

## COMMENT & ANALYSIS

# The perils of human trafficking hysteria

Anti-trafficking activists miss the point when they portray migrants as helpless victims who need 'rescuing'

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If one were to go by the latest US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report and recent media reports, Singapore is to be a destination country for countless victims of the hideous crime of human trafficking.

Reportedly, ruthless criminals lure and trick innocent women and children from around South-east Asia to be enslaved as prostitutes here.

What is more, even the ones who arrive here consenting to work in the sex industry can be easily abused and cheated by evil traffickers, apparently.

This terrifying vision being painted by such reports is illustrated by almost pornographic anecdotes from anonymous "survivors" who managed to run away from their brothel-prisons.

There is more, according to the activists of various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the authors of the TIP Report: "Modern-day slaves" are also to be found outside of the confines of the sex industry. Allegedly, many low-skilled migrant workers experience abuse and debt bondage at the hands of employers who cunningly manipulate them with threats of arrest and deportation.

Last year the Republic was

downgraded in the TIP report following what were alleged to be its lack of serious efforts to comply with the only ostensibly right standards promoted by the American administration.

The publication of this year's report was met with a strong reaction from Singapore: While it was acknowledged that the country had been taken off the Tier Two "watch list", officials complained that the report was "riddled with inaccuracies" and did not do justice to Singapore's anti-trafficking efforts.

Singaporean officials are right to criticise the culturally arrogant and dubious report, but the problem is far more fundamental.

The main issue is that the whole anti-human trafficking crusade may be misguided, based on wrong assumptions and perhaps greatly detrimental to the interests of the very people it claims to be helping.

According to the common discourse, human trafficking is a rather monolithic crime. It is a modern version of centuries-old slavery and as such, it has clearly identifiable victims who simply need to be "freed" or "rescued" from their oppressors.

Yet, the reality is much more complex. The truth is that illegal migration, or migration of people with no or little money, is always a messy business.

Unlike well-off travellers, migrants from poorer countries need to use dodgy documents, accept the help of sometimes shady intermediaries, and often need to borrow money on terms harsher than what an average Singaporean would consider fair. Once in a place like this, they may end up doing a job many of us would find unacceptable.

And surely, especially when their status is illegal, they lack any of the formal protections that an average Singaporean citizen enjoys. Hence, some of them may experience violence or abuse.

In general, with the exception of the extreme cases of actual kidnappings, migration of poor people (especially when undertaken illegally) contains some element of consent and potential risks of abuse. Yet, the human trafficking discourse hardly addresses any of the above.

According to the anti-trafficking industry, poor or illegal migrants are not independent individuals seeking to improve their lives by taking risks and travelling to distant lands. Instead, the



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assumption is that people (especially women) from poor countries are naive, pathetic and helpless and that they need to be "rescued".

The anti-traffickers reject the notion that poor migrants have free will and choice.

In human trafficking discourse, people do not migrate, but are moved across the globe like objects — if not solely by evil traffickers then also by omnipotent forces of nature or economy. They do not make any decisions but instead are forced, coerced, misled, manipulated, sold and bought. Similarly, they cannot be supported or listened to; instead they must be "saved".

What is more, there is a common belief that no one would choose to work in some "bad" industries or under some "bad" conditions. Hence, very often when the alleged "victims" fail to identify themselves as such, they are said to be "lying", "terrorised" or "brainwashed". This is a terrifying logic that effectively suggests that no evidence of oppression should be seen as evidence of particularly severe oppression. One is free to imagine where such thinking can lead.

Certainly, a number of migrants coming to Singapore experience violence or live and work in worse conditions than promised. Some may even be raped or held against their will — but these abuses are

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already treated as serious crimes under Singaporean law.

The problem of migrants in most cases is not the lack of some anti-trafficking legislation, but the fact that either their status or employment or both are illegal and hence, they either cannot or are afraid to seek protection from the Singaporean authorities when crimes take place.

What the current moral furore over human trafficking can do at best is to allow many migrants to present themselves as victims in order not to be classified as criminals.

What it makes difficult (if not impossible) is a serious debate on migration. ■

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