Reasons for migrating\***

Reason	Frequency	Per cent
Poverty	23	76.7
New experience	4	13.3
Invitation	12	40.0
Family situation	14	46.7
Escape violence	2	6.7
Others	5	16.7

\*Based on Filipina sample only; multiple answers allowed

Women in both Thailand and Philippines are often expected to shoulder the burden of family livelihood and survival, whether married or alone. Thus, it is the traditional and socio-cultural expected obligation of women as breadwinners combined with poverty that are the more important factors in their decision to migrate.<sup>1</sup> This link has been pointed out in several other studies, such as Truong (2006 in Skilbrei and Tveit 2007), who notes that the “decision-making process to enter migration networks in order to improve livelihood (or to prevent its erosion) is based on a careful assessment of household resources”. The majority of the women in the sample perceived their families as poor, with 19 women describing their household as poor because of a lack of profitable employment opportunities in their country.

Relative poverty is closely connected to various facets of women’s lives, such as their and their family members’ lack of gainful employment, the lack of higher education and the lack of opportunities to find work in their own country. All of these issues are interconnected and all contribute to or exacerbate a person’s poverty. Other related factors that can be more difficult to disclose but also influence the decision to migrate include domestic violence, the break-up of a marriage, the separation of parents and other family problems. The following explains the main migration push factors mentioned by the women respondents:

## Lack of education and limited local employment opportunities

Nearly all the women interviewed came from relatively poor socio-economic conditions and had little education. The vast majority of the Thai sample (18 of the 29) had only a primary school education (3–6 years of school). Five passed secondary lower level (7–9 years of school) and four had secondary upper level (10–12 years) of schooling. Only two had a post-secondary vocational college certificate. The younger women had had somewhat more access to higher education due to the increased availability of loans from the Government, but for some, these loans later became a financial burden that influenced the push to migrate.

I came from a peasant family. My parents grew rice and raised cattle on our small plot, and it was enough to raise me and my younger brother. I got a government loan to go to vocational college. [But] my father didn’t like the burden of such a high debt, 60,000 baht.  
(Pin, Thai woman)

Moving on

<sup>1</sup> The proportion of female-headed households in Thailand in the late 1980s was 20.8 per cent. In most cases following divorce, children stay with the mother; there is little enforcement of child support from the father. According to Thailand’s Ministry of Health, the divorce rate rose from 13 per cent in 1996 to 26 per cent in 2006.

In the Philippines, 9 of the 30 women respondents had completed their education through college. Of the remaining 21, two had some elementary education, another two graduated from elementary school, seven had some high school education, four graduated from high school, and six had attended college. In a society such as the Philippines in which a college degree serves as a strong determinant for the socio-economic advancement of individuals, the lack of a college degree certainly limits the kinds of jobs possible. Those who do not have the academic credentials and skills are commonly relegated to service and sales work, agriculture work, craft and related trades, factory work or elementary occupations—jobs that pay measly money.

The women respondents had worked in a variety of jobs before their first international migration. However, slightly more than half of the Filipina women were unemployed or had been working in the service sector prior to their leaving (table 2.4)

**Table 2.4: Type of work before migrating\***

Type of work	Frequency	%
No work/ unemployed	9	30
Service sector	9	30
Seamstress	2	6.7
Formal sector	3	10
Domestic work	2	6.7
Informal sector	1	3.3
Still a student	4	13.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>

\* Filipina sample only

Of the 17 Filipinas who had been working, the majority were in service-oriented occupations that pay minimum or below-minimum wages. Five of the working women, in fact, had a college degree; but a college education is not always an assurance of decent employment. Thus they had opted to work as a domestic worker or in the service sector because of the unavailability of financially rewarding employment in the country.

In the Thai sample, nine respondents reported farming as adults (not including others who may have worked on the family land while still in school), and seven had been in prostitution before

they migrated abroad. Four had worked in a factory, and three women reported having worked in each of the following sectors: construction, independent vending, unspecified day labour, retail, sewing/craftwork, bar work and massage. Two had been housewives, and one had been only 14 years old and not working when she first migrated abroad. Most of the women said that their work was seasonal, part-time and/or insecure and provided little income (the average being about 195 baht (US\$6 per day).

The majority of the Thai sample—21 of the 29—had migrated domestically before their first international migration, moving from one site to another to find better opportunities. Notably, only eight had been in prostitution prior to migration, even though 28 of the 29 entered into prostitution abroad, whether by force, threat or own choice. Those women did not have as much freedom as other women in the sample to change their workplace or sometimes even to physically leave the premises. However, some did move to different cities for prostitution before they migrated abroad. Only two of the women reported jobs that could be classified as semi-skilled work; one had been a doctor’s assistant and a caterer, and the other had worked in advertising for a large department store.

## Family relationships

Family relationships played a complex, sometimes contradictory and central role for nearly all the women before, during and after their migration abroad. This relationship provided either a positive or negative reason for migrating (to support and provide for them –positive- or to escape from their hostility or indifference -negative-) as well as a reason either to remigrate or to never migrate again. The work experiences of family members may also have influenced the choice for some women; in the Thai sample, seven had family members who had migrated before, and six had family members who were already in prostitution (either in Thailand or abroad).

The majority of the women in both countries had taken it upon themselves to become the breadwinners of their families because their parents were unemployed or already past the working age. Thus, the women saw it as their

responsibility to provide for their family. As one Filipina woman explained: “I am the second child but my eldest brother died, so now I am already considered the eldest.” (In the Philippines, the eldest child is expected to take on the financial responsibilities if the parents are unable to fulfil this obligation). Several Filipinas spoke of responsibilities for a parent: Beth decided to leave for Singapore to help her ageing parents, and Anita’s decision to work as an entertainer in Japan was tied to her promise to her stepfather before he died that she would provide for her mother. Emily decided to go to Malaysia when her mother became ill. Thus, their decision to migrate was influenced by a sense of filial duty and to provide for the needs of the family. Many felt it was also their responsibility to support not only their family but siblings and their families as well.

This sense of duty as the family breadwinner is heightened among women with children, given the expectation for them to care and provide for those children. Twenty-one of the Filipina women and 13 of the Thai women had children at the time they migrated who were dependent on them in one way or another. For instance, Filipina Selma and her security guard husband could barely make ends meet for their children.

We didn’t have enough money to buy food. We were always short of cash, especially for my children’s needs. We didn’t even have enough for our everyday expenses. I couldn’t give the things my children wanted.  
(Selma, Filipina woman)

Many women reported they could not rely on their husbands when raising their children.

My husband abandoned us and had a new family of his own. He left with us a big debt to the bank, and I had to feed my four children, who were growing every day. The main income from growing rice wasn’t enough because I had only 4 rai of land. I had to roam from village to village, selling vegetables that I bought from the market. Sometimes I sold sweets or meatballs. When I couldn’t make much that way, I picked up day-labour jobs harvesting chilli peppers in someone’s garden. I earned 3 baht per kilogram. That was enough to feed us day by day, [but] I never had savings to pay back the debt. (Aem, Thai woman)

I left my husband because he smoked marijuana and didn’t take care of his family. I had five children, and when my smallest son was about a year old, I left [my husband]. My second husband pitied me for raising my kids alone and took me to stay with him in his mother’s house. After six years, we still didn’t have enough money to have a place of our own.  
(Dahm, Thai woman)

In many cases, the out-migration pressure was not only from the burden of being a breadwinner but also from negative experiences in a dysfunctional family. One woman said that she didn’t want to stay at home because her father had remarried only a year after her mother died, and she was ashamed of him. Another said that her second migration was prompted in part by her marital problems and fighting with her husband. Another wanted to get as far away as possible after her divorce. One woman said that her family was not warm and that she was ill at ease with them after her mother and grandmother died and her father remarried. The lack of a warm family home prompted her to go on a succession of migrations, first to four provinces and then to two countries.



## Debt as a push factor

Debt, often with exorbitant interest rates, was another crucial factor that pushed women into accepting offers from local recruiters to work overseas. Loans that the women and/or their family members took out, both formally from banks or the village fund or informally from neighbours, relatives and loan sharks, built up to become an insurmountable burden. Prior to international migration, seven of the Thai women were heavily in debt, and eight were landless or had only a small plot of land.

When people looked at the size of our house, they would have thought we were rich. My father sent money to build the house when he worked overseas. But he died when I was in high school. My mother had to earn money as a day labourer to feed us. We had 10 rai of rice fields but it didn't provide enough. Some days we barely had anything to eat, and my mother borrowed money from relatives. After finishing school, I decided to move to Bangkok to work in a factory and sent money home to support my mother and brother and repay the debts.

(Yooney, Thai woman)

There can be many reasons for getting into debt. In some cases it was because of the cost of education for children. Although public schools do not charge tuition, the cost of books, uniforms, supplies and daily transportation to and from school can be substantial. Many of the women with children said that keeping their children in school as long as possible was one of their main goals.

I wanted to get rid of our debt in order to support my children's education and to build a new house that wouldn't flood in the rainy season.

(Aem, Thai woman)

In other cases, women fell into serious debt after a failed first migration. Flora's family had to borrow US\$2,667 from a bank and a person they knew to

pay for her recruitment fees and the processing fees for her travel documents for her trip to Hong Kong (first migration experience). But because hers was a failed migration experience in Hong Kong (she was fired after 12 days of working), she could not recoup her initial cash outlay. While the Philippine embassy in Hong Kong facilitated the return of half her money plus her one-month salary, she still had a sizeable debt to pay. She opted to go to Singapore where she did not have to pay the placement fee up front because it was deducted from her monthly salary.

## Pull factors and wanting independence

Outside family responsibility, some women were driven to try their luck abroad out of a desire for financial independence. Maan, who was trafficked after deciding to go to Malaysia from the Philippines, had wanted to buy certain things: "I wanted to be able to buy the things I wanted, like clothes; that's why I decided to work." Ria, another Filipina, wanted to be independent of her parents, to live on her own. Interestingly, Ria's father had a stable job as a seaman at that time and earned enough money for the family. However, Ria insisted on going to Japan to gain financial independence:

I asked [my father], 'What if I lost both [of you], how would I survive?' At that point, I knew little about independent living; I didn't even know how to cook. I asked for them to allow me to leave because I was not doing it for myself only but also for my son.

(Ria, Filipina woman)

Neah was attracted to working abroad when she saw how her neighbour could buy two passenger buses for a family business with earnings from working as a "waitress in Germany". At the time, Neah did not know the neighbour in fact had been trafficked for sexual exploitation in Nigeria. Neah was enticed to work in "Germany", but instead she faced the same destiny as her neighbour.



For a few women, migration was not so much a choice or their own decision but was forced on them. In 2003, a Muslim woman took Linda from her village near Zamboanga City in southern Philippines to Malaysia when she was 14 and sold as a “live-in partner” of a Chinese-Malaysian man. The girl did not even know she was being taken to Malaysia and was told she was going to work as a domestic worker.

## The Migration Experience

This section looks at certain factors that played important roles in the migration of the women in the study. First are the people who facilitated the trafficking or migration of the women respondents. Next are the fees they had to pay in the migration process. There is also a review of the number of times the women migrated and the kinds of experiences they had in their destination country; this part of the discussion focuses on the experience of trafficking and/or abuse of the women.

## Recruiters and traffickers

The women participating in this study were recruited and/or trafficked by different types of persons and organizations. However, only the Filipinas were specifically asked this question. Thus, based on the women’s responses, the traffickers and recruiters can be grouped into four categories: The first category involves people the women personally knew; this can then be sub-clustered into: i) relatives and ii) friends or acquaintances (neighbours, town mates, etc.). The second category involves a trafficker or recruiter who was referred by someone known to the woman, such as a relative or friend; in this relationship, there was a degree of trust involved because the referral came from someone the woman knew well. The third category involves people they did not know but who had either approached them or they had approached. The fourth and final category involves either local or foreign employment agencies. Based on the interviews, the majority of the traffickers or recruiters were either personally known to the women or had been referred by people the women knew (table 2.5).

**Table 2.5: Recruiter/trafficker, according to the degree of relationship with the respondent\***

Nature of relationship	Description	No. of respondents recruited through this channel (N=30)
Trafficker/recruiter known to victim	Relative	3
	Friend, neighbour, town mate (someone known to them)	6
Trafficker/recruiter referred by person known to the victim	Recruiter or trafficker referred by people the victim knew, such as a neighbour or relative	12
Trafficker/recruiter unknown to the victim	Individual or recruiter who was not part of the respondent’s social network; the victim more often than not had been approached by this person	6
Employment agencies	Job placement agency (local or abroad); the victim may have approached the agency or may have been referred to it by someone she knew	5

\*Filipina sample only

The second category involves friends or relatives, as in the case of Rachel, who was recruited to work in a bar in Singapore by her mother's good friend, or Beng, who was recruited by her uncle's former girlfriend. This category could involve a network of referrals. In the case of Maan, a cousin referred her to a female friend who introduced both of them to a recruiter hiring women to work in Malaysia. Fatima was recruited by an acquaintance named Lian, supposedly for a job in Brunei; she was referred to Lian's cousin named Jen. Jen, in turn, handed her over to Jessica, who took her to Malaysia. These stories illustrate a network of recruiters and transporters involved in the recruitment and trafficking of individuals and show how the network can involve different roles played by different people.

The next most numerous cases described during the research involved someone known to the respondent, such as a relative, friend, acquaintance or town mate. The trusting relationship shared by the victims with relatives, friends or acquaintances more easily predisposed them to trafficking and abuse because they had no reason to believe any malicious intent by the people they knew.

Some women were recruited by people outside their social network. Nora was approached by a recruiter and offered a job in Korea when she was training to be an entertainer in Japan. Linda was allegedly drugged by her recruiter and taken to Malaysia. Roselle met her trafficker while on a tricycle ride who had offered her a job as a waitress in Malaysia. Anita was taken to Japan for an arranged marriage by a Japanese tourist she met, and Jem was recruited to Japan by a male customer of her mother's, who met him when she was selling cotton candy. Although these were strangers, the women accepted their offer because of the large economic returns promised to them.

Others went through employment agencies either in the Philippines or abroad. Beng applied to a placement agency expecting to be given work in the computer industry but ended up as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, where she was raped by her employer. Most of the women who

experienced abuse in Singapore had used a Singaporean employment agency. Those agencies facilitated the conversion of their tourist visa into working visa; some of them had partnered with an employment agency in the Philippines. The Philippine-based agencies are usually in charge of assisting in the processing of travel documents, while the Singapore-based agencies find the employment and arrange for the conversion of the tourist visa to an employment visa.

## Fees paid and debts incurred during the migration process

The recruitment process almost always includes various fees, for the processing of documentary papers and the recruitment process. The would-be migrant is enticed to shell out money because of the assumed monetary returns that migration will bring her. Because many of these women are poor, they resort to selling property, such as land or livestock, or they resort to borrowing money to pay for the required fees.

The amount charged by recruiters/traffickers varied as did their mode of payment. Some required outright payment that had to be made before the migrant's departure. Others were paid through a salary deduction or as a commission. According to the Filipina's responses, the fees ranged from 3,000 pesos (US\$67) to 400,000 pesos (US\$9,000). These fees were either charged as placement or recruitment fees or for expenses that were incurred for transportation, food and handling fees.

For the other Filipina respondents, there were no outright fees but it was assumed that the money they would bring in for their employers would suffice as payment for any recruitment expenses.

The following table presents a summary of the modes of payment the Filipina respondents experienced.

**Table 2.6: Mode of payment to recruiter\***

Mode of payment	Terms
Direct payment	Had to pay for recruitment or placement, transportation and/or other incidental fees before leaving or after the contract was signed. Although direct payment was made before migration, the migrant discovered additional debt when she reached the destination country.
Salary deduction	A migrant was told no fees would be charged but that her salary would be deducted when she got to her destination (not clear whether this would be deducted on a monthly basis; what is clear is that they would have to pay for a specified amount to the recruiter). A migrant was charged more than she was originally told to pay before she left for the destination country (Emily, for example, was told that US\$67 would be deducted from her salary but when she arrived in Malaysia she learned an extra \$600 fee was to be deducted from her salary). Monthly salary deduction (Singapore domestic workers).
Commission for manager	Direct payment either before, during or after migration; for example, US\$267 was paid to the manager of one woman before she left for Japan. Another woman had to pay US\$1,300 to her manager after her time in Japan. Commission from monthly salary. For example, US\$300 of Anita’s \$900 monthly salary in Japan went to her manager; of Nora’s US\$350 salary in Korea, \$35 went to her manager.
Other fees	Many migrants discovered that other fees had to be paid when they got to their destination. For example, Teresa went to Malaysia with a tourist visa; her employer promised that she would arrange for the processing of her visa and work permit. However, the visa was not converted to a working visa, and the employer made her pay (US\$333) to renew the tourist visa on a monthly basis so she could remain working as a domestic worker. Another woman was made to pay US\$2,757 to redeem her passport after she said she wanted to discontinue her contract.
No outright payment but informed of debt at the destination country	The recruiter took care of expenses for the processing of documents and no outright fees were charged. However, the migrant only found out that she was indebted for those expenses when she reached the destination country. It was assumed that a migrant’s work was payment for the recruitment. Most of the Filipina women who were trafficked to Malaysia and Nigeria for prostitution were not required to pay the recruiter until after their arrival.

\* Filipina sample only

For those who made outright payments, some had to borrow money from relatives, a lending agency or a loan shark. A case in point is Flora, who borrowed more than US\$2,000 for her trip to Hong Kong. Angie’s family had to sell their farming equipment to pay the US\$667 placement fee. Maria’s family sold their land to collect enough money for her trip.

Some of the women also had to pay for things other than recruitment fees. Angie and Maureen, for example, had to pay the recruiter for the food they ate, their taxi fare, plane fare, etc., the total of which amounted to US\$1,778 for each. They were to pay this off through prostitution in Malaysia. Other women paid for their airfare after the

recruiter promised they would be paid back at destination; the airfare was never reimbursed.

Respondents who had experienced a previous failed migration and who had incurred debts or expenses were also easily attracted to job opportunities that offered salary deduction rather than the outright payment of placement fees. Salary deduction becomes an attractive option when a would-be migrant already is indebted and can’t come up with more money. However, it can lead to an abusive situation, as discussed in the next chapter.

By far, women who were trafficked for prostitution had the worst situation among the

Filipinas interviewed. This is because they found themselves indebted to their recruiter and to their employer. To leave a brothel, they had to pay their contract price in full. Non-payment of this would mean they had to stay in the brothel for a long time. Interestingly, women such as Neah and Arlyn felt obligated to pay for their debts. It was not just a sense of obligation but also a fear of what might happen if they did not honour their “debt”. Maan from Zamboanga City was told she owed her employer approximately US\$1,350 and was expected to pay it before she could get her passport back.

## Domestic and international migration

As previously noted, most of the women in the research migrated from their home province to a larger city in their country before migrating abroad (“two-step” migration). Only 8 of the 29 Thai women went abroad without having migrated domestically first (“one-step” migration). Of the Thais who migrated domestically prior to going abroad, seven remigrated domestically after their return to Thailand (of the “one-step” returnees, two migrated domestically for the first time after their return).

In their interview with a researcher, the women respondents expressed a greater difference between the state of being “home” (the village) and “away from home” (the city or a foreign country) than between domestic and international migration. (It was beyond the scope of this project to examine all the possible relationships between domestic and international migration.) When asked whether they would consider remigrating abroad, many of the respondents interpreted the question broadly: six Thai women said that at present they would consider domestic remigration, while three said the same of international remigration. In addition, when asked what their best and worst migration experience had been, a question that referred to international migration, five women cited domestic migration experiences as their worst, and four cited domestic experiences as their best.

Most of the young women in North Thailand who migrated in the “two-step” pattern had entered

into prostitution in Bangkok and/or bordering provinces and did so either by their own will or by deception or coercion. Only a few moved to work in a factory. These northern women were generally pressured by their parents, especially fathers, who were aware of the migration purpose of their child. Sisters Pla and Pohn, for example, were obliged to migrate due to their father’s power over them and their mother’s inability to protect them. After being sold by their father into prostitution in Bangkok at the ages of 14 and 16, their later international migration developed out of referrals made to them by acquaintances from within the industry.

I went to Bangkok when I was 16 years old [in 1989]...my father took 20,000 baht from [his friend who was an agent]. I loved my father and my mother; I had to agree to go. My older sister had already gone to Bangkok...when I was going to go, she came up from Bangkok and said [to our father], ‘Why does she have to go, one of us is already enough.’... Our mother tried to talk to him, too, but our father was the one who decided, and we were afraid of him...my mother didn’t want to accept it, but she had to.

*I think in every household [in our village], the father sold all [the daughters]. Sometimes they forced it, sometimes they didn’t. Some girls were willing to do it for their parents’ sake.*

(Pla, Thai woman)

In contrast, the women in north-eastern Thailand who had migrated in the “two-step” pattern tended to have migrated as factory and farm workers before moving abroad. For instance, at the age of 20, Pin from Khon Kaen worked in a shoe factory in Bangkok. It was long hours, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., with only Sundays off. Some days she had to work overtime until nearly midnight. After two months, Pin went to work as waitress in a beer garden. There she met someone who offered her work in Italy.

Nok from Buriram in north-eastern Thailand first worked on a tapioca farm in Chonburi (in the central-eastern region) from the age of 15 and then on a sugar plantation in Rayong

(central-southern Thailand). She met her husband while working on a construction site when she was 21 years old. After giving birth to a boy, she decided to work in the Netherlands with a relative of her husband.

The north-eastern women had exercised their autonomy when they decided to migrate (none reported being “sold” or heavily pressured by family members) to different provinces in Thailand. While moving from place to place, some met men with whom they lived and built a family and/or encountered trafficking recruiters who lured them with false promises for overseas employment. “One-step” women who had not migrated were generally at home raising children and subsistence farming when they were approached with an offer to migrate.

In both regions of northern Thailand and with both “one-step” and “two-step” migrants, agents tended to be trusted acquaintances and/or relatives. Of the first journeys abroad, five women were invited by a relative, five by a neighbour in the village and 13 by another friend or acquaintance. Only 5 of the 29 Thai women had been invited by someone completely outside their village or circle of friends and family.

There is often a false public perception that strangers pose the greatest “danger” to women, particularly in terms of trafficking, forced labour and forced prostitution as well as rape and other violence. The idea that strangers represent the greatest threat suggests at least three corollaries that are not particularly helpful to women in reality: i) that women should avoid all unknown people, places and situations in order to avoid danger; ii) that women who become victims may have “brought it upon themselves” for choosing to take a dangerous risk; and iii) that only bad, unknown men hurt women, so all the known men in a woman’s social or familial circle can be trusted implicitly.

There is considerable documentation underscoring the reality that perpetrators of violence against women are most likely known to them; in trafficking situations as well, the “agent” is most likely a known individual (or at least a friend of a friend) who leveraged, as a recruitment tool, a woman’s trust in the bonds of family or community. (In the case of trafficking, another common assumption that only men exploit

women and that women can therefore be trusted based on their sex also proves to be incorrect.)

The women who were deceived by a close neighbour or relative experienced a particularly painful social situation (discussed in chapter 4) upon their return, more so than women who were invited by more distant acquaintances in the village or in a city.

## Processes of out-migration

Most of the women who migrated abroad needed a facilitator to help them cross international borders. Sometimes this was the same acquaintance or relative who had offered the promise of work and sometimes the women were passed on to another agent. The women from northern Thailand mostly knew that they were entering into prostitution, but they assumed that the conditions would be similar to what they had already experienced and that the pay would be better. They were not told of the exorbitant debt to which they would be bonded; and they did not know the hours and conditions of work, including the inability to refuse customers or to insist on condom use, the minimum number of men required per day, the lack of any day for rest and/or physical confinement within the brothel or apartment, without the right to go outside the building unaccompanied.

Most of the north-eastern Thai respondents were lied to about the nature of the work; they were told that they would wash dishes or serve in a restaurant, work on a farm or serve drinks in a bar (but bartend only). One woman who had previously migrated without abuse as a caterer was told that she would have a job in the tourism industry. All of the women trusted that they would end up working for a higher salary than they would ever earn at home. Some articulated doubt but suppressed their concerns because of their belief that their kin and friends would not harm them.

For most of the women, the migration path that turned into trafficking passed through many processes and several individuals and institutions. The visa department might not have been knowingly complicit, but the tour agencies that assisted the women—for a high fee—through the passport and visa checkpoint were certainly part



of the network. One woman recalled that on the day she left Thailand:

At Don Muang [airport], the woman who took us told us to line up at counter 45 because they'd made an arrangement with that officer. We had to line up only at number 45 to smooth our passport check.  
(Thai woman)

Another woman paid a policeman to take her across the border into Malaysia on his motorcycle in order to avoid hassles at the immigration checkpoint.

Women from the North (two-thirds of whom were younger than 27 when they first migrated in the 1980s and 1990s) said that they generally left Thailand with false passports and were taken on indirect routes to their destination (for instance, from Hat Yai by land to Malaysia and then to Japan by ship; one woman was taken from Chiang Rai to Bangkok, then to Hat Yai in southern Thailand, over to Malaysia, by boat to Singapore, by plane to Taiwan and finally to Tokyo). They found themselves dependent on the agent who accompanied them on their convoluted journey. One reason for the circuitous route was to have women use counterfeit Malaysian passports, which suggests that by this time Japanese authorities were already suspicious of women with Thai passports. Exceptions to the need for involved facilitation were the few women who were already in prostitution near Thailand's border with Malaysia, who could cross the border on their own or with friends.

To pass through the immigration process at airports, women often travelled with a third party or were given money by an agent to carry and show if asked by the authorities as indicative of their self-sufficiency. One woman was told to carry the child of a white South African woman who accompanied her, thus posing as her nanny. Another woman, Noi, went with a group of six other Thai women and six Malaysians (including men and children) to pose as a Malay tour group. They were caught by Japanese officials at the airport before even being interviewed; she later succeeded in entering Japan with another similar group. If the women were accompanied by any other person, the cost of that person's travel

would be added to the debt that the women needed to pay after arriving at their destination.

Some of the women who first migrated in the 1980s and 1990s observed changes in more recent waves of migration.

Methods of tricking women to migrate abroad have changed. Like saying that the woman is the adopted child or the foster child of an older agent...or [saying that one is] going to do traditional massage work or traditional Thai performance is a way to get a visa, to say you're spreading Thai culture to many countries. Or agents look for women who look like they could pass as relatives and then take them to those other countries.  
(Thai woman)

Snack bars [in Japan] these days don't take people without [real] visas because when they get arrested, the police ask questions and they have to shut down for a while. Most Thai women [who now migrate to Japan] get married to Japanese men.  
(Yim Kuk, a Thai woman who migrated in 1984 at the age of 19)

Reference to the increased use of legal documents was echoed by the experience of recent migrants from north-eastern Thailand who migrated after the rise in government awareness concerning trafficking for prostitution in the late 1990s. The women migrated using genuine passports and visas and reported that the agent or pimp at the destination country took their passport from them in order to keep them from running away.

Instead of an agent accompanying them, most of those north-eastern Thai women received instruction on how to travel alone. One possible reason could be that they were older (average age 32) and thus less likely to be scrutinized as potentially in prostitution and/or trafficked by local or foreign authorities. Of a cluster of women from the North-East who all went to Italy via the same agent, only one, Taen, did not obtain a visa on her first application and had to go to the embassy with a travel agent to get it.

## Debt and debt bondage at destination

The amount of debt imposed on the women at the country of destination was one of the factors in identifying the respondents as a trafficked or exploited person for the purpose of this study. Consensual migration, even with the knowledge that they would enter into prostitution, becomes sexual exploitation when a woman is forced to accept unreasonable debt, is never paid, experiences physical, psychological or sexual abuse or some other form of labour abuse, including confinement with threats, coercion or force.

Heavy and artificial debt (well beyond the actual costs of travel and seldom known or agreed to by the woman) was a significant method of pressure and control. Women who acquired this “debt”, regardless of whether they had originally consented to enter into prostitution, were deprived their freedom of movement and told that their confinement would last until they had paid off the sum. Although the women who had been deceived about the conditions they were entering were more likely to try to escape, most eventually resigned themselves to the situation, believing they had no other choice and that once they paid the debt, they would regain their freedom. Those who had willingly entered into prostitution (though misled about the conditions) also believed that once they paid the debt they could continue working. Some of the women were indeed released from confinement and could earn their own money once the debt was paid. Others were not.

Pla, a Thai woman, was forced into prostitution on the street in Hong Kong, under close surveillance of the pimp, to pay a debt of 120,000 baht (US\$4,000). She had to receive no fewer than 40 customers per day, whom she spent 10–15 minutes with her and she was made to work at all hours. After the first day, she was exhausted and in pain and wanted to leave but stayed because she knew she had to pay the debt. After three days, she had received over 100 men but was not paid for anything. After the third day, she was arrested.

After having paid the original “debt”, some women were informed by their pimp or madam

that they had now been “sold” to another bar or brothel and thus acquired a new debt that would have to be worked off in order to gain their freedom. This prolongation of confinement and forced labour, with an additional artificial debt imposed upon them, was in violation of the (already unreasonable) terms of the original bond; even if the original arrangement could possibly be argued to be a form of bonded or indentured labour, it is difficult to see how a second “selling” of a woman after her first “debt” was paid could amount to anything but a form of slavery.

The debt that women who went to Japan had to pay was measured in “bai”, or the equivalent of 10,000 yen. Among the respondents, the debt ranged from 150–350 bai (US\$16,666–\$35,000). A 14-year-old girl who went to Malaysia had the lowest debt of all the respondents, at 45,000 baht (US\$1,500)—which still took her three months to work off.

Kik, a Thai woman, was lied to about the work she would be doing in Japan and then made to pay 450 bai, which at that time was the equivalent of US\$66,667. She remembers the situation as:

...the worst thing in my life. Who was this [person], where'd [the mama-san] come from, to make me pay such a huge debt? I can't forget it. She pointed in my face and said, 'Don't think about running away or I'll have you killed'...it was a system. As soon as I paid off all the debt, they were going to sell me again. And then they were going to give me more debt. That was too much, I couldn't stand it. I had to run away, even if it meant I might die.

(Kik, Thai woman)

Deuan was deceived by a friend who promised to find her work in the tourist industry in Europe but instead took her to Japan from Thailand. She was sold to a Taiwanese mama-san who forced her to pay a debt of US\$50,000. After working for nine months, she was rescued by police and deported to Thailand. But after she had been home less than one month, an agent came to her house and threatened that her family would be hurt if she did not return to Japan to finish paying off the debt. She didn't know of anyone who could help her; out of fear for her family's safety, she went back.



The second time was even worse, and she was forced to take on another 500 bai of debt, which took over a year for her to pay off. Her debt totalled 3 million baht (US\$100,000).

Rani arrived in Japan from Thailand to find a debt of 1.5 million baht (US\$50,000). After she paid it off in three months, she was sold to a second bar, where she worked for two months. She escaped after learning that she would be sold again.

The exorbitant debt women “acquired” after arriving in Japan did not have any real relationship to the actual costs of transportation and document fees. In addition, women were made to stay in a brothel, and the cost of food and housing was further subtracted from their pay.

The experience of women trafficked to Italy resembled the Japanese situation. There were two systems of debt, depending on whether the woman could afford to pay in advance for her travel documents and airfare. Either way, after arrival, half their earnings were taken by the boss for food and housing; if the woman had not paid for her own documents and ticket, the other half was also taken, and the woman received nothing. The women who had paid in advance also sometimes suffered from taking out loans in Thailand in order to migrate. Pin paid 300,000 baht (US\$10,000) to her agent. She had asked her aunt to take out a bank loan for two-thirds of the money and mortgaged her grandfather’s land for the last third.

Yooney, another Thai woman, paid for her passport fee and her agent covered the cost of airfare and visa. She was given 300 euro to carry to show to an immigration officer if she had to, but the money was taken back after her arrival. On arrival, the agent told her that she now had a debt of 600,000 baht (US\$20,000) and seized her land title (for property in Thailand) to ensure that she would stay to pay the debt.

Nok was told by her aunt that she would be working in her cousin’s bar in the Netherlands as a waitress, and the aunt made all the travel arrangements with money sent to her by the cousin’s Dutch husband. Nok travelled by herself from Thailand as far as Belgium, where she was met by another Thai woman who took her to the Netherlands, where she was met by the cousin, her Dutch husband and another Western man, whom she was told she would have to marry in order to stay longer (although she was already married at home). She discovered that this man was a pimp and she would have to work for him. She was also forced to have breast augmentation surgery. The couple controlling her did not tell her the amount of her debt or how long she would have to work for them, but she knew that the costs of her surgery were added to her debt.

The debt for women going to South Africa from Thailand was somewhat lower in comparison with other countries. The agent arranged for the documents and flight and charged women 150,000–300,000 baht (US\$5,000–\$10,000). Koh paid 1,000 baht for her passport and did not need a visa. In South Africa, she was sold for 150,000 baht (US\$5,000). She was forced to receive men for sex in a townhouse from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., then moved to a snooker bar where she was forced into prostitution from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. to pay the debt.

After learning of their “debt”, most of the Thai women who had gone to Japan resigned themselves to paying it back. They believed that after paying it off, they would be free to either work on their own and send money home, or to go home. But if they discovered that this promise would be broken and they would be sold again, they were more likely to resist or try to escape. The women who went to Italy and the Netherlands (not knowing it was for prostitution) were more likely to immediately resist customers and more likely to try persistently to escape.

## Prior knowledge about work

All the women believed they were acting independently in making their decisions to migrate, but nearly all had been given incomplete, misleading or blatantly false information before making their decisions. The recruitment of women involved various degrees of deception. This could be broadly clustered into two groups: i) women who were promised a particular job and certain amount of salary that did not match the reality in the destination country and were also vulnerable to abuse and exploitation; and ii) women who knew what work was expected of them but were not aware of the actual working conditions, which invariably involved abuse or exploitation.

Fifteen (half) of the Filipina respondents could be clustered within the first group. All of them were trafficked for sexual exploitation to the following countries: Malaysia, Nigeria, Singapore and Korea. These women were promised work as a waitress, salesclerk, domestic helper and entertainers and were promised a large salary. However, they found themselves in prostitution with a debt to their recruiter and employer. Fatima, for instance, was promised work as a salesclerk in Brunei with a monthly salary of US\$400. However, she was taken to Malaysia and forced to work in a brothel, sometimes having sex with five to six men a night. She was also not paid her salary for four months. Neah was promised a job as a waitress in Germany but found herself in a Nigerian brothel instead. She was later “resold” by her employer to another employer in another African country. The other women within this cluster had practically similar experiences.

The other half of the Filipina respondents knew the kind of work they were getting into but found themselves experiencing various kinds of abuses and exploitation in the destination country. The jobs were mostly as domestic workers (in Singapore and the Middle East) or entertainers (in Japan). Many of the abuses were related to violations of the contract or sexual and physical abuse.

When Rachel decided to migrate and agreed to go to work in a bar in Singapore, a decision that set her apart from the other Filipina respondents. Her family was in extreme poverty, with nothing to eat at times, which was the triggering factor that made her agree to go. She had seen how the lives of friends and neighbours who had worked as a guest relations officer in Manila bars or in nearby provinces had improved. She thought it would pay off for her and her family. Her consent, however, did not include the abuse she suffered.

Of the 29 Thai respondents, 13 were outright lied to about the work that they would be doing—they were promised jobs in agriculture, food service, retail, tourism and bar work. Another 14 were misled about the work conditions, not told the enormity of the debt they would have to bear or only given very partial information. Only one woman reported having sufficient knowledge about the work and conditions before making her first migration.

Of the Thai respondents who made a second international migration, three women had partial information and four had more or less complete information—although one of them was the woman whose family’s safety was threatened if she didn’t go back to Japan. The two women who made a third international migration only had partial information and did not know the real conditions of their work.

## Working experiences and exploitation in the destination country

Table 2.7 shows the types of abuses that the migrants experienced while working in the destination country. The most prevalent form of abuse was the withholding of salary or underpayment, followed by confinement, humiliation and psychological abuse, long working hours and sexual abuse. The women endured these abuses in varying degrees, although most recounted multiple types of abuse and exploitation.

**Table 2.7: Types of exploitation and abuse experienced by the respondents**

Exploitation and abuse while abroad	Filipina sample N=(30)	Thai sample N=(29)	Total	Ranking
No salary/underpayment	26	27	53	1
Sexual abuse	19	15	34	5
Long working hours/no day off	17	19	36	4
Humiliation and psychological abuse	24	16	40	3
Dangers/hazards to health	11	18	29	6
Physical violence	16	8	24	7
Confinement	18	24	42	2
Others	16	-	-	-

Younger women who had fewer life skills for navigating through a big city felt helpless to fight back or flee from their situation.

When my sister found out I hadn't taken any advance money from the brothel owner, she told me to run away. I said, 'How am I supposed to do that?' I wouldn't even have known what street to tell a taxi to go to. At that age, I'd never even been on a train, I didn't know what a train station was like. (Pla, Thai woman)

I didn't eat at all for two days. I was afraid, and I cried. Then I met someone else from the North and we could speak our dialect together, which helped me feel a little better. That night, they took me to the owner of the shop [in Japan] so she could have a look at me. She said she'd paid 180 bai for me. In Thailand they said 80 bai, so how come now it was 180? I didn't know. (Kan, Thai woman)

## Conditions for women in prostitution

For many of the women recruited or trafficked for sexual exploitation into prostitution, sexual abuse had become part of their daily routine. Some customers did not want to use condoms, although the women insisted. With the more-resistant customers, the women could not do anything but

relent. This exposed them to health dangers, such as HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases, and to unwanted pregnancy, such as what happened to Jocelyn who found herself pregnant when she returned to the Philippines and felt compelled to abort the foetus. Judy was confined in a closed, unventilated room with a guard 24 hours a day. The heat exposure and the long working hours caused nausea and body pains, which illustrates how hazardous her situation was. Women from other countries revealed the same situation;

Providing sex for men in Italy was no different from living in prison. We were confined and had someone watching us all the time. The mama-san took all our documents and only gave back our passport after the visa expired. If we refused to work, they wouldn't give us food. We had to work even when we had our periods. We ate only twice a day, at noon and at 3 p.m., and worked from 8 in the morning until midnight. Some men were sadists and liked to use violence, either hitting with their fists or a belt. (Aem, Thai woman)

In Japan, the system that women entered was well organized and under the control of the Yakuza mafia and their associates. Debt bondage was used not only to provide more profit for employers but, combined with confinement, emotional abuse, threats and physical violence, also to control the women (by forcing an "acceptance" of the situation). The most emotionally devastating abuse

was to resell a woman after she had paid off the first debt, prolonging her forced labour just when she thought she was about to gain her freedom.

Deuan was one of the women who encountered some of the worst forms of abuse and took the risk of trying to escape. She had previously migrated successfully to South Africa from Thailand and felt comfortable about doing it again after meeting a man who promised to get her a job working in the tourist industry in Europe. But instead, he took her to Japan, where a Taiwanese mama-san said she had bought her from the man and imposed a debt on her of US\$50,000.

The first time they made me go with a customer, I tried to tell him, but he didn't understand. I didn't want to do it. I refused. He said he'd already paid, so he wanted his money back. But the mama-san wouldn't give it to him...he pushed my face under water [in the bathtub]. We fought, we struggled. I managed to get out and he followed...he phoned to tell them I'd run away. I didn't know which way to go. It was cold, my hair was frozen, and I fell into the snow up to my chest more than once...I didn't have good clothes for the cold, or a jacket, and I was out in the snow, which really hurt my feet. It was the first time in my life I had felt snow on my skin and it hurt. I don't even know how to describe it. I can't forget it...

The hotel was the only building around in an undeveloped area... The rural Japanese people there, they didn't show me any concern at all. They're very private, they don't want to get involved, especially with foreigners; they looked down on us, they didn't want us there. No one helped me. They insulted me instead. The Yakuza found me, and we argued. I had to go back and I had to do it, or they'd come after my family. So in the end I had to give in. (Deuan, Thai woman)

The most common type of abuse—being cheated of wages—happened to nearly all the Thai women; only three did not report experiencing wage abuse during any of their migrations. Rampeung, for instance, went to Japan at the age of 22 with an agent who agreed to impose a lower

debt than was standard (approximately US\$10,000 instead of \$30,000). In Japan, she borrowed money from her brother-in-law (a Japanese man) to pay off her debt and then paid off the debt to the brother-in-law in instalments. She only had to pay the mama-san for her rent and earned at least US\$3,000–\$5,000 a month, sending most of this money home to her mother.

Naem made her own choices about where to work, but she still experienced labour abuses. She had gone to Malaysia from Thailand with a friend who recruited women for a Chinese boss with a massage parlour. Naem gave massages and sometimes provided sexual services; she sent 5,000–6,000 baht per month to her family. She did not move freely outside the building, but only out of fear of arrest. She could take a leave to visit home more than once and says that if she had become too dissatisfied with her pay, she could have left to find a new workplace. However, she endured long working hours and sadistic customers.

Thai women encountered debt-bondage systems in Italy and the Netherlands, although they were less organized than in Japan, involving individuals with personal ties to local people in Thailand. Thai women also found themselves deceived about work in South Africa and forced into prostitution.

I didn't know about [condoms]...I'd never done this kind of work. So I got pregnant...as soon as they knew they kicked and hit me and said I was stupid, dumb and how was I going to pay my debt now? They made me get an abortion and said that now I owed them the 600 euros they gave me to do that. So I was in even deeper debt and had to keep working. Two days after I had the abortion, they made me work again. It was very cruel. My friends [in the brothel], they were able to stand it, but for me it was mental torture. If I didn't work for them, they wouldn't give me any food. ... Even when they gave me food, as soon as a customer came in, they'd take the plate of food away right then and have us go with the man ... Whenever the bell rang, I felt my heart shake.

(Aem, Thai woman)

I was forced to take customers, in two places [per day]. I had to do it all day and all night, without any day off. When I had my period, I still had to do it. Most of the women there were on drugs. If not, they wouldn't be able to take it. ... I was in shock. My memory got short. I had a fever, and I shook. I couldn't sleep. My life in South Africa was like a living hell.

(Nina, Thai woman)

The Filipina respondents also experienced psychological and emotional abuse aside from the various physical abuses. Matet, who was trafficked to Malaysia, explained that when the women refused to work, their employer threatened to report them to the police and have them arrested and jailed. It was also their way of warning the women not to report their case to the police or the Philippine embassy. They were also the object of verbal abuse by employers. Neah recalled her boss shouting “idiot” at her and other women when they failed to get customers for the night. Alicia's boss threw glasses at them when they refused to approach or flirt with customers. Jocelyn was slapped by her manager, while Judy was in constant fear of being beaten or killed by her recruiter, who was constantly watching over her.

Sometimes, it was the customers who humiliated them by making the women do things against their will. Nora was harassed by customers and asked to perform a sexy dance. If she refused, she received no tip.

A number of the women respondents lived in a confined environment. Neah and Alicia were only allowed to go out if a customer took them out. They lived and worked in a guarded complex, enclosed by high walls and were always accompanied by guards whenever they went to a shop. Fatima and her co-workers were not allowed to go out without a chaperone. Even though Maan's employer took away her passport, she was still locked in.

Employers kept the women's passport to prevent them from escaping. Without the passport, though, they were treated as criminals when caught—overstaying aliens who were working without required papers and permit. The Malaysian police arrested Fatima and imprisoned her for four months in a city jail after she failed to produce her passport during a raid; although she was in fact a victim of a criminal ring, she was treated as the criminal.

## Conditions for women in other sectors

The women who worked in other sectors had a somewhat different experience from the women who were trafficked for sexual purposes in that the women knew they were to be entertainers in Japan or domestic workers in Singapore, Brunei or the Middle East. Most even had contracts, which allowed for the formalization of their employment agreement and a starting point in claiming their rights as workers. What the women were not aware of, however, were the working conditions they would be forced to endure in the destination country.

In the case of women going to Japan as entertainers (primarily singers), the Philippine Government has even instituted a bureaucratic channel of licensing employment agencies to ensure that the entertainers' employment is “legal”. They are also “certified” as “artists” through auditions and talent tests and are given an artist's book to prove that they are “professional entertainers”. Of course, such bureaucratic



channels are not foolproof, as the experiences of women in this report illustrate.

Most of the women respondents for this report who went to Singapore did not take the “legal” route. They travelled on a tourist visa and found an employment agency in Singapore. Unlike the case of Japan (which includes bilateral agreements between the two countries), there is no similar “regulation” of agencies that send workers to Singapore.

For all its faults, the Philippine Government has imposed certain requirements on foreign employment agencies to ensure the safety of Filipina workers. Employment agencies are required by the Philippine Government, for instance, to have attended an orientation seminar on Philippine culture, policies and responsibilities; to have an adequate holding and coordinating facility for domestic workers; and to verify the employment and welfare of workers (Sana, 2007). These licensed agencies are also required to ensure that the workers are treated humanely, to communicate with their family, to report the whereabouts and conditions of the workers upon request, to submit the worker to a physical examination when required, to ensure that the worker maintains ownership of their passport and to help in resolving problems that the workers encounter (Sana, 2007).

Because the Filipina respondents for this report did not go through Philippine-certified agencies, they became more vulnerable to abuse. Their cases teeter between trafficking and failed migration experiences. However, they have clearly experienced various kinds of abuses and exploitation as well.

For the women (who didn’t use an agency), non-payment or underpayment of salary was a common problem. For instance, the women who went to Singapore all had to endure a six-month salary deduction to pay for the recruitment fee. If they opted to move to another employer because of an abusive situation received a two-month extension to the initial six-month salary deduction stipulated in the contract was imposed. The women reported that although they were supposed to receive a S\$10–\$20 daily stipend for provisions, the employer often times did not give it or gave it late. This prevented them from sending money back home, which was their primary goal for migrating. The women’s salaries

averaged S\$320 (Flora was supposed to receive S\$340 for agreeing not to have any day off), which is below the S\$350 salary prescribed by the Philippine Government (Sana, 2007).

Maria, who went to Brunei, received a lower salary (US\$120) than what was promised (US\$220).

Anita, on the other hand, entered into an arranged marriage with a Japanese man to gain legal residency in Japan in order to work. The marriage was arranged by a Japanese tourist she met in the Philippines. However, after marrying the man in Japan, she found herself heavily in debt: She was made to pay US\$550 per month for the marriage arrangement and other expenses the husband supposedly made on her behalf. In total, she was expected to pay around US\$9,000. The husband confiscated her passport and return ticket, thus rendering her a virtual prisoner in his house.

In her second migration to Japan, Jem’s manager imposed penalties on the foreign entertainers working in his club, such as a salary or tip deduction or they were made to clean his house. She was earning almost nothing because the employer refused to pay her salary after she refused to barely dress herself and dance lewdly (her contract stipulated she was a singer but the manager insisted she had to dance). Her first migration experience, also at the same club in Japan, had gone well; she earned what she thought was enough money in exchange for only singing. By the second trip, the conditions had changed; so too did her experience.

The Filipina respondents who migrated into domestic work endured long work hours, sometimes starting at 5 a.m. and, in the extreme, ending at 3 a.m. (6 a.m. to midnight for most). Because they lived with their employer, they were essentially on call 24 hours a day. Beth and Selma each were made to work in more than one household even though their contract stipulated they worked for only one household. Some of the women were confined to the home, such as Flora who was not allowed any day or time off, even to socialize with other domestic workers in the neighbourhood. They experienced psychological abuse or humiliation. They were called names for minor infractions. The elderly mother of Selma’s employer, for instance, told her to go to hell or die. Sometimes, she would even hurt Selma. Selma recalled, “Every time she shouted at me, I felt I

was going crazy. I wanted to retaliate but couldn't. She was an old woman and I respected her.”

Pathum, one of only two women in the Thai cohort who migrated into a factory situation instead of prostitution, found her work conditions unbearable:

The garment factory was for export—they sent the clothes to many places, many countries. If you couldn't keep up with the pace, you'd have to work both day and night. ... You worked so much, it became a blur. Was it day? Was it night? Who knew?

They took \$300 back every month...But I was only making \$300 a month because I couldn't do as much work as I was told I would. So I had debt the whole time ... If I didn't give them the monthly payment they added interest. ... I had to work for four years to pay off the debt to the agency. As soon as it was all paid off, they sent me back.

It was like hell in the factory. One pregnant Thai woman, she was six or seven months pregnant, gave herself an abortion in the bathroom [because they were forbidden to get pregnant]. It smelled so bad. We saw the blood, we saw the umbilical cord, it was just—oh! Because we had to share the bathrooms. Think about it, a 6-month-old foetus that was forced out of the mother, what kind of condition do you think it was in? Its neck was torn through. We saw the head and the placenta that they threw in the trash.

It was very hot there (in the factory), to the point that my skin got burnt. It's better now, but before, all I had left were these [points to her eyes] and my skin was very dark. In the factory they cooked us, they baked us, totally. One of the Thai men, he was the cook, he died. He died wetting his pants, he died for unknown reasons.

(Pathum, Thai woman)

## Multiple international migration experiences

Several of the Filipina and Thai women migrated more than once; eight of the Filipinas migrated twice and seven migrated three or more times (table 2.8). Not all experienced abuse and exploitation each time.

**Table 2.8: Number of times migrated abroad\***

	Frequency	%
1	15	50.0
2	8	26.7
3 or more	7	23.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>

\* Filipina sample only

For those who had successful migration experiences, it was easier for them to try their luck again abroad. They defined a successful migration experience as one that allowed them to use their earnings to buy material things for their family, to invest in buying or repairing the family's house, to buy a vehicle or, for very few, to invest in a business. That success, however, was marginal and, worse, temporary, because most did not properly invest their earnings to ensure a livelihood for themselves and their family. Moreover, they had not eradicated their very reason for migrating in the first place—the lack of stable income and poverty. Once home, they found their earnings do not go a long way. Thus they had to find work again.

Each migration experience exposes women to the threat of being trafficked and exploited. Filipina Maureen had two relatively successful migration experiences in the Middle East before being trafficked to Malaysia. The Filipina and Thai women who went to Japan reported that they were constantly exposed to sexual abuse by their clients and wage abuse by the employer (the bulk of their earnings actually went to the club owners), but they kept on returning because of the financial rewards of working as an entertainer in the country. For women such as Ria and Anita, the financial “rewards” outweighed the abuses they had to endure; they went to Japan three times each.

But unsuccessful early migration does not necessarily equate with the decision not to remigrate. Nora had a terrible first experience in Korea but still decided to try Japan the second time, and Singapore the third time. When asked whether they still wanted to remigrate despite their negative experiences, 17 of the respondents said yes and one was ambivalent. Of the 17, 10 of them were actually making preparations to go abroad at the time of the interview. They perceived their previous experience of abuse and exploitation as a temporary set-back.

I think anyone who has gone abroad would find it difficult to just stay in the country. You will want to leave every time. When I first went abroad, people told me I would go back over and over again...and it was true. [Even though she was nearly forced into prostitution], her view of migration had not changed because not all countries would give me the same experience.  
...Try and try until you die.  
(Maureen, Filipina woman)

Judging by the various respondents' outlook on migrating, it seems there is willingness to risk their welfare. Flora, who escaped an abusive situation in which she was not given her salary for over six months and was treated like a workhorse, did not want to leave Singapore after she sought shelter from the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME). She was already taking concrete steps to find another employer. She would not have gone home had her visa and work permit not expired.

Migration for women such as the respondents is a continuum of good and bad experiences, and there is always the chance that the next time will be a lucky good one. Even after escaping an abusive situation, some women, like Flora, did not feel compelled to give up and looked for another option within the destination country. When Margie's domestic work conditions in Malaysia became intolerable (overworked, no salary, inadequate food), she complained to her agency. The agency took her from that employer and deployed her to temporary domestic stints (she would stay for a week or two then transfer to another household); the conditions were much

better but she did not earn as much money. The salary was less and she had to deduct a supposed recruitment fee each time. Eventually, the agency found her a job with an Australian couple with good working conditions and salary. Unfortunately, after several months, the couple moved to another country, sending Margie back to temporary employment again and the risk of exploitation once more.

After working in brothels in Togo, Neah decided to move to Cyprus where she heard the pay was better—although her situation did not necessarily become better.

## Feelings and concerns about family, changes in family's economic and social status

Most of the women respondents recalled their anxiousness about the welfare and security of their family while they worked abroad, knowing that their loved ones were in economic hardship. Some women had mortgaged land that either they or relatives owned in order to pay the agent's fee and travel costs, which added to the stress of earning money, especially as they endured abusive experiences.

Nearly all the Thai women (25 of the 29) could contact their family at least once by phone (20) and/or by post (7). Some were allowed to make calls, with the cost added to their debt, while others borrowed customers' cell phones to call home secretly. While in Italy, Taen could call her husband but was not allowed to speak to him alone, so she could not explain that she had been lied to and forced into prostitution. She cried but had to tell him it was only because she was homesick.

When I was at the centre, they let me call home. My mother was worried and upset. I cried to my mother that I wanted to go home, and my mother cried, too, because I had caused her to be worried.  
(Noi, Thai woman)



Only two women said that their sole contact with their family was via mail, and four did not mention any contact at all. One woman remembered, “I didn’t contact my family while I was in Japan, to the point that my parents thought I had died.” Some women did not contact home for emotional and social reasons. Kik missed her children terribly and cried every day out of worrying for them. But she did not want to let her family know what had happened to her or to be distressed, so she didn’t try to contact them.

The money that women sent to their family had various effects on the financial status and was used for various purposes, as table 2.9 explains (although referring only to the Thai respondents).

**Table 2.9: Remittance spending\***

Remittances spent on	No. of respondents
Bought household goods (TV, refrigerator, etc.)	9
Built new house	8
Bought motorcycle	8
Supported education of family members	6
Repaired old house	6
Bought land	4
Invested in petty trade	4
Bought car/pick-up truck	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>29</b>

\* Thai sample only

The building of a new house brings an elevation in social status, serving as very public and physical evidence of a family’s financial success. Among the Thai respondents, only women from the North who stayed for many years in Japan managed to build a new family house or buy a motorcycle for siblings. Some women were only able to send home a meagre amount of money from their tips; 12 women were not able to remit any money home at all.

## Summary

The women interviewed for this research migrated for a variety of reasons, but for most, the decision

was based on what the women perceived as the needs and expectations of their family—not their needs as individuals. Most of the women had little education, and their family had little or no land. Many women had already left home, migrating domestically in search of better-paying work prior to making their first international migration.

The women were invited to migrate by someone who knew them directly, knew a friend or family member or was at least from the same district or province and who used this shared sense of identity to encourage the women to trust them. Women were given very little information about the conditions of work, and some, particularly those from Northeast Thailand, were lied to outright.

To migrate, most of the women (with the exception of a few who migrated over land borders) were highly dependent on someone to navigate the process; they were typically told that they had to pay nothing for their transport and documents, but upon arrival in the destination country, were informed that they had to pay off a gigantic debt through prostitution (this was not the case for those who went into factory or domestic work or as singing entertainers).

Debt played a large role before and during the out-migration, with some women saying that they migrated to pay off existing debts, others going into debt to pay for their plane ticket, and many getting saddled with artificially inflated debt upon arrival.

Women who had previously been in prostitution and those who had friends and relatives who had entered into prostitution knew where they were going but were misled about the conditions. A few women who had never been in prostitution and agreed to migrate for other purposes discovered the shocking conditions they had to endure; these women, as discussed in the following chapters, reported more kinds of abuses and more post-traumatic symptoms immediately after their return. Regardless, women in all kinds of industries were robbed of their autonomy because they had made a decision to go abroad after being deliberately misinformed or kept uninformed about what life and work would be like. All of them had been exploited for their labour in the destination country in one way or another.

# *Chapter*

**3**



# CHAPTER 3



Moving on

## Out of Exploitation and the Point of Return

This chapter looks at issues surrounding the return of the 59 women to their home country. The return experience is inevitably connected to the migration experience, largely because that outcome prompted the return. The discussion begins with the stories on how the women managed their way out of the exploitation and confinement and then moves on to analysis of the migrants’ pre-return considerations and concludes with the assistance that was made available to them up to the point of their arrival back home.

### Ending the exploitative situation

Many of the Thai and Filipina women reported being confined during at least one of their migrations (table 3.1). Most of them tried to

escape the situation, but depending on their circumstance and their fears, had different means or opportunity to do so. The majority believed the only way to be set free would be to work off their debt and either did so or were arrested before paying off the debt.

**Table 3.1: Way out of confinement and exploitation\***

Method of ending confinement	No. of respondents
<b>Arrested</b> (not including the women who called the police and asked for a raid)	11
<b>Paid off debt</b> (in two cases, a third party helped to pay half or more of the debt)	7
<b>Called for help</b> (raid or assistance in escaping)	5
<b>Escaped independently</b>	1

\* Thai sample only

The majority of the confinements were brought to an end by a police raid (in the Thai sample, 16 of

the 24 situations). Two-thirds of the women were arrested in a fortuitous raid. The others who were arrested had asked for the raid (often with the help of a customer or relative) by contacting the police or the Thai embassy.

I asked for help from a Thai customer who was working as a cook. He helped me contact the Thai embassy, and a little while later the police came to raid, and took me out—I was the only one they took.  
(Koh, Thai woman)

Filipina Ting, who had been trafficked into prostitution in Malaysia when she was 14 years old, managed to call her grandmother several times with customers' cell phones. Her grandmother contacted organizations that were able to secure Ting's release by pressuring the brothel owner.

After hearing that they would be sold again from their Japanese brothel, Kik and a friend decided to flee. Both women were helped by their boyfriends. Kik and her boyfriend escaped, but the other couple was caught by the mama-san, and a fatal fight ensued. Both couples were charged with the murder of the mama-san. Kik and her boyfriend were declared innocent in the ensuing trial and released; the other couple were found guilty of murder and imprisoned. The woman was released after she was diagnosed as dying of cervical cancer; she died shortly after returning to Thailand. Her boyfriend remains in prison.

Nina had been locked inside a house in South Africa, and her madam had told the neighbours that they were sisters. She managed to climb out a window and flag down a student on a bicycle who helped her contact the Philippine embassy and the police.

Of the 30 women in the Filipina sample, three said they did not get any assistance at all in escaping. Patty, for instance, tried to seek help escaping from her domestic work job in Dubai from another Filipina she had managed to meet; the plan failed when the other women could not come to pick her up. She also attempted to call the Philippine embassy in Dubai but was not able to make contact with anyone.

Two women reported that family members helped them get out. Margie, for instance, contacted her family in the Philippines when she needed money for an operation in Malaysia for a spine problem. Her family sent her US\$890 for her medical expenses. Emily's uncle and aunt in the Philippines sent money to pay her "debt" to her recruiter.

## The point of return

Migrants' feelings often oscillate between being prepared and unprepared for return, depending on the circumstances. On one level (the personal level), the migrant may actually be prepared to come back; but on another level (the financial level), she might not be ready. Moreover, the very nature of that person's return—be it voluntary or involuntary—impacts the emotional interpretations of it. Each of the migrants' feelings and concerns about returning hinges on a host of factors, such as the experiences in the destination country, the actual reactions or perceived reactions of family members to their return, the social stigma associated to failed migration, how much they achieved in what was expected from their migration and their family situation. Other variables, such as falling ill or being repatriated or deported by immigration authorities, factor in heavily. All of these issues have implications on the ability of the migrant to reintegrate later on, once she arrives in her country of origin.

In general, three different categories of attitude towards returning were evident among the women interviewed in this study: i) those who were resolute, ii) those who were ambivalent and iii) those who did not want to return.

## Resolute about returning home

The women coming from a harrowing experience were the most resolute about returning home. Alicia, for instance, who was trafficked from the Philippines for prostitution to Nigeria, was more than ready to go home from the start of her vexing experience. However, she had become pregnant by a Taiwanese customer and was worried about what her parents would say of her

pregnancy as well as anxious about her child's future. The desire to get out and go home overrode the anxiety. "I really wanted to go home because I didn't want to remain in that kind of work," she recalled. The availability of help from her Taiwanese customer who later became her boyfriend played a huge role in her return; he paid her "debt" (originally it was US\$21,000 but was reduced to US\$5,000 and was further reduced to US\$2,500 after considerable haggling) and gave her a return plane ticket and US\$700 pocket money.

However, Neah, another Filipina, could find no one to help buy out her contract. She was resold to another employer in Togo.

The employer's policy was that if no customer was willing to pay for your contract price, you would be sold to other brothels. I was sold to another, along with another Filipina. We were supposed to taken to Abidjan [Cote d'Ivoire] but we didn't make it there because some problem came up. We were then taken to Lome [Togo].

(Neah, Filipina woman)

Maureen and Angie were trafficked together from the Philippines to Malaysia. They were initially told by their transporter that they would work as waitresses. On the way there they learned it was actually prostitution they were being taken to and that they had debts to pay. Having not yet arrived, they knew they wanted to go home.

We were going to be booked with customers daily. Our body would be used every day. We would work hard, but we would not get anything in return. Who would want that kind of work? (Angie, Filipina woman)

When they got to the brothel fronting as a restaurant, Maureen and Angie grabbed an opportunity and asked a Filipino who was dining in the restaurant to help them.

When we got there, they [the recruiters] thought we didn't have the chance to leave anymore. But my companion [Angie] made our move. We asked a Filipino ship captain to help us. [He] referred us to the Malaysian Immigration.

(Maureen, Filipina woman)

Jem encountered problems on her second trip to Japan from the Philippines when her employer forced her to dress scantily and dance lewdly when performing. Her contract only required she sing. Her refusal to obey resulted in fines, deducted from her salary, which left her with little or no pay. The verbal and psychological abuse plus the salary deductions provoked Jem to escape and to file a case against her employer in Japan. After she won the case, Jem decided to return home.

However, some women were not able to return even though they were exploited and really wanted to go home. Neah was trafficked to Nigeria and then sold to another brothel in Togo. In both instances, she could not return because she did not have the money to buy her return ticket. She was indentured on both occasions to her employer. To finance her return, she was forced to go to Cyprus to find a better-paying brothel.



We could not go home. We were only given \$50 a month as allowance. We were spending this money for our monthly provisions, too, so we could not save money. In Lome, there were more than ten women working in the brothel. There were Moroccans, Arabs, Romanians who were in sex work. I stayed there for several months, and we were not getting any salary. This is also because there were few customers. Business was as sporadic as the summer rains. There was no monthly salary. We were only given an allowance for food.

Some of my companions suggested that we go to Cyprus because we would be able to go home [earn enough money to purchase air ticket]. I went with them; there were three of us. When I left Lome [Togo], I didn't have a cent with me. We ended up in the same line of work. We would line up in front of customers. I had a swell time there because I was earning money every night. I earned at least 6 pounds a night; but you know, I was not able to save up. I went home with only US\$20 in my pocket. I spent a lot when I was there. (Neah, Filipina woman)

Having finally started to earn money, Neah began to enjoy her stay for a while: "It was good in Cyprus because you get paid on a daily basis. I earned at least 6 pounds a night and I also got a percentage from the drinks [my customers ordered]." But she was resolute about her return because she was not interested in remaining in prostitution. As soon as she saved money and as soon as her six-month contract in Cyprus was over, Neah decided to go home.

## Ambivalent about returning home

Not all the women who experienced a distressing situation in the destination country wanted to return home. This was particularly true for many of the Filipina women who went as domestic workers.

Beth, from the start, wanted to go back home because she found work with her employer difficult. But through the machinations of her aunt and her employer, her stay was extended well beyond her contract while she was experiencing various abuses (such as non-payment of salary, verbal and psychological abuse, long work hours, etc.). To make matters worse, Beth's husband took on a mistress and used the money she sent to finance his mistress. Beth was distraught with the news, which made her want to return home.

I really wanted to go home because the news about my philandering husband was just too much. I was thinking that it didn't matter that I didn't have money; the important thing was I did something to keep my family intact. (Beth, Filipina woman)

Her return to the Philippines was advanced when the police raided the Singaporean restaurant where she was working. The raid resulted in her temporary detention. She was charged for working as a waitress while contracted as a domestic worker. Police detention made the decision to go home seem much easier. Then suddenly she felt conflicted.

I was afraid that my husband would finally leave me. I was also afraid I would not see my child anymore. But I also knew I would be unemployed once I got home. (Beth, Filipina woman)

And although she had saved some money (US\$890), she knew it would not be enough for much when she got home. In fact, the money she saved was all spent by the first month after her return because she had paid for the birthday party of her child and for her husband's loans, among other things. She thought of staying on in Singapore once the case against her restaurant employer was resolved; but her return ticket had been purchased and her legal status was not renewed; there was no turning back.

It was too late to decide to stay in Singapore because my air ticket had already been purchased [by the employer through the directive of the Ministry of Manpower]. The ticket was ready for pick up when they called me. Had I known earlier that I was being sent home, I would have asked the Executive Director of the SMS to help me extend my stay [in Singapore] so I could look for another employer. I could just have gone on a two-week vacation in the Philippines. (Beth, Filipina woman)

Before Selma left for Singapore to work as a domestic worker, she had to borrow money to help send her brother to a security guard training centre. She was hoping that by going to Singapore she could repay the debt as well as provide financial support for the family. However, Selma did not receive any salary for the eight months she was in Singapore. In addition, she endured various abuses—verbal, psychological and physical—from her employer. She lost contact with her family because her employer forbade her use of the telephone. Her letters did not reach her family (she suspected her employers did not mail them).

Though she managed to change employers, she still was never paid (although they allowed her to call home once a month). At some point, Selma felt like “escaping”. She sought shelter at the NGO HOME while her lawsuit against her first employer was ongoing. At the HOME, Selma started meeting women who had had similar experiences. She eventually became a peer counsellor for abused migrant women, which gave her immense satisfaction. That sense of fulfilment made her want to remain in Singapore. She wanted to try her luck again with another employer because the salary of her husband, who worked as a security guard, was not enough for their needs. The eight months she had been in Singapore did not amount to anything. She felt pressured to make something of the journey to Singapore. However, her husband dissuaded her from staying on; he thought it best that she go home because their children were still small and needed their mother. She returned with only the SG\$100 the HOME gave her as pocket money.

Erin filed a case against her employment agency with Singapore’s Ministry of Manpower because she was forced into domestic work against her will. What was touted as temporary employment did not turn out to be short term. Her agency made her stay with an employer for weeks against her will. She was told she would work only for two days as a substitute but she ended up working several weeks although she only had a tourist visa. Because of this she filed a case against the agency and her employer with the Ministry of Manpower. The case dragged on for a year, which made life difficult for her. Erin wished she could go home.

I just wanted for my case to be finished. I didn’t want to stay anymore because I thought that I was really not lucky abroad because nothing significant had really happened to me. (Erin, Filipina woman)

Leaving would have been somewhat easy for Erin because she had financial support (her Australian boyfriend sent money regularly; her family also supported her financially). Her family also welcomed the prospect of her returning. There were death threats, allegedly from her agency, which were intimidating. The only thing that kept her in Singapore was the case against the employer. When it was over, though, she was hesitant about the actual return.

*When my case was over, I didn't really want to go home because I would miss the shelter. It was so sad because I had learned so much from there.* (Erin, Filipina woman)

But Erin also had other reasons for not wanting to go back to the Philippines related to their home environment and the gossip being spread about her.

I didn't want to go back to my hometown because my cousin was spreading stories about me being jailed in Singapore. My cousin has been telling everyone that I was jailed because I did some mischief. It hurt that they were telling everyone I was in prison. (Erin, Filipina woman)

Although Erin was prepared to return, certain issues brought out reservations. She could have opted to remain as a volunteer at the HOME or sought employment elsewhere in Singapore because the HOME helps to place women for domestic work. But Erin eventually decided Singapore was not for her and went home.

Beng, on the other hand, turned herself over to the immigration authorities in Japan after working illegally as a waitress and entertainer (she had no work permit and her visa had expired) when she became homesick and tired of working. However, at the point of actually departing (deportation, due to her circumstance) she felt reluctant to leave, or rather, she really didn't want to go home to the Philippines. She felt an overwhelming sense of loss for her friends and even her manager in the bar where she had worked and that she would no longer be supporting her family as she had been doing.

These stories draw attention to the various considerations and influences governing a woman's decision to return home. Although the decision may have been largely influenced by a negative experience, the help a woman receives also influences her ambivalence towards returning. For instance, had the help Beng received offered her other windows of opportunity, such as what the women in Singapore experienced, she might have chosen a different option. Of course, the gravity of the negative experience may be related to the ambivalence towards returning. Most of the women interviewed who were ambivalent about returning had not experienced any grave form of abuse as had the women who definitely wanted to go home—or at least in their perception, their experience of abuse and exploitation was not as serious.

## Reluctant and concerned about returning home

A third portion of the interviewed women actually dreaded the prospect of returning, despite the exploitation and abuse. The main concerns or reasons for not wanting to return was i) debt, ii) a sense of having failed as a migrant (returning with no savings) and iii) fear of stigmatization. All the returned Thai women were asked to recall how they felt prior to departing their destination country. The most common feeling expressed was “worry”, with 17 of the 29 women reporting a variety of reasons, as table 3.2 explains.

**Table 3.2: Main concerns about returning home\***

Subject of concern	No. of respondents
Debt and/or lack of savings	7
Community reaction/stigma	6
Family reaction	4
Lack of work/need to earn money to support the family	4
Health of self	2
Health of family member	2
Binational child's legal or social status (nationality, discrimination)	2
Future in general	2

\* Thai sample only (29 women)

However, but not surprising, many (11) of the Thai women also recalled feeling “happy or looking forward” to going home. Some were relieved that the trafficking experience and/or return process was coming to an end and that they would be reunited with loved ones. The third most common (six women) emotion was fear of traffickers, with the women describing their feelings as sadness, anger or embarrassment. Other feelings the women recalled:

- confused, shocked, dazed; experiencing memory loss
- ashamed, humiliated, stigmatized
- resentful that other migrants had succeeded
- homesick
- resigned

## Debt and lack of savings as a main concern

Debt and lack of savings were serious concerns among both the Thai and Filipina women interviewed. Maria, for example, was taken from the Philippines to Brunei and worked as a domestic worker in difficult circumstances. Her salary was lower than what was promised (she received US\$130 a month instead of the US\$220 that was promised), she worked seven days a week, starting at 6 a.m. and ending at midnight; she didn't have enough food to eat and was confined at the home of her employer. She didn't have a work permit (she entered Brunei on a tourist Visa), which was why she had to return to the Philippines. But Maria had borrowed US\$440 and pawned her land to pay her recruiting fee and to finance her trip abroad. The little she had been paid had not even paid off the debt to get there and now she had to go back.

Returning was very difficult because I had lots of debts, which I could not pay if I returned. What would happen to my family? I didn't have money to pay our debt. When we got to Malaysia [on the way home to Zamboanga City], I told Arbie [her companion who was also recruited to Brunei] that we should just stay in Malaysia so we could find any kind of work. I was willing at that point to get any kind of employment. But Arbie balked at that idea and preferred to go home. I was crying buckets of tears in the ship on our way home.

I constantly cried. I wanted to commit suicide on board the ship. I could not think straight. I kept thinking about my debts. .... I was extremely worried.

(Maria, Filipina woman)

Maria also faced the prospect of an angry sibling from whom she borrowed the money. True enough, when she got back, her sibling was mad. "My sister was angry because she was the one who lent me the US\$440 for the transportation expenses."

Maria's return was marked by failure, and this failure had repercussions on the well-being of her family because of the sizeable debt to pay. Her intention to help her family had backfired and caused more financial problems for her in the end. It was the disappointment, her family's anger and the fear and shame of returning home as a failed migrant that contributed to her not wanting to return.

Patty, another Filipina, had a harrowing experience in the United Arab Emirates where she worked as a domestic worker for an Arab family. Even from the start, Patty noticed the lascivious way her male employer acted towards her (he would say she smelled very good while touching her hand, when she was in shower he would knock at the door or try to open it to ask her to do some chores, etc.). These seemingly "harmless" actions escalated to an attempt to rape her. It was only because Patty fought back that the rape attempt was averted. But the experience did not leave her unscathed: "I was bruised all over. He even tried to strangle me, but I fought to survive." A few days after the incident, she told her employer she wanted to transfer to another employer. Instead of having her transferred, her employer had her working permit revoked. She was hastily sent home to the Philippines. She presumes the man was afraid she would complain about what happened.

Patty was not ready to go home, mostly because she had no money to take back.

My eyes were really puffy from crying. I could not take the fact that I was going home without money, not even a centavo. I was a failure. I was not able to send anything to my family and son. I also could not bring myself to tell them what happened....I could not accept what I experienced. I had been good to my employers, but what do they do? They send me home in tears and without money.

(Patty, Filipina woman)

But more than not having any money, Patty's frustration in returning home had to do with the thwarting of her life plans:



I felt frustrated because I had plans of doing business buying and selling gold because gold is cheap there [UAE]. Where will I get money to spend for my child? How will I send money [her child lives with her mother in Iloilo]? (Patty, Filipina woman)

After the incident with the first employer, Patty expected she would find another employer. She had tried to contact her employment agency for help with a transfer when her employer first made the sexual advances; the employment agency had done nothing to help her. She recalled, “The first time I complained, the only thing they told me was to be careful and to be watchful.” The agency was not willing to facilitate her transfer to another employer. Then she met a Filipino who offered her the possibility of changing to another employer. But before the man could help her, she was sent home.

The prospect of going home unsuccessful was too much for Patty.

I couldn't accept the fact that I was unsuccessful in Dubai. I didn't have money at all. I was going home to the Philippines defeated. (Patty, Filipina woman)

Patty's return had been most difficult to accept because she was unprepared to go home, not only because her employer forcibly repatriated her but also because prior to going to Dubai she had been in the Philippines for a year without any gainful employment. Thus, her financial difficulties would be exacerbated by her return.

Another Filipina, Flora also experienced abuse, but in Singapore. Flora had not been paid her salary and endured verbal and psychological abuse and long work hours. She was referred by the Ministry of Manpower to the HOME after she filed a case against her Singaporean employer. Along with refuge, Flora found that the HOME arranges for the re-employment of abused domestic workers. At the point, going home did not loom as an option; her husband had expressly told her not to come home unless she had money.

Flora had migrated another time previously and the family was still in debt from that experience, which had been a “failed” migration. For a year and a half, her husband's sister, who was the only one in the family with employment, was paying off the family's debts. Thus, Flora's husband and their debts played a major role in Flora's desire to stay on in Singapore. Her worries about what her neighbours would say also played an influencing factor. One of her neighbours had been gossiping about her first migration experience. She knew that if she returned a failed migrant twice, the tongues in her neighbourhood would not stop wagging as they had done when she returned from Hong Kong.

However, Flora was forced to return because her work visa expired by the time the employer provided a necessary release letter. She suspects the employer intentionally delayed it out of spite. She was so distraught about going home that she considered not boarding the flight to the Philippines.

## Fear of stigmatization

The community's perception, particularly towards a failed migration, was another primary concern related to returning that many of the interviewed women highlighted. The community usually expects migrants to achieve a certain level of economic success. A failed migration experience sets them up for gossip or derision. Interestingly, Maureen, Angie and Alicia (all Filipinas) did not worry about the negative perception of their community because they knew they were a victim. “Why should I feel embarrassed about this? It is them [her neighbours who recruited her] who should feel ashamed,” Alicia remarked.

Among the other Filipinas, however, Jem, Linda and Fatima were worried about what the community as well as relatives would think.

There are lots of gossipmongers in our community. They have malicious minds. I am really mad because they spread [stories] that I had been peddling my body [in Japan]. (Jem, Filipina woman)

Jem also worried about the situation of her family.

I was happy that I would be with my family but I was also a little sad because to my mind I had become worthless. I was thinking, how I could help my family financially?  
(Jem, Filipina woman)

The anxiety was troubling. But it paled in comparison to the abuse Jem had experienced in the bar where she worked in Japan and by the threats to her life, which made going home the most desirable option.

Yes [my manager threatened me]. Her husband is a Yakuza. That's why I was so scared... I was scared because of what they could do to me. I was happy because I was going to be with my family again. But I was also a little sad because I felt useless. I was thinking I could not help my family anymore.  
(Jem, Filipina woman)

The women's family reaction to their return was often mixed, with certain family members supportive and others looking down on them either for having been in prostitution or for returning home empty-handed.

While the majority (11) of the Thai women reported the family had been supportive, many were received by their families with a sceptical or directly negative attitude.

One woman's husband rejected her entirely for having been in prostitution, while other women reported that their husband was their main emotional support. One woman was furious with her husband's relatives for having led her into exploitation abroad; she lived with her parents for a year and a half before feeling emotionally ready to rejoin her husband and child. Some, like Kuk, had been completely out of contact with their family. When Kuk returned, her family seemed surprised because they had heard rumour that she had gone insane in Malaysia. (The next chapter looks at how the experiences back home vary over time.)

## The family's reaction to returning women

**Table 3.3: Family reaction to return\***

Nature of family reaction	No. of respondents
Supportive	11
Concerned	9
Happy	9
Sad	6
Angry	4
Surprised	3
Indifferent	2
Guilty	1
Disappointed	1
Rejecting	1
No reply/"they didn't know I was coming home"	6

\*Thai sample only

## Assistance during the return process

The 29 women in the Thai research cohort returned during two significant time periods: 8 (all from northern Thailand) during the 1990s and 21 (10 from the North and 11 from the North-East) after 2000. The women in the earlier group had migrated to work, mostly to Japan, when they were in their 20s and returned in their 30s. Their experience predates the Palermo Protocol and government adoption of anti-trafficking policies; thus these women were not considered trafficking victims and did not receive any assistance from the authorities in the destination country, with the exception of one woman who was taken to a shelter for two weeks in 1993.

The then Thai prime minister put human trafficking on the national agenda in 2004, and consequently, women who were assisted in their destination country had an "official" return, which includes an exchange of information between agencies in the destination country and in Thailand, reception at the airport by a representative of the Bureau of Anti-Trafficking in



Women and Children (BATWC) and an offer of funds to help them rebuild a working life in Thailand. The BATWC was set up under the Department of Social Development and Welfare (within the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security) to coordinate anti-trafficking work.

In their interviews for this report, the Thai women described the type of assistance they received during their return process, as shown in table 3.4.

**Table 3.4: Type of assistance during return\***

Type of assistance	No. of respondents reporting assistance (29 women, 39 migrations)
Financial support	24
Transportation	23
Shelter	14
Legal assistance	13
Psychological assistance	8
Other protection	7
Medical care	3

\* Thai sample only

Transportation assistance generally meant money for transportation or tickets but no accompaniment. Of the 23 women who received a plane or bus ticket for their return home (one woman received this aid on two returns), 12 received it from NGOs (nine of these were from the IOM); nine received them from other individuals (mostly a boyfriend or husband but also other arrested women, a madam who was forced by the South African police to pay, a mama-san in Japan who paid but with a warning to the returning woman not to cause trouble for her in Thailand). Only three received government help for transportation (two received a bus ticket from Malaysia and Singapore. Only one plane ticket was paid for by a government agency.

Government agencies did have a larger role in other forms of assistance. Sources of aid were nearly equally divided among government organizations (mostly police and immigration), NGOs and individuals (including relatives, customers and others). A total of 17 women said they were helped by a government organization (GO), 13 said they were helped by an NGO, and

14 were helped by an individual. Only ten women said they had received help from both a GO and an NGO, and eight received no help from either type of organization but from an individual. Three women received no help at all, not even from other individuals.

Two of the three who received no help, however, said explicitly that they did not have a need for help; one had crossed the land border with Malaysia several times by herself, and the other returned after she had fulfilled the terms of her factory contract, with her return ticket having been purchased in advance through deductions from her wages. The third woman who received no assistance at all during her return had paid off her debt and accumulated some savings. She decided by herself when to return and bought her return ticket from Singapore.

Only six women said that they wished they had received more help during the return. Four of them said they wanted either legal or financial help (or more concern) from the Thai embassy, two wanted a translator, and one wanted protection from her traffickers.

## First day of arrival

The Thai respondents offered detailed information on the first day of arrival. Most of the women wanted to be met on arrival by their family, with the exception of those who had been betrayed by relatives. Only one woman said she had asked someone to be there but that he refused (her husband, who was ashamed and angry that she had been in prostitution).

**Table 3.5: Relationship of person who met respondents at the airport\***

Person(s) who met respondent at airport	No. of respondents
Family	12
Government official	10
-both family and government	4
NGO	1
No one	9
No information	3

\*Thai sample only

In roughly two-thirds of the returns, women were met by either family members or government officials; NGOs did not play much of a role in the first day of arrival. Of the women who said they were met by no one, four said that they did not want anyone to be there. One woman was travelling with her Japanese boyfriend, with whom she returned to her family home, and another said that she was not ready emotionally to see her family and spent three nights in a hotel room in a small city on the way to her province. Two of the women spoke of returning by bus and easily transferred by themselves from one bus to another to return to their family home. One woman was not met by anyone and, after staying in an agent's rented room in Bangkok for one week, remigrated to another country.

Two of the women said that they had wanted to be met by family members but had not contacted anyone; one woman wanted to see her children, who were being cared for by her sister-in-law, but because she owed the sister-in-law money, she did not feel comfortable asking for the favour. Instead, she travelled by herself from the airport to the sister's house. The other woman wanted to call her family, but the only telephone line in the village was owned by the agent who had sent her abroad into an abusive situation, and so she did not call.

On most of the returns, the women went directly to a family home (parents, sibling, husband, children or other relatives). An additional seven women stopped only briefly (for less than one week) in Bangkok or another place, staying with a friend, relative or by themselves, before returning to the family home. On two occasions, women went directly from the airport to the police to press charges before going to the family home.

Only one woman reported not going home to family members at all—the woman who remigrated to another country after one week in Bangkok. However, there is no information from several of the women interviewed for this report; these were women who returned mostly from Singapore and Malaysia, and their return was most likely via bus. Some of those returns may have been made between the destination country and one of the two southern Thai cities (Betong and Su Ngai Kolok) where some of the women entered into prostitution instead of going to the family home in the province.

## Critical perspectives on assistance during the return process

The women from north-eastern Thailand, who returned in more recent years and as officially recognized victims of trafficking, said that they had received a lot of information from anti-trafficking officials upon their return. But, they added, sometimes it was too much for them to take in at the moment of arrival. Pin, a Thai, said that after travelling for so many hours, she just wanted to go home as soon as possible, to be alone and reflect, so she didn't pay that much attention to what the official told her at the airport. Gaem, a Thai, said she could not remember the name of the officials who met her at the airport or what agency they worked for or what they told her.

On the other hand, at least five women specifically criticized the service providers for not reaching women quickly enough or for not making their existence well known.

At the time [of my return], I didn't know any sort of agencies. There weren't any groups that came to me. I just found out about these organizations that can support me—NGOs—I didn't know of them before... I thought about maybe talking to the police, but then I thought, would they be able to do anything in time for my family? How much could the police help me?  
(Deuan, Thai woman)

Some women struggled on their own for years after their return before having any idea that they might be eligible for assistance.

All the government agencies and development groups have to look for and help women who just got home, quickly. Because if women don't have choices in life, they might be lured by agents to go again. ... If I had had someone help me when I first came back from Japan, if I had work to do, I wouldn't have gone to Taiwan again, twice, and then come home and try to kill myself.

(Yim, Thai woman)

These two conflicting criticisms—that information is given too soon (and thus not retained) or given too late—present a dilemma for both government and private agencies. To find returning women, it makes good sense to contact them at the moment of arrival; but given the emotional and physical exhaustion and the flood of preoccupations and worries that many women experience during their return, the first day of arrival might be a time when women are not well prepared to consider, process or respond to assistance options. The challenge is to make contact in a way that is not overwhelming for a woman but does let her know where she can go for assistance if she wants it, when she is ready.

## Summary

Many of the women highlighted in this chapter returned on their own volition and were more than ready to return, considering their experiences in the destination country. Most of those who wanted to return were the ones who experienced grave forms of abuse and exploitation in the destination country. Some returned with a sense of ambivalence because certain considerations left them conflicted between staying and going home. These considerations were exacerbated by the calculation of gains and losses as they would appear back home. While some found it more gainful to return, others were forced to return home. For some, returning was not an option, particularly not for those who had more to lose when they returned because of huge debts to pay or fears for the future of their family.

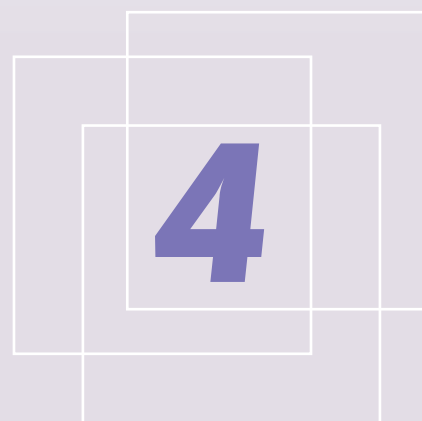
Assistance to these women also came either from informal networks (family and/or friends) or formal networks (government and/or non-government organizations). This contact with formal networks came either because they had been aware of the help from the start (the Singapore women received information from a booklet they got at the airport about the help made available by the HOME and the Ministry of Manpower) or they were helped by informal networks when they started experiencing abuse. Interestingly, women who had not been assisted did not have the benefit of such information. For some, assistance came from both formal and informal networks.

However, the majority of the assistance provided by institutions and individuals were reactive in nature in the sense that the assistance only responded to the immediate situation of the women. There is nothing bad in this, given that the women indeed had pressing issues that needed to be addressed; however, programmes must also consider that women have complex needs on their return and might actually need preparation for their reintegration into their community. Few of the women had actually been referred to institutions in the country when they returned. Jem was one of the few examples of women who had been turned over to the care of a local NGO in the Philippines by the NGO that took care of her in Japan.

To a large extent, the women had all been open to the help provided to them because there was a recognition of the need for it. But the women who did not receive any help successfully managed their return. However, they commented that they could have used some help, particularly in terms of financial assistance because it had been their biggest preoccupation. In a society where money is the gauge of success, coming home empty-handed spotlights a failure to improve the family life. It also highlights their vulnerabilities and the tenuous existence once they return to their country of origin.

# *Chapter*

**4**





## CHAPTER 4



### Life After Return and Integration Challenges

Everyone's experience is different, but everyone has had a difficult life.  
(Deuan, Thai woman)

Victims of trafficking face a myriad of difficulties upon returning while dealing with the impact of their harrowing experiences. Return and reintegration programmes have proliferated even though relatively little is known about the lives of trafficking victims upon leaving a destination country. This is not surprising because return migration is a neglected area in the research and the development of a viable framework for addressing the complexities of return and reintegration is still in its infancy (Arowolo, 2000).

This chapter looks at issues surrounding the return and reintegration of victims of trafficking and severe labour exploitation. With the wide

array of reasons for and the occasional ambivalence about returning among the returned victims interviewed for this report, it is difficult to disentangle the different degrees of voluntariness and preparedness as it impacted on the process of reintegration. The discussion in this chapter thus includes the socio-economic factors that present serious challenges to reintegration as well as the emotional and cultural elements of return that should be considered in the development of programmes and services.

Also covered are the interviewed women's experiences with the assistance providers. While the discussion centres on the experiences of the women with formal assistance systems in the Philippines and Thailand, there is also reference to the informal assistance through personal contacts and networks, the latter forming a significant part of the assistance that the victims of trafficking received. Considering that a large number of victims generally return unofficially, it seems particularly relevant to appraise how women cope in the absence of contact with formal assistance systems.



**Table 4.1: Main challenges and concerns after returning home\***

	Ranking of reintegration challenges				
	Respondents	First	Second	Third	Mentioned, but not in top three
Stigma	15	13	1	1	
Financial difficulties, including debt	20	4	12	4	
Family issues	19	4	4	13	
Health issues	8	3	4	1	
Depression	11	2	3	4	2
Boredom	4	1	—	1	2
Anger	5	1	1	2	1
Threats from trafficker/agent	3	1	1	—	1

\* Thai sample only

## The main concerns and challenges for reintegration

All the returned Thai women were asked to rank their three primary concerns and challenges after returning home. Some of the respondents gave answers that directly reflected their own experience, while others spoke more generally of women who were in the same situation.

Despite the fact that “financial difficulties” was mentioned most frequently, with “family issues” second, “stigma” was the problem that was chosen most often as the most pressing problem by a wide margin. Issues of money and family had been the greatest problems for most of the women before migration and continued to be of serious concern after they came home, only elbowed out of first place by the stigma attached to failed migration and/or prostitution as a new problem upon their return. Other problems were of grave concern to a smaller number of individuals and depended on the individual’s circumstances, such as health problems or threats from traffickers.

**Table 4.2: Overview of feelings after returning home\***

	First six months of return	Long-term (after first six months)
Worry	20	17
Happiness/optimism	12	12
Fear	8	4
*Fear of traffickers	*4	*2
Anger	7	2
Sadness	6	6
Other	5	11
Embarrassment	4	3

\* Thai sample only

Most women had a mixture of emotions after they returned, but the most commonly mentioned feeling was “worry”. In terms of how they felt over the passing of time, fewer women cited anger, worry, embarrassment and fear as among their primary emotions. However, this reduction in negative emotions did not correspond with an increase in the number of women saying that they were happy or optimistic about being at home. As would be expected, the number of “other” feelings and varied combinations of emotions emerged over time, as women’s social integration became more stable, more problematic or more complicated.

**Table 4.3: Examples of negative and positive feelings at home\***

Negative/stressful feelings	Positive optimistic emotions
Resignation to fate	Proud that new local job had given her new skills and a new role
A sense of not being accustomed to the old rural community	Gratitude for having settled into a family situation that she considered much luckier than that of other returnees
Disgust with people in the community for judging others only by their money	
A sense of living in two worlds, torn between relationships started in the destination country and a relationship established at home	Desire for change; growing older and want to stop migrating and have stable work that allows her to stay home
Indecision about remigrating to join a foreign husband or starting a new livelihood in Thailand and staying with her children	
Unease/sense of dread that neighbours continue to gossip about her experience and fear that her husband would know about her work abroad	Forgiveness to family members who had squandered all the savings
Weariness from work (local area)	Improved confidence

\* Thai sample only

In general, the older women who had been forced into prostitution reported a harder time recovering psychologically and emotionally than women who had been forced into prostitution when they were younger. It was also harder for those returnees from areas where it was uncommon for women to enter into prostitution because the stigma attached to it was greater than in villages where everyone knew several women who had migrated for that purpose.

## Financial situation and challenges for reintegration

In the previous chapter, economic motive was predominant in the women’s responses when asked about their decision to migrate. Basically,

migration was a risk they took to escape an environment of poverty and the lack of opportunities in exchange for the potential rewards they hoped to gain from working abroad. Central to their migration was a desire for a better life, often explained in terms of economic security. However, most of the women returned to a situation they had wanted to escape from. The majority of the women from both countries described their financial situation upon returning as worse than their pre-migration period, which indicates failed migrations; thus, financial difficulties remained their main concern after returning home.

Victims of trafficking are often deprived of the opportunity to gather resources needed to secure and prepare for their return, unlike regular returned migrants. A significant group of the Thai returnees (11) did describe their financial situation as better

**Table 4.4: Changes in financial status, compared to pre-migration**

Financial situation	Filipina respondents		Thai respondents		Total
	First period (< 6 months)	Long-term period (> 6 months)	First period (<6 months)	Long-term period (>6 months)	
<b>Worse</b> than pre-migration	14	6	9	14	43
<b>Better</b> than pre-migration	2	2	11	8	23
<b>Same</b> as before migration	11	12	7	3	33
No information	3	2	4	3	12

than it was before they migrated, indicating that they had come back with some savings. However, the money was often spent relatively fast. With no or limited new income opportunities, the majority of the women found themselves in a worse financial situation after the first six months.

Some women had been in debt prior to their decision to migrate, while others fell into debt in order to migrate; even those who came back with savings ran out of their money quickly. Still, others had to borrow money after their return, either to make ends meet or to continue to pay back debt incurred due to the migration. Their situation of indebtedness heightened their vulnerability to violence, confinement and other forms of abuse and exploitation. Almost half of the Filipinas (11 women, or 37 per cent) had debts to pay upon their return, ranging from 3,000 pesos to 80,000 pesos.

My savings lasted for only a year because of the unpaid loans. Also, I spent it for my family; they needed help. Until I noticed that nothing was left for me. But at least now I have a house. That's my only consolation. (Beng, Filipina woman who spent seven years in Japan)

If only we had the chance to work there (Brunei) for six months, we could have saved some money. But it was all for naught. Not only did we have to return, we had debts to pay! I worry for my siblings. I feel sad because of my loans. That is really our problem now. ... I pay [the 5,000 pesos owed to a distant relative] on a monthly basis. I now only have 1,000 pesos more to pay. ... My financial situation today is just the same [compared with before migrating]. We are still poor. But at least before I didn't have these debts! While I am happy that I returned because I am back with my siblings, I am sad at the same time because of my debts. Before, I couldn't sleep at night. I kept thinking of how to pay them. But now I can sleep much better. I am able to survive, little by little. (Filipina woman)

The situation of indebtedness heightens economic insecurity. This all too often is a prime factor affecting many women's return experience and sustainable reintegration.

The debt incurred to fund migration and the accumulating interest has repercussions on a returnee's life and her chances of successful integration. Indebtedness amplifies the frustration as a "failed migrant", which continues to pull the returnee down, even as she struggles to pick up the pieces. Debt often leads returnees to migrate again, exposing them to more risks and potential re-trafficking (Brunovskis and Surtees 2007:132).

However, for a few respondents, financial difficulty upon their return was not a result of debt but simply a result of lavish spending. Kuk, a Thai woman who returned after living in Japan for 11 years, was critical of how some women who came back with savings used their money quickly after their return.

[Some returnees] couldn't manage their savings and spent it all. Gambling, getting stuck on a man, not being able to make a plan... Some bought a car and then after a while sold it, when the money was gone...some had to migrate again to get more money because they didn't know how to plan their expenses. They came back to the country like this, gambling and going out...but when they were abroad, they just worked all the time, they didn't have time to play. (Kuk, Thai woman)

## Financial assistance upon return

Many women desired financial assistance. Fourteen of the Thai women said that they wanted but did not receive (or did not receive enough) financial assistance in the first six months, and 11 said the same about the period of return after the first six months.

## Financial assistance during the first six months

In the first six months, ten Thai women received financial support; roughly half reported it came from NGOs and the other half said from a government agency.<sup>1</sup>

Eight of the ten who received financial assistance in the first six months were from north-eastern Thailand; most of them had received some help in the destination country (Italy) from the IOM. They had returned since 2000, thus receiving an official status as trafficking victim. None of the women from the North who returned in the 1990s received financial help within the first six months; the only two who did get such assistance returned in 2004 and 2005.

Reactions to the financial assistance varied. Four of the ten women received support in the form of reimbursement for travel expenses to Bangkok to pursue a court case; all of them said that the money was insufficient to cover their real costs. Three of the women received between 30,000 and 50,000 baht (US \$1,000–\$1,667) for livelihood development; one of them, Pin, was suspicious of the process, and wondered if the government agency that facilitated the money from the IOM had given her the entire sum to which she was entitled. Of the remaining two women, one, Deuan, received 60,000 baht (US\$2,000) from the Department of Social Development for a skills training course, which she said was useful. The other, Dahm, received 10,000 baht (US\$334) for the educational costs of her two children, which she said was not enough, particularly when she also had to pay expenses for her pre-school-aged child as well.

## Financial assistance after the first six months

After the first six months, 22 of the 29 Thai women (6 of the 11 from the North-East, 16 of the 18 from the North) received some form of financial assistance.

Overall, women from north-eastern Thailand tended to receive larger sums of money (four of the six received about 50,000 baht (US\$1,667) for livelihood development) than the other women but expressed more dissatisfaction. The money they received did not meet their expectations and plans, such as opening a mini-mart or developing larger agricultural projects. It is possible (though not explicitly stated) that they thought these institutions were able to provide them with more.

Five of the six north-eastern women said that the financial assistance they received was inadequate. In addition to the livelihood funds, one received 800 baht (US\$27) per month for housing costs, another (as previously mentioned) continued to receive funds for her children's education, and several continued to receive some travel reimbursement to pursue their court case. All the women said that the money for these purposes was inadequate.

In the end, most of the women from the North-East used their livelihood money mostly for small agricultural projects. One woman started to sell noodles, but stopped when she was not able to turn a profit.

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, two received help from Thai NGOs (FACE and the Foundation for Women), two from the International Organization for Migration as facilitated by a Thai government agency (the Department of Social Development), four from the Bureau of Anti-Trafficking in Women and Children, one directly from the Department of Social Development, and one from a provincial anti-trafficking government agency.

I planned to improve my soil so I could have a chilli garden, to raise chillies to sell. I got money from the IOM and used 20,000 [baht] to dig a well. I bought a [machine to help in the cultivation process] for 5,000 baht and set up the electricity for 8,000 baht. But I needed more equipment, like hoses, and I needed to get the soil ready; the money was running short, even before I could plant the chillies." (Dahm, Thai woman)

The only north-eastern woman who had no comment on the amount of money, Oowan, said that her frustration was that she had not received more social and personal assistance.

It's not just about the money, forget that; I want people to be sincere with me and to follow everything closely, [to ask], 'How are your kids doing? Are you happy? Has your state of mind gotten any better?' Things like that...'Does your husband accept you? Are you fitting into society? When you go out, can you look people in the face, or are you hiding from people?' (Oowan, Thai woman)

In contrast, women from the North received less money for livelihood development, ranging from 1,400 to 40,000 baht (US\$47–\$1,334), with the vast majority (9 of 12) receiving between 8,000 and 15,000 baht (\$267–\$500). However, these women expressed more satisfaction, possibly because their plans—mostly small agricultural projects such as raising chickens or ducks, planting mushrooms or corn or running a small store from their home—were more limited and were adequately covered by the amount. It is also possible, though not explicitly stated, that the women perceived the funding sources (mostly locally based NGOs such as the Self-Empowerment of Migrant Workers (SEPOM), the Phayao branch of the YMCA and the Foundation for Women (FFW)) as having more modest resources to offer, compared with international and government organizations. The money that the northern women received also came mainly in the form of a loan; having had the experience of being in heavy debt, the women may have been more likely to prefer an amount of money that seemed feasible to re-pay over the long term.

In addition, many of the northern Thai women said that before they received the money, they had taken part in training and went on visits to worksites that corresponded with their choice of livelihood, which may have further guided their expectations for how much capital they would need. Overall, six of the northern women said the financial assistance was adequate or positive, while four said it was not enough. Two did not comment on the amount of money but felt that they had been reached many years after they would have wanted to be contacted.

[Non Government and Government Organisations that work with returning women] should have trainings and offer help finding work. Don't just emphasize giving money for livelihoods as the only thing, because you can't build a person out of money alone. Some people don't have the knowledge or skills, so they won't succeed. (Yim, Thai woman)

Noi, who returned after living in Japan for nine years, observed that even though she had participated in a programme to start a new livelihood, the financial assistance she received would not be enough for many women.

[Returnees] who have settled and have a husband, have kids and can't go anywhere will participate in an assistance programme. But the people who go to Pattaya [to enter into prostitution], if you have them raise fish, they probably won't be able to do much with it, because they don't have other work. If they raise fish, it won't be much. You give them just 6,000 or 7,000 baht, what about [supporting] their father, their mother, their siblings? These people refuse the assistance programme and go into prostitution. They don't stay home. Once the money is gone, they go again. (Noi, Thai woman)

Only 6 of the 18 northern Thai women received financial assistance other than a loan for developing a livelihood. Four of them received small amounts of money from a local NGO for



their children’s needs (diapers, school supplies; the largest sum reported was 4,000 baht (US\$134)). Of the other two, one woman received a small amount of money from her tambon administrative organization: 500 baht (US\$17) per month for living expenses because she is HIV-positive. Only one woman in the entire cohort received victim’s compensation, with the help of the BATWC; she used the 36,000 baht (US\$1,200) to buy farming utensils.

## Family and social relationships after returning

Family played a central role in the integration process. Nearly all the Thai women (27 of the 29) lived with at least one family member during the first six months after returning.

**Table 4.5: Where respondents lived (first six months after returning)\***

	Lived with	No. of respondents
Family	Children	14
	Boyfriend or husband	9
	Own parents	11
	Parents-in-law	1
	Grandparents	1
	Other relatives	12
Non-family	Friend	2
	Shelter	1
	Alone	4

\*Thai sample only

The number of women who did not stay with family members is even more negligible than is apparent from table 4.5. Both women who stayed with friends returned to their family within six months, and the one woman who went to a shelter stayed only one night. As for the four who stayed alone for a time, three did so because they remigrated within the first six months (one abroad, two domestically; these three included the only two women who did not stay with family at all); the fourth stayed by herself for only three nights before returning to her family.

**Table 4.6: Where respondents lived (long term)\***

	Lived with	No. of respondents
Family	Children	22
	Boyfriend or husband	13
	Own parents	12
	Parents-in-law	3
	Grandparents	1
	Other relatives	12
Non-family	Friend	0
	Shelter	0
	Alone	0

\*Thai sample only

In the long term, every woman lived with at least one family member. Other than the centrality and importance of the family as a social base, there was no one uniform type of family relationship for the women, which reflects the diversity of relationships that the women had had with family members prior to their migration. Some women said that their family provided them with the support that enabled them to carry on despite the money and social troubles.

[My mother] told me just to ignore what others said because I knew what the truth was in my heart, and what I'd done. Whoever criticized me, just let them. My mother really boosted my morale, as always.  
(Pathum, Thai woman)

The amount of trust and closeness within the family, the nature of other relatives’ experience with migration and the stigma or lack of stigma that each woman’s family placed on prostitution or on returning without money, varied from family to family. Women disclosed their migration/trafficking experiences to their family in different degrees. Some tried to hide the fact that they had been in prostitution, while others said that they assumed their family knew the kind of work they had done but did not necessarily talk about it in detail. Other women returned to families in which parents had previously sold them into prostitution in Bangkok or Pattaya or families in which several women had voluntarily entered



into prostitution to support the family; the nature of the work was not itself taboo within the family.

One woman who was forced into prostitution but rescued in a police raid (after sex with only two customers) told her family that the raid occurred before she had been forced to have sex at all. She said that if she told her family the truth about the two men, her mother might understand but she fears that her husband would reject her. Another woman was rejected by her husband after learning she was forced into prostitution, but he continues to send money from Bangkok to support their children. In contrast, another woman who returned from a similar situation and who had been trafficked by her sister-in-law says that her husband stayed staunchly by her side; he understood the situation and tried to make her feel better and was the one who urged her to press charges.

During the research interviews, the women who had been lied to and deceived by people close to them were openly emotional, but often spoke in a manner that suggested repressed anger and pain, even years after the betrayal. This was also true for women who had been trafficked domestically prior to their international migration; the first betrayal often remained the emotional wound that was most painful and difficult to heal, even if the woman later experienced abuse elsewhere. When Nok returned to Thailand, she was furious with her husband's aunt who had deceived her into going to the Netherlands. She felt that the experience was "like a scar". Due to this anger, she could not bring herself to go home immediately and stayed by herself for three days. Then after a brief visit to her husband and child, she went to live with her parents for a year and a half, taking anti-depressants, seeing a psychiatrist and working in the fields in order to regain psychological and emotional strength before she could return to her husband and child.

For some, it was neither stigma nor betrayal that complicated family relationships upon return but the fact of a prolonged absence and the changes that inevitably occurred over time. One woman from Isaan in north-eastern Thailand who had been abroad for four years described what she saw with other returnees:

[A]lmost everyone has problems within the family. Most women who migrate for work abroad already have a family, already have children. Then when they're abroad, they hear that their husband has gone and found a new wife or that he's had an affair with someone in her family, like her sister. When they get home, they find these problems, the family breaks. People outside weren't sincere with them, and then they come home to these family problems. Some people decide to kill themselves.

(Pathum, Thai woman)

Women who returned to northern Thailand, in contrast to the women from the north-eastern region, often returned to communities in which entering into prostitution had become a common practice for many of the local women. Only one northern woman reported problems of stigma within the family while the other women, if they had family problems, reported that the main struggles were economic or sometimes related to illness. Most expressed happiness with their family relationships, even if they encountered problems with others in the community.

Family also played a complicated role in women's decision about whether to remigrate. Five women said they considered international remigration during the first six months of return, and six considered domestic remigration (these numbers include one woman who considered both). Nearly all the women considering remigration (8 of 10) cited family as a reason to migrate again. However, in the long-term period after the first six months and up to the time of the interview, only three had considered international migration and six considered domestic (with none considering both), and a significant portion of the entire Thai cohort (13 of the 29) explicitly said that family was the reason they would not migrate again.

**Table 4.7: Family relations and remigration\***

	Family cited as reason to remigrate	Family cited as reason NOT to remigrate
First six months of return	8	3
After first six months of return	4	13

\* Thai sample only

Over time, it appears that the financial incentive of migration to support the family became less important than a desire to be close to the family, particularly the children, but also elderly parents and even siblings and nieces and nephews. Many women said that their desire to take care of family members as well as the emotional support and happiness they took from being within the family meant more to them than the possibility of earning more money (although other factors, such as increased age and the desire to avoid the danger of trafficking were also factors in the decision not to remigrate). Many women said that their financial needs remained a pressing concern even if they chose not to remigrate; one woman, Deuan, cited her family as both a reason to go and not go abroad for work. She wanted to provide for her children, but at the same time she dreaded the thought of separation from them.

### Family and social relationships: External assistance and support

None of the woman reported receiving assistance that directly addressed family relationships, such as group family counselling or other similar interventions. Such services likely do not exist, particularly in the rural countryside. Traditionally in Thailand, it is deemed inappropriate and even shameful to involve outsiders in family matters. However, several women spoke positively of peer-support groups that helped to counter-balance social stigma and to serve as a way to build other social relationships, express their emotions about matters that were hard to

discuss within the family and meet women who understood what they had gone through. In other words, finding peers was one way to build the sense of social belonging, which must be a part of any definition of “reintegration” for returning migrants.

At first, I was very embarrassed and didn't go anywhere without staring into space sadly. After I went to [the peer group gathering in] Chiang Mai, I had more courage to go back into society.  
(Oowan, Thai woman)

At [the peer group gathering at] Hua Hin, we sat and talked about money and we went out. It was good because we could talk about what we felt. At home I hadn't told anyone. So we all listened to each other.  
(Yooley, Thai woman)

Despite the importance that women placed on social and family problems (“stigma” and “family” being mentioned 36 times as ranking within the top three issues), only eight women put “peer-support activities” as one of the top three recommended priorities for aid from GOs and NGOs. This discrepancy could exist for a number of reasons, including knowing that such activities exist and the novelty for many women in turning to a government or non-profit institution as opposed to individuals within the community for something as personal and emotional as social support.

### Stigma as an integration challenge

From the moment of arrival in the home country, showing an identity card issued by the embassy—or even carrying a bag with the IOM logo—alerted Thai authorities to the fact that a woman was a returning migrant, who seemed to presume that the woman most likely has been in prostitution.

Moving on

[Because] the Immigration Police sent me, the Immigration in Thailand would know. They looked at me from head to foot. It was like all the officials, the whole atmosphere, were insulting. That was the first thing that made me not want to talk to anyone about what had happened to me. (Deuan, Thai woman)

Everybody has the burden of stigma, which makes it so you can't talk with anyone except friends who've lived through the same fate. Even our own families, we can't talk to them about everything. (Dahm, Thai woman)

*No matter how open returned women are about being in prostitution in Italy, their husbands say that their wives went to do other work.* (Oowan, Thai woman)

*I tried to sell things on the street three or four days [as I'd done before migration]. But I could see people sneering at me behind my back. Before I went away, I could sell things pretty well. I could figure out what was going on.* (Aem, Thai woman)

Some women came from villages where many women had entered into prostitution and were not stigmatized for the association with prostitution *per se* but instead were looked down upon for coming home without money or with a child or for not being able to build a nice house for the parents.

If I'd brought money back with me, [people in the village] would change how they were with me...they wouldn't criticize me. I'd be like a sweet smell to them, I could stink and they'd still say I smelled sweet—if I had money. (Dahm, Thai woman)

Because of the assumption that women who migrate abroad do so for entering into

prostitution, even women who migrated for purposes such as domestic work or agriculture, came back to experience the same stigma.

Most people who come back are seen as prostitutes. Even I was seen that way... Some women are abandoned by their husbands because of the rumours in the village. Some people have to separate and marry a new husband. Men who have migrated for work abroad tend to understand better. (Pathum, Thai woman who worked in a factory in Brunei)

Some women reported that, over time and especially if they were eventually able to improve their financial status, the question of stigma did change, or was at least blunted somewhat.

After a while, it turned out the household that had insulted me the most, they had a hard time with money and had to depend on me. In the end, they asked to borrow from me, even food to eat at home... [After a while] we went to make merit together like before and could get along... They probably haven't forgotten my past [but] they don't give me a hard time about it. (Noi, Thai woman)

Others stressed that even after a long time, the problem of stigma lingered.

It doesn't go away, you can't change people's minds. It's been years since I went away, but if I fight with someone in the neighbourhood who never went [anywhere], they'll insult me for having [been a prostitute]... It stays with you forever. It's important that you keep a strong spirit. (Taen, Thai woman)

## Betrayal by family and friends

There are cases of returned migrant women who become local recruiters to facilitate the journey of other women out of the country. Some women returnees have deceptively recruited their own family members for overseas prostitution, exploiting ties of kinship and trust. The women whom they recruit, particularly if they have been lied to about the kind of work they were sent to do, may try to pursue justice upon their return but often lack adequate financial and legal support to do so. Women who press charges also experience additional stigma for publicly accusing other members of the community and may be targeted for revenge for taking a case to court.

A trusted family friend, who along with his wife and their daughter turned out to be trafficking agents, had deceived Kik in Thailand. When she took the three of them to court, she was threatened.

I asked the agents for my money back, but they wouldn't give it to me. Instead they threatened me, harassed us in the middle of the night. They threw rocks at our house, they shot off a gun. They said that one day they'd come after my kids, who had to ride their bikes past their house every day [going to school], and kill them.  
(Kik, Thai woman)

Human trafficking reveals how thin the ties of kinship sometimes are in reality, belying the traditional myths of a supportive family clan and close-knit village community. Returning women interviewed for this report and who were betrayed by family members or neighbours expressed sorrow that such trusted people deliberately misled them into exploitation for their own material gain. Women who experienced such a betrayal of trust also reported further alienation from their community if others in the village sided with the agents; some even criticized the trafficked women for returning home empty-handed. These women lament the apparent impunity conferred on agents by virtue of their wealth and social status.

## Threats from traffickers

Six Thai women reported being afraid of their traffickers prior to their return. Four of them remained in fear during the first six months at home; in the longer term, only two women reported continuing to be afraid. For these two women, however, the fear was a harrowing part of their return experience. None of the women reported receiving direct protection against the traffickers' revenge, but nine women listed "protection from traffickers" as a priority that agencies should take in helping returning women (half of them listed it as one of the top three priorities).

How can this discrepancy between a relatively low number of reported threats and the relatively high importance placed on "protection from traffickers" be explained? One possibility is that women were not feeling threatened because they avoided direct confrontation after their return and specifically decided not to pursue any sort of public or legal accusation against their trafficker. After being abused abroad, these women would not need to be threatened to understand that the balance of power is not in their favour and may have chosen not to speak up against their abuser because they knew it would put them at risk. The absence of a reported threat does not by itself negate the women's vulnerability.

This is reinforced by the stories of women who said they did not fight back when abused during their trafficking experience abroad because they knew that if they did, they would be punished more harshly. These women said that by avoiding a direct challenge to their abusers, they were not subjected to increased violence—and this idea was corroborated by women who said they were beaten as punishment for disobeying or resisting the employer's abuse. In a similar vein, the women who suffered threats from traffickers dared to challenge their abusers after their return by taking them to court; the women who did not report being threatened had not tried to press charges against their abusers. It is not unreasonable to suppose that if more women are to be encouraged to prosecute traffickers, they must be given adequate protection; a relatively low incidence of threats may merely reflect the relatively low rate of victims who choose to prosecute their trafficker.



Kik and Deuan suffered from immense fears in Thailand; Deuan had been rescued once and had come home but the trafficker told her that her family would be harmed if she did not go back to Japan to continue working off her debt. She complied and experienced further abuse on her second migration. Although she did not press charges, the police reactivated a case against the man who had sold her in Japan and found out that she had been one of his victims. With support from the BATWC, she agreed to identify her trafficker and testify in court. Her fears about the trafficker (as well as fear that her family would discover what had happened to her) led to mixed emotions; at one time she agreed to be interviewed with her identity obscured for a documentary about trafficking. However, after she had started the filming, she became afraid that she would still be identifiable and withdrew from the production.

Kik was alone in her court case against the man who had lied to her and sold her into prostitution. The man had been a trusted family friend, and she was outraged to learn that he had done the same to other women who had not pressed charges after their return. She took the agent and his immediate family to court by herself, not knowing any organization that could provide her with support. The trafficker's family harassed her and her children, throwing objects at their house at night and threatening to murder the children, who had to pass the trafficker's house every day on their way to school. Out of fear for her family's safety, she moved three times. She has now settled elsewhere with the man who helped her escape from the brothel in Japan.

## Physical and psychological health: Situation and assistance

Sixteen of the returned Thai women reported having health problems after coming home, both physical and mental, related to their migration experience. The women who had been forced into prostitution reported lasting psychological effects. Six women reported conditions related to stress, including insomnia, anxiety and high blood pressure. One woman contracted HIV while working in Japan and is now on medication for

the rest of her life. Another said that she had been unable to have a sexual relationship with her husband because of back problems and that she had had irregular menstruation after having several abortions.

Few of the women received psychological counselling, instead seeking medical doctors to treat the physical symptoms of psychological damage. Some of the women said that they would have liked to receive counselling but did not know where they could get it.

Counselling and encouragement are the most important things, to do whatever it takes to make returned women strong enough to keep on fighting. They were lied to abroad and didn't have anyone be sincere with them [there], then they come back home and get all sorts of social pressure.  
(Pathum, Thai woman)

Some people come back and don't know who to turn to and are depressed, stressed and stigmatized. You have to find a way to talk about your feelings; don't keep it stuffed inside your heart.

(Nok, Thai woman)

Women who participated in peer-support group meetings (arranged by SEPOM in the North and the FFW in the central region in Thailand) referred to these activities as psychological assistance in their own right. Due to social stigma and sensitive family dynamics, women often said that they had few or no people with whom they could speak openly about their experience; they suffered from having to hold in their feelings and thoughts about what they had lived through abroad. They welcomed the catharsis of candid conversation with women who—even if their own experience of trafficking had not been identical to their own—would be empathetic and not judge them.

A third of the Thai women (9 of the 29) cited peer support as one of the top three priorities for assistance. When asked to give feedback on existing assistance, four specifically praised the

peer-support group activities, and three others said they would like to participate or to have more meetings. Two women explicitly advised women to seek out places to talk about their feelings.

Don't keep to yourself, don't stay alone. It'll make you think in circles and feel sad about life. Look for friends who are of the same heart. Talking will give you encouragement. If there's a group of friends like the peer-support group of SEPOM, it'll be best. It'll keep you from being lonely.  
(Yim, Thai woman)

Regaining peace of mind, believing that they have sincere personal support and discovering that they were strong enough to provide support to others increased the women's confidence. Providing counselling and other social resources appear to be very important for women who have suffered emotionally. However, this kind of work takes time and personal engagement in order to build a rapport and earn the trust of the women.

## Legal justice: Challenges and external support

Women who come home, the first thing [they deal with] is fear and suspicion. The second thing is not understanding the laws about trafficking and how to bring a case against their traffickers. And then there's the issue of getting advice on how to make a living, because once you run away [from the trafficking situation], all you've got is yourself.  
(Nina, Thai woman)

Taking a trafficker to court is no small matter, particularly for women who have few economic resources and little education. Most "agents" are people known to the women and live in the same village. Bringing either a criminal or civil case against them causes controversy within a small community that often takes the side of the more

affluent and powerful, typically the agent. It is therefore necessary to provide support to women who seek justice through the courts so that they can maintain their psychological strength and understand the many steps of the legal process and all of their legal rights.

When the north-eastern women who had been trafficked to Italy by a local woman pressed charges, others in the community treated them in a hostile way. The trafficker, who was related to most of the women through marriage or other kinship, was a respected figure and a former member of a local administrative body and was known to donate to the community temple and school. During a peer-support meeting run by the FFW, one of the women involved in the case said that a monk who was related to the trafficker turned his bowl away from her, refusing her food offering (monks traditionally accept food offerings from laypeople in the streets every morning).

The challenges in seeking justice through the courts have included this kind of community rejection as well as direct threats from traffickers. The amount of time and money it took to travel back and forth between the home province and the court in Bangkok also was a burden for the two women.<sup>2</sup>

Kik, from the northern Thailand province of Phitsanulok, first started to press charges locally but was warned by a local official that the traffickers (a family of three) had already tried to bribe the prosecutor not to take the case. She found it necessary to take the case to Bangkok court in order to have some hope of attaining justice. Kik's case took three and a half years for a decision, after which she was relieved that one of her traffickers was sentenced to 13 years in prison. However, the other two were also found guilty but filed an appeal, which has not yet been decided. In 2005, Kik filed a civil suit for compensation, but that case also has yet to be decided.

One of two other cases pursued by women from north-eastern Thailand who were interviewed for this report was decided in June 2008, after two years of proceedings; the agent was sentenced to 14 years in prison. The other case, also started in

<sup>2</sup> There were two criminal cases against agents who trafficked women from the North-East, but because both cases involved the same Bangkok-based agency, the court process took place in the capital.



2006, continues to linger on. The agent in that case appears to be doing what she can to prolong the process; first she claimed that she was ill and could only receive treatment in Italy (causing the women who had brought the suit to fear that she had fled permanently); when she did come back, she asked for another delay so that she could change her lawyer.

Another returned woman interviewed for this report is part of a continuing civil court case taking place in the Netherlands. The court had decided in favour of her and the other plaintiffs, but the agent appealed the verdict; the appeal is still pending.

It takes much perseverance and determination to see a court case through to the end. But those women who succeeded in winning their legal battle reported that they have gained self-confidence and overcome stigma by showing to their community that their traffickers were in the wrong. During a peer-support meeting in June 2008, shortly after the court decision in favour of two of the north-eastern women, the women indicated that their mental and emotional well-being had improved because they won the case and their traffickers were imprisoned.

## Summary

When the interviewed women returned to Thailand and the Philippines, the most pressing concerns that had led to their migration—money and family—remained their most pressing concerns, with the significant addition for many of social stigma due to their having been in prostitution and/or their returning to the home village with little or no savings.

“Worry” was the most frequently reported and dominant emotion. Women who returned independently after many years abroad, who had accumulated some savings and returned to their villages reported the least social stigma; but they still had family and money issues once their savings were depleted. Women who had been forced into prostitution had the most severe and long-lasting psychological effects upon their return. Among them, the stress was compounded

if they returned to villages where prostitution was stigmatized.

Family was central to the women’s experience after return, as both a source of support and/or additional stress and thus a reason to remigrate as well as a reason to stay home. Many women, despite their physical closeness and financial and social interdependency with their family members, did not feel that they could speak openly about their experience abroad; that repression of feelings was a source of unhappiness.

The women who participated in NGO-run peer-support groups appreciated the chance to speak freely with women who had had a similar experience and to receive psychological support; individual counselling by professionals is not a common practice in Thailand and the Philippines, particularly for working-class and poor rural women. The peer groups functioned as the main source of psychological support. However, building such groups takes much time and strong interpersonal skills for agencies to develop; it can be costly to bring together women from different provinces and regions.

Relatively few women were directly threatened after their return, but this may be because most women chose to avoid confronting or prosecuting their traffickers, and so were not targeted for retribution. None of the women who were threatened received adequate protection that made them feel safe; one woman had to undergo re-trafficking to protect her family, while another moved her family more than once to escape the threats.

Those women who did take their traffickers to court faced a long process, and several complained that the assistance they had been given to cover travel costs associated with the court case was inadequate. For those women who emerged from the process victorious, it was of great importance to see their abusers found guilty.

Financial support for livelihoods received mixed reviews from the women; women who had returned more recently and had received larger amounts of money were also the most dissatisfied, possibly because their expectations were higher than what could be achieved with the aid. Women

who returned several years ago and who received smaller amounts of money as loans reported more satisfaction, possibly because their expectations for the projects, guided by the agency's orientation and training programmes, were in line with what was possible, given the amount of money.

However, even some of these women were critical of the assistance because they had had to struggle for many years without receiving or knowing of any assistance. One woman noted that the modest scale of the loans would only be acceptable to women with families who had already decided to stay home, whereas younger women willing to remigrate would not be persuaded to stay home by such small projects.



# *Chapter*

**5**



## CHAPTER 5



### Looking to the Future and Recommendations From Returned Women<sup>1</sup>

#### A diversity of future aspirations

Twenty of the 29 Thai women interviewed for this report expressed a desire to remain in their home province, either continuing their present work or learning new skills and getting more capital to start work at home. Nine of the women who planned

to continue in their present work were in agriculture, cultivating crops and/or raising livestock. Four worked for NGOs, sometimes in

combination with working on the family farm. Two sold dry goods from their home, two had craft-oriented jobs (sewing and making hats) and one was a vendor selling coffee. Two women who wanted to stay in the province but start a new venture wanted to open a beauty salon, and one had already received funds to take a training course and had begun to apprentice in salons owned by others. One woman took a flower arrangement course; if she was able to get capital funds, she wanted to open a workshop in which she would produce (and hire employees to produce) craft flowers out of natural materials.

When women expressed hopes for the future and plans outside of work, they most often said that they wanted to make sure their children could stay

<sup>1</sup> This section involves only comments from the Thai respondents.



in school and get a better education than they had received so that they would have more choices and more security.

Most of the 12 women who said they were considering work that would take them away from their home province had much more tentative and conditional plans. Nine of these women said they would work in a different province, either temporarily or seasonally, or only if their new business failed or if, and when, they divorced their husband.

Some of the women who considered leaving their home province had plans that were different from the type of vocations that were most often encouraged by a reintegration programme: Two wanted to become a tour guide and one wanted to do domestic work for foreigners in order to have a better income, which would mean continuing to live in Bangkok instead of returning to her home province. One woman now working for an NGO in Bangkok would like to get a college education in social services and have a professional career in that field.

Only three were considering international migration: two of them involved marriage (one would return to her husband in Denmark, the other hoped to find and marry a Swede), and one would work on a three-year contract for a factory in Taiwan.

From this diversity of plans, it is clear that assistance programmes must take into account that individuals will have different desires for their lives. Even the women who said they wanted to continue working in the home province had a variety of goals; in addition to supporting their family and keeping their children in school, some had additional ambitions, such as creating a small crafts workshop or transforming an existing income-generating project (currently a noodle shop) into a women's resource centre.

## Adjusting to life at home

Pohn returned to her Thai village over nine years ago, married and had a child. When she first returned, she didn't know anything about successful farming because she had been sold by

her father to a brothel in Bangkok at age 15. It took time to adjust to rural life and to learn new skills. Last year, she received some funds from an ILO-supported YMCA project to raise catfish.

At first, I couldn't accept [rural life]. I used to spend money freely. And now I couldn't do as I pleased. I had to resign myself to it. I had to think about my kids, what to buy for them, what to have them eat. I had to worry about them first. I couldn't act like I did before, with money to buy beautiful clothes. I didn't have that anymore, I had to be thrifty...These days, my family has enough to eat, enough to get by. If we don't have money, we can sell vegetables, and we harvest our own rice. My husband works in the fields.

In the future I want to make a fish pond and raise fish. I'll keep a kitchen garden. I'm making fertilizer/compost now. When there are trainings, I go to them every time.  
(Pohn, Thai woman)

Pla has been back in Thailand for over three years, raising her three children who were born over the course of her years of migration. She now makes a small income raising ducks and is waiting for more funds so she can raise catfish.

Even these days, [agents] ask me if I want to go work like that again, saying I'll get 30,000 or 50,000 [baht per month]. It's still not over. I say I don't want it. I've had enough of that life. I don't want it. I don't even drink or smoke now. I'm tired. I don't care if it is a big pile of money, I'd rather live like this. I'm happy with my family, my kids, my relatives.  
(Pla, Thai woman)

Wan migrated to Singapore, came home but was unable to earn a good living from her job sewing hats. So she remigrated to Taiwan, was arrested and sent home. She has received some support from a local NGO to buy an industrial sewing machine that enables her to make a bit more money than before and to work at home.

Before I used to do sewing for hire, in Jun district. I earned 70–80 baht [per day]. But now I get a little over 100 [baht]. I can eat at home. I make enough to live on...I've adjusted from having hundreds of thousands of baht to just being like this, enough for necessities... Life is happy. I'm not migrating again. I don't want to go anywhere else.  
(Wan, Thai woman)

working for other people. She would like to open her own salon but needs about 50,000–60,000 baht (US\$1,667–\$2,000) to do so. However, the organizations that she has met could only provide her with a smaller amount (10,000–15,000 baht (US\$333–\$500) and demanded that she comply with additional conditions. For instance, one NGO expects that women who receive funds from them to renounce any intention ever to engage again in the prior activities (prostitution), to actively demonstrate a desire to help others and to refrain from gambling or taking any drugs.

## Limits to traditional livelihood assistance

The women who had happy family lives and who were reconciled to a rural lifestyle were content to be at home. Several had taken part in a local initiative in northern Thailand that provides return migrants with exposure trips, legal information and training to participate in income-generating activities. One expectation of the group (as understood by the women, although it is not clear whether this was an explicit condition) has been that members must say that they do not intend to remigrate. Such a programme, while being of benefit to those who want to stay home, cannot suit returning women if they have other desires.

As noted by some of the women, small-scale agricultural projects do not address the needs of women—particularly younger women—who still will have the desire or energy to migrate domestically or abroad in search of a greater income. In addition, women who want neither to adapt to the traditional rural life nor to enter another round of typical migration for domestic work or factory work but do want to continue their education outside of vocational training and to pursue higher-paying white collar jobs (such as the two who wanted to become tour guides, the one who wanted to open a spa or the one who wanted to be a social worker) would need assistance that supported them in these goals (such as financial help for more advanced education) without being required to remain in their home province.

Some limitations are not only about location. Nina completed a beautician's course and has been

While any private group has the right to set its conditions on the assistance it gives, historically there has been a tendency for groups working with returning women migrants to take a somewhat moralistic tone and to specify behavioural requirements that may or may not have a relevant effect on the proposed work. To an extent, this means that women who want to receive certain types of financial assistance must convince the service provider that they are eager to leave their association with prostitution behind and to assume the traditional role of a “good woman” again. This kind of requirement has the effect of limiting the scope of assistance to only certain women who adhere (or can credibly claim to adhere) to such a social role. It also reinforces negative stereotyping that may sustain lingering self-esteem troubles among women.

Lastly, although the three women who were considering international remigration did not ask for assistance to further their plans, it is reasonable to expect that they would need the same information that should also be available to first-time migrants concerning safe migration practices, legal rights and sources of assistance.

## Speaking out

Some women have kept their trafficking experience a secret from others in their community, sometimes even from their own family. Other women have agreed to speak publicly, usually with the idea that their experience can serve as a lesson for other women, to warn them of the deception and abuse they risk when they migrate abroad.

Women who have taken on this role, speaking in public meetings at provincial and national levels, have had mixed experiences. It has been particularly painful when some members of the audience did not believe what they recounted. Speaking about what happened to them, particularly when it carries the stigma of prostitution, is already a risky endeavour because some people will not accord them the same respect and dignity as they do to other women (regarding them as “fallen women”).

Aem, a Thai woman felt bitter because she felt let down by an NGO’s promises to help her in exchange for speaking about her trafficking experiences.

I asked for fish spawn from [an NGO’s job training centre], but they wanted me to talk [publicly] about what had happened to me. I [agreed] because I thought that once I’d gotten help from them, things would be easier. Last year I [spoke out] with [a friend, who is also in the same legal case]. They gave us money, [only] 300 baht each. We came home together and felt like we’d been lied to. Wherever you go, people will trick you... People come and ask you questions about this or that, but I don’t see them giving any help. (Aem, Thai woman)

The NGO centre eventually sent people to Aem’s house to dig a fish pond, but it was too small to earn an income; and even then, the pond wasn’t dug until a long time after her requested participation in a meeting.

Still, for some women, the experience of speaking out has given them increased self-confidence and a sense that they have an active role in helping others, that they can maybe change the perception of women who have migrated or been trafficked abroad. One woman—the one who was snubbed at her local temple after she took her trafficker to court—said she would like her peer-support group to organize a merit-making ceremony at that temple and to work with the local administrative body to organize a public event in which the trafficked women could tell others the truth about what had happened to them, in order to turn public opinion.

## Summary

Two-thirds of the Thai women interviewed wanted to stay in their home province. This majority may only reflect the sampling because the researchers interviewed women in areas that send migrants as opposed to concentrating on urban centres that receive domestic and international migrants (where, conceivably, there might have been more returned women who planned to stay in their new urban environment). Several women said that it had been hard to re-adjust at first to a rural lifestyle but after several years they had accepted the modest material means and quieter social atmosphere of the village.

The expectation that women would stay seemed to guide the livelihood assistance received. Although it was not clear whether a commitment to staying in the home province was an explicit requirement for getting aid, many of the women believed that this was the assumption of the agencies, and training and proposed work (mostly small-scale agricultural projects) was work for the countryside, on the woman’s small amount of land, and not preparation for work in a city.

Of those considering remigration, most were focused on domestic, not international, migration. Even those who wanted to stay in their province, however, had different desires for their vocational futures, including some who wanted to follow a career that was not typically cultivated by local agencies that work with returning women. The desire to stay in the home province was also sometimes flexible, with women saying they might migrate domestically for a short while or seasonally, or if their new business venture failed, or if their family circumstances changed.

Some women have taken on a role of speaking out about their experiences in order to warn other women of the dangers of trafficking. One woman was angry about her encounter with an NGO that asked her to take on this role but did not compensate her in the way that they had promised, while others have felt emboldened by their opportunities to speak out in public.

## Recommendations From Returned Women

When asked for their advice to women considering migration, to other returning women and to agencies that assist women migrants and trafficking victims, many of the respondents were hesitant at first, particularly about giving advice to women who had never migrated. They knew from their own experience that migration often seemed to be the only promising option for women with little education and few opportunities for steady, well-paying work. Those women who had tried to share their painful experiences of exploitation with others and were met with disbelief or scorn said that they did not think it likely that new migrants, particularly young people, would listen to what they had to say. The promises of wealth made overseas work too tantalizing.

People who want to go will go. Returnees can talk, but they won't listen... But if someone really asks, I'll answer in a direct way, that going to do that kind of work [entertainment or prostitution] is an unhappy, difficult experience—drunken customers, all sorts of problems. But if they don't ask, I'm not going to say anything because I don't want them to accuse me of meddling in their business.  
(Wan)

If they want to go but don't know anything about it, it's hard to give advice because they won't listen. They won't understand what I'm trying to tell them... Even me, when I went, people tried to warn me that I was going to be lied to and get in trouble. My friends in Pattaya tried to tell me. I listened to them—but not really, because I kept thinking about all the money I could make. You can't really warn anyone.  
(Nina)

I called from Italy to the mother of a woman who wanted to migrate and told her I'd been sold, but she thought I was lying. She thought that everyone who went abroad got rich and suspected that I was in competition with her [daughter] to earn money.  
(Aem)

Many of the returned women, most of whom are now in their late 30s and 40s, commented frequently on their perception that teenagers and women in their 20s were now migrating for reasons different than before.

The new generation of kids isn't scared of anything. These kids are still going to enter into prostitution. There are some who think they'll go work in a factory... We try to warn them, but they talk back disrespectfully to those of us who've gone and come back... It hurts that they talk like that, we can't talk together. So you have to let them go, these stubborn kids who want to do their own thing.  
(Pohn)

Back when I was their age, there were agents that came into the villages. Some girls knew that they were selling themselves and were willing to do it to support their family. It was the true sacrifice of a daughter. But girls these days, they're materialistic, they want things, they want mobile phones, expensive clothes, so they take risks that could lead them to being victims... Some of the kids around my village, if they want a phone, they even agree to be a mistress for a wealthy man... They go on their own, they don't even need to be invited.  
(Nit)

How much of the women's observations is based on actual changes in migration behaviour and how much has been filtered through a certain generational bias that tends to amplify the indiscretion or immorality of the younger generation and minimize the foibles of one's own is impossible to gauge objectively, particularly as it was beyond the scope of this research project to conduct in-depth interviews with teenagers who had just begun or not yet begun to migrate.

## Returnee's advice to new potential migrants

The Thai women who migrated at least once and returned to their home villages perceive the new generation of migrants as different and impervious to advice. However, they were willing to provide some counsel for potential migrants. Most of the women first advised against migration outright, but nearly all of them were pragmatic in their view that young people would migrate anyway. Most of their advice stressed being wary of promises that sounded too good to be true, even if they came from relatives, and in learning as much as possible about the job and conditions before agreeing to go anywhere.

The most frequently cited advice from the Thai respondents:

### a) Don't go if you have alternatives and it's not absolutely necessary.

Get an education instead of going abroad. You can get scholarship funds from the Government. Doing so will enable you to get work, and you won't have to struggle by going abroad. Having a modest income that's just enough to get by on and staying with your family would be the best.

(Kan)

Don't go if it's to go into prostitution. Working near home would be better. Because the people who go into that don't really get rich; the people who get rich, most of them got married to a Japanese man. And another reason is that when you come back from Japan, you can't do anything else because you make a lot of money and then you can't come back and farm. It's hard to start over again from the beginning.

(Yuan)

Don't go. It's true you can get a lot of money, but then it's gone fast. It doesn't last. If you stay at home, there's everything you need, happiness with your family, warmth.

(Pla)

### b) If you must migrate, migrate legally.

If you want to migrate, check to see if it comes through the labour ministry or not... Other countries are not so beautiful or heavenly. Their money has a lot of value, but you have to have knowledge to be able to work for it.

(Aem)

Nothing comes easily. If you go for free, without paying anything, like I did when I went to South Africa, afterwards you're in debt... Go legally and check with the labour ministry before you go.

(Koh)



**c) Learn about the country where you're going.**

Look for detailed information about the country where you're going, including the culture and customs and living conditions. Most of them are insulting towards Thai women. [Thai women were] especially known for being 'window girls', which meant that women who didn't want anyone to know what they were doing still couldn't hide it. If you don't know what it's really going to be like, it's better not to go.

(Nok)

There are now many government and NGO agencies that can give information; women who want to migrate should seek their advice and study their recommendations.

(Rani)

As previously explained, the majority of the respondents had returned to their home village with the intention of staying permanently within the province, and several had already accepted assistance with the understanding that they did not plan to remigrate. Given those characteristics and the fact that the women all had experienced exploitation and/or trafficking situations, it is not surprising that many of them expressed relatively negative migration views. Such sentiments cannot be extrapolated to represent the point of view of all returning women, or even of all trafficking victims, including those who have not resettled in their home village.

## Advice to returning women

The counsel that the women offered for other women in their situation tended to be much more sympathetic and encouraging. Most of what they said was less along the lines of warning or practical advice and more of an encouraging spirit, such as giving each other emotional courage and strength:

**a) Seek help from others, and don't keep your feelings to yourself.**

Some people come back and don't know who to turn to and are depressed, stressed and stigmatized. You have to find a way to talk about your feelings; don't keep it stuffed inside your heart. You should seek advice or call agencies that will talk with you.

(Nok)

**b) Don't give up hope.**

You may be depressed, have debt and don't have savings, but please don't feel hopeless. Go forward slowly, little by little. Don't pressure yourself too much. Everything will eventually work out.

(Kan)

If you come back disappointed, don't despair. Look at it this way, everything that happened was a life experience. If you've fallen, get up again. But it will probably take time.

(Pin)

**c) Stand up for your rights.**

You should know how to demand your rights, especially for victims' compensation and funds to build a livelihood. Don't waste the opportunity. You should learn what agencies are available to help you. (Kik)

We're not dead yet. As long as we're alive, we've got to fight.

(Yooley)

Accept it [come to terms with it], but don't keep quiet.

(Aem)



**d) Consider alternatives to risky migration.**

You should just look for day labour or work as a vendor in your village. If you make a little more than 100 baht per day, it's enough to get by. You don't need to struggle to go abroad again. (Jiew)

Try to contact GOs and NGOs that can offer job skills training or help you find work or that will give money to start life over so that you don't have to migrate abroad again.

(Rani)

Don't make the person getting help have to call on you all the time; contact us, stay in touch... Don't just drop us and leave us alone. Pay attention to us and our progress. (Dahm)

*Visit the villages often. Some agencies only visit one time and then they disappear for a year. It's too long for women migrants to wait. They have to make a living, they have to look after their family.*

(Kan)

I'd like there to be an agency that gives legal advice and keeps track of the progress of court cases at each step.

(Aem)

## Advice and feedback to agencies

When asked to assess the assistance that they had received, half of the Thai women who received funds to build a livelihood said that the money was insufficient for the vocation or business that they wanted to pursue. Otherwise, the women's experiences with GOs and NGOs and their recommendations ranged fairly widely and were somewhat dependent on their region and their date of return.

There were four broad themes that surfaced several times:

**a) Stay in contact, follow up during long processes and communicate well.**

Please be consistent in your contact with women who come back. Don't leave us alone for a long time because the women will feel lonely, and it's hard to find a way out.

(Yaem)

**b) Bring women together to share ideas and give each other support.**

Holding peer group discussions for women who've had problems [and having them] meet each other is a good way to help women recover the mental and emotional health that have been so battered in each woman. It gives a way for women to offer each other mutual encouragement.

(Nok)

*Yor Ying<sup>2</sup> is a good example in their help and follow up. They have a newsletter, phone line and meetings [with other returned women]. It helps you understand the problems and experience of other women.*

(Koh)

The peer group meetings of the [returned women's network] are good, but a long time passes in between meetings because we live so far away from each other. So even meeting once a year is good. I like these activities and think they're worthwhile.

(Noi)

2 The FFW women's migrants resource center (named Yor Ying) in Bangkok assists returnees and new migrants and is funded by the ILO-HSF project.

**c) Provide women with training and help them to find jobs.**

I'd like training in building a livelihood, more information about health, and loans for livelihood that are either given [freely] or at least don't have interest.  
(Yooley)

Many [returned women] are already older adults. It's hard to compete for new jobs, so they need advice on new ways to make a living.  
(Pathum)

*The most valuable thing from the YMCA was the increased knowledge. What impressed me the most was learning about women's rights, not letting others push you down. Also, the trainings that helped me build a sustainable livelihood, that let me 'love my hometown'—that's all I need to be satisfied, that's all.*  
(Pla)

**d) Work hard to publicize your services, and reach more women.**

Most women don't know about Governmental and Non Governmental Organisations. There should be more publicity. Some women had to struggle on their own for a long time before they found anyone who could help them.  
(Kik)

*Put information in the airport bathrooms... Women will have privacy, and men won't look at them for reading it. If flyers are out in public areas, women won't pick them up because they don't want others to see them doing so.*  
(Deuan)

Come talk to us, let us know what kind of help returning women can get and where we have to go to get it. Help us to feel at ease.  
(Yooley)

Publicize yourselves more so that people in the community are familiar with you.  
(Rani)

## Some other specific suggestions

Some people aren't able to go home [to the province] right away. There should be a temporary emergency shelter for women who need to recover psychologically, because some people keep the truth of their experience hidden away. There should be [help with] cases against traffickers and agents in the villages because *most of the people in the community respect those who have a high social status.*  
(Kik)

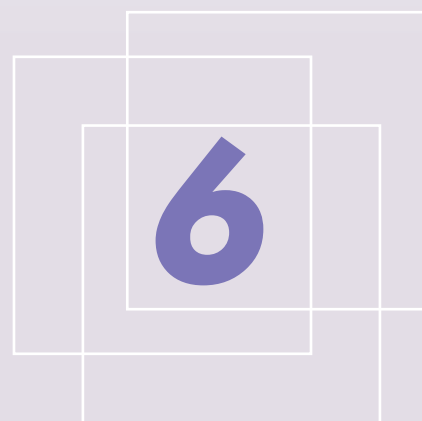
Government agencies should offer help right away. They should give advice about the law because all of those processes have a lot of steps.  
(Koh)

Counselling and encouragement are the most important things, to do whatever it takes to make returned women strong enough to keep on fighting.  
(Pathum)



# *Chapter*

**6**





## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The interviews with returned women in Thailand and Philippines underscored the importance of recognizing the factors that encourage and trigger migration—family responsibilities, economic need and the pressures of debt, a lack of adequate job options, a desire for the social status and respect that is gained through affluence. These factors remain the most pressing factors after a woman’s return. Thai women who experienced trafficking and labour abuse abroad say that their greatest concerns when they came back still included supporting and taking care of their family members, having a job with a secure income and having enough money to avoid worrying about debt. The extent of social acceptance or rejection was as crucial as economic factors in how content or not women were to stay in their home community; their social situation influenced their confidence about the future. Women in conflict with agents who lived in the same community were angry about what happened or afraid of retribution, further complicating their social integration.

Family and community relationships continue to be extremely important to most of the women. Just as the motives for migration were seldom solely about making increased individual income or having new experiences as an individual, trafficking and exploitation were seldom solely matters of an individual being abused. Both economically and socially, the people around each woman who survived trafficking are strongly affected. Shame, grief, anger, stigmatization as well as the weighing of options for a small income at home versus the risk of seeking a larger income through remigration, all affect women as members of a number of social circles, including their relatives, their village and their peers.

Even though the women’s expectations and experiences after their return varied widely, the factors of family, money, work and social relationships were intertwined and remained key

to successful reintegration. One woman who was no longer in serious debt and was satisfied with a more modest living said that her family had pressured her to migrate again for the sake of their own wealth and social status. She reported that this pressure made her tense and unhappy and would influence whatever plans she might have otherwise made for her own future.

Another woman who was trafficked by a trusted relative and fell into great debt said that addressing the emotional and social problems caused by the violation of trust was more pressing for her than addressing her economic need. Another woman who had a happy family life but no steady income said that her main concerns were work and money because without an adequate source of either, her children would have to leave school early and have fewer prospects for their future. Yet another woman, who used to be a street vendor, found that her former customers would not buy from her anymore after she returned because of the stigma they attached to prostitution; this social rejection has had an economic effect. A woman who was threatened by her trafficker said that her most pressing concern since her return was her family’s safety. Her community has looked down on her and no one is willing to protect her—these social factors have worsened her physical danger.

The lesson taken from interviewing this spectrum of women is that assistance should be flexible enough to respond to each woman’s needs and plans for her future, without prescribing one narrow path to success or defining “reintegration” in narrow terms of time. Some women found themselves in essentially the same economic and social position as they were in before they left, in a relatively short time; others said that they continue to suffer the effects of their experience even years later.

For example, women who came back with some savings and to supportive families in villages where entering into prostitution had been fairly commonplace did not experience great stigmatization but soon found themselves in need



of better-paying and more secure work. Other women, especially those who had been deceived by relatives and had been threatened by traffickers after taking legal action or who returned to families or communities where prostitution was not accepted as a livelihood and still endured heavy stigma or who pursued court cases that took years to resolve or who were coping with their HIV-positive status as a result of their work abroad, felt the negative effects of their trafficking for a much longer duration.

The extent to which trafficking survivors can re-establish a base and move on in their lives so that the trafficking experience becomes less central an influence on their status and concerns varies greatly. In addition, there is a need to question the common notion that a returnee must go back to her former community in order to have successfully taken the next steps in life after her trafficking experience. From what the women have reported, a more appropriate goal than “reintegration” would be a successful recovery of a woman’s ability to make sound choices regarding her family, work, place of residence, education and legal recourse.

Trafficking is basically about losing autonomy and control. Thus, integration should be about regaining autonomy and control. It is not just about returning home to stay put but about being socially and economically empowered to make better-informed choices and to become a healthy productive member of society, wherever that might be. Thus, the main objective of integration should be to promote self-reliance and resiliency and to empower, encourage and equip returnees to improve their own situation, based on their skills and aspirations.

Overall, the trafficking survivors interviewed for this research project conveyed that the most crucial support they have needed in their post-return life included, regardless of the geographic area in which they settled:

- assistance in building new skills and finding work
- emotional support from peers and/or professional counsellors
- legal advice about their rights and options and support at every step if they choose to engage

in legal processes to bring their abusers to justice

- financial support that can allow for more ambitious livelihood building
- compensation for abuses suffered as victims of a crime
- physical health care
- protection from traffickers’ retribution.

In offering this support, agencies are urged to be active in their outreach towards trafficking survivors and to maintain clear and continuous communication over the long term.

In a peer-support meeting facilitated by the FFW, participants took part in a psychological survey that showed that those women who had won their court case against their trafficker felt significantly less stress than those whose cases were ongoing. Thus a “legal” action clearly can have a strong psychological and emotional effect, as is true for activities that can be described as “economic” if, for example, skills training leads to work and work leads to increased security for one’s children. Conversely, if a woman only feels strong enough to re-enter the workforce after she has received sympathetic emotional support, a “psycho-social” activity can have a tangible economic effect. Reclaiming (and increasing) personal capacity can take many forms, and the social, economic and legal aspects of a woman’s life are highly interdependent, a fact sometimes obscured by dryly dividing aspects of women’s experience and types of assistance into different categories.

It is thus of utmost importance that efforts to support trafficking survivors after they return take a holistic approach that recognizes the equal importance and interdependence of social, physical, psychological and economic factors in a woman’s life. Furthermore, assisting women to take the next steps should mean—beyond providing information, resources and communication—acknowledging that it is always the women, not the service providers, who should ultimately make decisions about the women’s lives. Women’s plans and desires for the future, no matter what the work sector they chose or whether they include staying at home, migrating to another province or remigrating abroad, should be

respected by anyone who claims to have the women's best interests at heart.

## General Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the research findings and direct advice from women who have returned from exploitative migration experiences abroad:

### For NGOs and GOs in the origin country

- Maintain good communication with organizations in origin countries to promote continuity of support for women after their return and to increase the number of returning women who are identified and offered assistance.

### Upon return

- Receive women at the point of arrival if they want to be met, but do not assume that they do.
- Understand that women may not be in an appropriate state of mind for a protracted discussion immediately on arrival; give contact information so the woman can contact the agency later, or suggest a place and time convenient for the woman to speak in more depth.

### Post return

- Listen to what women identify as their own problems, needs and desires for the future instead of imposing one model for successful "reintegration". In particular, refrain from imposing conditions on aid that would require women to stay in their home village or proscribe personal behaviour that is irrelevant to the assistance offered.

- Inform women of available assistance and their rights in a discreet and respectful manner (such as no unexpected visits to a woman's home in a vehicle marked "Aid to Trafficking Victims", etc.).
- Give women advice about legal options, including information about relevant policies and procedures, how long a case can take and what will be expected of the women throughout the process.
- Address psychological and emotional concerns of women. There is a tension between the desire of women to talk about their experiences and the shame imposed on them for having had such experiences. Professional psychotherapy is uncommon in many places in Asia and may not be the most appropriate solution for many women who say that the act of recounting their experiences to a stranger only increases their suffering. Many Thai and Filipina women have grown up in a society that does not encourage a confessional tell-all approach to personal and sexual suffering, and many women will not be comfortable speaking about their exploitation with strangers in authority, even trained mental health care professionals. In this context, peer support groups now fill a need by providing women with a warm, trusting forum in which they can speak about things that they cannot discuss even with their family. For the future, however, more innovative approaches to psychological and emotional care should be developed, because logistically it is difficult to implement such peer groups in a widespread way.
- Help women with their economic plans, not only by providing funds but by exposing women to new livelihoods and by offering trainings that enable women to make and carry out business plans. For women who are ready and able to make more ambitious plans than current vocational programmes offer, NGOs and GOs would do well to investigate micro-credit schemes that have been more developed in other countries, to see how such projects could feasibly be implemented.
- Recognize that under some countries' trafficking law, it is possible for women to seek criminal and civil cases simultaneously; support those women who want to do so, so that they can pursue both criminal justice and rightful compensation in a timely manner and not have to endure consecutive years-long court cases.

## Specifically for government and international organizations

- Organize pre-departure training for women migrants.
- Provide emergency shelter for women returnees who need it.
- Implement guidelines for providing information to and treating women returnees, and provide rights-based training to personnel who work with returning women.
- Clearly communicate the kinds of assistance available to returning women. Provide training on legal literacy in rural villages that are home to many migrants and trafficking victims.
- Disseminate migration and human trafficking information via the mass media.
- Strengthen cooperation with domestic and international organizations in assisting women returnees.

## Guiding principles

The two key themes that the women interviewed for this report spoke of repeatedly were communication and respect. It is important to recognize that, especially given the many different types of needs (economic, social, legal, physical and psychological) and the many different types of agencies (in origin and destination countries, both government and private) and the scattered locations of the women who are the target beneficiaries, communication is of critical importance.

Sources of assistance may exist, but for them to succeed, women must know about them and what they must do to access them. Without clear and consistent communication, a woman is left to wonder in the midst of disparate pieces of information: how long she will have to stay in a shelter while her travel papers are being processed; or whether she has the right to file charges against her pimp even though she entered the country illegally; or when she's going to hear whether her request for a livelihood loan will be approved; or if she can get scholarship funds to enable her children to stay in school for the coming term; or what kind of training opportunities exist that might help her change her situation.

Nearly all of the critiques that the women offered about the provision of services had to do with not being informed about services or about service providers losing contact. Clarity, consistency and continuity of contact and aid mean that a woman can have some control because she knows what is going on, what is available to her, what choices she has and what she must do in order to take advantage of those choices.

Above all, returning women want to be treated with respect. One of the most intractable problems that most of the women interviewed for this report encountered after their return was stigma, which manifests itself when other people disrespect them, discount their thoughts and feelings and assume that they know what the women's experience abroad was and meant. It is vital for those groups that want to work in the women's interests and on their behalf always to speak with women sincerely and in good faith and to listen with an open mind. By respecting the choices that women make and by endeavouring to provide them with the resources to implement those choices—by taking the role of ally, not saviour—service providers can truly lend a useful hand to these women who are working hard to recover their dignity and to build their own new path.

## Recommended DOs and DON'Ts in integration programming<sup>1</sup>

### DO:

- develop a flexible approach that provides real solutions to each individual
- work with and for returnees to empower them to improve their situation
- listen and learn carefully from returnees about their concerns, needs and ideas (focus on what is close to their “hearts”)
- actively involve returnees
- respect and support their decisions—it’s their life (a rights-based approach)
- emphasize economic empowerment; integration becomes meaningless if there is no livelihood to return to
- create good-quality skills training programmes and keep them short and focused (women have other responsibilities)
- keep in mind that although start-your-own-business courses can be excellent, not all returnees are entrepreneurial
- respect and protect returnee’s right to privacy and confidentiality
- promote self-reliance and resiliency
- foster a rights-based—bottom-up—approach
- create a positive image around integration activities; assistance and services should be an attractive opportunity (create a “winners” project image)
- provide hope and opportunity
- leave a legacy: tools and good practices for future programmes.

### DON'T:

- contribute to harm in the name of anti-trafficking
- be fixed, rigid and top-down oriented
- make one-size-fits-all solutions.

1 Lisborg, A. (2006) “Economic and social empowerment of returned victims of trafficking”, PowerPoint presentation, Project Briefing, Reintegration Research Methodology Workshop. 27-28 February. Bangkok.



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*Going back – Moving on: A synthesis report of the trends and experiences of returned trafficking victims in Thailand and the Philippines*

This report explores some of the issues, obstacles and opportunities related to the return and integration of women migrants who have experienced exploitative situations abroad, including forced labour and human trafficking. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with returned victims of trafficking in Thailand and the Philippines, the report examines the individual experiences and challenges the women faced – at their destination abroad but also upon their return. The researchers examined the physical and psychological conditions of the women, their concerns and aspirations before leaving and upon their return, and the ways they have coped with the reunification of family and country. The report includes a critical review of the inadequate assistance available and received by returnees. It documents the primary concerns of the women and advocates their needs as expressed by the women themselves. The report concludes with suggestions for improving the quality and effectiveness of reintegration assistance at a variety of levels.

