

South Asia Work in Freedom Transnational Evaluation (SWiFT)

SWiFT Evaluation Overview
April 2016



Intervention research

Large numbers of South Asian women and girls migrate for work, only to be exploited as domestic workers and in textile manufacturing. Little is known about how to prevent these abuses. The South Asia Work in Freedom Transnational Evaluation (SWiFT) is a five-year programme of research and evaluation, seeking to answer the fundamental and pressing question:

How can we prevent the trafficking of women and girls for domestic work and the garment sector?

SWiFT is funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and runs alongside the *Work in Freedom* (WiF) programme, implemented by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). This multi-country intervention aims to tackle the trafficking of women into household work and clothes factories in South Asia and the Middle East.

The WiF programme:

- trains women, before they migrate, in ways to avoid exploitation and make safe choices
- improves the practices of labour recruitment agencies
- supports women at destination locations
- works with governments to improve legal and policy frameworks.



Because so little evidence exists on how to prevent trafficking, DFID has invested in strong research and evaluation of WiF, as a basis for impact in other countries in the future. To carry out the evaluation, researchers from the Gender, Violence and Health Centre (GVHC) of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) work with specialist research institutions Drishti in Bangladesh, The Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) in India and The Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM) in Nepal. They are evaluating WiF activities in order to answer key questions:

- What puts migrant workers, particularly women, at risk of being exploited? What might protect them from these abuses?
- How do women who want to migrate for work gather information and make decisions about how to migrate?
- In what ways does the ILO's programme help women protect themselves against exploitation and instead empower them to migrate safely to earn a good wage in decent jobs?



SWiFT is timely and unique research. By the end of 2018, SWiFT aims to provide robust evidence to strengthen programmes that promote women's access to safe and decent jobs. Work in the selected study sites will offer new and practical findings on:

- the scope and characteristics of labour trafficking
- forms and dynamics of exploitation experienced by female labour migrants
- information-seeking and decision-making patterns among prospective migrants and their families
- promising strategies to help women who choose to migrate do so safely, find decent work and avoid labour exploitation.

To develop evidence to inform the Work in Freedom Programme, the SWIFT evaluation includes:

- surveys to identify migration dynamics, pre-migration knowledge and decision-making and risks associated with exploitation
- longitudinal cohort studies to learn about women's migration trajectories and the potential longer-term influence of WiF activities
- pre- and post-knowledge surveys to assess the effects of pre-migration activities.



Why is this work important?

Human trafficking and modern forms of slavery remain global scourges of the 21st century. Many goods and services are, indeed, provided by extraordinarily exploited labourers. A recent multi-country study of human trafficking¹ in the Mekong region of Southeast Asia conducted by the LSHTM and the International Organization for Migration found that trafficking survivors had been exploited in over 15 different sectors, including:

- men and boys trafficked for deep sea fishing
- women and girls trafficked as brides, domestic workers and sex workers
- children trafficked for street-begging and car cleaning
- people trafficked for work in farming, factories, food processing, construction and other commonly under-regulated sectors

Over the past decade, there has been growing international acknowledgement of employment arrangements that have been referred to as 'modern slavery'. The current magnitude of labour exploitation cannot be blamed solely on a few unscrupulous actors or organised criminals but is instead attributable to worldwide quests for ever cheaper services and goods.



1. Ligia Kiss et al, Health of men, women, and children in post-trafficking services in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam: an observational cross-sectional study. *The Lancet Global Health*. DOI: 10.1016/S2214-109X(15)70016-1.

These demands create the space for the exploitative employment of millions of aspiring labour migrants from some of the world's poorest areas. It is not sufficient to punish the perpetrators of egregious acts of human trafficking after the fact – larger systems have to shift in order to help people earn a decent living by working in safe conditions of employment.

Making the necessary political and economic changes that foster safe and fair labour conditions will not be quick or easy. Meanwhile, campaigns have tried to warn people about the possibility of being trafficked if they choose to migrate for work. However, research shows that these dire warnings often appear to go unheeded. This is not because people are naïve or obstinate but rather because their general reality tells them a different story. Labour migration has existed for centuries, and today millions of workers around the world migrate safely. Many migrant workers return to villages and towns with success stories. Fewer admit to failures. More importantly, many live in poverty and do not have a sensible alternative.



As climate change continues to cause failing crops and decreasing farmland, and people are displaced and lose employment options as a result of long-term humanitarian crises, a great many people choose to migrate from necessity. These individuals might best be viewed as aspiring and resourceful. Instead of, or along with, messages about the risks of human trafficking and work to repair a system that disadvantages so many workers, it is important to help people find safe ways to migrate. Prospective labour migrants need information about how to avoid exploitative recruitment arrangements, extortionate labour contracts and abusive working conditions. Some of this advice will come from other successful returning migrants. Changes will also depend on employers who create good working conditions for hard-working prospective labour migrants and the contributions of labour rights groups who empower workers. Other guidance will come from research such as SWIFT, which will contribute to a stronger evidence base about the ways migrants can navigate systems that disadvantage them.

Adapted from Dr Cathy Zimmerman: "Are we still served by slaves in the 21st century?" 17 Oct 2015, www.trust.org/item/20151017091705-90rgy/

