Preventing Human Trafficking in Vietnam through Economic Empowerment Programmes

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Abstract: Recently, trafficking in persons is a growing global issue and has been a complicated problem in Vietnam. In Vietnam, women, men, girls and boys are trafficked and exploited in a wide range of industries and settings. Vietnam has demonstrated its commitment to preventing human trafficking, both within and without its borders by conducting several different measures. In this paper, the author intends to examine the human trafficking situation and crime prevention in Vietnam through economic empowerment programmes.

Keywords: Human trafficking, prevent, economic empowerment programmes, Vietnam.

1. THE SITUATION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN VIETNAM

It is investigated that human trafficking is a growing global problem, especially the trafficking from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to Europe. Meanwhile, Vietnam is a country of origin for trafficking in both males and females. In Vietnam, women, men, girls and boys are trafficked and exploited in a wide range of industries and settings. It now occurs across the country and there is a trend towards cross-border trafficking. Vietnamese victims are trafficked to Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea, Laos, China, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom and so on.

According to statistics from the Ministry of Public Security, in the last decade, nearly 4,000 human trafficking cases were detected with around 8,500 victims. Around 70% of all victims was trafficked to China. Cross-border trafficking between Vietnam and Cambodia was mainly in women for prostitution and forced labor. Meanwhile, along the Viet Nam–Lao People’s Democratic Republic border, there was smaller-scale trafficking for prostitution or forced marriage. Trafficking in the form of illegal marriage brokering and false marriages to Malaysia, China, Republic of Korea, and Taiwan occurred more often in southern provinces, while cases of child trafficking, substitution and appropriation were more prevalent in northern border provinces. Regarding victims, the sale of people aged 16 or older is around 88% of the total number of trafficked persons. The trafficking of children under 16 years old is 7.5%, and the sale of both adults and children is 4.5%. There are majority number people trafficked abroad and only few of the are trafficked in the country.

It is believed the real figures of human trafficking in Vietnam are much higher, as the majority of trafficked persons return without reporting to officials they have been trafficked, and due to stigma and discrimination, often do not tell their families and friends. As has been the case with trafficking in many other areas, the number of trafficked persons within and from Vietnam has often been given in the form of estimates whose source or basis have not been established and are thus unreliable. Reasons popularly given for this dearth of adequate data include ‘the unauthorized and clandestine nature of the activities’, ‘poor data collection’, and ‘the reluctance of victims’ to report trafficking cases. Another important reason, which seems to be the most important in the situation of trafficking data in Vietnam, is a considerable lack of information or available data, at both national and regional levels.

2. ROOT CAUSES FOR THE EXISTENCE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND CHALLENGES OF THE PREVENTION

There is a wide-ranging agreement about causes of human trafficking. For example, sexual exploitation is caused by range of factors including inequality between men and women, poverty, lack of education, lack of awareness of trafficking (Bernat and Winkeller 2010). Others include globalization, lack of employment opportunities, economic imbalances and conflicts among regions, decline of border controls, globalized corruption, rural to urban migration (Shelley 2010). Similarly, Schloenhardt (2001) indicates that push and pull factors of human trafficking include political, demographic, socioeconomic and environmental nature. Among those causes, economic factors are common and primary causes of trafficking is poverty (Samarasinghe 2008). Schwartz (2004) also indicates that “Poverty is still one of the strongest factors pushing
girls and women into the sex industry and making them and their families vulnerable to traffickers promising a better life”. Economic factors comprise dire poverty, lack of job opportunities, and lack of social benefits.

In Vietnam, many people who are trafficked - especially women - originally come from rural areas where poverty is experienced more severely than in urban areas (Derks 1998). The economic reform starting in the late 1980s has opened up the country for the global market. Although it has benefitted national economic development, inequality still occurs between urban and rural areas (Derks 1998). Because the declining role of agriculture in rural economy, many families have to find a strategy to improve their economic situation by sending family member(s) to earn money elsewhere, and beyond agriculture (Rigg 1997). However, because of low occupation skills, they mostly get involved in simple, non-skilled and low salary jobs in the cities (Tran and Le 2000). The demands from factories, domestic work, and sex industry also continuously push female out-migration from rural areas (Rushing and Watts 2005).

Anti-trafficking responses have become “an important priority for many governments around the world” (Laczko and Gozdiaki 2005). It is argued that prevention is “the most long-term avenue for reducing or eliminating human trafficking” (Shinkle 2007). Prevention of trafficking not only reduces the number of victims and trafficking consequences, but also contributes to saving resources which are spent to investigate criminal cases and protect victims (Duong 2014). The prevention human trafficking in Vietnam is facing a number of difficulties and challenges. The first challenge is that prevention measures focus on sexual exploitation, while paying little attention to forced labour or other types of trafficking. Therefore, the implementation of policies and laws has failed to weaken criminal activities. A prevention movement has not attracted a large number of people, especially women. The effectiveness of awareness-raising campaigns and educational programmes is limited (Duong 2014; Tucker et al. 2009). For example, awareness-raising campaigns and activities focus on the general public rather than specific groups most at risk as potential victims.

Regarding the resources, research commissioned by the International Labour Organization (2005) indicates that “a programme aimed at combating trafficking as well as its implementation and the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation cannot be carried out without adequate financial and human resources”. Most of the national and local official reports on trafficking in Vietnam have observed that scarce government expenditure and inefficient budget allocation have limited the results of trafficking prevention programmes and anti-trafficking collaborations (Steering Committee 138/CP 2015; Ministry of Information and Communications 2015; Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2015). Similarly, interviewees in the research claimed that they encountered difficulties in providing support for victims’ rehabilitation and reintegration due to a lack of funding. These views were confirmed by government reports (Steering Committee 138/CP 2015; Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2015). Some participants revealed assistance gaps at the shelters because of the restricted resources provided for essential needs, medical care, psychological support, and vocational training. Friesendorf (2007) argues that the limited budget is problematic in terms of providing financial assistance and interactions between government staff and trafficked persons. In Vietnam, similar problems were affirmed by study participants. For instance, service providers “lacked the funding to travel to the homes of victims who lived in distant villages”. Another example is the short-term allowance for overcoming financial hardship. Although the authorities recognised that the small amount of financial support had very limited results, they were not able to provide a higher allowance due to restricted funding from the government.

3. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES

As mentioned, poverty and limited vocational skills are the most important aspects influencing the trafficking situation in Vietnam and other countries. Therefore, the Vietnamese Government has developed programmes to strengthen people’s economic empowerment, including providing loans and vocational training. For example, the Vietnam Women’s Union and local authorities have collaborated with the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies1 to provide micro-credit loans

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1The Vietnam Bank for Social Policies was “established under Premier’s Decision No. 13/2002QD-TTg dated 4th October 2002 and the Government’s Decree No. 78/ND-CP dated 4th October 2002 on providing credit for the poor and other policy beneficiaries; based upon the re-organization of the Bank for the Poor and separation from Vietnam Bank for Agriculture & Rural Development for purpose of detaching policy lending from commercial lending. Vietnam Bank for Social Policies is regarded as an efficient tool of the Government in mobilising various resources domestically and internationally to perform the designated socio-policy lending programmes of the Government”. For more information, access Vietnam Bank for Social Policies website: http://www.vbsp.org.vn/en/vbsp/view_content.php?manm=10
for poor women. Many of them are at-risk women or women from ethnic minorities. Although only a limited number of people in a “poor household” can access existing financial institutions, the partnership partly has improved the livelihoods of high-risk people and suppressed human trafficking (Women’s union 2, 3). One interviewee stated that the collaboration between government agencies, banks, and the People’s Credit Fund has played an essential role in changing the economic status of many Vietnamese people, as well as preventing the trafficking situation (Women’s union 2). This collaborative role is also mentioned in a government report (Vietnam Women’s Union 2015). One study participant confidently stated:

We asked poor women about their difficulties and guided them how to borrow money from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies. We asked local authorities to provide them with a certificate [the certificate showed that the women belonged to poor household families]. The Vietnam Bank for Social Policies could loan them up to 20 million Dong [about USD 1000] … They spent that money on raising pigs, cows, and chickens or farming. (Women’s union 2)

Moreover, the Vietnam Women’s Union and Divisions on Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs endeavour to develop many people’s vocational skills. Some projects and programmes concentrate on improving skills for their beneficiaries as a means to protect them from the dangers of human trafficking. For example, Project 295, implemented by the Vietnamese Government and involving the participation of seven ministries and local People’s Committees, aims to increase vocational training for women. Although there has been no evaluation of the connection between the project and human trafficking prevention, the research participants believed that the project has brought more stable income to many vulnerable women, helped them get out of poverty and, therefore, indirectly prevents human trafficking (Women’s union 1, 5). Other vocational programmes also provide professional training, technical skill courses, or job placement assistance for individuals who have low levels of education and vocational skills. The aim of such programmes is to reduce or nullify economic concerns, which are primary factors leading to trafficking. Some interviewees explained:

The Vietnam Women’s Union together with Divisions on Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and other agencies opened centres for vocational training … In the last five years, as in the 2015 Vietnam Women’s Union report, over one million women attended vocational training. Around 8000 people had jobs. Many of them were the poor. Now, they have jobs and do not want to leave their hometown anymore. If they left for jobs, they would be victims of trafficking. (Women’s union 1)

The provincial People’s Committee asked us [women’s union staff] to open a centre for vocational training three years ago. We received an annual budget to maintain centre activities. Divisions on Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs also gave us advice on how to run training courses successfully … Over one hundred trainees graduated from the centre. Some of them are working in local companies. Some of them are managing small businesses at home or looking for jobs. (Women’s union 3)

Challenges of Strengthening People’s Economic Empowerment

While most respondents reported favourably on the preventative value of economic empowerment, especially in preventing the trafficking of women, they also raised some concerns about the strategy’s limitations. The first limitation is that the incorporation of trafficking prevention into economic development programmes is narrow and has achieved limited results (Police officer; Border guard 1; Women’s union 1). As previously mentioned, in dealing with human trafficking,
Vietnamese agencies have attempted to incorporate trafficking prevention into poverty reduction programmes. However, it is not a top priority of inter-agency cooperation to prevent trafficking, nor is the incorporation of trafficking prevention into poverty reduction programmes a focus of the National Plan of Action. An example is the economic empowerment programme for families that are not on the poor household list, especially families just above the list. It was believed that those families also face severe struggles to achieve an adequate standard of living. If the families experience illness or business losses, they could fall into poverty and be vulnerable to trafficking. Improving the economic status for those families could strengthen the anti-trafficking programme. An in-depth connection between programmes for economic empowerment and preventing those people from being trafficked is not, however, guaranteed (Women’s union 1). There has been no detailed evaluation or examination of the benefits of this approach, as one local women’s union staff member confirmed:

The combination of the trafficking prevention and economic empowerment programmes in our province was weak. The anti-trafficking plan did not require agencies to combine them. We implemented them separately. Some staff even did not know the relationships between those programmes … Vietnam Women’s Union reports on the incorporation were general. And, the Steering Committee did not mention it in their reports. (Women’s union 4)

Moreover, there is a lack of effective collaboration in providing vocational training and arranging suitable jobs. Although Project 295 and other programmes have tried to develop knowledge and skills of their beneficiaries, only a limited number of trainees satisfy market requirements (Women’s union 1, 4, 5). After undertaking vocational training, they are still only infrequently recruited by local businesses. For example, women in some provinces only had opportunities to learn tailoring, make-up, or hairdressing at occupational centres of the Vietnam Women’s Union. As a result, those women “only could run their own business”. They “could not apply for positions in the local industrial zone” which needed other professional skills (Women’s union 4). Moreover, interviewees also suspected that local People’s Committees; Vietnam Women’s Union; Divisions on Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and other agencies do not actively cooperate with local companies and enterprises to arrange suitable occupations for trainees. A local women’s union staff member stated:

We received money from the provincial People’s Committee to organise vocational training, but only a little. Last year, our centre [vocational training centre] had 27 trainees. They were all learning tailoring. Two women wanted to learn hairdressing. We had to send them to another centre because we did not have anyone to teach it … At the end of the course, they would be free to find jobs. The People’s Committee or Divisions on Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs did not help them to have stable jobs. If they were not able to work for a company, they would have to set up a business at home. (Women’s union 5)

For people who can access existing financial supports, technical training in using loans effectively is rarely provided. Individuals who have lived in extremely harsh conditions lack financial knowledge and social skills. Meanwhile, skill training and technical documents provided by state agencies and official financial institutions in some provinces are restricted (Women’s union 1; Ministry of Information and Communications staff 2). For example, a participant conceded that the local Vietnam Women’s Union and Vietnam Bank for Social Policies “helped women to access loans with low-interest rates” but they “did not ask experts to guide the borrowers to run their own business”. Local women’s union staff, who also have limited financial knowledge and skills, can only “help the borrowers to build traditional careers, such as raising pigs and chickens as well as growing pepper” (Women’s union 4). There is no close cooperation between authorities in providing technological assistance for programme beneficiaries. Accordingly, many people are not confident in running their own business and managing their money effectively (Ministry of Information and Communications staff 1).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES

As discussed, economic difficulties are the main contributing factor to human trafficking in Vietnam. Financial hardship also limits the results of rehabilitation and reintegration processes where the trafficked person’s lack of income continues post-
trafficking. Raising the living standards of high-risk people and trafficking victims is therefore an essential component of any anti-trafficking programme. However, economic empowerment strategies cannot be implemented by individuals or any single government agency. The implementation of economic empowerment measures requires close cooperation between multiple government offices. Recommendations for economic empowerment strategies from this study focus on vocational training and financial support.

First, study participants argued that government agencies should provide practical professional training and job placement programmes (Police officer; Women's union 5; Social welfare staff 2). As noted previously, people at high risk of being trafficked and trafficking victims in Vietnam often lack professional skills. However, job training courses are only available for limited occupations. Therefore, interviewees suggested that vocational training should align with at-risk people and trafficking victims’ current abilities and market realities (Women's union 5; Social welfare staff 2). In each province Divisions on Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs needs to cooperate with the Department of Finance, Vietnam Women’s Union, and other government departments in inspecting and identifying local job market requirements. Based on these local labour market needs the appropriate vocational training programmes could be designed and offered to at-risk residents and trafficking victims. Market analysis can also assist those individuals to understand which occupations may best match their current skills and employability, as well as help them to decide which training courses to undertake. During job training sessions, trainees need to be provided with not only practical job skills but also employability skills, life skills, and interpersonal skills, as recommended by interviewees (Social welfare staff 1, 2) and in conferences (Ministry of Public Security 2014; Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2014). Moreover, vocational training is only the first step towards job placement or business development. Study participants recommended that government officers should contact local businesses to find employment positions for trainees (Police officer; Women's union 5). These suggested activities could lead to increased employment opportunities for high-risk individuals and trafficked persons, effectively reducing their vulnerability. Some local authorities involved in vocational training courses recommended:

[…] Before running vocational training sessions, local government departments need to examine market needs. For example, they need to contact local companies or industrial parks to understand which types of jobs the market needs. Depending on the results, government agencies should run different vocational training courses which are in line with market requirements … The training also needs to include various types of jobs so people can choose which one is suitable for their skills and abilities … At the end of the courses, government departments also need to introduce trainees to local companies or industrial parks, so learners have more chances to find suitable jobs. (Women’s union 5)

[…] To improve the quality of vocational training for trafficked persons, service providers need to discuss the market needs and victims’ desire with them carefully. Then, we [government officers] advise trafficking victims to choose suitable courses [vocational training courses]. They need tuition fees, living expenses, and travelling expenses paid … During the courses, they are also trained in necessary skills, such as teamwork, organising, communication, problem solving, personal safety, and so on … Anti-trafficking actors need to help them find jobs or run a small business after the training course. It is very important because many trafficking victims do not know where and how they can apply for jobs. (Social welfare staff 2)

Second, interviewees suggested that the government should provide micro-loans as start-up capital to people at high risk of being trafficked and trafficking victims if they want to establish a small business in order to become economically self-sufficient (Social welfare staff 1; Women’s union 4). This recommendation is strongly consistent with suggestions made at previous conferences (Steering Committee 138/CP 2012; Ministry of Public Security 2014) as well as in international research (Surtees 2013; Wheaton et al. 2010). As study participants suggested, micro-loans should not be limited to disadvantaged trafficked persons only. The support should be made available to any trafficking victim who requires capital to run their business. Micro-loans should be associated with no or low-interest rates. A
provincial Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs employee recommended that the anti-trafficking agencies, for example, Divisions on Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and the Vietnam Women’s Union, could act as surety for victims when they need to borrow money from banks (Social welfare staff 1). To guarantee the loans are used for an appropriate purpose, government agencies could also provide business equipment and supplies rather than cash loans. Additionally, to minimise the financial risk due to an adverse economic environment for new businesses, an economist or experienced entrepreneur could provide training courses or advice on running a business. Such advice, for example, could include how to manage a business through different market situations, how to maximise profit, how to reinvest in the business, and how to solve financial problems (Women’s union 4; Ministry of Information and Communications staff 1; Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2014). Some local government staff recommended:

Anti-trafficking agencies need to cooperate with the Social Policy Bank in considering loan applications of at-risk people and trafficking victims. I think not only poor trafficked persons but also all types of victims should be allowed to borrow money from the bank ... The interest rates should be low, for example, from zero to two per cent. If trafficked persons do not have collateral, we [social welfare staff] or the Vietnam Women’s Union need to act as a guarantor for the debtors. (Social welfare staff 1)

[…] to help borrowers in running a small business successfully, state actors need to provide ongoing support and mentoring for them. Government agencies can organise workshops within communes or have one-on-one discussions with the debtors. Advisors could be state officers or financial professionals ... In the workshops, individuals are able to discuss their difficulties and concerns. Counsellors will let them know how to run suitable businesses and deal with challenges. (Women’s union 4)

To improve the situation, the Vietnamese Government needs to allocate a higher budget to anti-trafficking programmes, as recommended by participants (Border guard 2; Ministry of Information and Communications staff 5; Social welfare staff 3; Women’s union 5) and in national conferences (Steering Committee 138/CP 2012; Ministry of Public Security 2013). At both central and provincial government levels, funds have to be reallocated to high-risk areas and people who need comprehensive services such as awareness campaigns, education, and job training (Border guard 2; Ministry of Information and Communications staff 5). Study interviewees also suggested that government funding for some protection measures should be available for all types of trafficking victims—not only for disadvantaged individuals (Social welfare staff 3; Women’s union 5). This solution is very consistent with the suggestions from previous studies to allocate government funding for anti-trafficking programmes in Vietnam (Duong 2014; Hoang 2013; Tucker et al. 2009).

Moreover, additional funding sources should also be sought from Non-government organizations and different economic entities (Women’s union 3; Social welfare staff 5). As Trees and colleagues (2012: 48) argue, “government regulations related to supporting trafficked persons are limited and restricted to specific support”; some anti-trafficking measures cannot continue without external funding assistance. Therefore, external funding support would significantly contribute to building, developing, and implementing anti-trafficking activities. Local actors recommended techniques for raising external anti-trafficking funding:

The government fund for anti-trafficking strategies was limited. If there was no support from Non-government organizations, some models could not be implemented. The local governments did not mobilise effective support from the private sector... In my opinion, the government should mobilise the societal resources for trafficking prevention and victims’ support, for example, private companies or businessmen. (Women’s union 3)

[…] authorities should build up public funds sponsored by local business and individuals. At communication campaigns or meetings of local residents, we can obtain contributions from enterprises and individuals ... The funds raised could be used to prevent human trafficking and other crimes as well as support victims. (Social welfare staff 5)
5. CONCLUSION

Regarding economic empowerment strategies, only a few studies have examined the implementation and outcomes of these measures in the Vietnamese context (Duong 2014; Tucker et al. 2009). International reports also describe socio-economic measures in place in Vietnam, including poverty reduction and vocational training programmes intended to address trafficking (The Asia Foundation 2008). However, these reports do not provide detailed information on the programmes or their strengths and weaknesses.

Respondents in this study identified several successful prevention results regarding economic empowerment programmes. They include changing the economic status of many Vietnamese people as well as preventing the trafficking situation. Meanwhile, some vocational programmes also provide professional training, technical skill courses, or job placement assistance for individuals who have low levels of education and vocational skills. However, the incorporation of trafficking prevention into economic development programmes in the whole country is still narrow and has achieved limited results. They are the lack of effective collaboration in providing vocational training, technical training in using loans effectively and arranging suitable jobs. Research participants also pointed to the need for improvements to address the limitations of these programmes, which include providing practical professional training and job placement programmes; micro-loans as start-up capital to people at high risk of being trafficked and trafficking victims; and allocating a higher budget to anti-trafficking programmes.

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