

GENDER PERSPECTIVES

 VOLUME 1, ISSUE 4
JUNE 2010

IN THIS ISSUE

- 01** Gender and Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia
By Dr Sallie Yea and Dr Theresa W. Devasahayam
- 03** Upcoming Events, Seminars and Conferences - Local & Regional

FEATURE ARTICLE



Dr Sallie Yea is a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore (NUS). She has published extensively on human trafficking, including articles in *Women's Studies International Forum*, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* and *International Migration*. Her first book, *Un-trafficked*, is due to be published by University of Hawaii Press this year.

GENDER AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

By Dr Sallie Yea and Dr Theresa W. Devasahayam

Human trafficking has become a universal concern. Oftentimes gender is at the crux of human trafficking since women are more likely than men to be trafficked for the sex industry. For this reason, trafficking has come to be synonymous with sexual exploitation. When women are victims of trafficking, gender discrimination and inequality are factors responsible for women's vulnerability. Gender is a critical variable as it constitutes a primary factor in identifying those at risk and how women and girls, owing to their gender identity, become more vulnerable to trafficking than men. Moreover, labour exploitation and human rights violations have been found to abound among trafficked women more than men. For these reasons, human trafficking is not gender-neutral and, thus, a gender perspective is integral to understanding the plight of trafficked victims.

In Southeast Asia, sex trafficking has been described to mean trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation among women and girls. Trafficked women in this region usually end up working in brothels, bars, pubs and "sex jungles". Trafficking for marriage, forced labour, servitude and slavery are less common. Sexual trafficking of boys, however, does exist.

[L]abour exploitation and human rights violations have been found to abound among trafficked women more than men.

Trafficking also occurs in instances in which the victim has been duped into taking on employment on terms not

congruous to those spelt out earlier, although these (wo)men are documented (or legal) workers. In cases of domestic servitude, there have been women who have been promised by their prospective employers a certain salary but end up not receiving the sum. Abuse also occurs when employers deny a domestic worker a day off although this term has been laid out in the employment contract. Some others are asked initially to clean only the house; but they end up cleaning cars, bathing pets, and helping out in their madam's offices as well.

But when it comes to human trafficking, the focus tends to be on women and girls in prostitution. This is for various reasons. First, there are obvious moral concerns as it indicates how society acts towards the disadvantaged and vulnerable. Second, the media hype around the prostitution of women and girls has also increased public awareness on human trafficking by highlighting the vulnerability and plight of victims. In this respect, the media oftentimes does a great service in inciting the emotions of the viewers to the exploitation experienced by the victims. Third, otherwise known as the Palermo Protocol, is the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children—a protocol to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. As of September 2008, the Protocol has received international recognition having been signed by 117 countries. The sheer numbers have also raised public awareness on human trafficking. In a 2008 news report, the United Nations estimates nearly 2.5 million people from 127 dif-



Theresa Devasahayam

Dr Theresa W. Devasahayam is Fellow and Gender Studies Programme coordinator at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Her publications include the co-edited volume *Working and Mothering in Asia* (2007) together with Professor Brenda S.A. Yeoh published by the National University of Singapore Press and a solely edited volume *Gender Trends in Southeast Asia* (2009) published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. In addition, she has published in numerous regional and international journals.

But the focus on the commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls has nonetheless left other gender issues and other forms of human trafficking relatively unexplored in Southeast Asia...

ferent countries have been trafficked worldwide. According to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (2006), sex trafficking accounts for 80 percent of all human trafficking. In addition, 65 percent of all victims are moved across borders for sexual exploitation. But the UN International Labour Organization (2005) puts the figure lower at 43 per cent, arguing that other types of trafficking are even less reported than sex trafficking.

But the trafficking of men and boys appears to be missing from these figures. Besides, women and girls in other forms of trafficking beyond commercial sexual exploitation are also not captured in these estimates.

In Cambodia, for example, there are two major locations for child sexual exploitation: establishment-based and street-based. The establishment-based locations for child sexual exploitation involve mostly trafficked girls, and include a substantial number who have been trafficked from Vietnam. By contrast, street-based locations for child sexual exploitation involve mainly boys who have street-living lifestyles especially in tourist areas. A report by Keane (2006) found that 88 percent of child interviewees were involved in sexual relations with (male) tourists, while 80 percent of these children were boys. An interesting finding was that these children shared common characteristics such as stressors in the family (for example, alcoholism, domestic violence, and low education levels of victim and parents). It was also found that boys received only US\$ 10 compared to girls who received US\$ 15. The price was much higher for girl virgins as well, but not among boy virgins. Moreover, the average age of entry for boys was 12.3 years.

Trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation is increasing. But the focus on the commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls has nonetheless left other gender issues and other forms of human trafficking relatively unexplored in Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, it has been found that gender is a salient variable in the trafficking of men and boys, especially for forced labour in different industries, organ removal, commercial sexual exploitation or begging. The 2003 example of trafficking of men in Thailand's fishing industry is a case in point as reported by the National Human Rights Commission. Six fishing trawlers, consisting of around

100 crew members, sailed from Samut province in Thailand to fish in Indonesian waters. Among them, four were younger than 16 years old and none were allowed to return home for three years. The report had further mentioned that 38 men died on board (two buried on an unknown Indonesian island; the others dumped at sea, and one further crew member died upon return). While the others survived, they returned emaciated, emotionally disturbed, were unable to see, walk or hear properly and were later diagnosed with serious vitamin deficiencies as they ate only fish for three years. To top it all, none of the men were paid.

This was an obvious case of denial of rights. Employers claimed the men were unknown to them and said employment was the responsibility of the boat skippers. In response, the skippers refused to pay the men until they could prove they had been aboard the boats. To complicate matters, the men were registered under Thai names even though they were all Burmese, Mon and Karen because they were hoping to find employment in Thailand. Resolution on this matter has been stalled because the Labour Law in Thailand does not cover fishermen working outside Thai territory for more than a year.

But human trafficking occurs in other forms of slavery or slavery-like practices, servitude and forced labour, aside from prostitution. The question to ask, however, is how prevalent and patterned are these other forms of human trafficking in Southeast Asia. Moreover, what do these other forms of human trafficking tell us about gender in trafficking since men and boys are also frequently the victims of such exploitative practices?

Globally an increasing number of countries have enacted national anti-trafficking laws while others have gone further by ratifying the relevant international conventions related to anti-trafficking. Yet the Trafficking in Persons Report released by the US Department of State in 2010 mentions that 2009 saw only 4,166 successful prosecutions although it was estimated that there were about 12.3 million people trafficked across the world.

Adopting the relevant UN protocol is a definite start for many countries and it should be a priority for countries in the Southeast Asian region. But how these governments end up implementing the requirements in the Palermo Protocol and identifying areas where they need to focus their efforts on are also a critical step forward in the fight against human trafficking.

UPCOMING EVENTS, SEMINARS & CONFERENCES - LOCAL & REGIONAL

- ◆ **“The Nexus of Migration and Masculinity in the Asian Context”**
15 – 16 Jul 2010
ARI Seminar Room
By the Asia Research Institute (ARI),
National University of Singapore (NUS)
- ◆ **Global Maternal Health Conference 2010**
30 Aug – 1 Sep 2010
India Habitat Centre
New Delhi, India
By the Maternal Health Task Force and
the Public Health Foundation of India
- ◆ **The Ambiguity of Family as Private-Public Domain**
7 – 8 Oct 2010
ARI Seminar Room
By the Asia Research Institute (ARI),
National University of Singapore (NUS)
- ◆ **Global Domestic Violence Conference 2010**
1 – 3 Nov 2010
The Berjaya Times Square Hotel and Convention
Centre
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
By the Global Coalition against Domestic Violence
(GCA-DV)
- ◆ **Globalization, Human Rights and Mobility:
Exploring the Gender Trope**
22 – 23 Nov 2010
Seminar Room II
By the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies,
Singapore
- ◆ **“How Safe is Safe? Evaluating Migration Channels
for Women Migrants”**
25 – 26 Nov 2010
Seminar Room II
By the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
(Singapore); the Asia Research Institute, National
University of Singapore ; and the Asia Pacific
Centre, University of New England (Australia)

CONTACT US

Send us your enquiries, feedback & suggestions to:

ISEAS GENDER STUDIES PROGRAMME
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
30 HENG MUI KENG TERRACE, PASIR PANJANG
SINGAPORE 119614
TEL: (65) 6778 0955
FAX: (65) 6778 1735
EMAIL: genderstudies@iseas.edu.sg