

Hill Tribe Citizenship

The hill tribes are a group of ethnic minorities living in the highlands of continental Southeast Asia. Though members of hill tribes are eligible for Thai citizenship under national law, many are unable to attain it due to complex regulations, lack of access to resources, social prejudice and government apathy.

Without citizenship status, hill tribe members cannot own land and are not protected by labour laws. They cannot travel freely between districts and have no access to social welfare services like subsidised healthcare. Those without citizenship are subject to arrest and fines.

With lives circumscribed by incredibly limited opportunities, hill tribe men, women and children are particularly vulnerable to lies intended to lure them into systems of violent oppression, including human trafficking.

THE FACTS

- The hill tribes, minority ethnic groups living in Thailand's northern and western highlands, number 600,000 to 1 million people. (Physicians for Human Rights)
- There are approximately one dozen hill tribes in northern Thailand's remote highland communities. (UNHCR)
- Individuals without citizenship, though born in the country, are considered to be living illegally in Thailand. They are not permitted to work and can legally be deported. (Physicians for Human Rights)
- Lack of citizenship is the chief factor in the particular vulnerability of hill tribe women and girls to trafficking and other forms of exploitation. (UNESCO)

IJM'S RESPONSE

Hill tribe members who lack the citizenship documentation to which they are entitled are disproportionately vulnerable to human trafficking and other forms of violent abuse. IJM Thailand secures this critical documentation for eligible families as a preventative measure to reduce their vulnerability to trafficking. The office, located in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand, has conducted significant outreach among the Karen, Akha, Lahu and Thai Yai (Shan) tribes. IJM's citizenship team has provided this vital protection to more than 10,000 hill tribe members to date.

ABOUT INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE MISSION

International Justice Mission is a human rights agency that secures justice for victims of slavery, sexual exploitation and other forms of violent oppression. IJM lawyers, investigators and aftercare professionals work with local officials to ensure immediate victim rescue and aftercare, to prosecute perpetrators and to promote functioning public justice systems.



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SIMLA'S STORY – THAILAND

A member of Thailand's hill tribe population, Simla* (picture left above) lacked the national citizenship to which she was entitled. As a result, she was vulnerable to being trafficked. When she was a teenager, Simla was lured from her village in Northern Thailand by the promise of a stable job in a city – but she was instead sold into a brothel where she was sexually assaulted daily for the next two and a half years. IJM investigators uncovered her captivity and brought evidence to the local police, leading to the operation that ultimately freed Simla and several others.

IJM Thailand's legal team then represented Simla in the citizenship application process. She was awarded Thai citizenship, which grants her access to education, jobs and health benefits. Simla's future is far more secure than her past.

* In order to protect this IJM client, a pseudonym has been used and the photograph has been obscured. Real name and casework documentation are on file with IJM.