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Human Trafficking in South East Asia and Economic Empowerment

Ethan Yang

Today human trafficking, which is essentially a euphemism for slavery, controls an estimated 21 million or more victims. In short, the highest number of slaves in human history. One of the most notorious regions for this industry is South East Asia. Countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, China, and India maintain some of the highest rates of human trafficking cases as well as some of the worst human rights violations (US State Department). In this region, slaves are not only exploited and abused, but shipped to markets across the world from Japan to Brazil. Factors such as poverty, corruption, policy, and globalization all feed the human trafficking machine, each one multiplying the success of the industry. Perhaps one of the glaring commonalities amongst South East Asian countries is the level of poverty rampant amongst cities and villages. The third world conditions prevalent throughout the region leaves people incredibly desperate and susceptible to human trafficking. This factor presents a problem that must be addressed, but also provides a solution to mitigating the complex issue that is human trafficking.

Human trafficking in South East Asia has proven to be a lucrative business, with hundreds of millions of dollars being made. Its processes and motivations are incredibly complex, drawing from countless different players and industries. The individuals involved range from the criminal organizations that conduct the trafficking, all the way to government officials and aristocrats. In countries such as Thailand, high ranking military officials have been convicted of involvement in human trafficking, and in Myanmar the military openly participates in the industry (Vice News). Countless people from businessmen to nameless citizens have also been widely involved in the supply chain, from guarding slaves to distribution (Vice News). According to the United Nations: “the most common form of human trafficking (79%) is sexual exploitation... The second most common form of human trafficking is forced labor (18%), although this may be a misrepresentation because forced labor is less frequently detected and reported than trafficking for sexual exploitation” (United Nations). Along with these two categories, forced organ removal and begging are amongst common fates for trafficked victims as well (United Nations). Individuals are typically taken from impoverished areas and transported to industrial areas, many times in other countries such as Korea, Japan, and China (June Lee). China is by far one of the largest consumers of trafficked individuals, with wives and prostitutes being purchased to satisfy a disproportionate male population. Along with the sex industry, China’s ballooning economy has tempted many factories and businesses to resort to slave labor imported from South East Asia. Japan and Korea maintain thriving and expanding sex industries making them common destinations for sex slaves from around the world (June Lee). These issues demonstrate the effects of globalization and migration, allowing human trafficking to become even more entrenched in the global economy than ever.

Poverty is by far one of the largest factors causing the prevalence of human trafficking. Poor living conditions combined with lack of infrastructure make citizens vulnerable targets. In villages across South East Asia, desperate individuals are deceived into slavery with false

promises of work. For example, in Rakhine State, Myanmar, traffickers deceive victims with offers of transportation to international job markets, but ultimately force them into slavery or sell them for ransom (Vice News). Victims are typically sold to various businesses and are kept in camps where many are murdered. In areas of Thailand, Burma, Malaysia and all throughout South East Asia, mass graves reminiscent of the Holocaust can be found in many rural areas. These are a product of the atrocities committed by traffickers causing their human cargo to die due to poor living conditions and brutal treatment. Many if not all of these cases could have been prevented if sufficient development and jobs were presented in the villages the victims came from. There would be no need to turn to false advertisements of work in far off places or resort to selling oneself to provide for the family. In many areas, poverty is intentionally caused by faulty government policy. This can be seen in Indonesia where many areas receive unequal infrastructural development, causing some areas to flourish and others to become impoverished. This strategy has caused an increase of migrant workers pouring into the developed areas where they are often forced into slavery (Shelly). In all these cases, poor living conditions and rampant poverty has led people to fall victim to human trafficking. Difficult financial situations have led people to sell themselves into prostitution or false opportunities of work. For both sex slavery and forced labor, poverty is at the root of the issue.

Prostitution constitutes the largest portion of human trafficking, around 79% worldwide (United Nations). Women and children make up the majority of individuals involved in prostitution, often being sold or kidnapped into service. In South East Asia, these individuals serve a critical role in staffing a booming sex tourism industry. From remote villages to the largest cities, prostitution is an unavoidable fact of life. This can be seen in Cambodia as it attracts men from around the world wishing to take advantage of the prevalent sex industry. From countries such as Cambodia and Thailand, prostitutes are trafficked regionally and internationally to other booming sex markets such as Japan and Korea (June Lee). Prostitution is an especially complicated issue when compared to traditional slave labor. This is because of concerns with STD transmissions as well as the fact that many victims sell themselves intentionally. Victims exploited for sex work often need to be prostitutes because their current jobs pay poverty level wages. In Cambodia, many people are forced to work in sweat shops for as little as 80 dollars a month, making prostitution a more attractive option. As a result, people would choose to be sex slaves over factory workers which pays less and sometimes more dangerous (Vice News). This reality means that some individuals involved in the sex industry are intentionally participating rather than being coerced or kidnapped like in forced labor. Whether they are purposefully participating or trafficked, the realities of this industry are still frightening. There is an “estimate that one-third of the prostitutes in Cambodia are under the age of 18, the majority of whom are Vietnamese. Vulnerable children in Cambodia who become victims of the domestic sex trade are abused and often then killed. Girls are subjected to torture by electric shock in underground dungeons under the brothels to keep them compliant and ready to work even when in intense pain. In a publicized case of victimization in Cambodia, a woman trafficker poked out an eye of a young girl who would not have sex immediately after a painful abortion. Torture chambers housed underneath the brothels were used by the madams to keep the girls smiling for customers” (Louise Shelly). This instance demonstrates the realities of an industry that may seem more attractive than legal work, but in reality is governed by the culture of slavery.

Forced labor or traditional slavery is the second most prevalent form of human trafficking comprising around 18 percent and one of the most preventable (United Nations). Unlike

prostitution, all victims of forced labor receive no form of benefit. It is the purest form of slavery where victims are merely a form of production, completely disposable. Victims of forced labor are typically used to cheaply fill positions in industries such as fishing, agriculture, and manufacturing. While slaves are being transported to destinations around the world, they are typically held in terrible conditions, crammed into boats and holding pens. It is common for thousands of victims to die in the transportation process and all throughout South East Asia, mass graves mark those locations (Vice News). In Thailand, the fishing industry is infamous for being one of the largest consumers of slave labor. A recent investigation showed that “over the past two years found that Thai and migrant slaves are used on trawlers that catch fish sold in the US, UK and elsewhere in Europe” (The Guardian). Apart from being forced to work around the world, trafficked fishermen are typically worked to death, tortured, and tossed overboard. People forced into this industry are usually deceived into believing that the job they are taking will be legitimate or are kidnapped and forced into service. These networks of slavery draw from the impoverished regions prevalent throughout South East Asia, where people are desperate to take any job offering (Vice News).

Human trafficking is an incredibly complex and well-oiled machine. Factors such as migration, globalization, economic inequality, and corruption all play an instrumental role in its prevalence. These issues are incredibly complicated and sometimes impossible to address. One claim states that removing corruption could erase almost half of all human trafficking in South East Asia overnight (Vice News). However, corruption is ingrained into the very culture of the region. Corruption ranges from government officials being involved in huge scandals all the way down to the average citizen bribing officials to get basic items like cellphones. Attempting to mitigate human trafficking by addressing issues such as corruption, would prove to be frustratingly ineffective, as it already has. Instead attacking the common root of all trafficking cases, poverty, could prove more effective and more straightforward. The reason why people turn to prostitution or end up in forced labor is because of their economic position. Aside from prosecuting people involved in human trafficking, developing the areas where traffickers recruit from could prove more effective. Many people in South East Asia live in third world conditions, with no infrastructure or employment opportunities, leading them to seek work elsewhere. This is when they encounter false offers of work from traffickers who are readily exploiting the situation (Vice News). Establishing a basic infrastructure would prove to be not only instrumental in reducing human trafficking, but also affordable. Muhammad Yunus, the father of micro lending, proved that giving an impoverished wood carver in Bangladesh as little as \$27 could allow her to kick start her own business. Yunus worked with impoverished villages with little to no infrastructure, with many of the villagers working in slave or slave like institutions. He continually proved that by giving small loans to struggling individuals and guiding them in the purchasing of capital, lives could be changed. This in turn creates a feedback loop where individuals now have more money to spend, buying more services from one another and making the village richer as a whole (Yunus). This same concept of strategically infusing money into impoverished areas, supporting business, funding schools, and creating infrastructure could mitigate human trafficking. For example, new business could be created with a relatively small amount of money to purchase capital and a brief education on how to conduct business. In impoverished villages, this could be the catalyst that sparks an economic revival. When this is combined with infrastructural improvements such as farm and school building, along with educated guidance, an entire village could be transformed very cheaply. When economic empowerment is introduced into an area, the number of people vulnerable to human trafficking is

drastically reduced. Without poverty, there are no incentives to take up prostitution or risk false job advertisements that result in slavery. In the poverty stricken villages and towns throughout South East Asia, a small amount of money can have a significant impact. Many areas where trafficking is prevalent there is little to no infrastructure, leaving people incredibly vulnerable. Providing guidance and funds to create a basic infrastructure would be relatively cheap and cripple trafficking operations. Yunus discovered that many people have talents and ideas, but needed a financial kick start and basic guidance. Giving small donations and business ideas to people in poverty could allow them to capitalize on their skills. Yunus saw his micro loans in a poverty stricken town in Arkansas inspire people to start restaurants, clothing stores, and carpentry shops (Yunus). As people gain the capabilities to become self-sufficient, they are able to improve their quality of life which allows them to spend more money, furthering the local economy. Jumpstarting business and infrastructure in areas of poverty can start feedback cycles that ultimately improve the quality of life for the community. In essence, economic empowerment eliminates the base that trafficking feeds off of, impoverished humans.

Equipped with this information, it is entirely possible that a grassroots campaign can have a significant impact in mitigating human trafficking in South East Asia. I can use crowdfunding and fundraising techniques to raise money for such an initiative. My proposed course of action is to study specific villages in South East Asia, isolate what is lacking and what potential this village has for growth. Then after diagnosing how poverty affects the people of the village, devise a plan to target specific individuals and areas of interest with infusions of money. By devising plans for basic infrastructural improvements, such as kick starting farms, business, and growth projects, the general level of poverty can be alleviated. As a result, the number of people who turn to human trafficking is greatly diminished, if not eliminated. In order to accomplish this plan, I will initiate a series of fundraising and awareness campaigns at Trinity College. These will be carried out by my club the Asian American Student Association, which is conducting such an event next semester. Alongside my club, I will call upon the members of the Coalition of Asian Culture Clubs, an intercollegiate alliance of Asian clubs across Connecticut, to do the same. At the end of the semester we will pool the money and support we have gathered to economically empower our selected villages in South East Asia. By doing so I hope to not only change lives, but set a precedent for what is possible in the fight against modern slavery. In essence, taking a step to bring the world as it is, to what it should be.

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