

WISE ADVICE
With White Collar @ scmp.com

Exclusive podcast interviews
with top business leaders.

[CLICK HERE](#)

[PRINT](#)

[CLOSE](#)

Slavery isn't limited to women and children

Gwi-yeop Son

Updated on Oct 06, 2008

The UN has designated this week as Dignity and Justice for Detainees Week, as part of the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Our failure to abolish slavery - detention in its most cruel form - is shocking evidence of the immense task still at hand to guarantee the basic rights and freedoms in the declaration.

When it comes to addressing the human rights of male victims of human trafficking, it seems we are only just starting to acknowledge the real scale of the problem. Trafficking is a cruel phenomenon that doesn't only target women and children. For many, it is hard to believe that men, too, are highly vulnerable to human trafficking and slavery. However, this is particularly true in sectors such as fishing, construction, agriculture and manufacturing.

Di was only 19 when he was deceived into migrating from Cambodia to Thailand. Forced to work unpaid in inhumane conditions on a fishing boat, it was three years before he set foot on dry land again. When he finally escaped, he was immediately arrested for coming into the country illegally, and then forcibly sent home, penniless. Years of his life had been stolen for the profit of others.

Until very recently, men like Di were simply deemed criminals and deported. No attention was paid to abuses suffered and no justice meted out to the perpetrators. This is because the laws and mechanisms to identify and assist victims did not extend to trafficked men.

The difference today is that countries like Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia have enacted stronger and more inclusive laws that criminalise those engaged in human trafficking, while providing greater protection to "all" victims - women, children and men. However, there are serious challenges in applying these laws. This includes getting national immigration authorities and the police to ensure equal rights

and protections to everyone, regardless of gender or nationality.

Standard practice should mean that victims themselves are asked about their needs and concerns. Sadly, this is not what happens.

Projects like the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking try to mobilise support by gathering the right information through direct contact with victims and designing appropriate responses. Research reveals that what most men want is a decent livelihood to support their loved ones - with the basic freedom to move and work. But, on a global scale, the necessary financial support simply isn't there.

In a positive development, key Asian destination countries for human trafficking are beginning to set aside more funds to support both foreign and domestic victims.

For anti-trafficking laws to work, they must be applied strictly and consistently across borders. That we need more money to do this is indisputable. That we need a better understanding of how to respond to the real needs of victims is also undeniable. While the care and treatment of victims must be tailored to the needs of each individual, dignity and justice should be applied in equal measure.

Gwi-yeop Son is the UN resident co-ordinator in Thailand

Copyright © 2008 South China Morning Post Publishers Ltd. All right reserved