Phnom Penh) – The Cambodian and Malaysian governments’ failure to regulate recruiters and employers leaves Cambodian migrant domestic workers exposed to a wide range of abuses, Human Rights Watch said in a report issued today. Tens of thousands of Cambodian women and girls who migrate to Malaysia have little protection against forced confinement in training centers, heavy debt burdens, and exploitative working conditions.

The 105-page report, “‘[They Deceived Us at Every Step’: Abuse of Cambodian Domestic Workers Migrating to Malaysia](http://hrw.org/reports/2011/11/01/they-deceived-us-every-step-0),”documents Cambodian domestic workers’ experiences during recruitment, work abroad, and upon their return home. It is based on 80 interviews with migrant domestic workers, their families, government officials, nongovernmental organizations, and recruitment agents. The report highlights the numerous obstacles that prevent mistreated women and girls from obtaining justice and redress in both Cambodia and Malaysia.

“Cambodia has been eager to promote labor migration but reluctant to provide even the most basic protections for migrant women and girls,” said Jyotsna Poudyal, women’s rights research fellow at Human Rights Watch. “The government should stop abdicating responsibility to unscrupulous recruitment agencies and clean up exploitation and abuse.”

Since 2008, forty to fifty thousand Cambodian women and girls have migrated to Malaysia as domestic workers. Some recruitment agents in [Cambodia](http://www.hrw.org/asia/cambodia) forge fraudulent identity documents to recruit children, offer cash and food incentives that leave migrants and their families heavily indebted, mislead them about their job responsibilities in Malaysia, and charge excessive recruitment fees.

Domestic workers told Human Rights Watch that agents forcibly confine recruitsfor three months or longer in training centers without adequate food, water, and medical care. Some labor agents coerce women and girls to migrate even if they no longer wish to work abroad. Workers who escape from the training centers face retaliation for escaping or for failing to pay debts related to the recruitment process.

The husband of a domestic worker who escaped from a training center told Human Rights Watch:

The representative from the company said if my wife doesn’t return he will auction this house and land. And if the auction is not enough, they will arrest me and put me in jail.

At times collaboration of government officials with private recruitment agencies makes it almost impossible for workers to seek effective redress, Human Rights Watch found. One domestic worker said that two women had attempted suicide in a training center in Cambodia after the agency refused their request to return home.

The agency then held a meeting with all recruits. Two police officials were there.

“The police officials told us that if we [attempted to] commit suicide, then they would put us in jail,” one of the workers said. “They also said that we should never try to escape. Even if we escape, the police will find [us] and we will still be sent to Malaysia.”

In the first successful prosecution of a recruitment agency, a Cambodian court in September 2011 sentenced a manager of the VC Manpower recruitment agency to 13 months in prison for illegally detaining child workers. However, the government has failed to arrest and prosecute other recruitment agents involved in similar abuses, and it has not revoked the license of a single recruitment agency.

“While the conviction of one abusive agent in Cambodia is a step forward, it remains an exception,” Poudyal said. “The Cambodian government should put an end to systematic exploitation of domestic workers by ensuring that all agents are held accountable for their acts.”

Once in Malaysia, Cambodian women and girls often have to surrender their passports to their agents or employers, making it harder for them to leave if they are mistreated. Many work for 14 to 21 hours a day without rest breaks or days off. And many are forcibly confined to their work places, are not given adequate food, and are physically and verbally abused. Some have been sexually abused by their employers. None of the workers Human Rights Watch interviewed said they had received their full salary.

Malaysian labor laws exclude migrant domestic workers from key protections, such as a weekly day of rest, annual leave, and limits on working hours. Immigration laws tie a domestic worker’s residency to her employer, so the employer can terminate a domestic worker’s contract at will and refuse permission to transfer jobs. These policies restrict domestic workers’ ability to seek redress and to change employers, even in cases of abuse, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch documented cases in which the combination of deception and indebtedness during recruitment, forced confinement, unpaid wages, and threats of retaliation for escaping or failing to pay debts amounted to forced labor, including trafficking and debt bondage. Abused workers often turn to the local agents of their recruitment companies, since they are typically the only contact the worker has in Malaysia, but may face intimidation and a return to the same abusive employer.The Cambodian embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital, has also returned workers, including those who experienced sexual and physical abuse, to their recruitment agency or employers.

The Cambodian government should introduce a comprehensive migration law, strengthen monitoring of recruitment agencies, and imposesignificant penalties when violations occur, Human Rights Watch said. The Malaysian government should revise its labor and sponsorship laws to strengthen protection for domestic workers. Both countries should increase support services for abused workers, including legal aid and psychosocial services.

Human Rights Watch also urged Cambodia and Malaysia to ratify the International Labour Organization Convention on domestic work. The treaty obliges governments to ensure decent working conditions, to impose a minimum age requirement for domestic work, and to protect domestic workers from violence and exploitative recruitment practices.

“When the Cambodian embassy in Malaysia sends abused workers back to their recruitment agencies, it is putting women who have suffered tremendously at risk of further abuse,”Poudyal said. “Cambodia and Malaysia should ratify the new ILO Convention on domestic work, but they should start applying its provisions even before ratification is completed to safeguard the rights of domestic workers.”

**Selected accounts from victims and their families interviewed for the report:**
**The real names of the speakers have not been used to protect their identities.

Sorn Srey Leak**, a domestic worker, described her experience at the training center:

Two weeks after I started living in the training center, I fell sick. I called my mother and asked her to bring money and pay back the loan so that I [could] return home. But the company asked my mother to pay them $450. We were penniless. How could we pay the money?

**Chain Channi**, a domestic worker who started work each day at 5:00 a.m. and was not able to go to sleep until 3:00 a.m., never got a chance to rest. She described her experience at her employer’s house in Malaysia:

If I finished my job quickly, my boss made me clean the house again. The wife of the employer shouted and beat me every day. She kicked [me], slapped me, pulled my hair and beat me all over my body… The employer also beat me with his hands and kicked me. I never received my salary.

**Thy Thip**, age 16 and a prospective domestic worker, recalled her experience during her recruitment in Cambodia:

I told the broker that I am still under age. The broker told me that because of my physical appearance, I look older than my real age, and being under age will not be a problem. I applied to work in Malaysia to earn income for my family, which is very poor.

**Sok Sen**described what happened after his wife ran away from a training center:

She wanted to return home but the agency demanded that she pay them $1,000… I tried to find her but I don’t know where she is… The representative from the company said if my wife doesn’t return he will auction this house and land. And if the auction is not enough, they will arrest me and put me in jail.