

COMPANIES MUST ENSURE SUPPLY CHAIN FREE OF FORCED LABOUR

Human trafficking 'a concern for every country'

Singapore could do more to address issue, such as bilateral agreements with source countries, says expert

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SINGAPORE – Faced with debts and abandoned by her husband, Ms Tata's (not her real name) college friend introduced her to someone who promised her a job at a restaurant in Singapore. The Indonesian mother of one arrived last March in the hope of earning a living. Instead, she was forced to work as a sex worker in Geylang for about a month.

Her ordeal began shortly after she travelled from Yogyakarta to Singapore via Batam. After she was picked up at HarbourFront and taken to Aljunied Crescent, Ms Tata began asking about the restaurant job, but her questions were left unanswered. Only after she was told to dress up and taken to

Geylang, did she realise that she would be working as a sex worker.

Although she wanted to run away, her freedom was restricted and she was constantly monitored by other sex workers. Her situation was made worse by the fact that she did not know her way around Singapore.

"I did what I had to do and got some customers," said Ms Tata yesterday, as she told her story with the help of a translator to 80 participants at a human trafficking seminar at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

The International Labour Organization has estimated that 20.9 million people were in forced labour in 2012, with 4.5 million sexually exploited, 14.2 million exploited for labour and 2.2 million in state-imposed forced labour. In the Asia-Pacific region, 11.7 million are estimated to be in forced labour.

Singapore is considered a destination country, but experts at the seminar yesterday — presented by SMU and the Singapore Inter-Agency Taskforce on Trafficking in Persons

— said trafficking was a concern for every country.

Besides sexual exploitation, where the victims are largely women and children, awareness has emerged in recent years of labour exploitation, such as in the agriculture and construction industries, for which a greater proportion of victims are males, said Mr Jonathan Martens, Senior Migrant Assistance Specialist for Asia and the Pacific at the International Organization for Migration.

The inter-agency task force here is co-chaired by the Home Affairs and Manpower ministries and supported by agencies such as the Attorney-General's Chambers, said Mr Zhang Weihang, a member of the task force secretariat and a Deputy Director at the Ministry of Home Affairs.

The Government does not have all the answers and partners civil society to address the "multifaceted" issue, he said. Efforts include regular visits to task forces in other countries, he said.

Migration researcher Sallie Yea said Singapore could do more. The Republic does not have anti-traffick-

ing bilateral agreements with source countries, which impedes investigations — an issue she has raised with the task force. "The other thing is, I have referred cases of labour trafficking to the Ministry of Manpower and it has accepted those as having elements of labour trafficking ... and yet, I would see the lorries of the same companies out in the streets, deploying workers to public works," she said. "I think that's unacceptable in a country like Singapore."

The private sector must also play its part, such as by ensuring a supply chain free of forced labour, said experts. In virtual trafficking — which includes child pornography and where images of sexual abuse are shared or sold — commercial and technological companies are complicit if their payment channels or platforms are used, said Ms Bindu Sharma, Asia-Pacific Policy Director of the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children in Singapore.

The companies could remove and block such content or do data mining to assess trends, for instance.

As for Ms Tata, an encounter with volunteers who were reaching out to sex workers in Geylang helped her emerge from the nightmare. She left Singapore for Batam in April last year, but did not elaborate on how her ordeal ended. Yesterday, the petite woman said she might, in fact, begin working with the volunteers in Geylang to train others in awareness on sex trafficking.

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