

# **Exploring the Impact of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation Toward Women Migrant Workers: A Case Study in Riau, Indonesia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The opportunity for working outside the homeland to pursue a better life is tempting, specially for those who are living unsettled in terms of economic context and with improper education. This situation has brought some issues pertaining to abuse of migrant workers, specially women. Human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation toward them are considered as criminal violation of human rights. Reports from various sources pertaining to trauma, humiliation and fear of physical violence and psychological perception are alarming. Regarding the phenomenon described, this study is intended to give a comprehensive overview on the impact of this issue in Riau, Indonesia which is considered as one of the strategic points in Indonesia where deviation of migrant workers flow occurs. Data were analyzed by considering the practical implication of socio-culture, psychology, and the aspects of national security. Pull and push factors of the situation are revealed as the trigger of the desire for working abroad by considering the interaction among communities. Recommendations for holding counselling services to the victims to minimize their psychological distress, as well as improve their well-being, become part of the rehabilitation of victims. Trafficking as part of national security will be discussed critically as part of political aspects.

Keywords: women migrant workers, human trafficking, human rights violation, impact, Riau

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Globalization has entrenched the world economy with the development of an increasingly integrated global economy marked specially by free trade, free flow of capital, and the tapping of cheaper foreign labor markets that transcend nation-state boundaries. In part, globalization disseminates practices, values, technology and other human

products throughout the globe. Globalization fosters interdependence between states for commerce and facilitates the transfer of commodities. Comparative advantage in goods and cheap labor in developing states have played a significant role in the commodification and exploitation of humans for economic ends. In developing states where agrarian lifestyles once predominated, citizens are left without education or appropriate skills to compete in an evolving work-force. To a large extent, the developing countries have become the factories and workshops for the developed countries.

A high demand for cheap labor by multinational corporations in developed countries has resulted in the trafficking and exploitation of desperate workers who, in turn, are subjected to a lifetime of slave-like conditions (Brewer, 2012). The opportunity for working outside the homeland to pursue a better life is opened, specially for those who are living unsettled in terms of economic condition and have no proper education. The number of Indonesians seeking work abroad remains very high, with an estimated 6.5 million to 9 million Indonesian migrant workers worldwide. Indonesian women are particularly vulnerable to trafficking for sexual and labor exploitation. It is estimated that between 69 to 75 percent of all overseas Indonesian workers are female, the vast majority working as domestic workers. This situation has brought some issues pertaining to abuse of migrant workers, specially women who are considered vulnerable. This condition gives an opportunity to the chief or leader among traffickers. They are organized criminal syndicates that capitalize on a lucrative sex-trafficking industry that has met with an insatiable demand. In particular, crime syndicates are notorious in identifying vulnerable females who entertain visions of a better life and may thus, be more susceptible to deceptive job opportunities in a foreign country. Once they arrive in the “destination” country, it is often too late for these vulnerable women to escape the web of deceit as they are relegated to a life of slavery.

Human trafficking violates human dignity. Trafficking of women is a mode of slavery, which occurred about 200 years ago, and which is rampant nowadays. Also, it continues to be a current international issue.

It is like a never-ending story attendant to migration. Virtually, every country in the world is affected by human trafficking for sexual exploitation or forced labor. Reliable global data are limited, but the number of victims are believed to be reaching epidemic proportions. Data taken from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report on trafficking in persons document the trafficking of human beings from 127 countries being exploited in 137 countries. Trafficking, specially of women, has become a global transnational issue. Approximately 7 to 12 billion dollars in profit are gained by the recruiters (Sulaimanova, 2016).

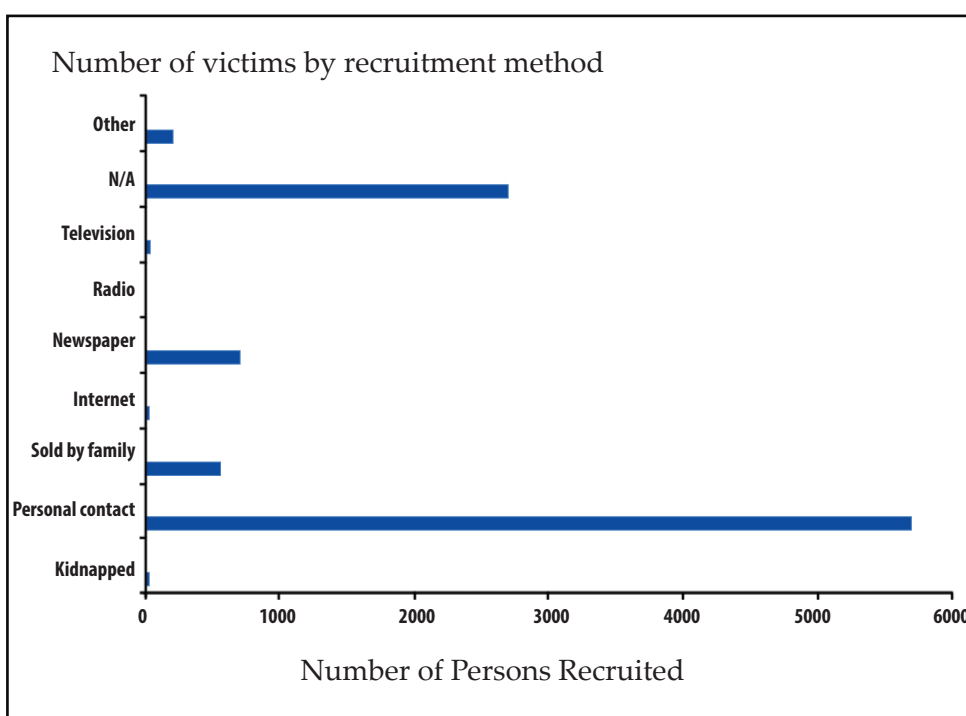
Southeast Asia is one of the regions that has vulnerability toward trafficking cases. Some countries in Southeast Asia have its own dynamism to survive and remain stable against economic crisis. These countries that remain stable are Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Malaysia, but they are also the destination of women trafficking in Southeast Asia (Euarukskul, 1995).

## **WOMEN TRAFFICKING IN RIAU: AN OVERVIEW**

Indonesia is not only a major source of human capital for trafficking but also a destination and transit country for foreign victims from neighboring countries. Internal trafficking across and between provinces and from rural to urban areas are equally pervasive. More than two-thirds of the provinces in Indonesia are destinations for internal trafficking. Riau Islands are considered as a key hub in human trafficking activities in Southeast Asia. The proximity between Singapore and Malaysia indicates that both islands are very strategic to be part of both domestic and international trafficking of women for commercial sex and domestic work, or any other purposes (Agustinanto, 2003). Recently, the supply side of trafficking and the conditions in countries of origin have received most of the attention of researchers, NGO's and policy makers. Little attention gives focus on the demand side of trafficking. The trafficking process begins with the demand for women to be employed as housemaids or in prostitution. It begins when pimps place orders for women, when pimps need new women, they contact an agent who can provide women recruits (Hughes, 2004). For trafficking to work, the traffickers have to

force or convince their victims to leave their familiar surroundings and to travel with them. This can be achieved in a number of ways. Based on the IOM Counter-Trafficking Database, which provides information on victims who have been assisted by IOM projects in 78 countries, most recruitment occurs through personal contacts (Table 1). According to the database from IOM, 46 per cent of victims knew their recruiter and 54 per cent were recruited by strangers. In addition, 52 per cent of recruiters were men and 42 per cent were women, and in 6 per cent of recruitments both men and women were involved as recruiters.

**Table 1: Number of victims by recruitment method**



Source: IOM Counter-trafficking Database

Riau Province is considered rich for its abundant natural resources. Nevertheless, human trafficking cases have remained high in Riau since the location is becoming the transit point of trading for some countries. Riau Province is also stated as the connecting port among some South East Asian countries which facilitate human trafficking. Therefore, Riau

is the hub for woman trafficking. Some of these women are traded as sex laborers (Anti, 2011).

The impact of women trafficking issue in society is multidimensional. The victims have faced economic issues and even abuse. These issues are part of governmental responsibility to guarantee the security and welfare of the citizens, specially those who are working abroad.

## **DISCUSSION: IMPACT OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING TOWARD WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS**

In the study, the researchers used qualitative approach with case study of women trafficking in Riau by focusing on the impact of the trafficking in three aspects; socio-cultural, psychological and national security. Uncertainty reduction theory and the concept of security were used to construct the research framework and support the analysis. The theory helped the construction of how perception and attitude after human trafficking experience was constructed, explored and how and why did it happen and how the victims deal with society. Meanwhile, security concerns on how this trafficking issue would probably lead to threaten the national security, especially in Riau becomes an issue.

### **Socio-culture Aspect**

There are a number of factors that lead people to migration; pull and push factors. Economic consideration is the main factor that forces people to move to another country. This phenomenon has brought woman trafficking for most of the migrants are women. The uncertain domestic economy has become a crucial factor in pushing people to work abroad or pursue opportunities to get a stable economic condition. Therefore, working abroad becomes such a big reason for people's mobility. Poverty is considered as the main factor that triggered women trafficking, specially in Indonesia. The hope for a better life by having a proper job and income has become the fundamental reason that pushed them to work even outside their country. Scholars argued that poverty and economic condition are the

main factors that lead to human trafficking. When so many people hope for a better opportunity to work abroad, the opportunity for some group of people to take advantage of said condition arises. Therefore, trafficking becomes possible when demand for labor and interest for working abroad runs high.

Poverty is one of the effects of the uneven economic development in a given country. This condition is predominant in South East Asia, Middle Asia and East Europe which have become as the active area for women trafficking. The mentioned factor is aggravated by the low wage levels in the country of origin and more job opportunities in destination countries. These have become the pull and push factors for those who are migrating. We can see that people are pushed by the uncomfortable situation to do more effort for a better life. One of the factors that triggered the high number of women trafficking is that they are promised to have a job with high payment, with young girls as the targets (Weiner, 1995). Education is a vital requirement for people who are in the labor market. Labor recruits have to understand the kind of job they would get, the requirements they need to fulfill, their rights and responsibilities pertaining to their work, the working contract and so forth. The low level of literacy is the impact of the low education development in the country (Misra, 2005).

Working abroad is a new experience for migrant workers: how to face the new environment, working with new bosses and so forth. In fact, they have to face the reality that they have become victims of human trafficking. This condition, when expectations do not meet reality, will probably affect their interaction in their destination country or their hometown after repatriation. Coming back home is another new experience for them in terms of social interaction. Status as victims of trafficking has brought them to certain social conditions that are no longer similar as before they left. Besides the social interaction, women trafficking issues have led to the spread of sexual diseases. The women victims of trafficking have become the main cause of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STD). South East Asia is the most infected area with more than 7.5 million people infected by human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

## Psychological Aspect

Psychological factors experienced by the victims of women trafficking include social burden and health conditions. Victims of sexual abuse and sexual harassment are frustrated yet depressed (Othman, 2006). Sexual harassment toward women may cause the feeling of fear, low self-esteem, unpleasant feeling, and internal conflict that lead to frustration. This was stated by Kristi Poerwandari as the head of gender study program at Universitas Indonesia. Those who have been abused and harassed during the trafficking experience are trapped in such a condition that they cannot escape from. Traumatic experience cannot be avoided. Post-traumatic reaction leads to difficulties in getting back to the former life activity, the weakening of physical health and psychological aspects, distrust and low self-confidence that complicate the process of getting back to society.

Women trafficking can threaten health and security as whole which hinders the social and economic development. Trafficking not only affects the individual as victim, but also the society and country as a solid system. Moreso, the phenomenon has impacted toward women's rights, social status, reputation of the country and national security.

## National Security Aspect

Security is a constructed concept which refers to the responsibility of the State to protect the territory and its citizen as a whole from any threat that might be caused by the trafficking issue (Weiner, 1995). Therefore, trafficking of women has become part of national security issue. National security has changed at the very basic level. The concept of national security no longer pertains to internal and external threats per se, it is also *azymutal* which refers to global threat that cannot be considered as internal or external threats. Therefore, the threat caused by human trafficking is now multidimensional. Referring to trafficking that occurred, the stagnant economic condition has led to social life among the society. More than two million Indonesian migrant workers work as unskilled workers, domestic helpers, or mill-hand farm laborers. Some of them are trapped in the trafficking activity which shows that the government has not been able to

create social welfare among the citizens. This has become one of the key aspects of national security.

Besides the social welfare issue, the feeling of being safe in their own environment is the key indicator of national security. Pleasant or unpleasant environment is such an issue in national security. If the unpleasant environment does exist because of the regime that frustrates the society, this may lead to the willingness for working abroad to get rid of the economic pressure.

In some countries as Myanmar, the regime that suppressed the citizens has caused frustration toward the people and later on they tend to choose to be migrant workers in order to escape from the internal situation (Othman, 2006). The never ending conflict in the country is one of the reasons why an unpleasant feeling has arisen (Ejalu, 2006). This condition has occurred in a number of countries, specially in East Europe, which have a long history of conflict (Dewey, 2010). In order to leave the former environment, they have to think of a way to get out and get any kind of job to survive. Therefore, registration as migrant workers is such a promising way out. Thus, the movement of people across borders is triggered by the gap of social and economic status that has arisen in this globalization era. The gap grows in between the social realities that cannot hinder the migration flow and due to the "unclear law". The reasons mentioned lead to women trafficking and are therefore difficult to handle because of the infirmity of laws and the internal country condition. Therefore, the force of law that can effectively overcome the situation is needed.

## CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, we can conclude that the trafficking of women in Riau is triggered by pull and push factors; pull factor is the tempting opportunity in the destination country to work with high wages, and push factors are the domestic conditions in their home country. Post-trafficking experience may lead to the uncertainty when the victims are back home. The process of repatriation has impacted on the social



interaction, psychological stress due to health conditions that they might be accused of being infected with sexually-transmitted diseases and so forth. Besides the psychological aspect that may occur during repatriation, victims also experience fear, low self-esteem, and frustrations caused by other unpleasant feelings and internal conflicts. Another impact that is also important is the national security aspect. The trafficking phenomenon cannot be separated from the security aspects due to internal, external, and *azymutal* threats that cause people to migrate for safety and a better life. Therefore, a solid and firm enforcement of laws is absolutely needed to prevent such a condition.

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