

Preventing human trafficking

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Trafficking for labour exploitation is a form of modern-day slavery, a gross human rights abuse. Here in the Asia-Pacific region, we see the greatest incidence of trafficking for forced labour in the world today. The International Labour Organization estimates that, globally, there are 12.4 million victims of forced labour, including 2.4 million who are trafficked for forced labour and sexual exploitation. Three-quarters of the world's forced labour occurs right here in the Asia-Pacific region. Half of all the trafficked victims are Asian.

These workers are being denied their basic human rights. Often, as young migrants they have, either by choice, necessity and/or coercion, ended up labouring below the radar screen of the local authorities - and sometimes even within their view but with a purposeful neglect.

These young people are making the cheap T-shirts one can so easily buy in the markets. They are catching fish that appears in our restaurants, and clean the homes of many others - most often with no safety nets or redress should they be exploited, injured, cheated or treated unfairly.

Indeed, many of these workers, including children, are victims of human trafficking. Their plight goes unnoticed within a sea of undocumented manual workers who cross borders to toil in foreign countries within Asia in general, and the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) in particular.

Fortunately, governments are now paying much closer attention to the problem. Trafficking is now seen to occur within a labour migration paradigm. It is encouraging to witness that the approach to combating human trafficking has begun to focus more specifically on labour exploitation, and ways to prevent the abuses from occurring. The ILO has played an important role in achieving this recognition.

Since 2000, the ILO's Mekong Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women has worked with five governments in the GMS, as well as workers' and employers' organizations, NGOs and others, to identify sectors where trafficking for labour exploitation occurs. The most likely workplaces are the fishing and seafood processing sectors, small-scale manufacturing, agriculture, construction and domestic work.

In more recent years, the ILO partnerships with governments, workers, employers and others have gone beyond identifying the areas of exploitation and toward finding ways to prevent the abusive environments from flourishing.

There has been considerable success in the area of preventing trafficking. Through these partnerships, we have reached out to hundreds of thousands of young people, especially girls and young women, to warn them about the dangers of ill-prepared migration when leaving home to look for work. From television soap operas about trafficking, to formal and informal classroom instruction, to one-on-one outreach, we have armed young people of working age with the information they need to make migration for work a safer choice - within their own countries and when crossing borders.

We have also provided assistance to governments to help them develop and implement recruitment policies to make migration work better for them. More and more employers in migrant-dependent areas want access to a flexible workforce and they see the value in treating their migrant workers fairly so they don't leave prematurely after time and money has been spent to train them.

Unions also see the value in ensuring that migrant workers - documented or otherwise - are receiving the same wages and working conditions as local workers, so as not to undercut their own members.

By listening to young migrants we've all learned a lot about ways to protect young workers from falling into the traps set by traffickers and the minority of employers who would abuse their vulnerabilities.

This week, representatives from governments, workers' and employers' organizations in five countries (including Thailand), as well as NGO partners and others, have gathered in Bangkok to examine more than two-dozen "proven practices" in human trafficking prevention. Among these many examples is the development of "Women's Homes" in China's Yunnan province. I visited one of these centres just last month in Kunming and witnessed how it had become a "home away from home" for many young migrant women. At this centre, the self-confidence of these young women was evident. The women had a collective sparkle in their eyes. They've also been learning new skills, and they are taking on leadership roles, like becoming a "big sister" to others. Since the first in this series of pilot centres was opened, a network of more than 100 of these centres has sprung up in Yunnan alone - and similar work is now well under way in a further five

provinces of China. The positive impact of these centres on prevention of trafficking in young women and girls was so obvious and tangible that the provincial government has pledged that it will open more and more of them in the near future.

This kind of pro-active work to empower young migrants, especially young women and girls of working age, is critical to help them avoid trafficking and the related labour and sexual abuses.

Forced labour and trafficking represent the underside of globalization and deny people their basic rights and dignity. The exploitation suffered by victims of trafficking is the antithesis of decent work, and detracts from efforts to pursue full, productive and freely chosen employment.

Put simply, in the fight against trafficking, prevention works.

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