

Vietnam's economic growth has improved mobility, giving people more opportunities to travel to find better jobs.

But as industries change and cities grow, so do the dangers to the country's workers. Human trafficking is becoming a bigger problem in Vietnam and the government is doing more to address the problem.

What was once an issue confined mostly to women and children who are sold into the sex industry, pressures from increasing urbanization are changing the nature of human trafficking in Vietnam.

While, demand for wives in countries like China fuel the trade, the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, says socio-economic factors are also at play. People living in rural areas with low employment, little awareness and poor education are vulnerable to ploys that could leave them as virtual slaves.

Phan Van Ngoc, former Vietnam country director for Actionaid, says Vietnam's economic situation is making people more vulnerable to trafficking. In underemployed rural areas, people want to migrate from their home village to make more money.

The issue is not confined to Vietnam. It also occurs in China, Thailand and other neighboring countries. He says the bottom line is that poor people want better lives.

"The problem is that people seek a better life and the problem is that they do not have enough information about the destination," said Ngoc. "That's why they are trapped into something that is against their will and against their basic rights."

In January, Vietnam is set to introduce the Anti-Human Trafficking Law, which the National Assembly passed in March. The law is accompanied by a \$13.5 million dollar, five-year anti-trafficking plan. The National Plan of Action for Trafficking has been welcomed by international organizations as a positive step because it goes beyond countering trafficking for sexual exploitation.

The law improves coordination among different ministries, institutions and mass organizations in Vietnam and also stresses the importance of prevention. Ngoc says the new provisions are vital to protect workers who are poorly informed about trafficking risks.

"They have to have an informed choice," Ngoc added. "It means that they should have enough information about the destination so they can decide whether or not they want to go. It's best to work at the commune and even district level in areas with a high risk of human trafficking. If they want to go, please, but there must be guidance."

Although authorities have started paying more attention to people being trafficked for cheap labor, Florian Forster, the country director for the International Organization of Migration (IOM) says that does not mean all laborers are treated badly.

"We should not think that all internal workers are exploited," said Forster. "Actually, research shows internal migrants moving to urban areas are economically better off. That's one of the reasons why they move."

Vietnam also has an official policy to promote sending temporary laborers abroad. Around 80 to 100,000 Vietnamese workers leave the country, through official channels, every year.

The United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking says labor reforms in China are actually fueling abuses among Vietnamese. A 2008 law in China mandates better pay and benefits for Chinese nationals, so Chinese employers instead hire Vietnamese laborers who are exempt from the provisions. However, Forster says the two governments are working together to tackle exploitation.

"There is some ongoing cooperation between Vietnam and China," Forster added. "This year they signed a memorandum of understanding to address trafficking in human beings so there is a legal basis for cooperation. There is also a sub-regional process involving Mekong sub-regional countries, including China."

Although Ngoc welcomes Vietnam's anti-trafficking law, he says there needs to be a firmer commitment from government agencies and outside groups to get better results. He says one reason for the lack of progress is local governments not wanting to take responsibility.

"They don't want to admit there is trafficking of Vietnamese women," Ngoc noted. "It's really sensitive, for example if you work as a provincial authority you don't want to say there is a lot of human trafficking from my own province."

He says the situation is now improving because the country's anti-trafficking law is helping to address that kind of attitude.

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