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Cyberspace and Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia

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The most recent UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons identifies East Asia and the Pacific as an origin area for victims of trafficking where most of the victims consist of both adult and underage females. The Report also showed that in the East Asia and the Pacific region, a third of the victims (33%) are children, and 38% of all trafficked victims are sexually exploited with the vast majority of people trafficked for labour exploitation. The origins of this are found in the increase in affordability and accessibility in international travel in the sixties and seventies, which led to a surge in the international tourism industry. Developing Southeast Asian Governments began to promote national tourism policies as the tourist dollar became a major contributor to their economic growth. The rise of traditional tourism also led to the emergence of sex tourism. This has human security implications for the region – human trafficking increases as demand for sex workers exceeds its supply. A key example is the growth and increasing sophistication of sex trafficking operations as sex traffickers today use cyberspace as a means for recruitment.

How is the Internet used to facilitate trafficking?

Not only did the sex sector benefit from spillovers from traditional tourism, their profits also contributed tacitly to the economic growth of their host nations. That and corruption within public institutions resulted in the industry growing unchecked as many Southeast Asian governments were unable or unwilling to respond to it. As prostitution flourished, demand for sex workers increased and pimps started to rely on human trafficking to supply sex workers when local sources dried up. Women and children are particularly vulnerable.

Today, the development of the Internet and the communication infrastructure it provides facilitates human trafficking. Through the Internet there is a cornucopia of information detailing the costs and whereabouts of available services, how-to guides on avoiding or bribing local law enforcement to escape prosecution, and even travel agency services with individual or group packages. The demand for sex tourism creates its supply of victims. The Internet has also been incorporated into the business model of human trafficking operations. Pimps and traffickers exploit social media channels to recruit minors through fraud or coercion.

Crowding out of cyberspace for human trafficking

Various stakeholders - state, business, and civil society - have collaborated through digital activism to combat the use of cyberspace for both human and sex trafficking. Online petitions and other awareness-raising activities help propel issues concerning the use of internet by traffickers to the forefront. They double as platforms for NGO fundraising to combat human trafficking on the ground and promote situational awareness, serving as a spring board to lobby for legislative changes.

Due to the transnational nature of the crime, legal frameworks need to address both demand and supply side of human trafficking. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) passed in 2000 allows the U.S.A. to impose sanctions on and withhold non-essential foreign aid from countries with flagrant violations.

Southeast Asian countries have also stepped up efforts to regulate the industry. In 2004, members of ASEAN reaffirmed their stance to regionally coordinate against human trafficking in the Declaration Against Trafficking in Persons Particularly Women and Children. Local level efforts have also been made. In Singapore, the extra-territorial Prevention of Human Trafficking Act prosecutes all who participate in human trafficking and provides protection and the rehabilitation of victims. In the Philippines, state-business partnerships have taken a more direct approach, using data-mapping techniques to track the digital footprints of sex traffickers to aid law enforcers.

The way forward

Anti-sex trafficking legislation in Southeast Asia varies in terms of coverage in prosecuting offenders and protecting victims. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that differing definitions of trafficking, poor inter-agency communication and variations in quality and quantity of data collection hinders data and best practices integration at the national and regional levels. Undergirding the issue are socio-economic factors with traffickers promising a stable income for people looking to make ends meet but are unaware of the hidden costs of their ventures. Also corruption remains a challenge amongst public officials, impeding law enforcement. Legislation and enforcement efforts at the local and transnational level need to catch up with human traffickers' use of cyberspace to make anti-human trafficking efforts more effective.

Recommended Readings:

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- Singapore International Energy Week 2015, 26–30 October 2015, Singapore.

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- Open-ended Intergovernmental Meeting to Explore All Options Regarding an Appropriate and Effective Review Mechanism for UNTOC and the Protocols thereto, 28-30 September 2015, Vienna, Austria
- Conference: Human Trafficking, Labor Migration, & Migration Control in Comparative Historical Perspective, 16-17 October 2015, Chicago, U.S.A.

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