

Provide Better Protection for Victims of Human Trafficking

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With the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons falling on 30 July, there is cause for us to review how well Singapore has done in combating human trafficking.

Low wage migrant workers who make up 30% of our workforce are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. NGOs like HOME handle cases where workers are deceived about the nature and conditions of their work but coerced from leaving employment due to economic duress and work pass conditions such as the need to seek permission from the employer to change jobs and the uncertainty of gaining other employment should they raise a complaint.

Given the clandestine nature of the crime, often, the key to prosecuting traffickers is through the testimonies and cooperation of victims. However, victims are reluctant to seek justice, and may even refuse to report their cases because of uncertainties regarding their legal status, fear of being prosecuted for legal infractions committed while trafficked and the pressure to continue to provide for their families.

In 2014, three Vietnamese who sought help from HOME declined to pursue their case when they became aware that they will not be allowed to work because Vietnam is not a source country under the Temporary Job Scheme extended to workers who are to remain in Singapore to assist with investigations. Foreign domestic workers who are trafficked found that they could not switch sectors if they wish to continue working while investigations are undergoing. Currently, only limited protection, which includes temporary shelter and counselling, is legislated. They are provided on a case-by-case basis.

The urgency to better protect victims is more real now that Singapore has ratified the international conventions, namely the Palermo Protocol and ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking In Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) in September and November 2015, respectively. These treaties contain provisions for victims such as physical and psychological recovery, medical care, housing, mental health counselling, job training, legal assistance, and physical safety; providing temporary or permanent residence for victims; and facilitating their safe repatriation. The Stoptrafficking.sg campaign, backed by a coalition of NGOs, has recommended strengthening our anti-trafficking legislation by codifying protection measures

including the non-criminalisation of victims, the right to work, and shelter. Key terms like forced labour and coercion should be better defined.

Protection measures should not be dismissed as discretionary provisions but instead should be regarded as integral to an effective anti-trafficking programme.

Tam Peck Hoon (Ms)

Head, Advocacy and Awareness

Campaign Manager, Stoptrafficking.sg

Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics