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Reintegrating Cambodia's Return Migrants: Gender, Employment, and Livelihood Challenges

Phal Raksmeay

Research Associate,
Policy Research in
Agriculture and Rural
Development, CDRI

Sim Sokcheng

Director, Centre Policy
Research in Agriculture
and Rural Development,
CDRI

Milan Thomas

Country Economist, Asian
Development Bank

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Key messages

- Women with children in their households are significantly more likely to be unemployed, highlighting the disproportionate gendered caregiving burden upon return from Thailand.
- Employment outcomes vary significantly across provinces, with Battambang province showing the greatest challenges.
- Return migrants face difficulties re-entering previous sectors of work, highlighting skills mismatches and structural constraints in the domestic labour market.
- Many return migrants wish to remain in their home provinces, creating demand for productive local livelihoods, particularly in agriculture.
- The most requested job market support includes vacancy information (≈60 percent), placement services (≈55 percent), and skills training (≈26 percent).
- Targeted labour market reintegration policies, including childcare support, geographically targeted employment programmes, strengthened job matching, rural livelihood development, and industry-responsive skills training, are needed to improve employment outcomes and economic resilience among return migrants.

Introduction

Three geopolitical shocks in 2025–2026 introduced significant uncertainty into Cambodia’s short-term economic outlook: changes in US trade policy, the border closure with Thailand¹, and the conflict in the Middle East. Within this broader context, return migrants from Thailand face important challenges related to labour market reintegration, income recovery, and livelihood resilience. The Royal Government of Cambodia and development partners are considering programmes to protect vulnerable workers and promote shock-resilient economic activities.

Given Cambodia’s relatively youthful population and the important contribution of women to the labour force, sustaining female labour force participation (FLFP) is critical for inclusive economic growth and long-term development. FLFP has been improving over the past decade, despite the temporary setback during the COVID-19 pandemic (NIS 2018, 2020, 2022, 2025). However, the closure of the Thailand–Cambodia border poses a threat to sustaining this progress by increasing the risk of unemployment and slowing labour market reintegration among female return migrants.

Understanding the challenges faced by return migrants—accounting for as much as 10 percent of Cambodia’s labour force (CDRI 2025)—is essential for designing an effective response to ongoing humanitarian and economic disruptions. This brief addresses the question: Which groups of return migrants face the greatest reintegration challenges, and what forms of targeted support most effectively enhance their social and economic resilience?

The brief draws on household listing and return migrant household survey data conducted by CDRI, with financial support from The Asia Foundation (TAF), between December 2025

and January 2026 in six Cambodian provinces with high concentrations of return migrants from Thailand. Using a stratified three-stage sampling design, the survey collected information from 852 return migrants aged 18 years and above who returned between May and November 2025, of whom 42 percent were women (Roth, So, and Sim 2026). The analysis combines descriptive statistics and regression analysis to examine employment outcomes, reintegration challenges, welfare conditions, and gender disparities among return migrants. Whenever comparisons across groups or locations are made, t-tests or ANOVA are used to assess whether differences are statistically significant.

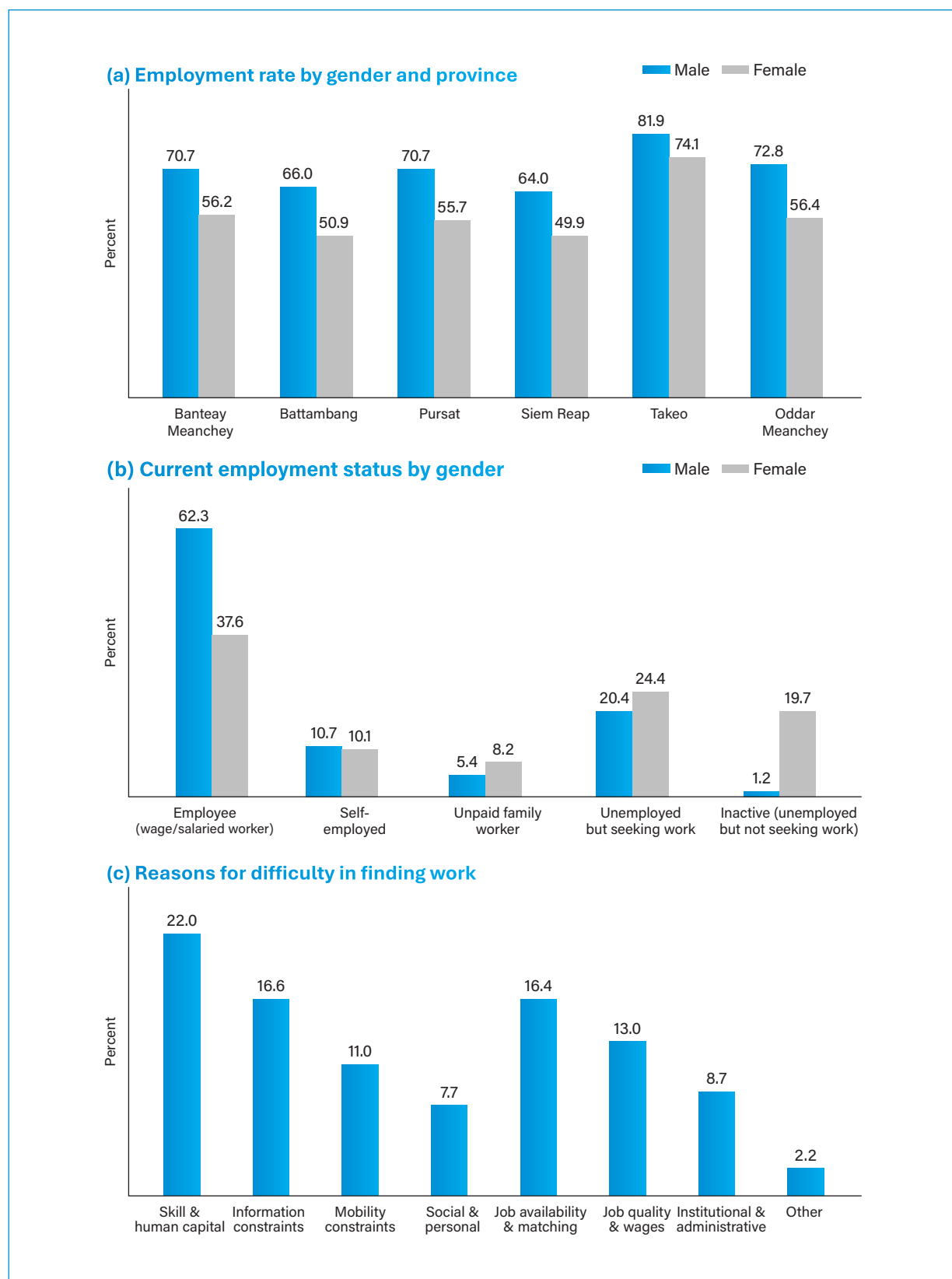
Key findings

Uneven economic reintegration across provinces

Battambang is the most vulnerable province, with higher unemployment, larger household sizes, and a higher share of IDPoor households (households officially identified as poor under Cambodia’s national poverty identification programme) compared with other provinces. The employment rate of return migrants is 6.7 percentage points lower in Battambang than in the rest of the sample, while the share of vulnerable households (measured by IDPoor status) is 14.9 percentage points higher. Figure 1(a) further shows that male return migrants consistently have higher employment rates than female return migrants across provinces. District-level analysis highlights high unemployment in areas such as Thma Koul, suggesting that reintegration challenges are spatially concentrated and require targeted local interventions. Takeo stands out as an outlier, with markedly stronger employment and reintegration outcomes, likely reflecting better access to manufacturing employment opportunities and its proximity to the capital.

¹ Preliminary findings from the CDRI–ADB study, “Impact of the Border Closure on the Cambodian Economy: A Dynamic CGE Analysis,” indicate that border-related disruptions could reduce Cambodia’s GDP per capita growth by 1–2 percentage points in 2026.

Figure 1: Labour market reintegration outcomes and employment barriers among return migrants



Source: Authors' estimates based on data from the migrant household listing survey and the return migrant household survey, 2026.

Challenges in sectoral employment transition

Return migrants were previously concentrated in manufacturing (33.5 percent) and construction (40.9 percent) sectors while working abroad. However, upon returning, many face difficulties re-entering similar sectors, leading to a shift into informal employment or unemployment (Figure 2). Service workers have a particularly hard time finding work upon returning. This pattern suggests limited transferability of skills and highlights structural constraints in the domestic labour market, particularly in the absorption of returning workers into stable and productive employment.

Gender disparities driven by caregiving

Women return migrants are 20 percent more likely to be unemployed and 16 times more likely to be economically inactive than men return migrants (Figure 1(b)). Regression analysis shows that this gap is likely driven by caregiving responsibilities. Women with children are significantly more likely to be unemployed, while age alone does not have a strong effect. Additional analysis shows that this effect is not concentrated among higher-earning returnees, suggesting that it reflects caregiving constraints rather than differences in opportunity cost.

Barriers to employment

Return migrants report several interrelated constraints in accessing employment opportunities. The most prominent barriers include skills and human capital limitations (22.0 percent) and limited access to job information (16.6 percent), which restrict awareness of available opportunities, as well as skills mismatches between migrants' experience and local labour market demand. In addition, a lack of suitable jobs (16.4 percent) in local areas further constrains reintegration, particularly in rural provinces (Figure 1(c)).

High demand for employment support

Consistent with these barriers, return migrants express strong demand for direct employment support. The most requested forms of assistance include access to job vacancy information (around 60 percent), job placement services (around 55 percent), and skills training (around 26 percent). Demand for skills training is strongly gendered and is heavily agricultural, in line with return migrants' reported desire to remain in their home provinces (Figure 3). These findings highlight the importance of strengthening labour market intermediation and improving access to relevant training opportunities.

Reintegration progress and benchmarking

Official statistics from the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT) indicate that approximately 957,622 Cambodian workers returned to the country between 8 June 2025 and 9 January 2026. By 23 January 2026, over 620,000—around 65 percent—had secured employment or engaged in other economic activities, including family-based agriculture, commercial farming, construction, handicrafts, restaurants, and informal work (CDRI and ERIA 2025; MLVT 2026). This is broadly consistent with our survey, conducted between December 2025 and January 2026, which finds that approximately 69 percent of return migrants were engaged in economic activities, including wage employment, self-employment, and unpaid family work. This alignment suggests that the survey results provide a credible micro-level benchmark for understanding reintegration outcomes and can complement administrative data from MLVT. Building on this, there is an opportunity to strengthen collaboration between research institutions and government agencies to use such data for monitoring reintegration trends and improving the targeting of support programmes.

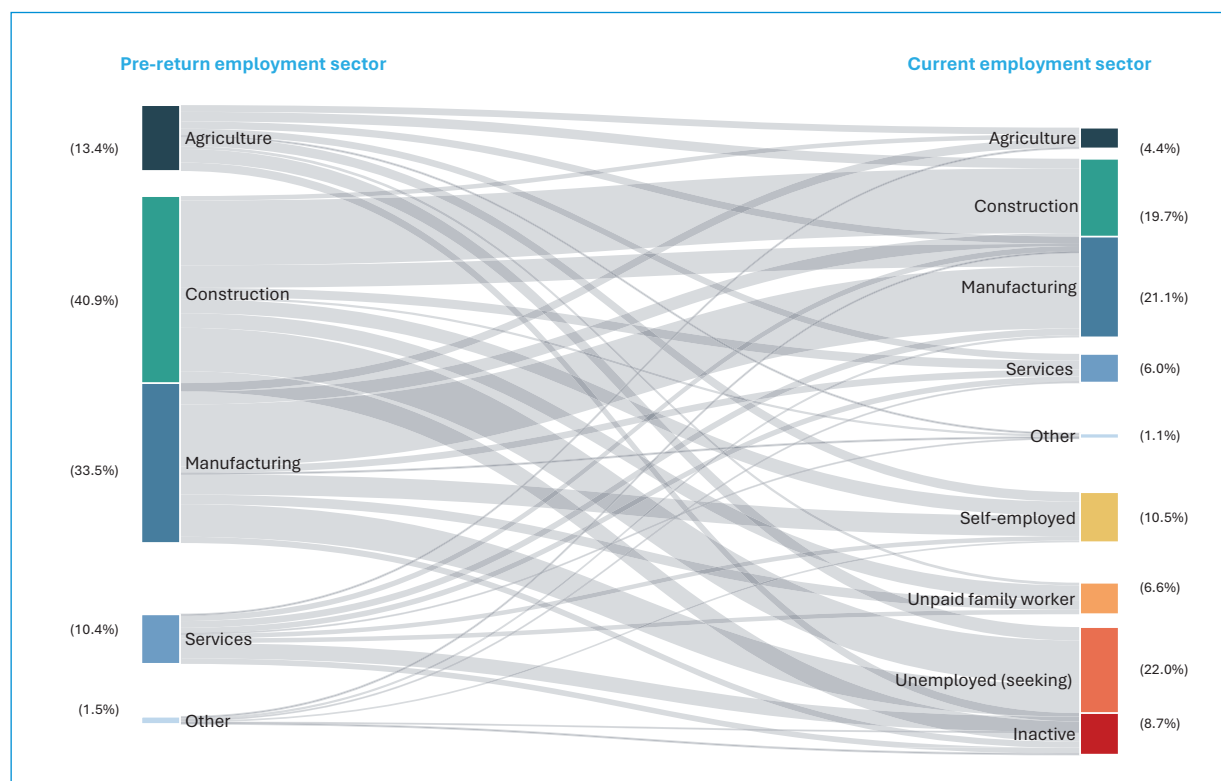
Opportunity cost and underutilisation of skills

Many return migrants, particularly women with children, were previously employed in relatively high-paying jobs in Thailand (approximately USD377 per month). Upon return, they face limited earning opportunities in Cambodia (approximately USD211 per month). At the same time, caregiving responsibilities, especially for children, create additional constraints on labour market participation. The underutilisation of skills and experience acquired abroad, particularly among women, represents a significant economic loss and undermines efforts to improve female labour force participation. Policies that facilitate access to childcare services, flexible work arrangements, and local employment opportunities could help better leverage the human capital of return migrants and reduce this loss.

Policy implications

- **Labour market reintegration of female return migrants:** (1) Expand pilot childcare programmes, including community-based and workplace-based childcare services, to reduce caregiving constraints and enable caregivers, particularly women with children, to participate in the labour market; (2) promote flexible work arrangements; and (3) strengthen targeted employment and job matching services for female return migrants.
- **Geographic targeting:** Prioritise employment support and livelihood programmes in high-vulnerability provinces and districts, particularly in Battambang, where unemployment and household vulnerability are greatest.

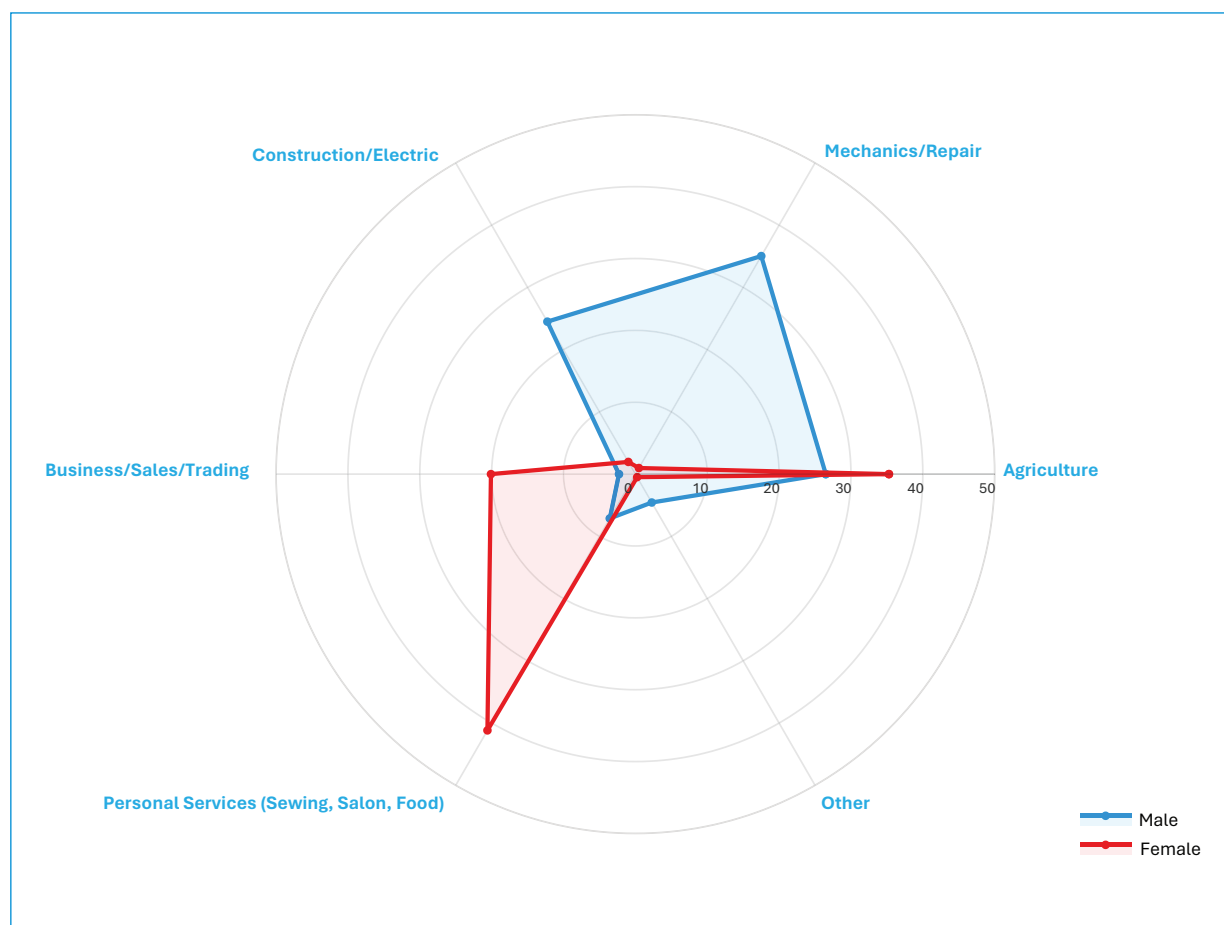
Figure 2: Sector of work (before returning and currently)



Note: “Pre-return employment sector” refers to the employment sector while migrants were working in Thailand, whereas “current employment sector” refers to their current employment sector after returning to Cambodia.

Source: Authors’ estimates based on the return migrant household survey data, 2026.

Figure 3: Types of skills training requested by return migrants



Source: Authors' estimates based on the return migrant household survey data, 2026.

- Strengthen and scale up job matching services (by MLVT):** Improve access to job vacancy information, expand outreach in rural and migrant-dense areas, and build on existing government programmes to enhance effectiveness. While more than 620,000 return migrants have already secured employment, the next stage of reintegration should also move beyond employment numbers towards improving productivity, job quality, and income recovery.
- Agriculture sector:** Since most migrants want to stay on their provincial land, invest in rural infrastructure, agricultural inputs, modern agricultural cooperatives, and extension services so that rural households can be more productive without moving.
- Skills development for industry and services:** Strengthen public-private partnerships for skills development by improving collaboration between TVET institutions and private companies in designing and delivering industry-responsive training programmes and skills certification systems. Relevant discussion is available in ADB (2026) and Veung (2024).

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Cambodia Development Resource Institute

56 Street 315, Tuol Kork
PO Box 622, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
+855 23 881701 / 881916 / 883603
cdri@cdri.org.kh · www.cdri.org.kh



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