

Risk Geographies

Human rights abuses are well documented in global seafood supply chains. These abuses proliferate when states are unwilling or unable to enforce [international standards for human rights](#). To adequately assess country-level risks in your company's supply chains, legal protections and government enforcement must be taken into account when making sourcing decisions. This list highlights some of the most important geographical considerations related to human rights risks.

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Thailand

Common Human Rights Issues: Forced Labor and Human Trafficking

Thailand is a major contributor to the global seafood economy. [According to the FAO](#), it ranks sixth in global seafood exports, following China, Norway, Vietnam, India, and Chile. In 2017, [Thailand's fishery sector](#), combined with its seafood processing sector, employed over 600,000 workers, over half of which were migrant workers from Cambodia and Myanmar. The ILO cites shortages of Thai workers willing to fish and increasing economic disparity between Thailand and its neighboring countries as reasons for the predominance of migrant fishers. Migrant workers typically have to pay higher recruitment fees and are generally more vulnerable to exploitation than Thai nationals. Additionally, the Thailand government's migration policy and inefficient anti-trafficking laws provide very little protection for fishers and processors.

In an effort to reduce the number of undocumented migrant fishers in the industry, Thailand introduced a "[pink card](#)" system that ties fishers' legal status to specific employers. Unintentionally, this system creates conditions that encourage abuse of migrant workers. Fishers are not allowed to change jobs without the permission of their employers, who, in turn, demand that the fishers pay off their "debts" before allowing them to leave. The "pink card" system has had the [unforeseen consequence](#) of allowing employers to coerce fishers into continued labor under the guise of compliance. Additionally, under the

[Thai Labor Relations Act of 1975](#), migrant workers are disallowed from forming or leading unions and therefore face significant limits on their rights to collective action and bargaining.

Although the Thai government has implemented anti-trafficking laws, Thai authorities are challenged by limited capacity, corruption within law-enforcement, lack of criminal proceedings, and insufficient effort. Until the 2008 enactment of the [Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act, B.E 2551](#), fishers who had been trafficked into labor on fishing boats weren't officially recognized as victims. This failure to identify victims, provide them with protections, and prevent further [abuse persists within Thailand's fishing industry](#). In 2020, the Seafood Working Group (SWG) submitted [official concerns](#) in response to the [U.S. Department of State: Trafficking in Persons Report \(TIP\) 2020](#). The SWG recommended that Thailand's ranking be downgraded from "Tier 2" to "Tier 2 Watch List" under the TIPs ranking criteria. Thailand has not met the minimum standards in combatting human trafficking, nor has it effectively enacted responsible recruitment practices for migrant workers.

Taiwan

Common Human Rights Issues: Physical and Psychological Abuse, Human Trafficking

Egregious acts of physical violence inflicted upon workers, lack of worker safety, forced labor, and human trafficking have been [documented on Taiwanese fishing vessels](#). Similar to the Thai fishing workforce, the majority of fishers aboard Taiwanese vessels are migrant workers who are afforded fewer human rights protections than Taiwanese nationals. According to the Taiwanese Fisheries Agency, in 2019, more than 21,000 documented fishers were migrants, with the majority coming from Indonesia and the Philippines.

The [Taiwanese fisher recruitment](#) process places workers into two tiers: an "official" tier and a "letter guaranteed placement" tier. The majority of Indonesian fishers are assigned to the second tier, which places them with private agencies on vessels operating outside Taiwanese waters. Migrant fishers operating outside of Taiwanese waters are afforded fewer protections than those within national waters and thus are at greater risk of abuse and exploitation.

Despite efforts by authorities to combat human trafficking, the U.S. Department of State [2020 Trafficking in Persons Report](#) found that Taiwan has "insufficient staffing and inspection protocols [that] impede efforts to combat forced labor on Taiwan-flagged and -owned fishing vessels in the highly vulnerable Distant Water Fleet (DWF)." The lack of prosecution and disproportionate punishment for traffickers allows this serious issue to persist. For example, Greenpeace has found that traffickers accused in the [Giant Ocean human trafficking case](#) are still openly involved in the recruitment of migrant fishers for Taiwan's DWF fleet. Authorities sometimes treat trafficking cases as labor disputes and fail to convict traffickers who exploited migrant fishers on Taiwan-flagged vessels. Although authorities have

made efforts to track instances of human trafficking, there have been few to no legal repercussions for traffickers.

In their 2018 report, [Misery at Sea](#), Greenpeace revealed some of the most severe accounts of physical abuse and exploitation aboard Taiwanese fishing vessels. Interviews with fishers disclosed instances of starvation, beating, verbal abuse, threats of violence, and withholding of medicine. Fishers were forced to work under the threat of punishment, often without adequate nutrition or rest. In one case, a captain refused to stop the vessel and forced his crew to continue working after one of their members fell overboard. [Human Rights at Sea's baseline study](#) on Taiwan's fishing industry found that, even when not at sea, over 90% of migrant fishers lived onboard the vessels—without proper sanitation or adequate living space—because captains required them to “guard” the vessel while docked.

Despite evidence in the form of testimonials, photos, and radio transcriptions, Taiwan's Fisheries Agency, the regulator responsible for all domestic and international fishing matters, has yet to eliminate these human rights abuses in a manner that aligns with ILO standards.

Vietnam

Common Human Rights Issue: Child Labor

Vietnam's fishing fleet has grown explosively, with the number of vessels increasing by over 160% from 1990 to 2018. This rapid expansion has led to the overfishing of Vietnamese waters and simultaneous pressure on Vietnamese fishing vessels to maintain profitability. A 2019 report, [Caught in the Net](#), by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), revealed how this desperate situation has affected fishers. Among accounts of debt bondage and unsafe working and living conditions, were serious cases of child labor. Children as young as 11 years of age were found working on Vietnamese vessels detained in Thailand for IUU fishing. EJF's conclusion is that the continued lack of governance and transparency in the fishing sector encourages child labor aboard vessels.

The [Vietnamese Labor Code \(article 165\)](#) states that “minor employees” (under the age of 18) are prohibited from heavy and hazardous work environments, like that of distant water fishing. Vietnam recently launched [ENHANCE](#), a program to increase the capacity to prevent and reduce child labor. While the ILO finds this program strategy to be effective, their 2018 [evaluation](#) of ENHANCE found progress to be behind targets.

Of the 41 vessels that EJF surveyed for [Caught in the Net](#), none had logbooks, crew lists, or crew contracts. This lack of documentation, combined with superficial vessel inspections at port departures/arrivals, allows vessel operators to use child laborers, increasing the risk of forced labor and abuse. Even though child fishers oftentimes work on their family's vessel or with family members, these situations are still detrimental to a child and illegal under Vietnamese laws. Proper identity checks and thorough vessel inspections are two of the social responsibility practices that can help reduce the risk of the exploitation of children.

Bangladesh

Common Human Rights Issues: Child Labor, Bonded Labor

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is one of the top ten exporters of shrimp globally. However, over the last five years, Bangladesh has seen a 34% reduction in shrimp exports. This decline is partially attributed to competitors such as Thailand and India growing a lower cost, hybrid variety of shrimp—the whiteleg shrimp (*Litopenaeus vannamei*, formerly *Penaeus vannamei*, also known as Pacific white shrimp or King prawn)—with more success than the black tiger shrimp (*Penaeus monodon*, commonly also known as giant tiger prawn or Asian tiger shrimp; the primary variety produced by Bangladesh). Historically, Bangladesh banned whiteleg shrimp farming to prevent the spread of the viral diseases that they may carry into native populations. In January 2020, the Bangladeshi government approved [pilot projects](#) to begin farming whiteleg shrimp in an attempt to “boost competitiveness”. However, the continued decline of the Bangladeshi shrimp market is [threatening the livelihoods](#) of many working within Bangladesh’s shrimp aquaculture sector.

The Bangladeshi shrimp industry consists of three main sectors—fry collecting, farming, and processing. Evidence of bonded and child labor is prevalent in all segments of the supply chain.

Shrimp fry can be obtained through wild capture or hatchery cultivation. Despite the banning of wild capture fry in 2000, it is still practiced extensively in Bangladesh. The ban on wild capture was an attempt to limit environmental damage; however, it was ineffective at halting wild capture and instead increased the vulnerability and exploitation of wild fry collectors. A [2008 – 2011 study](#) by Verité found that fry collectors were forced to pay bribes to officials and law enforcement to continue operations, leaving them vulnerable to extortion and coercion.

Additionally, most fry collectors reported being indebted to money lenders or middlemen after borrowing money for supplies or to replace the lack of income during their off-season. Once a collector borrowed money, they often had to sell off their fry at rates much lower than the market value in order to pay off their debts. Workers in fry collection were found to be primarily women and children, who were vulnerable due to their limited mobility. They were often forced to sell to middlemen for low rates because they could not transport their fry directly to market. The financial vulnerability of fry collectors led them into cycles of debt that put them at risk for bonded labor. Verité found that shrimp farm laborers were also at risk of bonded labor, because they often took out loans with high-interest rates and were forced to pay off debts through service if they could afford to do so monetarily.

Investigations by [Verité](#) and [Humanity United](#) found that children as young as 10 years of age work as fry collectors. Wild fry collection is considered dangerous and hazardous as workers spend six to 10 hours a day standing in direct sun, with little to no protection. Verité also found that children ages 10 to 15 worked at both shrimp farms and processing facilities. The children that went to work with their parents stated that they needed to contribute income for their families and that they did not attend school.

India

Common Human Rights Issues: Human Trafficking, Forced Labor

India is the fourth largest exporter of seafood in the world and, as of 2020, roughly 40.5 million people are involved in the fisheries sector. The government has prioritized the [growth of India's seafood industry](#) and aims for a near doubling of fisheries production by 2023.

According to the [ILO](#), 90% of India's workforce, including the majority of fisheries work, falls under the informal sector—[informal employment](#) is any work that is unregulated and unprotected by the state. India's parliament has been working on increasing a range of worker rights including emergency aid and health checks. In 2020, India passed a series of [labor law reforms](#), in an attempt to create more effective and transparent labor laws while making it easier for industries to function. Although the new codes were intended to make the labor laws clearer by increasing transparency and simplicity, an unfortunate result is that the rights of workers may be fewer. Conditions of these new labor codes further restrict workers' rights to strike and link workers' benefits to the size of a company. Smaller firms will not be able to provide social benefits to their workers. Additionally, the new labor codes do not extend protections to workers within the informal sector. Thus, fishers and seafood workers in the informal sector will continue to remain without protections or benefits.

Commodities from India have a high risk of human trafficking and forced labor. According to the U.S. Department of State [2020 Trafficking in Persons Report](#), there are approximately eight million trafficked persons in India, the majority of which are forced/bonded laborers. Without legal protection or a single legal framework to address seafood sector labor issues, fishers and seafood processors will remain at risk.

North Korea

Common Human Rights Issues: Forced Labor

Many countries ban seafood exported from North Korea, yet North Korean seafood and seafood processed by North Korean workers still end up in U.S. supply chains. [Associated Press \(AP\) investigations](#) found that China is the primary link between North Korean produced seafood and American supply chains. While it is not illegal for China to hire North Korean workers, it is [a federal crime](#) for American companies to import goods made by North Korean workers, regardless of their physical work location.

North Koreans working in China are subject to much stricter surveillance than Chinese workers and are often isolated from their Chinese employers and co-workers. Additionally, they are often restricted from leaving their work facilities and, if they do leave, they must travel in groups. The AP reports cite fear of workers running away and/or mingling with South Koreans as reasons for the extreme surveillance.



At a facility in Hunchun, China, the AP observed North Korean seafood processors, the majority of which were women, living in crowded dormitory-style housing next to the factory. Typically, they were committed to two or three year contracts and could not return home before the contract end date. Additionally, they were not allowed the same labor rights as their Chinese co-workers. Further, 70% of their wages were withheld by the North Korean government, and a large portion of the remainder of their wages went to paying off their labor broker debts or bribes. While the pay is much lower than what Chinese workers receive, these jobs still offer much higher wages than what North Koreans would make in their home country. Thus, workers put up with excessive hours, bonded labor, surveillance, and isolation for the potential to earn better income.

Given the extreme lack of transparency in these supply chains, it is nearly impossible to determine the seafood products processed by North Korean workers versus those exported directly from North Korea to China. Seafood from North Korea and goods produced by North Korean labor then end up in supply chains that reach the U.S., the UK, Japan, and other countries that have sanctions specifically against this.