A report presented to Asylum Access Thailand

Human Capital

and the Employment Situations of Urban Refugees in Thailand

(Volume 1):
Baseline Findings

By

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Dedicated to all urban refugees in Thailand

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The present study emerges from an urgent need to investigate human capital and employment situations of urban refugees in Thailand to provide a basis for advocating their right to work. This right was intentionally omitted during the drafting of the National Screening Mechanism (NSM). Nevertheless, since urban refugees will go through the NSM process and remain temporarily in Thailand soon, Section 63 of the Emergency Decree on Managing the Work of Aliens B.E. 2560 could provide them with a channel for employment. If that scenario were possible, what would these refugees contribute to Thailand's labor market? To answer this question, it is essential to investigate human capital and the potential of urban refugees. This volume fills such gaps by providing the results of a baseline survey. In addition, as the COVID-19 pandemic remains consequential, this report explores the employment situations of urban refugees during the pandemic and compares it to the preceding period; this could provide additional insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected refugees' employment and vulnerabilities.

The results presented in this report provide supply-side data for recognizing the available human capital of urban refugees in Thailand. It focuses specifically on their skills, education, and prior work experience, which could be beneficial to Thai society. This report helps to identify the way urban refugees have made use of their human capital in Thailand through an exploration of their employment situations. Based on the findings of the present study, the Thai government and other stakeholders in Thailand can plan how urban refugees could be integrated into Thailand's labor market or how they could assist refugee employment in the long run.

Methodology

The present study considers human capital as the research framework. It adopts the 1998 OECD's definition of human capital by focusing on skills, work experiences, education levels, language competencies, and the attributes of urban

refugees (e.g., gender, country of origin, etc.). These factors help to demonstrate the available human capital of urban refugees for economic returns. This study also explores the current employment situations of urban refugees—usually referred to as a set of labor market indicators—by identifying the employment opportunities among different refugee groups.

Due to the pandemic, this report used a telephone survey for data collection. The surveys were conducted over a four-month period between September and December 2020 with strict enforcement of ethical standards to protect confidentially of refugees. The questionnaire consisted of four major parts: demographic information, refugees' available human capital, and employment situation in Thailand and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report conducted univariate and bivariate analyses drawing data from the survey. Both techniques were appropriate because this volume aims to provide baseline insights into human capital and the employment situation of urban refugees in Thailand.

This study adopted a broad definition of urban refugees. Thus, some refugees whose asylum requests were denied or those who had not yet had their refugee status granted by the UNHCR were also included in the survey. The present report is based on the dataset available from Asylum Access Thailand (AAT). The survey was limited to 140 respondents from 10 countries of origin, including Pakistan, Somalia, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, and Palestine. The present study used quota sampling to recruit the respondents. This non-probability sampling technique was employed due to several limitations to ensure a proportional representation of refugees across the gender spectrum and from all ten countries of origin.

Time, budget, and human resource constraints concurrently affected the current project. The widespread pandemic also posed additional challenges to the study. In addition, a conflicting schedule between enumerators and interpreters within the research time frame led the present investigation to exclude Sri Lankan and Chinese from the survey, limiting the number of refugee groups. Another limitation of the present study is its operation in many languages and simultaneous translation. There were some data inconsistencies for responses to some questions in the survey that had to be resolved through discussion with enumerators and interpreters.

Key Insights

Human Capital of Urban Refugees in Thailand

Education

• Seventy-nine percent of respondents who were older than 18 years old had a formal education; most had completed at least their primary education.

• Twenty-two percent of the respondents lacked any formal education.

• Male refugees were more likely to have a formal education than female refugees.

• Among urban male refugees, 98.5 percent had at least a primary education, while only 58 percent of female refugees were formally educated.

Prior Work Experience

• Seventy percent of the respondents had work experience before coming to Thailand with varying types of work.

• Work profiles included farmers, entrepreneurs, chefs, nurses, accountants, schoolteachers, and computer experts.

• Male refugees were more likely to have prior work experiences than female refugees.

Skills

Labor Skills

• More than 95 percent of the respondents reported having skills in at least one of the following areas: manufacturing, crafting, construction, cooking, business and entrepreneurship, computer skills, farming, and agriculture.

• Cooking is the most common skill among the respondents, followed by farming and agriculture, construction, crafting, computer skills, manufacturing, and entrepreneurship.

Language Skills

• More than 85 percent of the respondents could understand at least two spoken languages.

• The most common spoken language that respondents across all groups could understand was English; 50 percent of the respondents spoke English.

• Fifteen percent of the urban refugees in the survey reported that they could understand Thai. Most of them were from Thailand's neighboring countries, especially Vietnam.

• There was no significant difference in language skills between urban male and female refugees.

Employment Situations of Urban Refugees in Thailand

Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

• Seventy-four percent of the respondents were engaged in income-generating activities in the informal sector before the pandemic, although urban refugees are prohibited from working legally and formally in Thailand.

• Twenty percent of all the respondents who reported working in Thailand had worked in at least two jobs.

• Respondents' wages varied. Some wages were as low as 40 THB per day for picking chilies, with others receiving up to 800 THB per day working in organizations, depending on the skills required.

• Education, Thai language skills, and gender provided insight into the employment situations of urban refugees in Thailand before the pandemic.

• Urban refugees without any formal education were three times more likely to be unemployed in Thailand when compared with other groups of forcibly displaced people who had some formal education.

• A lack of formal education did not mean no jobs since nearly half of those who had no formal education had found work in Thailand.

• Refugees who had work in their home countries also had work in

Thailand. However, 20 percent of those with prior work experience had not found work after arriving in Thailand.

• Thirty percent of those who did not understand Thai had never worked in Thailand compared to only 9.5 percent of those who could understand Thai.

• Before COVID-19, most refugees of all genders had worked in Thailand. The percentage of working male refugees was slightly higher than female refugees, 83 percent to 64 percent, respectively.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic (as of December 2020)

• The employment situations of urban refugees had changed significantly during the pandemic.

• Only 29 percent of all the respondents had work as of December 2020, down from 74 percent during the pre-COVID era.

• Those respondents who had kept their jobs did so at the mercy of their employers and were paid less.

• Male respondents continued to be hired at a slightly higher rate than female respondents.

• The pandemic had severely affected the employment situations of all education groups, especially those with no formal education, only primary education, and technical training; their employment rates were 7 percent, 13 percent, and no employment, respectively.

• The only two education groups where the majority had remained employed included respondents with a master's degree, doctorate, and upper secondary education, and who mostly worked in semi- or high-skilled jobs.

• Thai language ability and the number of skill areas did not make a difference in employment during the pandemic. Regardless of whether refugees could understand Thai, the employment rate was approximately 25 percent.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As the global refugee landscape has shifted in recent decades, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study suggests that all parties, including civil society groups and the Thai government, need to consider urban refugees' human capital and employment situations more seriously. Suppose host governments, including Thailand, were to continue to bar refugees from working, instead of helping to solve their problems, they will create additional burdens, not only for the refugees but also for the governments themselves. For this reason, it would be more appropriate for the host government and the public in a host country to consider how the human capital of refugees could be used to the benefit of the host nation.

- Local and international organizations and researchers should expand the scope of the study to include more urban refugees in Thailand to make the supply-side data more comprehensive and accurate, reflecting the actual population of urban refugees in the country. Data access and resource sharing between different parties are highly needed to attain this goal.
- An analysis of labor market demands to provide data for labor market matching is essential. Such a study would provide insights into the employment sector in Thailand and the integration of urban refugees. The matching would provide practitioners with training activities to strengthen urban refugees' labor market appeal.
- All stakeholders should see urban refugees as a potential human resource that can be further developed to benefit the host society. Thai government officials can work together with civil society groups and businesses to provide training support for urban refugees to channel their human capital into the labor market and into areas needed by the Thai economy. The Thai government can use existing laws to make employment of urban refugees possible.
- The Thai government and relevant parties in Thailand need to provide more financial and in-kind support for urban refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Center for Social Development Studies or Asylum Access Thailand.

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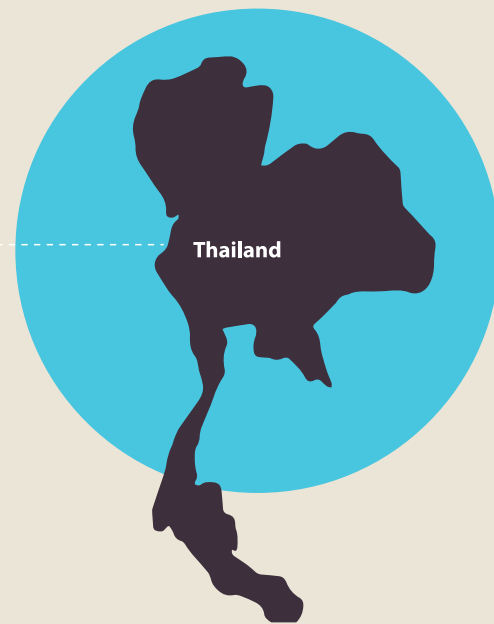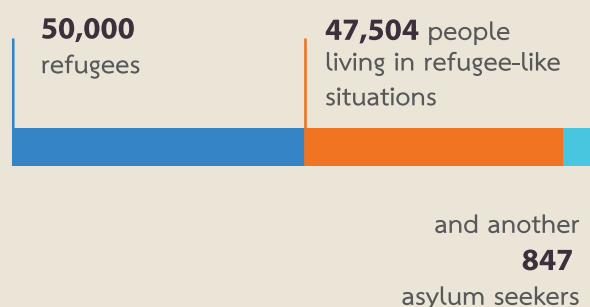|	
AAT	Asylum Access Thailand
BMA	Bangkok Metropolitan Area
BRC	Bangkok Refugee Center
EFA	Education for All Policy
GCM	Global Compact on Migration
GCR	Global Compact on Refugee
JRS	Jesuit Refugee Service
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding on the Alternative to Detention for Children in the Immigration Detention Center
NSM	Regulations of the Office of the Prime Minister on the Screening and the Protection of Aliens who Enter into the Kingdom and are Unable to Return to their Country of Origin (or the National Screening Mechanism)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
RSD	Refugee Status Determination
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Background

Thailand has been one of the major refugee host countries for several decades. More than one million refugees—mainly from neighboring countries—have temporarily sought refuge in Thailand before returning to their home country or resettling in a third country.

As of January 2021, UNHCR (2021: 2) reported that Thailand continues to host approximately 50,000 refugees, 47,504 people living in refugee-like situations, and another 847 asylum seekers. Among these populations are roughly 5,000 urban refugees who have sought refuge mostly in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area (BMA). However, several reports recognize that the actual number of refugees in urban settings remains obscure (e.g., Kulvmann, 2017). Using the refugee definition based on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the 1951 Convention hereafter) and its 1967 Protocol, the UNHCR's records exclude some groups who identify themselves as refugees, including closed cases where refugees look forward to appealing for their status determination and those groups whose status determination has not yet been processed, such as the Rohingya. Thus, the actual number of urban refugees in Thailand could be higher.

Thailand

● As of January 2021, UNHCR (2021: 2) reported that Thailand continues to host approximately

50,000 refugees

47,504 people living in refugee-like situations

and another **847** asylum seekers

The limitations of the international legal definition of refugees have led several organizations to adopt a broader definition of the term to design and deliver material assistance programs that are more comprehensive and inclusive (Fragomen, 1970). These organizations rely on self-identification to identify refugees. The present study—so also the dataset—operates based on this broader definition of refugee to provide a more comprehensive outlook of asylum situations in Thailand. This report includes the asylum seekers and closed cases pending appeal for status determination when identifying a refugee.

According to Thai domestic laws. refugees lack formal legal recognition. Thailand is a non-signatory to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol; refugees are subject to the Immigration Act B.E. 2522 (1979), meaning they can be arrested, detained, and deported (Coddington, 2020). However, in the past decades, the Thai government has relied significantly on Article 17 of the Immigration Act to develop ad hoc policy tools, allowing certain groups of refugees to temporarily reside in Thailand. Groups are classified differently; some are known as "displaced persons" or "people fleeing fighting" depending on a policy tool the Thai government used at each moment. The Thai government has allowed the UNHCR and civil society organizations to assist some refugee populations for humanitarian purposes.

In 2016, more comprehensive institutional mechanisms for refugee management materialized in Thailand after Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha made ten pledges at the Leaders' Summit on Refugees (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Some measures pertinent to urban refugees included the following:

1 Enacting legislation on the prevention of torture and forced disappearances and honoring the principle of non-refoulement;

2 Developing a screening mechanism to distinguish between those seeking protection and economic migrants;

3 Improving the conditions of detention and seeking an alternative to child detention; and

4 Providing humanitarian assistance and access to healthcare and education to irregular migrants.

By 2019, several key milestones were reached. Thailand signed the non-binding Global Compact on Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in December 2018. On January 21, 2019, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Royal Thai Police, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Public Health, and the Ministry of Education signed the Memorandum of Understanding on the Alternative to Detention for Children in the Immigration Detention Center (the MoU hereafter) at the Thai Government House (National Security Council, 2019). The MoU led the Immigration Bureau to move some children out of the immigration detention center to children homes and family aid houses. Nonetheless, several reports have noted that some children are still being detained in major immigration facilities (*Prachatai*, 2020).

Another significant development was the enactment of the Regulations of the Office of the Prime Minister on the Screening and the Protection of Aliens who Enter into the Kingdom and are Unable to Return to the Country of Origin (the National Screening Mechanism (NSM) hereafter) (*Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 2019). The NSM was officially announced on December 25, 2019, and came into effect in June 2020. After screening and becoming a "protected person" under the NSM process, people intending to seek asylum in Thailand are accorded with the right to healthcare and are allowed to remain temporarily in Thailand. Children with a protected person status also have the right to education. However, as of July 2021, the Thai government is still in the process of developing screening rules, procedures and criteria. The Immigration Bureau, which serves as the NSM principal enforcement agency, aims to finalize the standards by the end of 2021. Immigration officials have also been trained to conduct refugee status determination (RSD) with the assistance of UNHCR.

While the signs of progress are laudable, one of the critical challenges awaiting the screened-in and those hoping to seek refuge in Thailand is employment. The final version of the NSM does not mention the right to work, leaving it unclear whether a protected person could work formally. Some officials suggest that these people should be able to work. A primary drafter of the NSM once said that the right to work was absent because some officials from the security sectors were concerned that granting this right might lead the protected person to settle in Thailand indefinitely and serve as a "pull factor" thus attracting larger numbers of the forcibly displaced into Thailand (Jittiang, 2019). Nevertheless, Section 63 of the Emergency Decree on Managing the

Work of Aliens B.E. 2560 provides a channel for employment opportunities for urban refugees once they are granted a protected person status and are permitted to remain in Thailand temporarily. If employment for urban refugees is possible, what would be the contributions of these refugees to Thailand's labor market in that scenario?

To answer this question, it is essential to investigate the human capital and potential of urban refugees. Therefore, this study aims to fill such gaps by providing baseline survey results. Also, as the COVID-19 pandemic remains consequential, what do we know about the informal employment situation of urban refugees during this time compared to the period before COVID-19? This investigation could provide additional insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected refugees' employment and vulnerabilities.
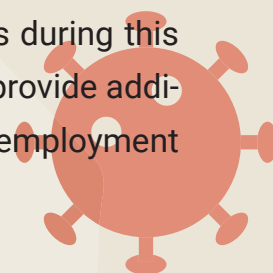
Research Questions
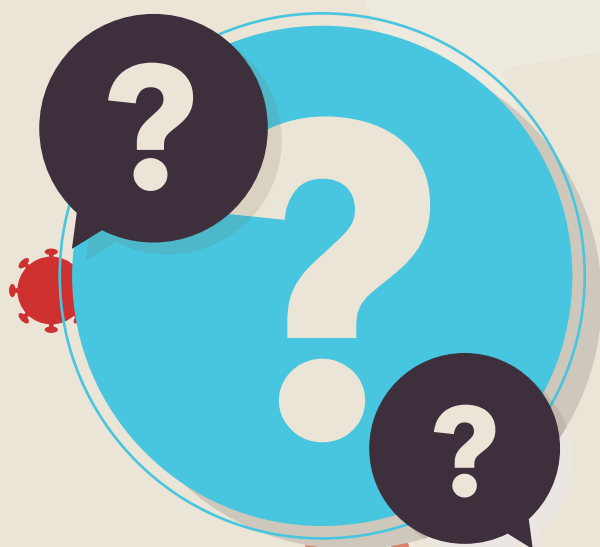
1 What is the available human capital of urban refugees in Thailand?

2 What were the employment situations of urban refugees in Thailand before the COVID-19 pandemic?

3 What are the changes in the employment situations of urban refugees in Thailand during the pandemic?

Significances

The present study provides supply-side data on the available human capital of urban refugees in Thailand. It focuses specifically on their skills, education, and prior work experience, which could be beneficial to Thai society. This report helps to identify the way urban refugees have made use of their human capital in Thailand through the exploration of their employment situations. Based on the findings of the present study, the Thai government, UNHCR, civil society groups, and other stakeholders in Thailand can plan how urban refugees could be integrated into Thailand's labor market or how they could assist refugee employment in the long run.
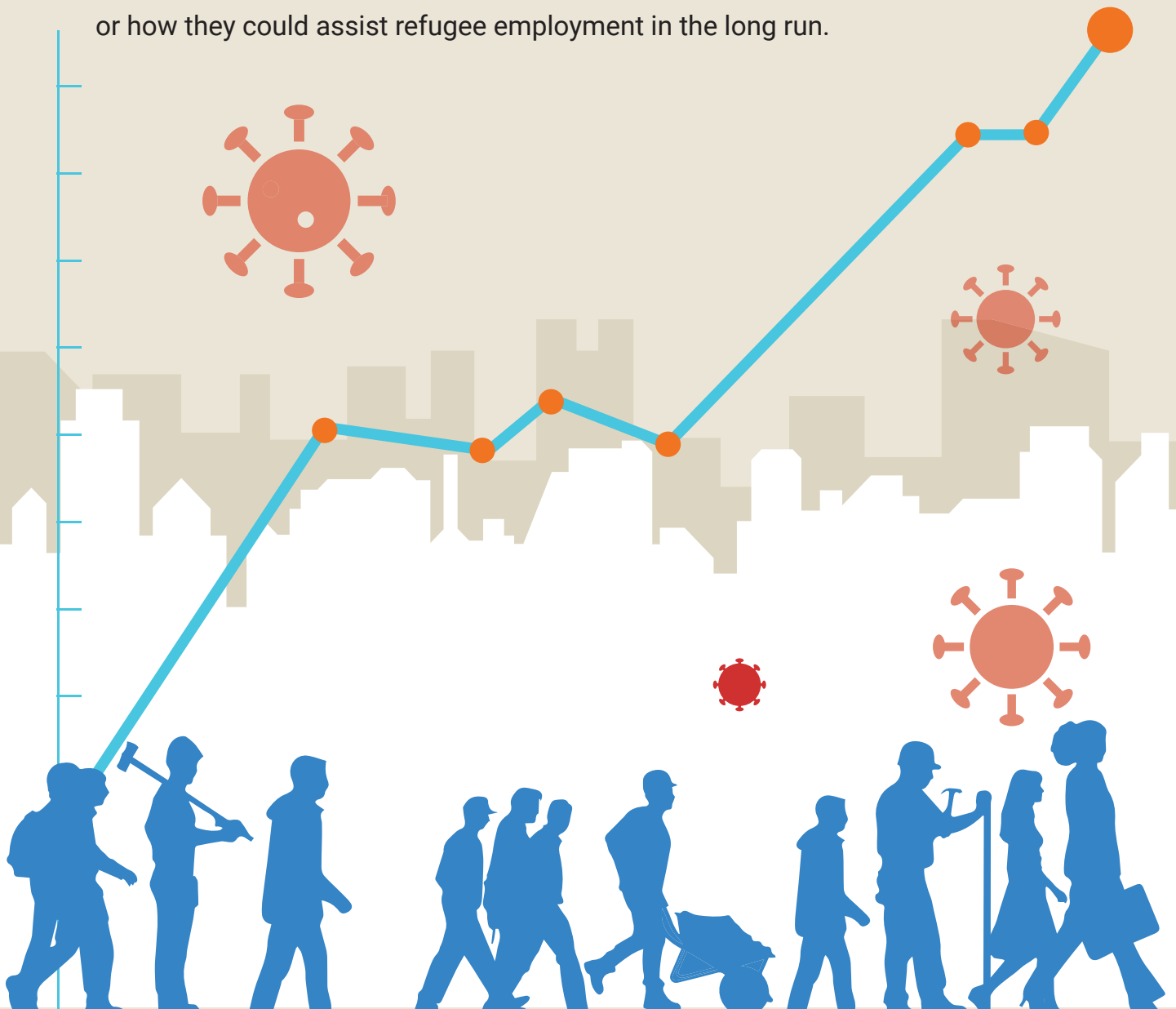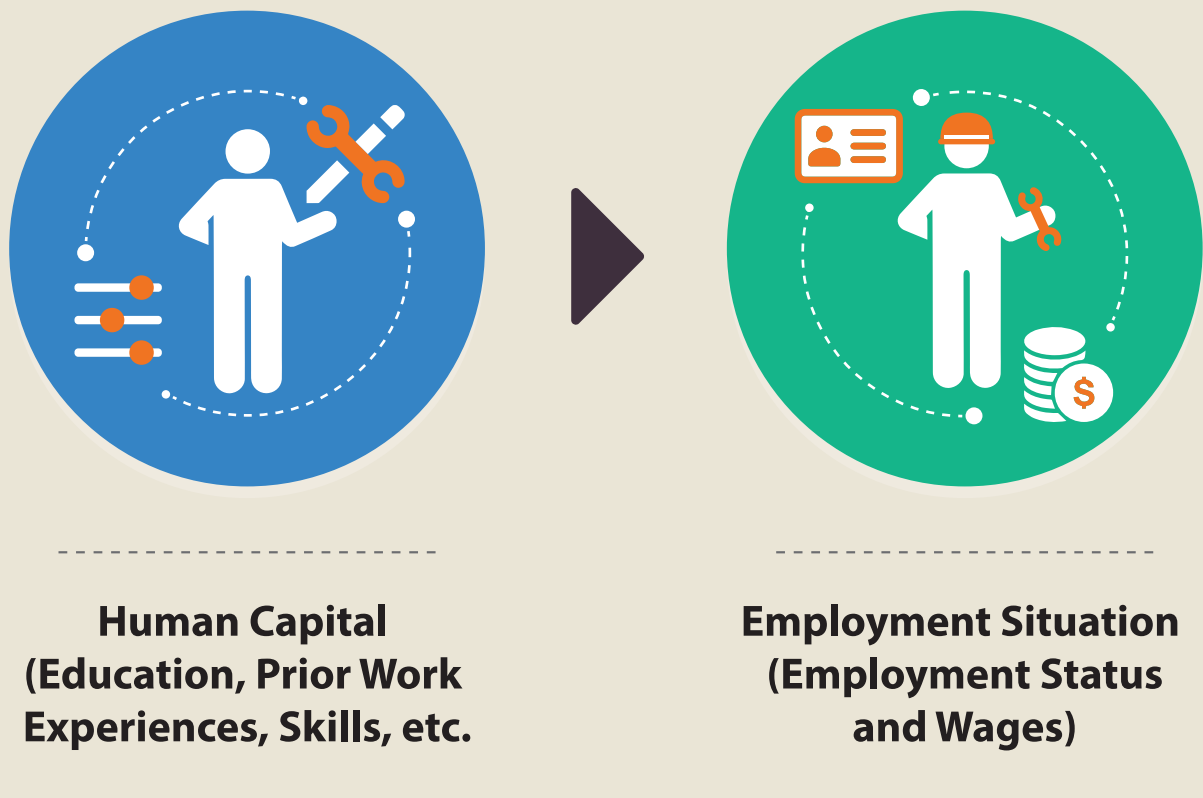
METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

Research Framework

The present study considers human capital as a research framework. This concept can be traced back to the *Wealth of Nations*, in which Adam Smith recognizes the significance of abilities acquired by members of society. However, human capital had not become popular until the 1960s when neoclassical economists—including Jacob Mincer, Theodore Schultz, and Gary Becker—adopted the concept to demonstrate that human investment is as substantial as the investment in machinery for economic returns (Goldin, 2016). Since then, human capital is included in mainstream economics and has become one of the critical indicators that global institutions use to measure national development. For example, the World Bank Group issues an annual *Human Capital Index Report* to explore the extent to which each country could benefit from the potential of its people (see, e.g., The World Bank, 2021).

Figure 1. Research Framework

**Human Capital
(Education, Prior Work
Experiences, Skills, etc.**

**Employment Situation
(Employment Status
and Wages)**

There are several definitions of human capital, but the most widely accepted definition is that of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD defines human capital as "the knowledge, skills, competencies, and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being" (OECD, 2001, 18). The *Guide on Measuring Human Capital* developed by United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2013, 9) notes that the 2001 OECD definition of human capital is "all-embracing" and "multi-facet," covering both economic and non-economic returns.

However, since the present study focuses mainly on urban refugees' human capital pertinent to labor market activities, it adopts the narrower definition of human capital contained in the OECD's 1998 report; namely, that human capital refers to "the knowledge, skills, competencies, and other attributes embodied in individuals that are relevant to economic activity" (OECD, 1998, 9). The present study also uses the 1998 OECD report's determination of human capital. It focuses on the skills, work experiences, education levels, language competencies, and attributes of urban refugees (e.g., gender, country of origin, etc.). These factors help to demonstrate the available human capital of urban refugees for economic returns.

This study also explores the current employment situations of urban refugees, usually referred to as a set of labor market indicators (see United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). It specifically identifies employment opportunities among different refugee groups and their wages. Refugees are classified as "have worked" before if they did any paid work in Thailand. They are classified as "have never worked" if they had never worked in Thailand. The report eventually compares the employment situation before and during the outbreak of COVID-19, which will provide insights into how refugees could be supported during this trying time.

Data Collection and Analysis

Telephone Survey

Gaining access to urban refugees in Thailand is challenging. Many live in hiding, while some move from one place to another because the Thai state does not legally recognize them. Thus, phone calls are the most convenient way to make contact with refugees. The COVID-19 pandemic has rendered this means of communication appro-

priate given the implementation of social distancing and the mandated wearing of masks in Thailand. De Rada (2010) has also suggested that telephone surveys also help to increase representation and provide a better quality of survey results because it allows respondents to be anonymized.

Before the telephone survey began, enumerators and interpreters participated in training sessions in September 2020 to develop a working relationship and to familiarize themselves with the questionnaire and research process. All the study's interpreters were urban refugees who had years of training in working on legal cases with AAT. Interpreters provided additional input to reshape the questionnaire during training, given that some terms may be unavailable in some languages. They also flagged some sensitivity concerns. These comments eventually helped to strengthen the questionnaire's quality.

The surveys were conducted over a four-month period between September and December 2020. They were arrange based on the availability of the enumerators and interpreters. To conduct the survey, an enumerator sat together with an interpreter who translated simultaneously while making the call to the respondents. The enumerator then filled in the responses using the *KoBoToolbox* application. Each survey took between 40 minutes and one hour. The enumerator started the study by providing details of the project and asking for the consent of potential respondents. Once participants agreed with the research terms, the enumerator asked questions in sequence. However, respondents could skip any questions and choose to stop the survey at any time. They were also compensated for taking time to participate in the survey.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of four major parts. The first focuses on demographic information. The second part explores the human capital of refugees looking specifically at available skills, education, and work experience before coming to Thailand. The third section examines the employment situation in Thailand prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. The final part asks about the situation and employment of urban refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some survey questions were open-ended, allowing respondents to provide qualitative answers and assessments.

Analysis

This report employed univariate and bivariate analyses to extract data from the
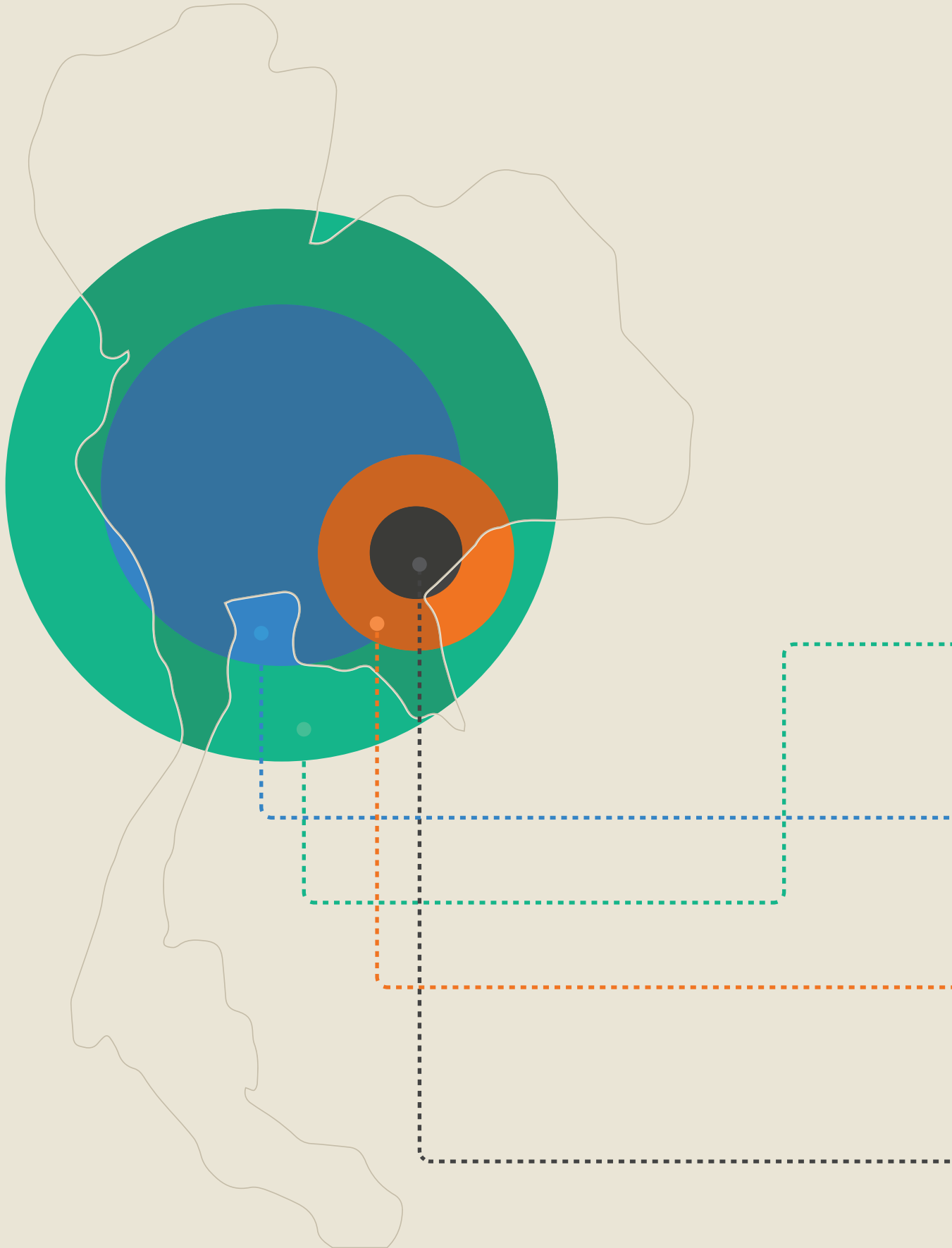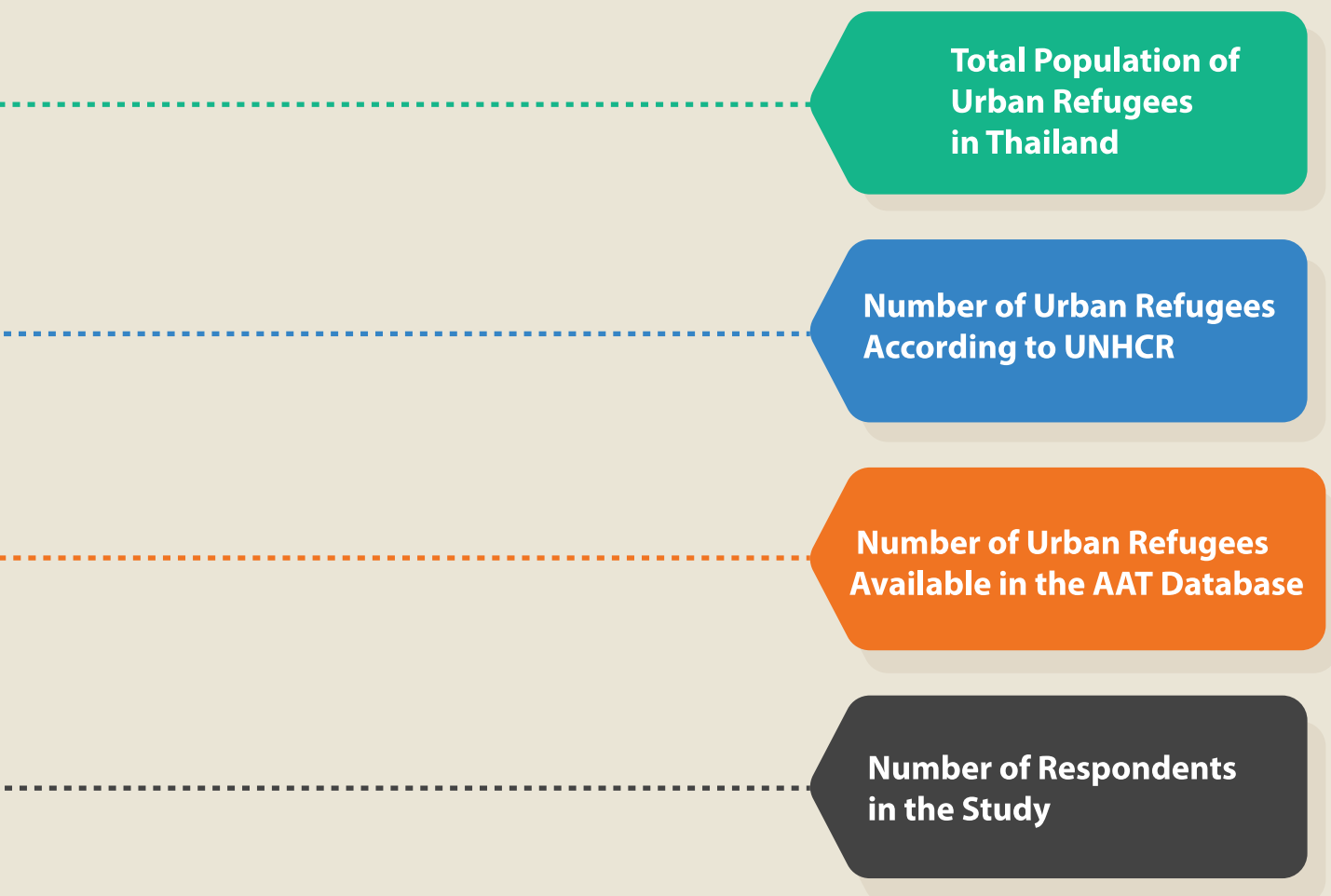
individual surveys. Both techniques are appropriate because this study aims to provide baseline insights into human capital and the employment situation of urban refugees in Thailand. The use of cross-tabulation for the bivariate analysis, in particular, made some relationships in the survey more apparent. In addition, this method helped to examine the connections between categorical variables included in the survey.

Respondents and Sampling

Figure 2

Number of Respondents in Relation to the Total Urban Refugee Population in Thailand

Total Population of Urban Refugees in Thailand

Number of Urban Refugees According to UNHCR

Number of Urban Refugees Available in the AAT Database

Number of Respondents in the Study

Because this study adopts a broad definition of urban refugees, some people whose asylum requests have been denied or those whose refugee status has not yet been granted by the UNHCR were also included in the survey. The present report replies on the AAT dataset, which is the most accessible database for researchers. The data cover approximately 1,000 refugees from 13 groups. However, due to financial and time constraints and the availability of interpreters, this survey was limited to 140 respondents from 10 countries of origin, including Pakistan, Somalia, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, and Palestine.

The present study used quota sampling to recruit the respondents. This non-probability sampling technique was adopted because of several limitations in ensuring a proportional representation of refugees from all ten countries of origin and across the gender spectrum. Since the AAT database already classifies refugees based on their gender and country of origin and, quota sampling was plausible. Gender balance was taken into consideration to ensure a representation of all gender groups. The current study then looked at urban refugees from each country of origin and recruited between approximately 20 percent and 25 percent of the population for each group.

Total Number of Respondents by their Country of Origin

Table 1

Country of Origin	Total Number of Respondents
Afghanistan	13
Cambodia	1
Iran	2
Iraq	4
Laos	1
Pakistan	48
Palestine	4
Somalia	27
Syria	2
Vietnam	38

Total **140**

All the respondents in the survey were at least 18 years old. Those under the age of 18 were considered dependent. Enumerators contacted 146 respondents, but six declined to participate. Thus, only 140 respondents were included in the survey (n=140). *Table 1* illustrates the number of refugees from each country of origin. Sixty-seven of the respondents were female refugees, 72 were male refugees, and one person identified themselves as non-binary. Due to the limited number of respondents from some countries of origin, the present study does not rely on a country of origin as a key factor for data analysis.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the present study. Time, budget, and human resource constraints concurrently affected the current project. This survey took place during a pandemic with limited budgets for compensating additional research participants, interpreters, and enumerators. The use of telephone surveys would require extensive resources if the research team were to contact all the refugee populations in the AAT database. Thus, it could not include all the populations. The solution was to interview as many participants as the budgets allowed. In addition, a conflicting schedule between enumerators and Chinese and Sri Lankan interpreters within the research period led the present investigation to exclude both groups from the survey, thus limiting the number of refugee groups.

Another limitation of the present study is that it was conducted in many languages using simultaneous translation. Different interpreters may use various phrases in their language to obtain answers from the respondents. Thus, there were some data inconsistencies for responses to some questions in the survey, which had to be resolved through discussion with enumerators and interpreters. At the same time, some details were lost during the simultaneous translation. The interpreter may have unintentionally excluded some details. Thus, enumerators had to follow up with an interpreter whenever the former detected that the latter may not have captured the full response.

HUMAN CAPITAL OF URBAN REFUGEES IN THAILAND

This section summarizes the key findings of the analysis of the human capital of urban refugees in Thailand.

It focuses on three significant aspects: education, prior work experience, and skills (including labor and language skills).

Figure 3 :

Educational Level of Respondents

Upper secondary school (Grade 10 – 12)
24%

Bachelor's Degree
6%

Master's/Doctorate
2%

Lower secondary school (Grade 7 – 9)
25%

No formal education
22%

Technical / Vocational School
6%

Primary school (Grade 1 - 6)
15%

Pie chart values: 2%, 6%, 6%, 24%, 25%, 25%, 15%, 22%
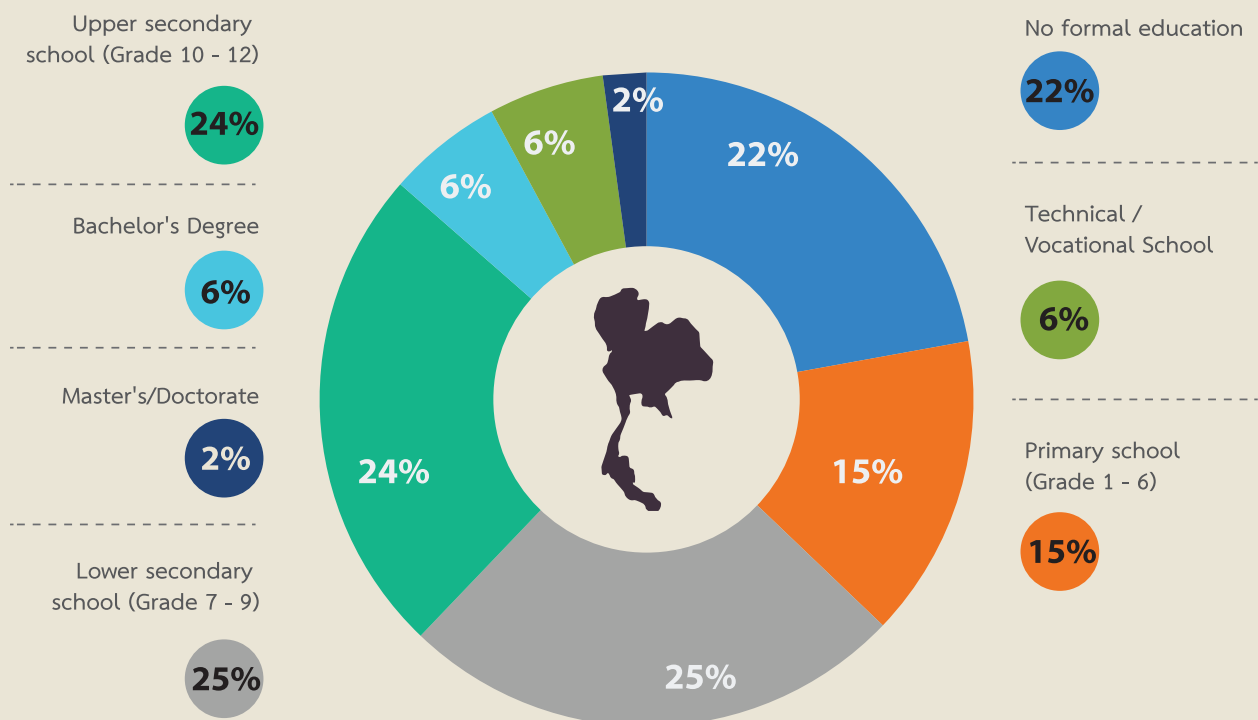
Data from the baseline survey indicate that most (78%) of urban refugees

who were older than 18 years

had a formal education (see Figure 3).

Most of the refugees had at least finished their primary education. Twenty-one refugees (15%) had completed primary school, and 79 refugees (49%) had completed secondary school. Some refugees who had primary or secondary education were educated in Thailand. The Thai government has implemented an "Education for All" since 1990. The 2017 Constitution of Thailand guarantees 12 years of free primary education for children, regardless of their nationality or legal status. Eight participants (6%) trained in a vocational school, while another 11 respondents (8%) had obtained at least a bachelor's degree, one of whom had a doctorate. Despite the high number of respondents with an education, this survey found that 22 percent of the participants had no formal education.

Figure 4 *:*

Educational Level of Respondents by Gender

Female Refugees

Male Refugees

- No formal education
- Master's/Doctorate
- Primary school (Grade 1 - 6)
- Technical / Vocational School
- Upper secondary school (Grade 10 - 12)
- Technical / Vocational School
- Lower secondary school (Grade 7 - 9)

When considering gender in *Figure 4*, this report found that male refugees were more likely to have formal education than female refugees. Sixty-nine of the 72 male respondents (98.5%) had at least primary education, while only 39 of the 67 female participants (58%) had received a formal education. Looking closer into each gender, most male refugees (81%) had either primary or secondary education. Only three male participants (4%) had no formal education.

Female refugees in the survey seem to have a strikingly different education profile. Forty-seven percent of female refugees had primary or secondary education,

42 percent

had no formal education.

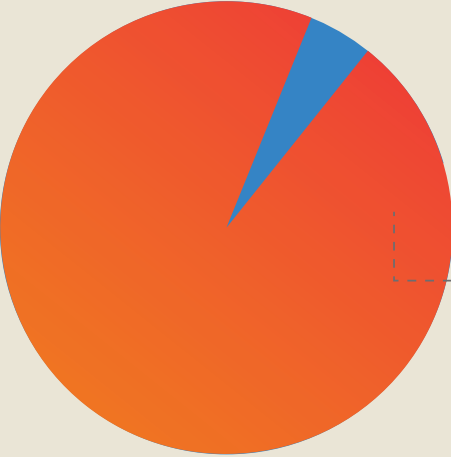The qualitative results found that the latter group came mainly from Somalia and Vietnam. Interestingly, the percentage of male and female refugees with at least a bachelor's degree was even at eight percent each.

Educational Level of Respondents by Gender

Female Refugees   Male Refugees

- No formal education
- Lower secondary school (Grade 7 - 9)
- Technical/Vocational School
- Primary school (Grade 1 - 6)
- Upper secondary school (Grade 10 - 12)
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's/Doctorate
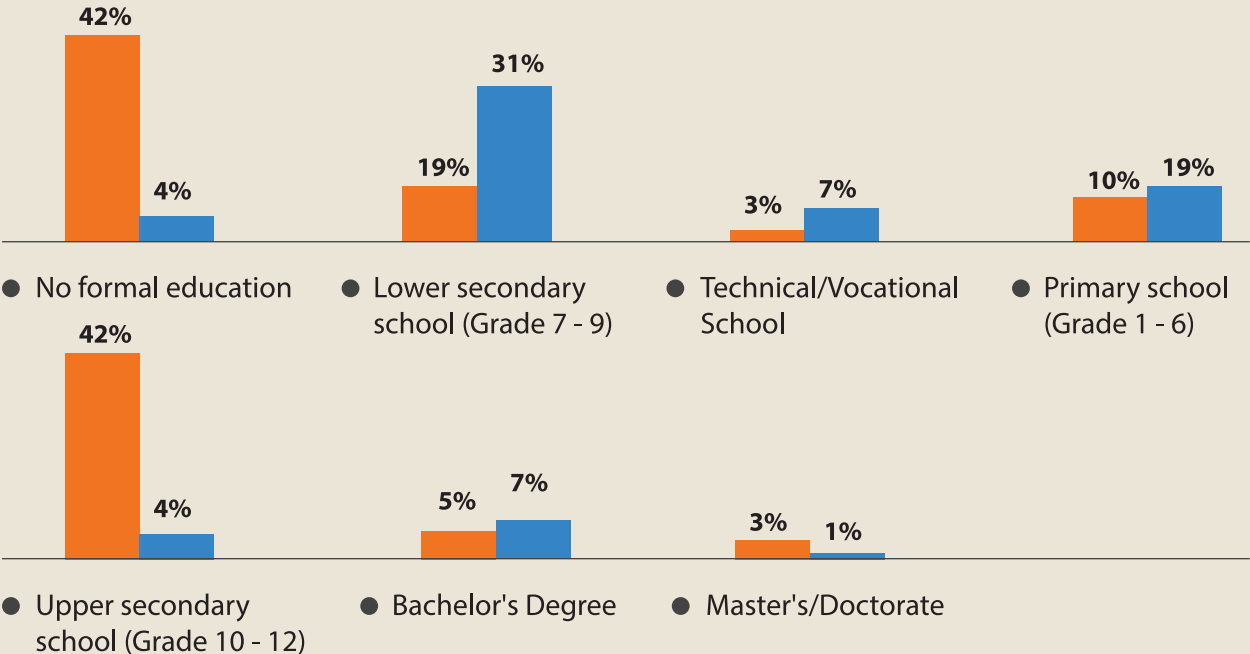
Prior Work Experience

Figure 5 :

Work Experience of Respondents Prior to Arrival in Thailand

30 percent of the respondents reported having no prior work experience

No   30%
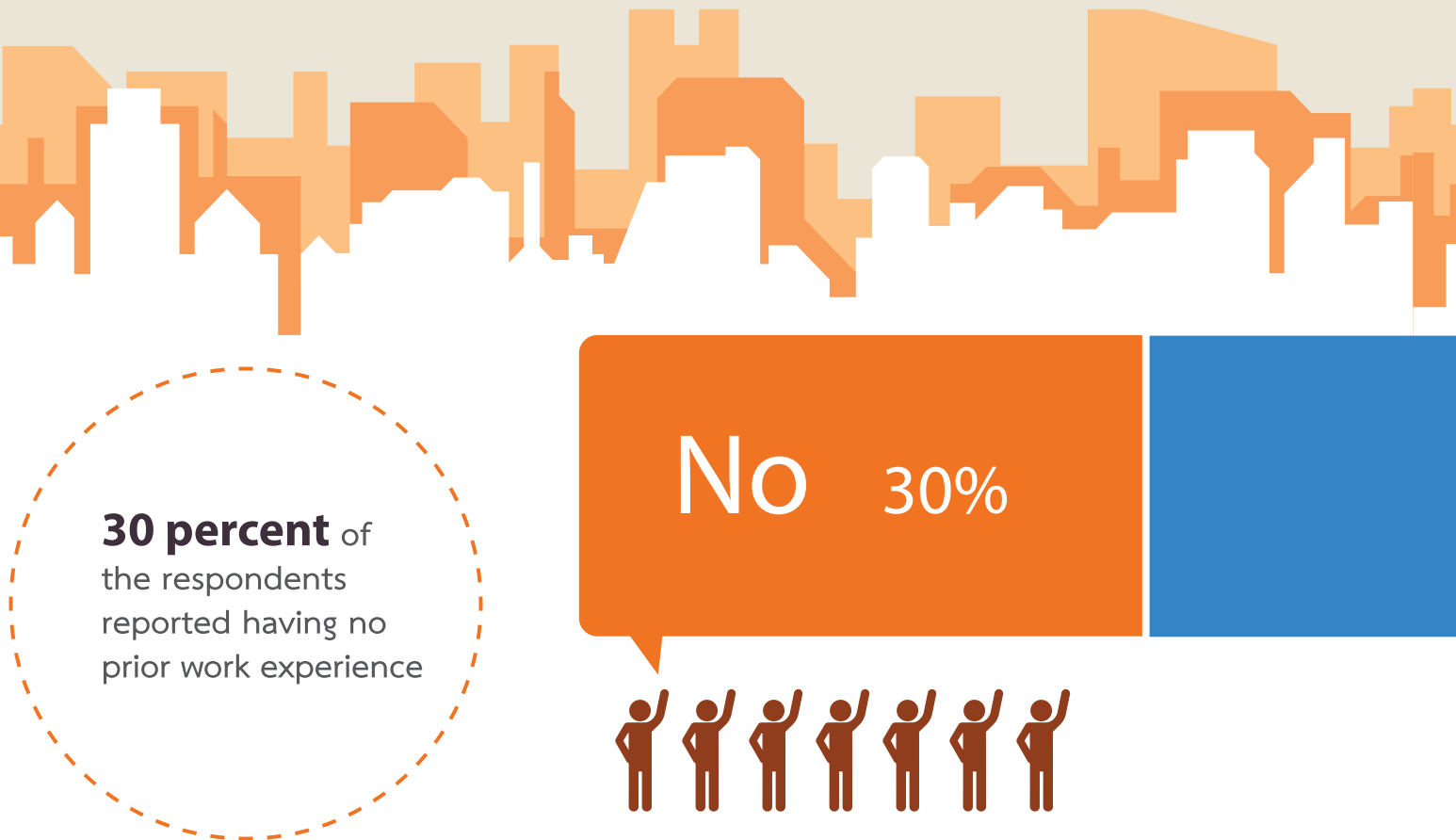
The present study defines work as engagement in income-generating activities. It finds that 70 percent of the respondents had work experience before coming to Thailand (see *Figure 5*). Their work profiles varied and included farmers, entrepreneurs, chefs, nurses, accountants, schoolteachers, and computer experts. Nonetheless, 30 percent of the respondents reported having no prior work experience.

Yes   70%

70%
Their work profiles varied and included

- farmers
- entrepreneurs
- chefs
- nurses
- accountants
- schoolteachers
- computer experts

When considering gender, male refugees were more likely to have prior experience than female refugees: 83 percent of male refugees have previous work experiences compared to 55 percent of female refugees. Thirty female refugees did not have any prior work experience compared to only 12 male refugees. Thus, female refugees are three times more likely to have no work experience. This survey found that more than half of the women in this category (19 persons) were Somali.

Skills

The present study covers major skill areas, including manufacturing, crafting, construction, cooking, business and entrepreneurship, computer, farming, and agriculture. The survey also asked an open-ended question about other technical skills to allow respondents to report additional skills they may possess, which could benefit the Thai economy. It also explored the language skills of respondents.
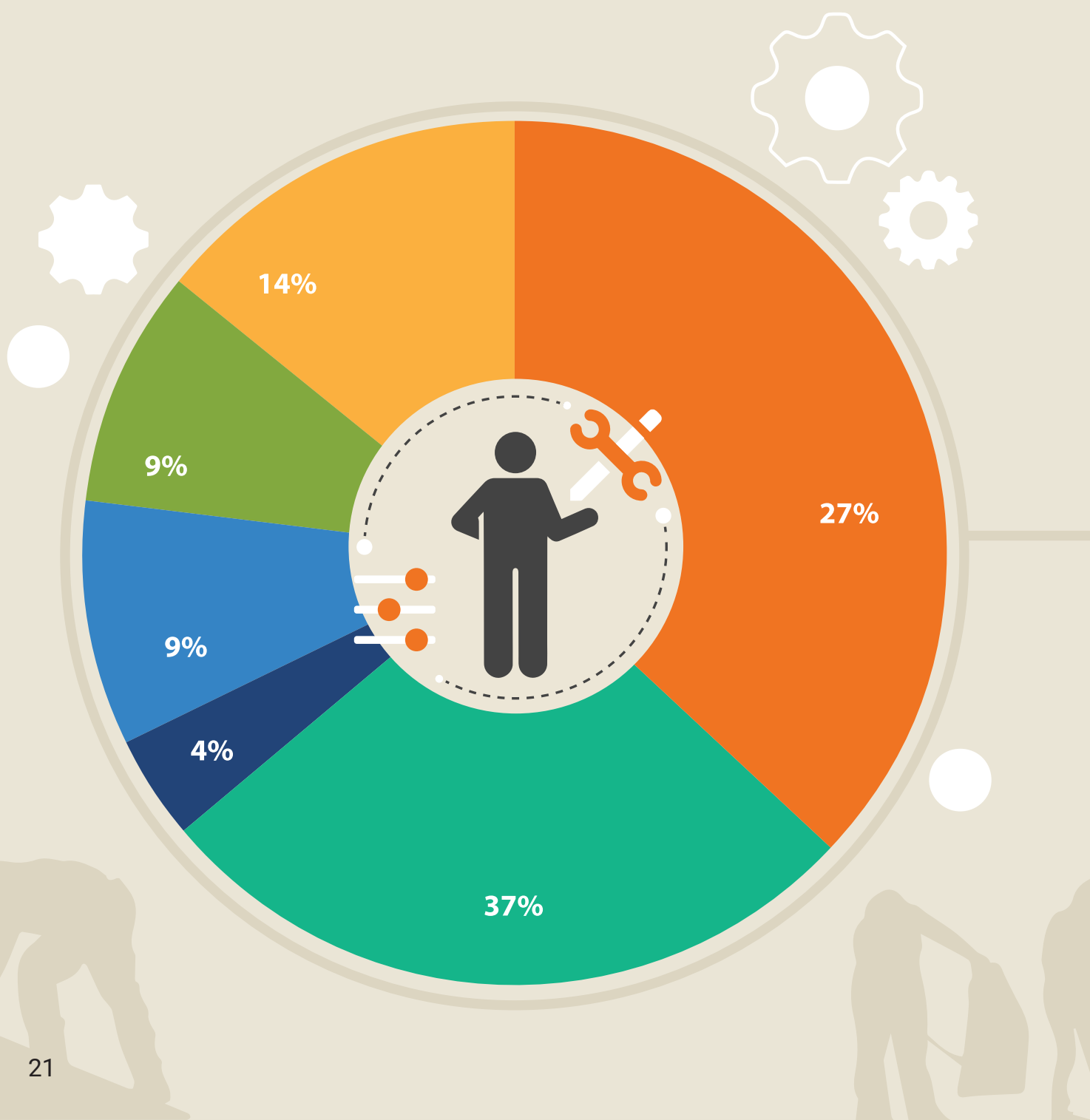
Labor Skills

- 14%
- 9%
- 9%
- 4%
- 37%
- 27%

Figure 6 :

Number of Skill Areas of Respondents

Having no skills	Having skill in one area	Having skill in two areas
4%	**27%**	**37%**

Having skills in three areas	Having skills in four areas	Having skills in four areas
14%	**9%**	**9%**
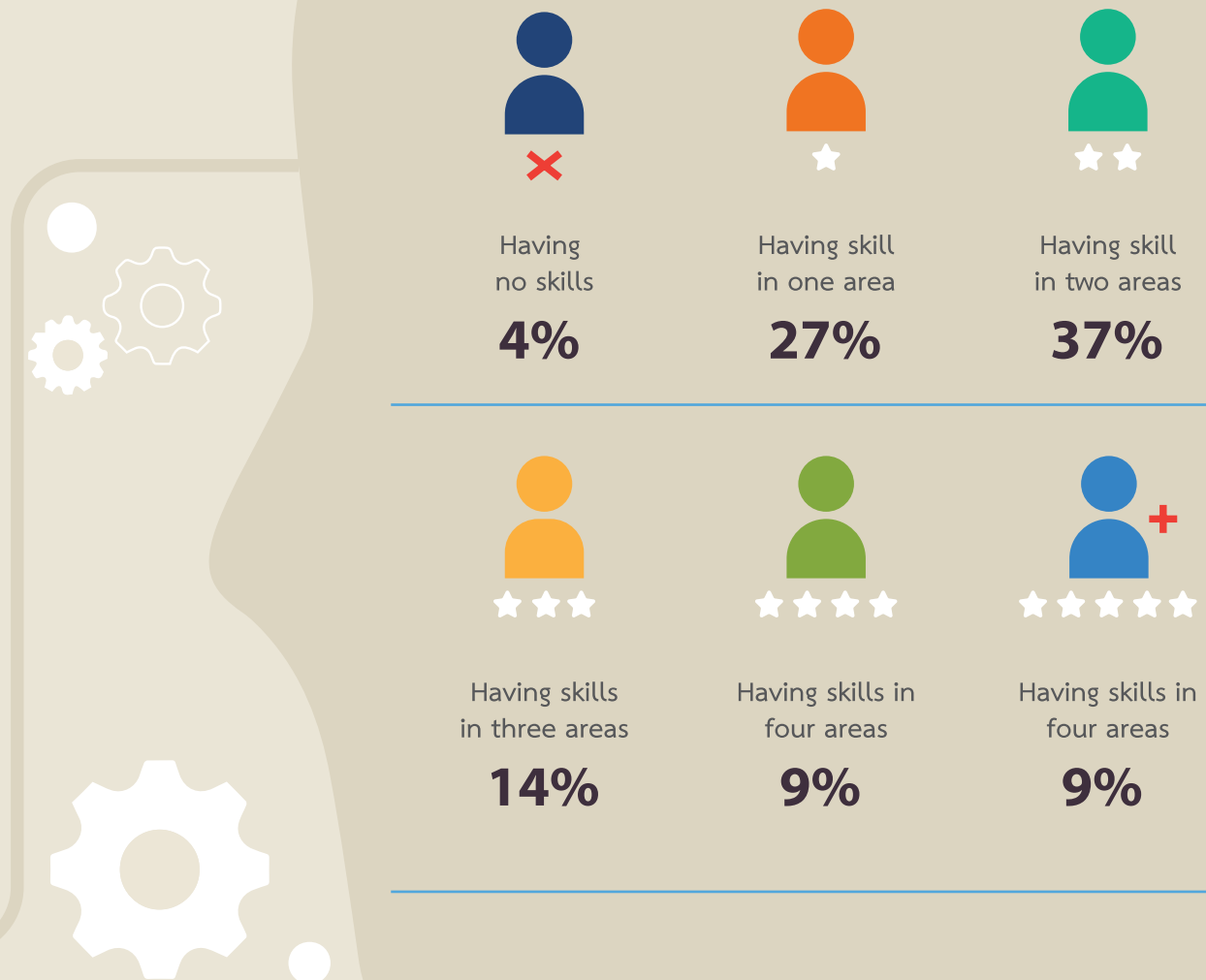
Figure 6 shows the number of skill areas respondents possessed. More than 95 percent of the respondents reported having skills in at least one area. Gender did not make any difference in terms of skill possession. The number of skill areas were evenly distributed among the male and female respondents. Most urban refugees reported having skills in two areas. Cooking was the most common skill, followed by farming and agriculture, construction, crafting, computer, manufacturing, and entrepreneurship (see *Figure 7*). Respondents with crafting skills could design craft products or sew clothes, while those with manufacturing skills reported prior work experience ranging from working as a mechanic to being a lumberjack. For other skills, responses are diverse, encompassing low to high skills, such as cleaning, teaching, nursing, beauty salon, and interpreting.

Figure 7 :

Skill Areas of Respondents

● Have a skill   ● Have no skill

Skill Area	Have a skill	Have no skill
Other	~26%	
Farming and Agriculture	~36%	
Computer	~14%	
Enterpreneurship	~11%	
Cooking	~69%	
Construction	~31%	
Crafting	~25%	
Manufacturing	~15%	

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%
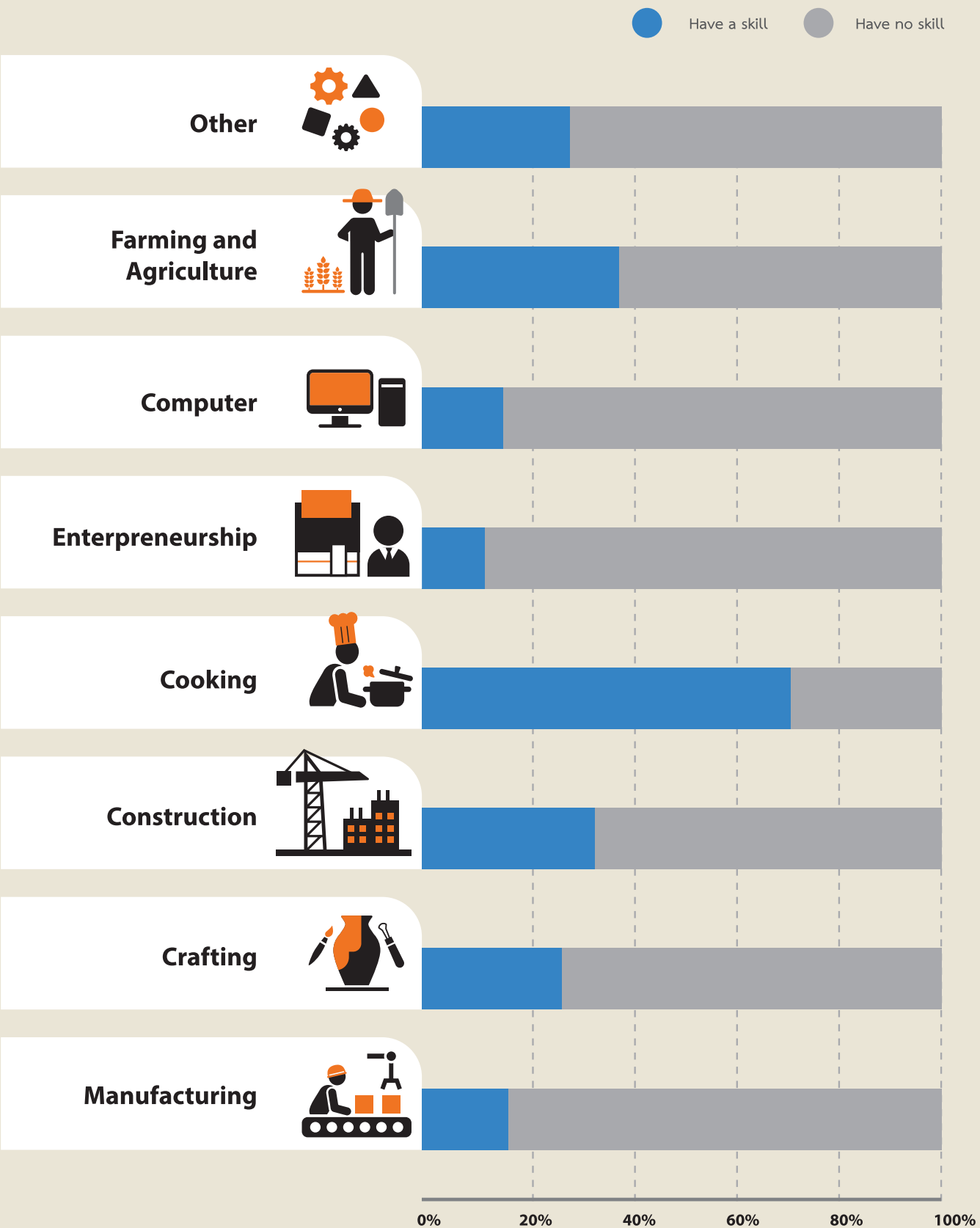
Language Skills

Figure 8 :

Number of Languages Spoken by Respondents

Two Languages
41%

Three Languages
39%

6%
Four or More Languages
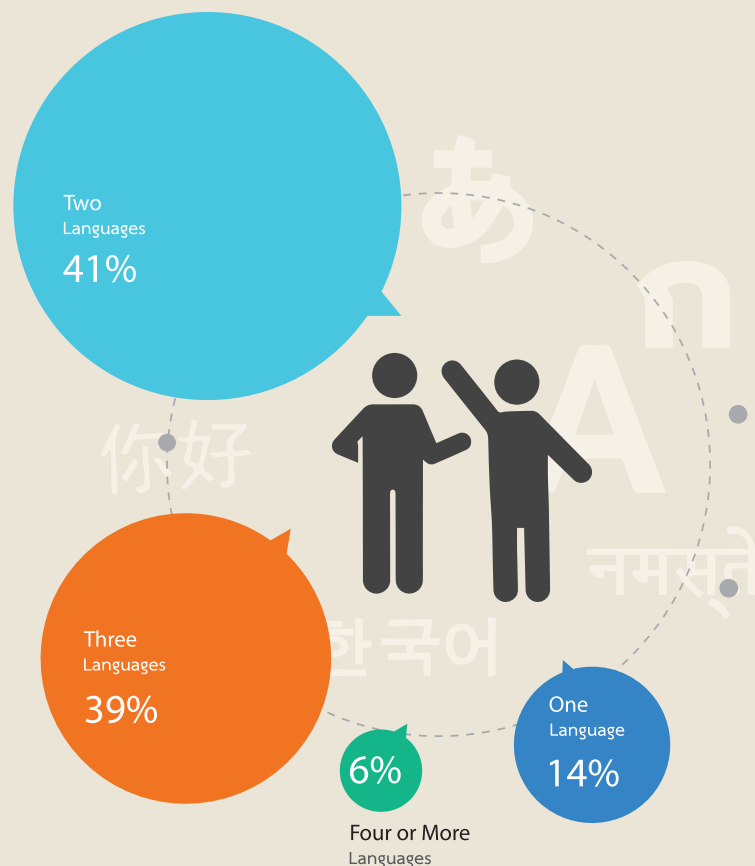
One Language
14%

The present study captured the responses of both national and ethnic language skills. The first question on the language survey focused on the number of languages used daily by the respondents in terms of both understanding and communicating. More than 85 percent of the respondents could understand at least two spoken languages (see *Figure 8*). Again, gender did not make a difference in language skills. The most common language respondents across all groups could understand was English, with a reported 50 percent. Fifteen percent of urban refugees in the survey reported understanding Thai: 14 were male refugees and seven were female refugees, most of them were from Vietnam and have been in Thailand for at least four years.

EMPLOYMENT SITUATIONS OF URBAN REFUGEES IN THAILAND

This section explores urban refugees' contributions to the Thai labor market and their current employment trends in Thailand. It focuses mainly on respondents' engagement in income-generating activities both before and after the COVID-19 outbreak and draws attention to differences in employment trends across various groups.
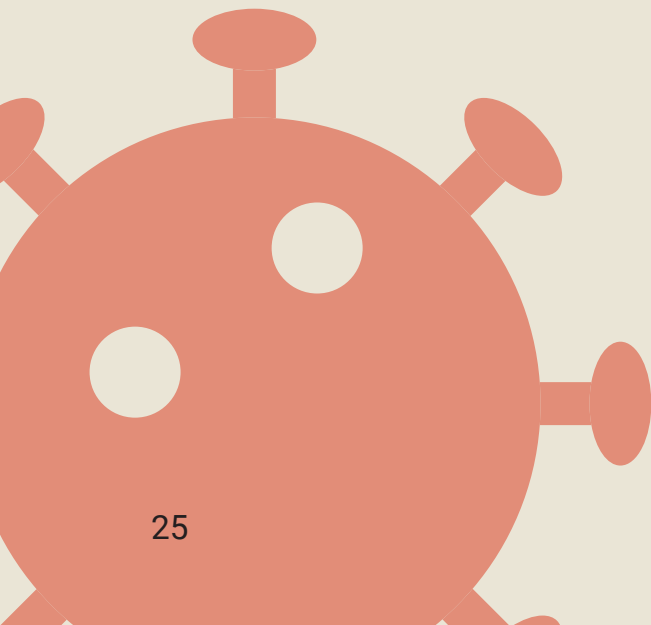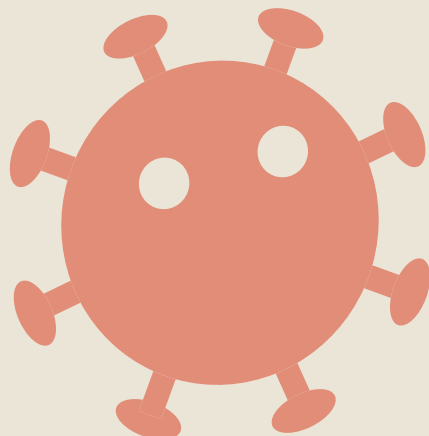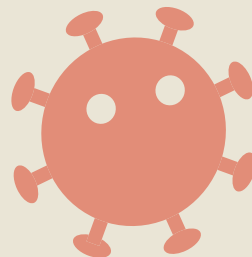
Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Figure 9 :

Employment Situation of Respondents before the Pandemic

Having skills in four areas — 20%

Having skills in four areas — 54%

None — 26%
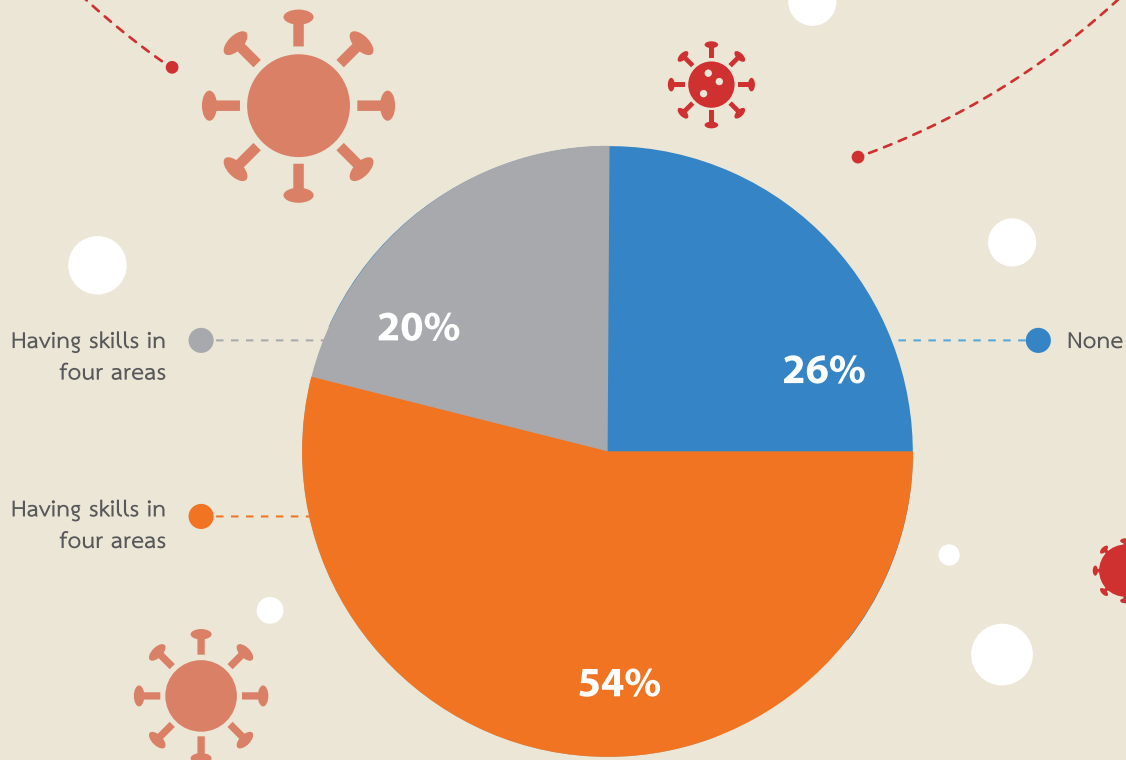
Although urban refugees are prohibited from working legally and formally in Thailand, this study found that 74 percent of the respondents engaged in income-generating activities in the informal sector before the pandemic (see *Figure 9)*. Twenty percent of the respondents who reported working in Thailand had worked in at least two jobs. These jobs were primarily low-skill jobs, and included working as waiters, cleaners, construction workers, and security guards.

These jobs were primarily low- skill jobs

waiters   cleaners   construction workers   security guards

Nonetheless, some had engaged in semi- or high-skill jobs working as interpreters for refugee organizations or as chefs in restaurants. This study found that respondents' wages varied.

Some received wages as low as 40 THB per day for picking chilies to 800 THB per day working for organizations, depending on the skill requirements.

skill requirements

skill requirements
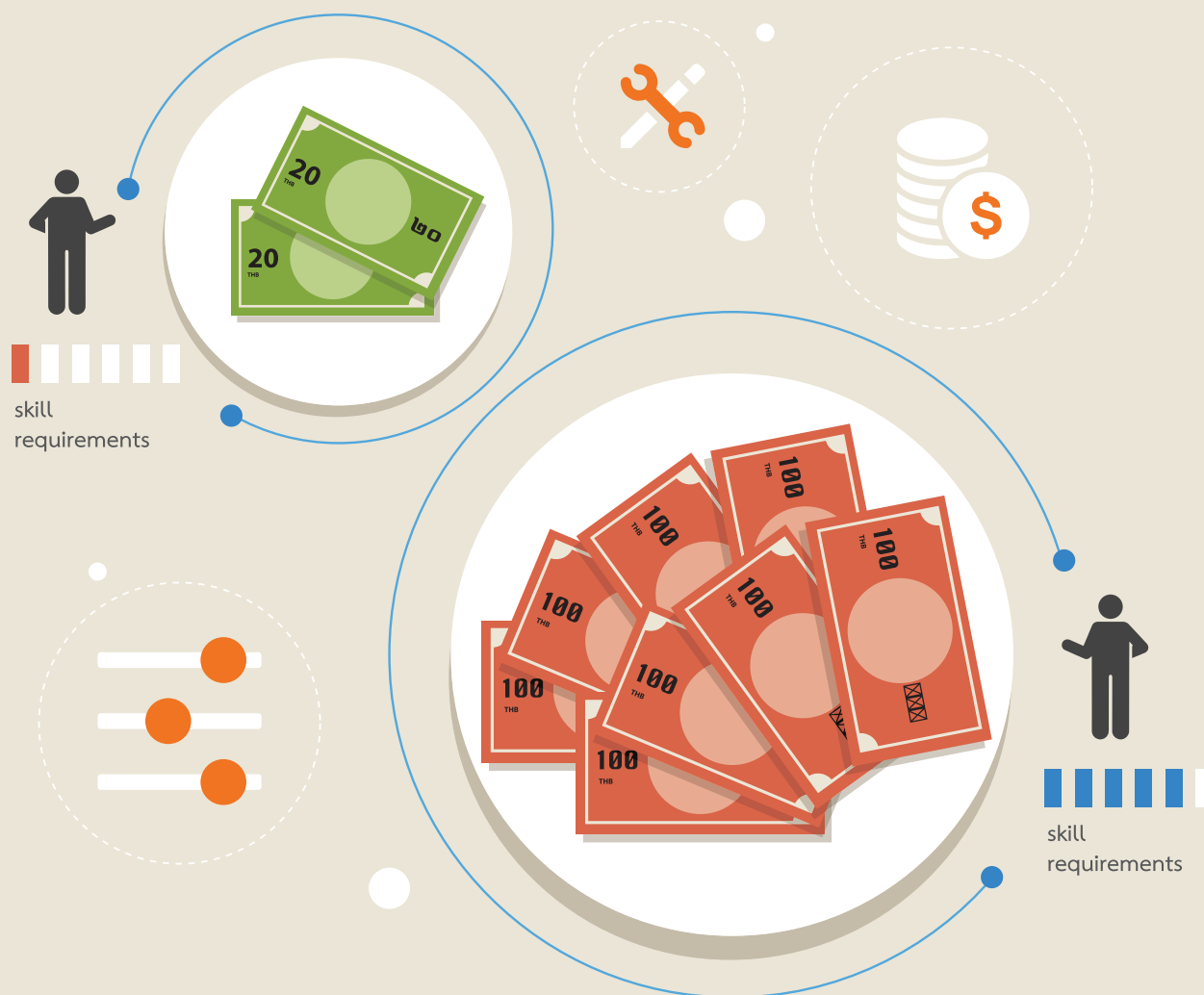
Most people who had worked in their home country worked in Thailand (see *Figure 10*). However, 20 percent of those with prior work experience had never worked after arriving in the country. More than half (55%) were women from Vietnam, Pakistan, and Somalia. The survey also reveals that 60 percent of those who had no prior work experience in their home country had engaged in income-generating activities in Thailand, suggesting that they had found ways to survive in Thailand. However, the current report could not explain the reasons for the lack of employment in Thailand among those with previous work experiences in their home country.

Figure 10

Employment Situations in Thailand before the Pandemic by Previous Work Experiences in their Home Country

Have prior work experiences

80%

20%

● Have worked in Thailand

● Have never worked in Thailand

60%

40%

Have no prior work experiences
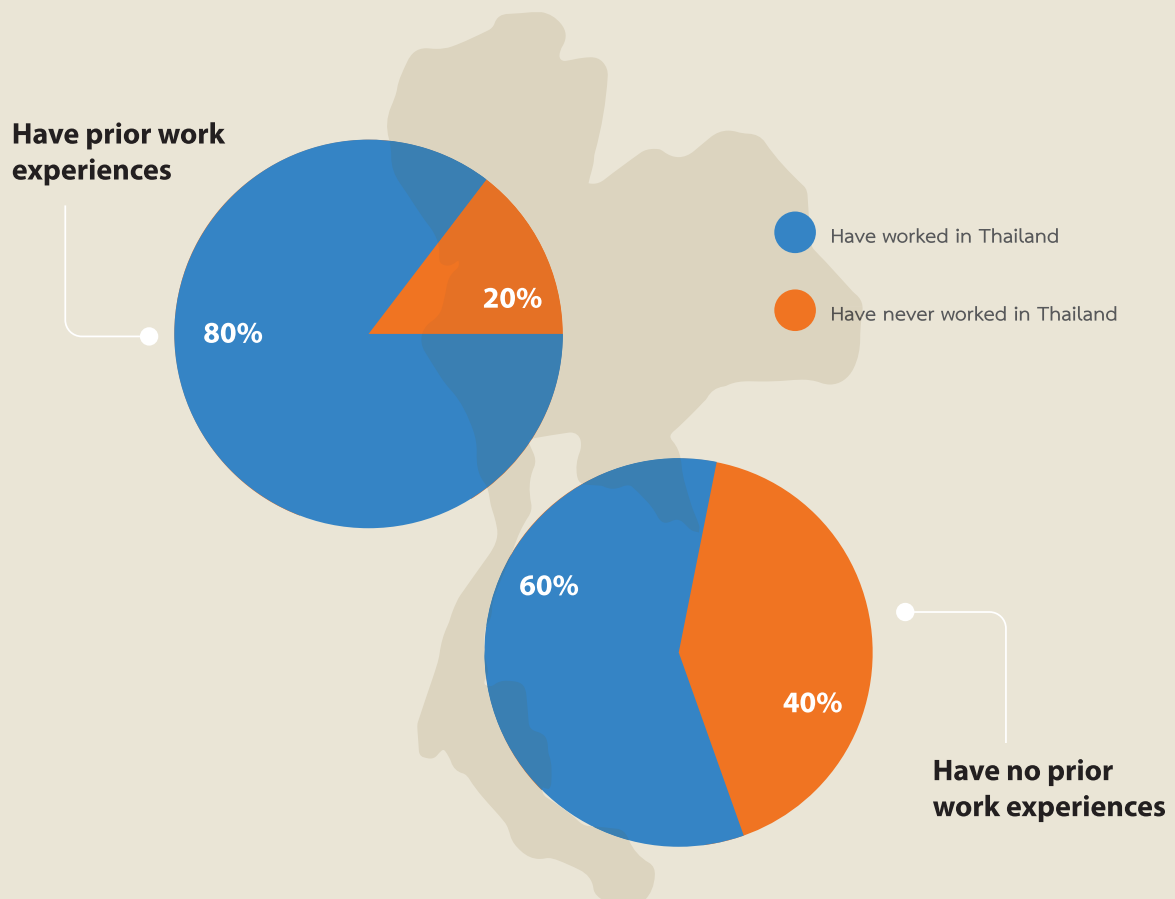
Taking a closer look at other relationships, the survey shows that although 4 percent of the respondents reported having no skills, more than 60 percent of them had worked in Thailand before the pandemic (see *Figure 11*). The percentage of urban refugees who have worked in Thailand is slightly higher for those with more skill areas. However, the percentage of those who have worked in Thailand is lower for those reported to have skills in two, five, or more areas. This result suggests that the number of skill areas itself may not say much about the employment situation of urban refugees in Thailand. Thus, it may be significant to look at specific economic sectors, which may help to explain why some urban refugees who have no skills are more frequently employed than those reported to have skills in five or more areas.

Figure 11

Employment Situations in Thailand before the Pandemic by the Number of Skill Areas
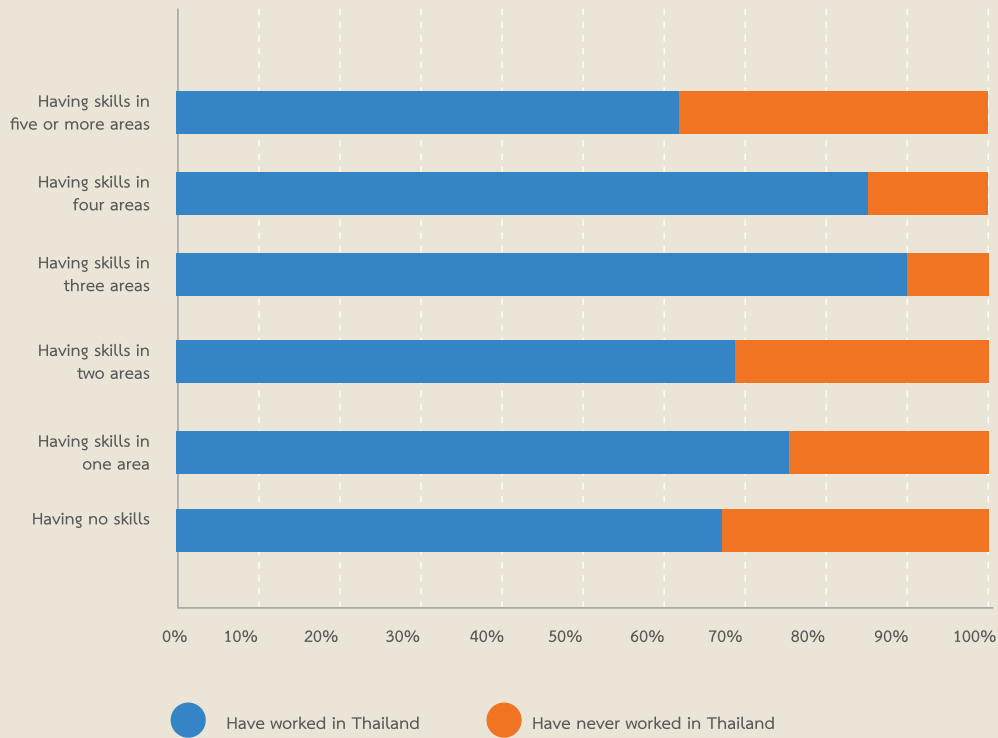
Based on cross-tabulations, three significant factors that may help to understand the employment situations of urban refugees in Thailand before the pandemic include education, Thai language skills, and gender. The survey found that those without any formal education are three times more likely to be unemployed in Thailand compared to other groups of forcibly displaced people who have some formal education (see *Figure 12*). However, having no formal education does not mean no jobs since nearly half of those who had no formal education had worked in Thailand. The survey also shows that the percentage of those who have worked in Thailand increases as education increases. However, the employment situation drops significantly for those who had attended a technical or vocational school. The percentage of those with a bachelor's degree who had been employed was also slightly lower than those with upper secondary education. All urban refugees with a master's degree or doctorate found employment.

Figure 12

Employment Situations in Thailand before the Pandemic by Education Level

Legend:
- 🔵 Have worked in Thailand
- 🟠 Have never worked in Thailand
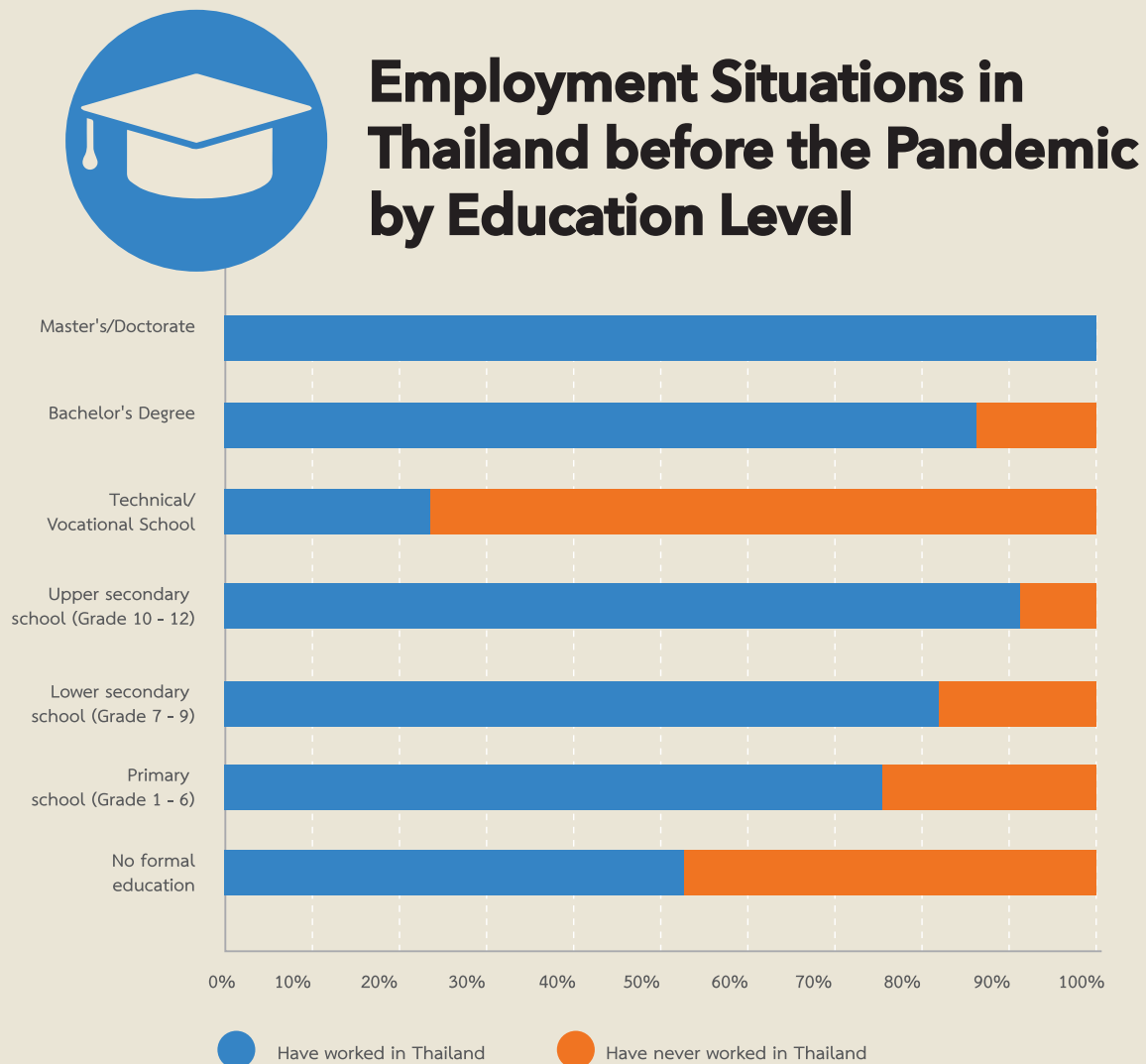
Based on the relationship between Thai language competency and employment situation, when considering the Thai language ability of the entire refugee population in the survey (see *Figure 13)*, the study found that nearly 30 percent of those who did not understand Thai had never worked in Thailand (34 out of 119 people). By comparison, only 9.5 percent of those who understood Thai had never worked (two out of 21 people). All the refugees with no formal education but who had some Thai language ability had worked in Thailand before. In contrast, only half of those who neither had formal education nor spoke Thai had ever worked. Thus, the relationship between the lack of formal education and Thai language ability may partially help to explain employment outcomes. Thai language ability seems to impact the employment situation of urban refugees in Thailand.

Figure 13

Employment Situations in Thailand before the Pandemic by Thai Language Skill

Can Understand Thai

Can not
Understand Thai

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

● Have worked in Thailand   ● Have never worked in Thailand
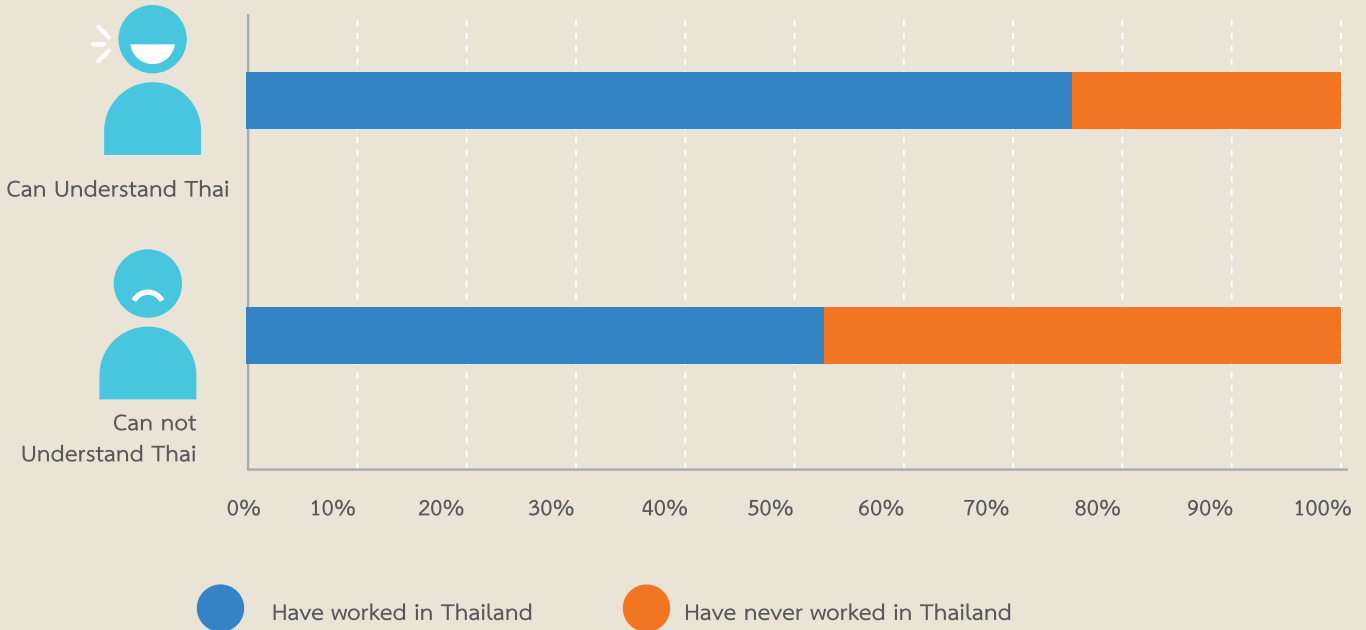
Figure 14

Employment Situations in Thailand before the Pandemic by Thai Language Skill

17%

83%

36%

64%

● Have worked in Thailand   ● Have never worked in Thailand
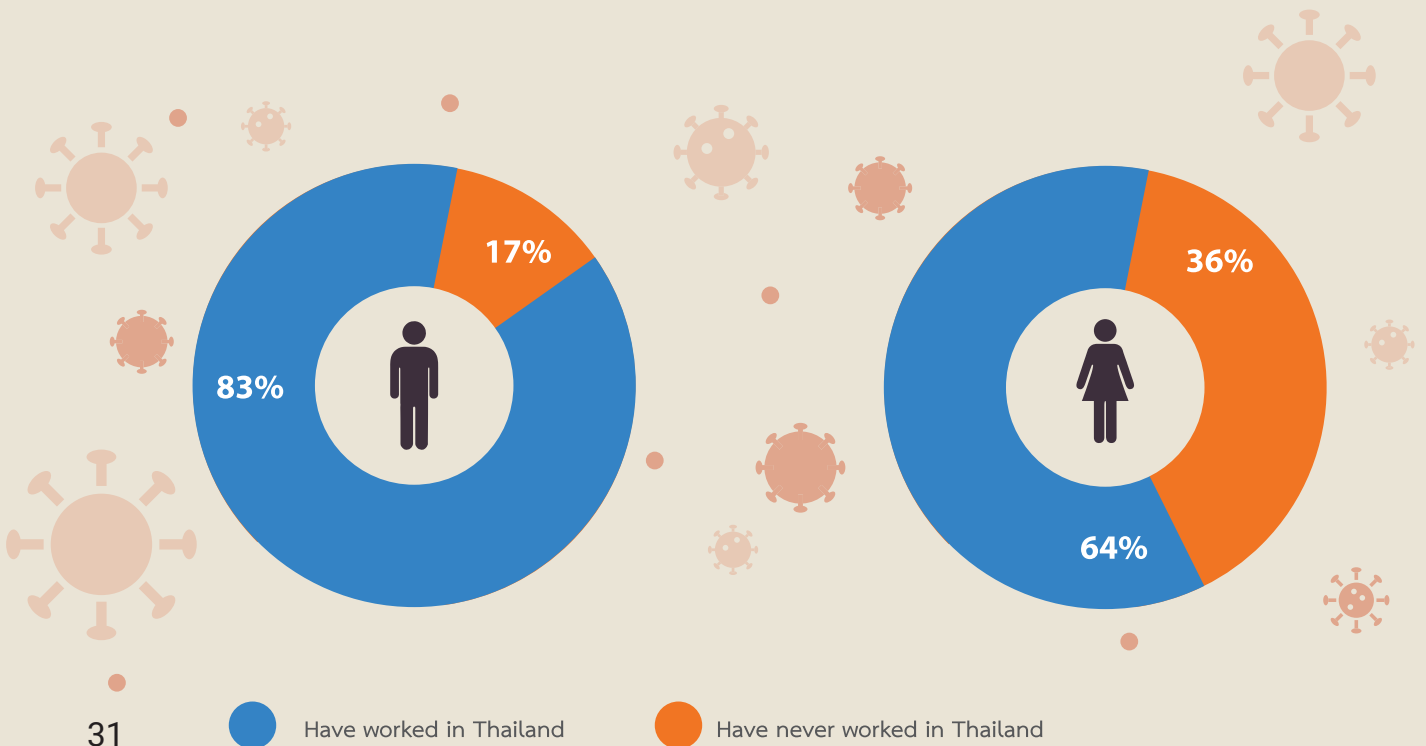
Looking at the difference in employment situation between male and female refugees before COVID-19, most refugees from both genders had worked in Thailand. The percentage of working male refugees was slightly higher than for female refugees: 83 percent and 64 percent, respectively. Family obligation could explain the lower rate in the female workforce's engagement since some refugees had children living in Thailand.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic (as of December 2020)

Figure 15

Employment Situations of Respondents before and during the Pandemic

Yes   No

Pre-COVID

26%

74%

As of December 2020

29%

71%
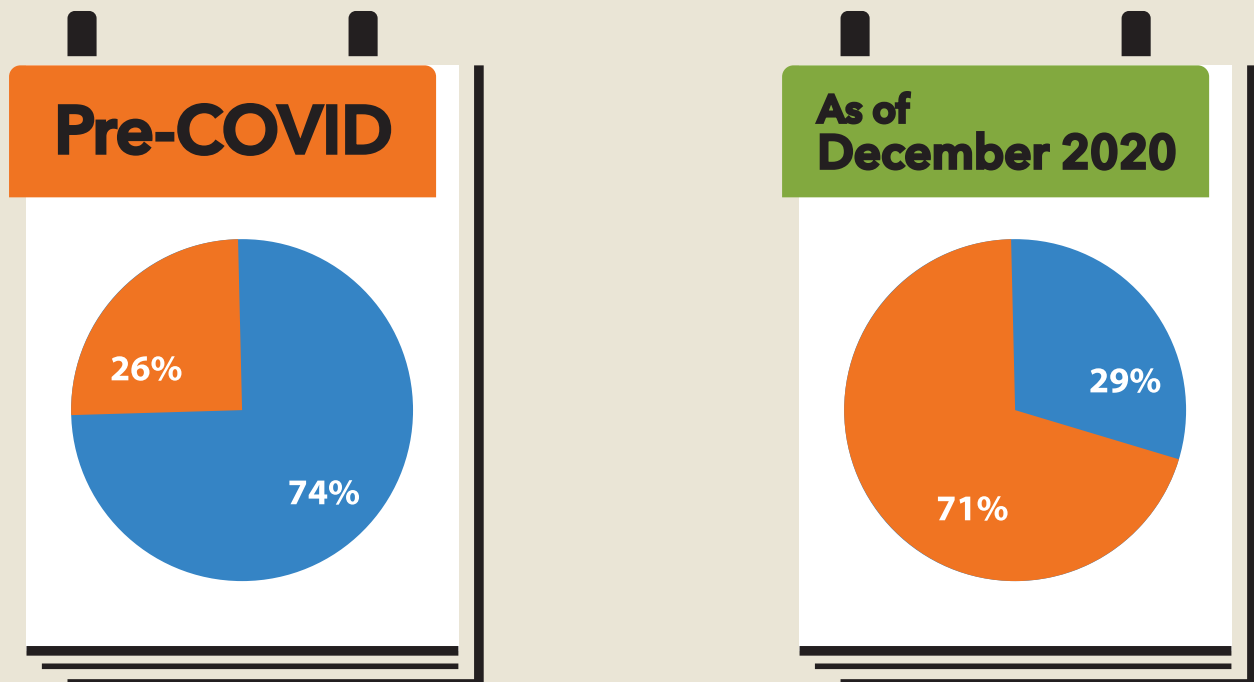
Figure 16

Employment Situations of Respondents during the Pandemic by Gender
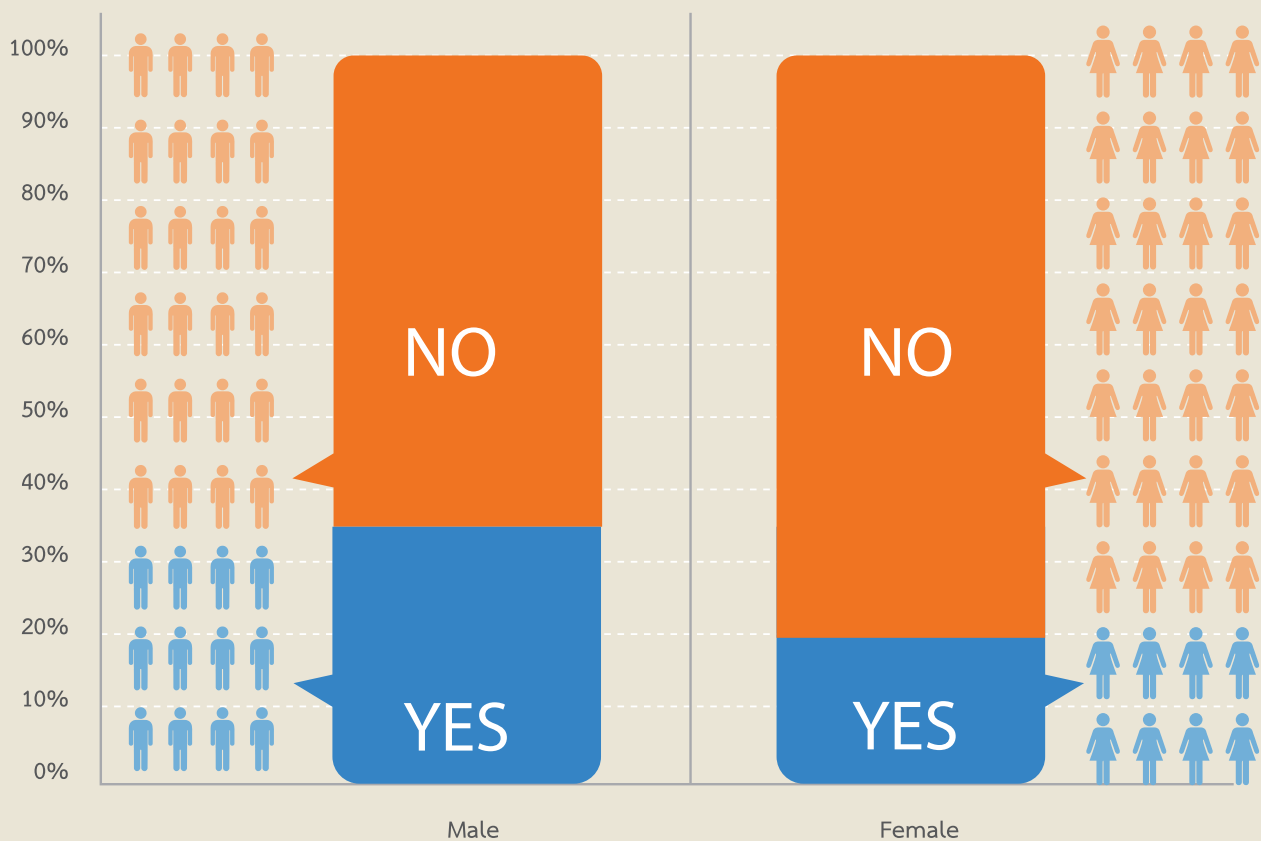
Since the outbreak of COVID-19 (as of December 2020), the employment situation of urban refugees has changed significantly. Only 29 percent of the respondents had worked in Thailand (see *Figure 12*), compared to 74 percent during the pre-COVID era. Those keeping their jobs could do so at the mercy of their employers; however, many reported getting paid less.

Figure 17

34

Employment Situations of Respondents during the Pandemic by Educational Level

Master's/Doctorate

Bachelor's Degree

Technical/ Vocational School

Upper secondary school (Grade 10 - 12)

Lower secondary school (Grade 7 - 9)

Primary school (Grade 1 - 6)

No formal education

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

● Have worked in Thailand   ● Have never worked in Thailand
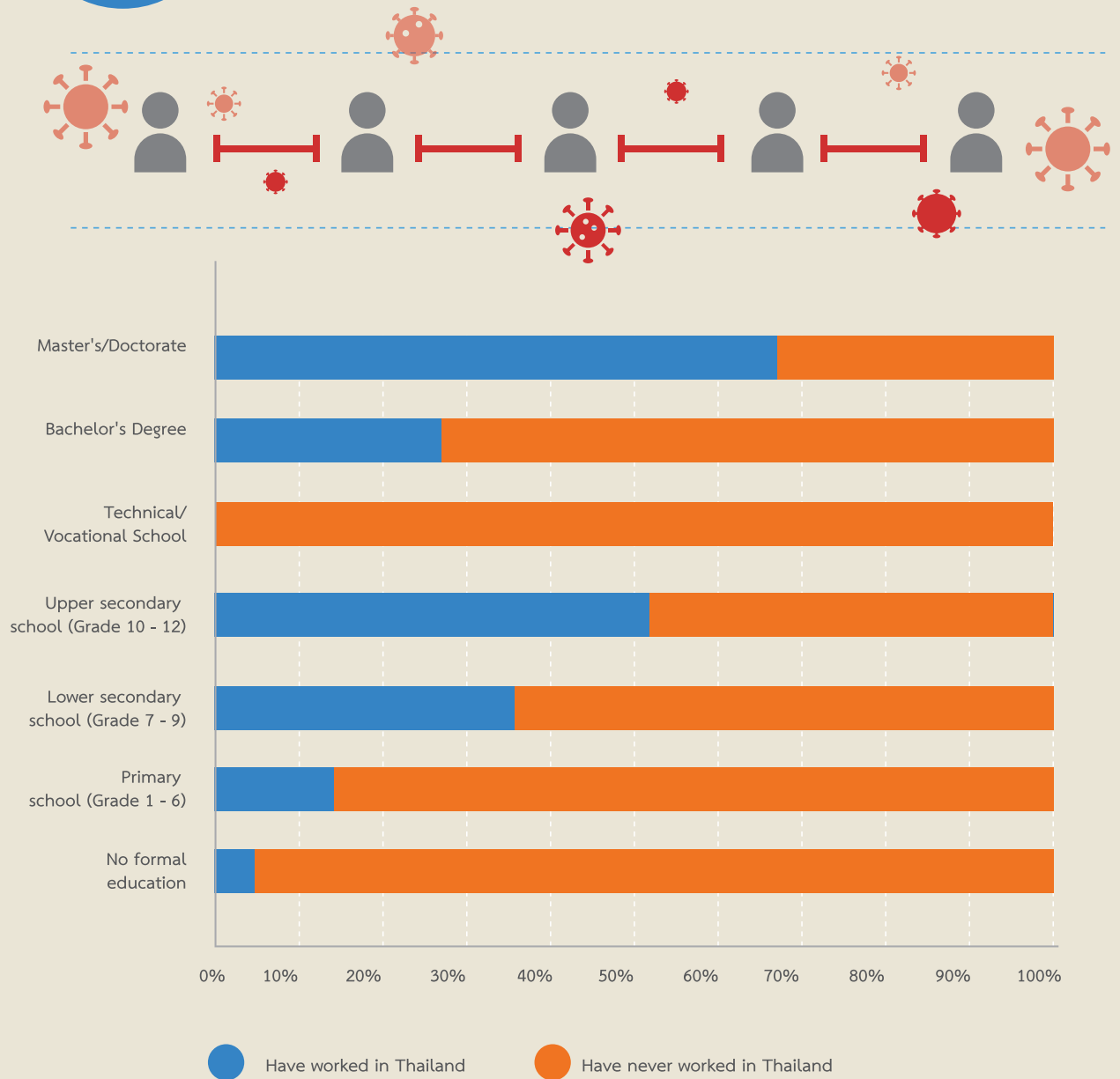
During the pandemic, male urban refugees continued to be hired at a slightly higher rate than female refugees: 35 percent versus 21 percent (see *Figure 17*). When comparing the results during the pre-COVID period shown in *Figure 11*, the drop is quite significant, especially for male refugees, where employment was down from 80 percent before the pandemic. When looking at changes in employment situations during the pandemic by educational level, the effects seem to change significantly across all groups, especially among those with no formal education, primary education, and technical training, where employment rates were 7%, 13%, and no employment, respectively. The only two education groups where the majority remained employed included urban refugees with a master's degree, doctorate, or upper secondary education. These people mostly worked in semi-skilled or high-skilled jobs; nevertheless, their employment rate had dropped from 100 percent to 67 percent, and from 91 percent to 52 percent, respectively, from the pre-COVID period.

Thai language ability did not seem to make a difference in terms of employment during the pandemic. Both people who could and those who could not understand Thai were employed at a rate of approximately 25 percent. The number of skill areas also made no difference in terms of hiring. Regardless of the number of skill areas urban refugees had, they lost their jobs at a significant rate. As a result of unemployment, most urban refugees have increasingly relied on contributions from churches and non-profit organizations, including the AAT, Bangkok Refugee Center (BRC), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), and the Tzu Chi Foundation.

CONCLUSION

The present report sheds light on urban refugees' human capital and employment situations in Thailand before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report suggests that urban refugees in Thailand possess human capital in all three areas, including education, prior work experiences before coming to Thailand, and skills that could be of use. Human capital, however, varied based on different characteristics. This volume illustrates such a variation when considering gender. There is quite a significant difference between men and women regarding educational level and prior work experience. Male refugees are more likely to have formal education and previous work experience compared to female refugees. However, gender seems to make no difference in terms of skills. Females could have as many skills as males in various areas. The remaining question is how their human capital could benefit Thai society since that would depend on the demands of the Thai market and economy. Thus, a matching between labor demand and supply is needed.

When considering the employment situations of urban refugees, this survey found significant changes before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, respondents engaged in income-generating activities in Thailand's informal sector, albeit illegally. Education, Thai language skills, and gender helped to provide a better understanding of the employment situations of urban refugees during this time. Urban refugees with some formal education are three times more likely to be employed in Thailand than those without any formal education. However, having no formal education does not mean no jobs since nearly half of those who had no formal education had worked in Thailand. People who understand the Thai language are also more likely to work in Thailand and are less likely to be unemployed. In terms of gender, the percentage of working male refugees was slightly higher than for female refugees.

However, the pandemic has brought about significant differences to the livelihoods of urban refugees. Most of refugees had lost their jobs. Only one-third of the respondents remained employed in Thailand as of December 2020. Those respondents keeping their jobs could do so based on the kindness of their employers; however, all were paid less. Thai language ability and the number of skill areas did not make a difference in employment during the pandemic. Gender and educational level seemed to

affect the work of respondents to some degree. Male respondents continued to be hired at a slightly higher rate than female respondents. At the same time, the only two education groups in which the majority remained employed included respondents with a master's degree, doctorate, or upper secondary education, who mainly worked in semi- or high-skilled jobs.

As the global refugee landscape has shifted in recent decades and more so with the COVID-19 pandemic, this study suggests that all parties, including civil society groups and the Thai government, need to consider urban refugees' human capital and employment situations more seriously. With several countries imposing and tightening travel restrictions during the pandemic, the movement of refugees across international borders has become very difficult. Thus, their stay in the present host countries has become more protracted. Suppose the host governments, including Thailand, were to continue to bar refugees from working instead of helping to solve any problem, they will create additional burdens not only to refugees but also to themselves. For this reason, it would be more appropriate for the host government and the public in a host country to consider how the human capital of refugees could be used to the benefit of the host nation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• The insights provided by this baseline survey should shed light on the tentative landscape of refugees' human capital and employment situations before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other organizations and researchers should expand the scope of the study to include more urban refugees in Thailand to make the supply-side data more comprehensive and accurate, by reflecting the actual population of urban refugees in the country. To achieve this goal, data access and resource sharing between different parties, including the Thai government, civil society groups, academics, and UNHCR, are needed.

• Second, another essential step based on this study is to analyze labor market demand and provide data for labor market matching. Through this form of study, it will become apparent in which employment sector urban refugees could be integrated. The matching would provide practitioners with training activities to strengthen urban refugees' labor market appeal.

• Third, the results of this survey show a different image of refugees from what is shown in the media or in the public discourse. Urban refugees struggle to survive and find work even though they are not allowed to work legally. This finding shows that, instead of perceiving refugees as a public burden, they should be seen as potential human resource who are eager that can be further developed to benefit the host society. Thus, government officials can work together with civil society groups and business sectors to provide training support for them and channel their human capital into labor market areas. All parties can channel these urban refugees into the market sectors by matching foreign labor demand and urban refugees' human capital. Section 63 of the Emergency Decree on Managing the Work of Aliens B.E. 2560 also provides a basis for making the employment of urban refugees possible.

• Fourth, employment situations before and during the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed urban refugees' vulnerabilities in the labor market. Regardless of gender, educational level, and experience, many of them lost their jobs or were paid less. The lack

of employment opportunities means that these people become less self-sufficient and rely more on public and civil society resources. Precarity has become their way of life, in addition to having limited access to vaccines and COVID-19 tests (Jittiang 2021). Thus, the Thai government and relevant parties needs to provide more financial and in-kind support for these populations during this trying time so that they will once again be able to stand by themselves once again.

"A refugee is someone who survived and who can create the future."

Amela Koluder

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