

The sweep of modern-day slavery

As the global economy shrinks, human trafficking is on the rise – and it extends far beyond prostitution



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guardian.co.uk, Thursday 25 June 2009 17.00 BST

As jobs disappear and unemployment increases, desperate people may accept worse conditions in order to have a job, even a bad one. Some businesses and individuals unscrupulously exploit this desperation in order to force others to work in poor conditions. From cacao and banana plantations in Ivory Coast, to gold mines in Ghana, to brothels in the US and Cambodia, thousands of people around the globe endure modern-day slavery, according to the US government's 2009 Trafficking in Persons Report, released this month.

Migrants pay exorbitant fees for the promise of work, only to find themselves trapped in countries where they do not speak the language doing work for which they will not be paid. Parents send children to live with and work for others, sometimes with the promise of schooling, and the children are forced to work between 16 and 20 hours each day. Employers maintain control over their workers by keeping their passports, withholding their payments and subjecting them to physical and sexual abuse.

In the US, the Bush administration focused on sex trafficking, raiding brothels and massage parlours. But while some trafficked people were offered visas and assistance, more often the raids led to arrests and deportations. They also hampered efforts to bring the traffickers to justice. I interviewed many people, including trafficked sex workers, for a report released by the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center in January 2009. We found that raids traumatised trafficked persons and discouraged them from cooperating with prosecution efforts. The Bush administration's approach also needlessly targeted adult sex workers who were not trafficked and instead willingly engaged in prostitution and enjoyed decent working conditions.

The new TIP report suggests that the Obama administration is taking a more effective approach. Instead of adopting the Bush administration's myopic focus on sex trafficking, the Obama administration has expanded the definition of

trafficking to include a wider variety of examples of labour abuses than ever before. The new report focuses on force, fraud and coercion more generally, whether in the construction, fishing, mining or other industries.

The variety of economic sectors represented is especially pertinent as the global economy shrinks. Indeed, the report says:

The UN's Office on Drugs and Crime published its second global trends in trafficking in persons in February 2009. UN officials said the worldwide rise in this form of modern-day slavery is a result of a growing demand for cheap goods and services. They expect the impact of the crisis to push more business underground to avoid taxes and unionised labour. And they anticipate increasing use of forced, cheap and child labour by multinational companies strapped by financial struggles.

Applying existing labour laws would address many abusive situations, including trafficking. Wage and hour stipulations are additional tools that are currently under-utilised. The Obama administration and the international community should also recognise informal labour situations. Many people who cannot legally work in the country where they live seek work in informal sectors – in bars and restaurants, for example, or in homes as nannies or maids, or as day labourers.

Labour rights in the US apply to everyone regardless of immigration status. These laws address working conditions and should be applied and enforced in factories and other workplaces. But these laws do not apply to live-in and domestic workers, who are often isolated and vulnerable to abuse including trafficking. They do not apply to sex workers, who are often in illegal workplaces. These laws should be expanded to apply to domestic workers and sex workers, two venues that the newest TIP report cites as particularly vulnerable to workplace abuses.