



International  
Labour  
Office



# Work in Freedom

**Preventing trafficking of women and girls  
in South Asia and the Middle East**

*Promoting education, fair recruitment, safe migration and decent work*



UK Department for International Development (DFID)



London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

# Women and girls on the move in South Asia

For millions of poor people in South Asia, migration is an important livelihood strategy to escape poverty for themselves and their families. They move long distances in pursuit of jobs and earnings to remit home. Some migrate from poor to richer regions, or from rural to urban areas, within their own country, while many migrate abroad. This is the case for many women and girls who face discrimination at home and are willing to take up offers of jobs in countries of the Middle East, particularly as domestic workers in private households. While some succeed in their migration venture, many are prone to deception by unscrupulous labour recruiters or to exploitation at the hands of employers in the destination region or country, practices that may amount to trafficking for forced labour.

The Work in Freedom programme adopts an integrated and targeted approach to prevent trafficking of women and girls in South Asian countries of origin (Bangladesh, India and Nepal) and in selected destination countries (India, Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates). It will reach at least 100,000 women and girls as direct beneficiaries.

## The challenge

Unpaid wages, confiscation of identity documents, excessively long working hours without days off, restrictions on movement, deception about terms and conditions of work, sexual violence and intimidation are among the abuses reported that point to situations of forced labour and trafficking. ILO estimates that 12.3 million of the nearly 21 million women, men and children in forced labour globally are found in the Asia and Pacific and Middle East regions. The majority are exploited in economic activities outside the sex industry, such as domestic work or the textiles and garment sector. Some 55 per cent of all victims of forced labour are women and girls.

There are many causes and risk factors for forced labour and trafficking. Women and girls, who suffer discrimination and social exclusion due to their sex, caste, race or religion, are particularly vulnerable. Trafficking is facilitated by weak regulatory frameworks and poor law enforcement, as well as by restrictive and gender-insensitive migration policies. Women's vulnerability affects their experience at each stage of the migration process – from recruitment, through employment and upon their return home.

Domestic work and the garment industry are economic sectors that attract numerous women and girls in and from South Asia. Migrant domestic workers find themselves particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to their high dependence on their employers, and to the fact that private homes are often excluded from labour market regulations and labour inspection. Child domestic workers, aged less than 18, are at special risk, more readily subject to control and abuse by their employer and other household members. Away from their families, they are isolated and deprived of any form of social support or protection. The ready-made garment sector has also been subject to allegations of labour violations affecting women workers, including excessive working hours, forced overtime and low or unpaid wages.

These challenges require an integrated and holistic response involving a broad range of organizations and stakeholders, acting at different leverage points to minimize the risks of migration and to empower women at all stages in their quest for decent work and economic independence.

The ILO-DFID "Work in Freedom" programme will promote empowerment and education, fair recruitment, safe migration and decent work for women and girls from South Asia, and thus contribute to the prevention of human trafficking in this region and in the Middle East.

**Project duration: 2013 - 2018**

**Project budget: £8.3 million**



## It's about empowerment

Prevention measures attack the root causes rather than the symptoms of forced labour and human trafficking and can bring about long-term transformational change. They represent a vital part of any effective strategy to combat trafficking by addressing the "supply" of vulnerable workers, empowering them to protect themselves more effectively from abuse and to secure positive migration outcomes for themselves, their families and their communities.

Economic empowerment is not only about earning a decent wage. It is also about understanding the real cost of migration and having the knowledge and skills to manage personal finances and remittances. By providing women with educational support and training on rights and skills, the programme will increase their livelihood alternatives - either enhancing their ability to access or create local employment opportunities or allowing them to choose to migrate as well-informed, skilled workers with higher income-earning potential abroad. Work in Freedom will initiate and support outreach efforts to women in their place of origin, sensitizing them on safe and rights-based migration, financial literacy, rights at work and how to recognize, and protect themselves from, the risks of trafficking.

Empowered women can participate in and influence what concerns them. Work in Freedom will strengthen and listen to the voices of women and girls when developing and implementing action programmes, policy recommendations and other interventions. It will strengthen the capacity of workers' organizations and community-based groups, including migrant and domestic workers' associations, to offer services and support to the women and girls most at risk of trafficking and exploitation.

Education is essential not only to establish a skilled workforce of working age, but also to prevent child labour. Children who are excluded from access to education may have few options other than to enter the labour market where they can suffer exploitation and hazardous conditions. Girls are especially vulnerable to sex trafficking and forced labour in domestic work. Work in Freedom will provide formal and non-formal educational support for girls in the poorest areas of out-migration. By staying in school longer, they will be better able to get skilled work and earn higher wages later in life, to resist early marriage and have fewer children. The programme will contribute to raising an educated generation of women who enjoy greater control, choice, voice and economic opportunity in their lives.

## It's about fair recruitment and safe migration

In South Asia, most low-skilled workers rely on private recruitment agencies or individuals to act as intermediaries with potential overseas employers. Often resorting to the services of informal and unregistered recruiters, workers become vulnerable to abuse, including forced labour and trafficking. Migrants pay exorbitant fees, taking out high-interest loans ahead of their departure that can lead them into debt bondage. Workers may be deceived about the nature and conditions of work, have their contracts substituted by less favourable ones on arrival, have their passports confiscated and be subject to illegal wage deductions, threats or physical violence.

Work in Freedom will work with the recruitment industry, in the places of origin and destination of migrant workers, to foster ethical practices by raising awareness of the provisions of the ILO Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181) and industry good practice, and by promoting the implementation of codes of practice based on full respect for workers' rights. It will also enhance government capacity, legislation and policies to effectively regulate and monitor the recruitment industry. The programme aims to ensure safe migration corridors, in which well-regulated and ethical private employment agencies contribute to the achievement of decent work.

Even well prepared migration can go wrong if laws and policies fail to protect workers' rights. Work in Freedom will bring together the governments of origin and destination countries and facilitate dialogue for the development of gender-sensitive laws and policies, including bilateral memoranda of understanding, which protect the rights of migrant workers, especially women. This will both enhance the developmental impact of labour migration and reduce irregular migration and human trafficking.

## It's about labour protection and decent work

Protecting the basic rights of all workers, including regular and irregular migrants, is an obligation under ILO Conventions and international human rights law.

Work in Freedom will support governments to put in place laws, policies and programmes to protect women workers from exploitation and ensure decent working conditions. It will promote effective law enforcement, particularly in those sectors most prone to trafficking, in both source and destination countries. This will include strengthening the capacity of concerned stakeholders to identify, investigate and prosecute cases of trafficking and forced labour, and enhancing cooperation between police, labour inspectors and other concerned law enforcement officials.

Governments have the primary responsibility for labour protection, but employers' and workers' organizations also have vital roles to play. The programme will promote their active participation in relevant activities, and will also strengthen collaboration between government, social partners and community-based organizations in countries of origin and destination.

Domestic workers provide a critical service to their employers, but are rarely recognized as such. Changing the attitudes and behaviour of employers to value and treat their domestic workers with respect will take time. Work in Freedom will promote vocational skills training to professionalize domestic work and accredit workers for the many skills they acquire and use on a daily basis. This will encourage employers to treat domestic workers as real employees, from whom they can expect an efficient and professional service in return for fair terms and conditions of employment.

## Cutting edge research to measure impact

The design of anti-trafficking interventions must draw upon a robust evidence base on what works and what doesn't in practice. Building up such an evidence base is an important component of Work in Freedom. A study on laws and policies related to labour exploitation and trafficking will be conducted to identify where gaps exist and how these could be filled. Border surveys will investigate labour migration flows along each of the corridors targeted by the programme. A survey of employers will shed light on their awareness and knowledge about workers' rights, and of legal channels for recruitment, while a survey of recruitment and placement agencies will explore their practices and constraints to "ethical" operations. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) will conduct research to assess the impact of specific interventions. This will include household surveys on the recruitment and working conditions of internal and cross-border women migrant workers and research to engage the project beneficiaries at different stages in their migration experience.

## Partnerships

Work in Freedom will foster close collaboration between policy makers, law enforcement authorities, employers, trade unions and civil society. The programme will identify and build on established good practice rather than reinventing the wheel or duplicating existing efforts. It will convene like-minded actors in the anti-trafficking arena to build a coalition to take effective and coordinated action for the prevention of trafficking and the empowerment of vulnerable groups. The programme will work with key international partners such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Regional Office for South Asia (UNODC-ROSA), the International Federation of Private Employment Agencies (CIETT), the International Organisation of Employers (IOE), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and its sector-specific affiliates.

Work in Freedom will invite other implementing partners to take responsibility for specific outputs or activities, both at national and international levels, such as the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), Anti-Slavery International (ASI), Migrant Forum Asia (MFA), and the Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB). In each participating country, the ILO will establish a project steering committee involving relevant government ministries, social partners and other stakeholders. National research institutions will be engaged to undertake specific research activities.

Strategic alliances with other UN bodies and international organisations such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) will be strengthened to ensure consistent advocacy messages, to build consensus around key policy recommendations and to promote the widest possible sharing and dissemination of the programme's learning and outputs.