



Measures to counter human trafficking often harm the very people they're supposed to help

by Patty Pitts

Every day throughout the world migrants of all ages are shuttled between and within countries against their will. Some of them find themselves in forced working conditions, whether in factories, fields or private homes.

While accurate statistics for human trafficking are hard to come by, it's a sufficient problem domestically that both Canada and BC have action plans to address and attempt to eradicate this violation of human rights.

Protecting these vulnerable people is a laudable goal but it's often done without any consultation with the people themselves, says UVic gender studies professor Annalee Lepp. As a member of the Bangkok-based Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) she has, since 1996, participated in Canadian and international studies on migration and anti-trafficking interventions.

The findings have determined that, while well-intentioned, human trafficking interventions often have a negative impact on the very people they're supposed to benefit.

"The prevention of trafficking is cited as a justification to tighten borders," says Lepp, adding that protective measures instead often

jeopardize the legitimate drive and need to migrate in search of safety, employment and survival.

GAATW's 2007 report, *Canada's Role: The Impact of Anti-Trafficking Measures on Human Rights and the World* criticized interventions—such as tighter border restrictions, tougher scrutiny of targeted nationalities and those engaged in migrant sex work, and detention facilities for trafficked people—as being harmful instead of beneficial.

"There's an assumption among some state officials and NGOs that migrant women and trafficked people have no capacity to make their own decisions or have no agency," says Lepp.

She argues that governments tend to focus on identifying and prosecuting traffickers over assisting those who have been trafficked or exploited. "If people are survivors of a crime against them, shouldn't they be permitted to remain in the country and have any be permiss-

government officials and NGOs speak on their behalf and assume they know what is best."

Lepp is currently the Canadian researcher in a seven-country GAATW project examining how sex worker organizations have been impacted by anti-trafficking campaigns and interventions.

She says that many women are prevented to work in the sex industry, so all women working in the industry are trafficked. That's simply not the case," says Lepp. "It's also important to acknowledge that men and trans people also work in the industry."

"Our project examines what kind of strategies and initiatives sex worker organizations employ to address instances of coercion and abuse in the industry and to highlight their central role in addressing working conditions in this sector."

Addressing trafficking must go beyond rescue, says Lepp.

"It requires strategies that respect and meet the needs of those who are harmed rather than criminalizing them. The world community needs to offer trafficked migrants something other than a return ticket back to the conditions that may have put them in this situation in the first place."

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