

External contribution

Preventing human trafficking through empowering at-risk communities in Vietnam

Authors: Christina Bui, Diep Vuong, Diane Truong, Loan Luong, Tien Nguyen

Non-profit organisation: Pacific Links Foundation

Introduction: migration from Vietnam to Europe

Over the past 10 years, the number of Vietnamese migrants undertaking the journey from Vietnam to Europe has increased. European countries with a significant Vietnamese diaspora, such as Germany, Poland, France, and the UK, are popular destinations for migrants to seek work, whether as contract-based or irregular migrants. Other peripheral countries have also become transit or destination countries (or both) for such migrants. For example, due to its location between Germany and France and having access to the English Channel, Belgium has become a popular transit country for traffickers to smuggle irregular migrants through before moving them to France and/or the UK.

In October 2019, the deaths of 39 Vietnamese migrants in a refrigerated truck in Essex sparked widespread international attention to the phenomenon of inconspicuously smuggling and trafficking irregular migrants from Vietnam through Europe to the UK. Driven by economic, familial, and social factors, migrants pay upwards of €50,000 for their risky, irregular journeys to Europe. In reality, once they arrive in Europe, they are vulnerable to labor and/or sexual exploitation with limited resources at their disposal to receive assistance.

It is not always the case that only irregular migrants are vulnerable; even those who come to Europe with legal work contracts are at risk of exploitation. In November 2021, 500 Vietnamese migrant workers who had valid work contracts were found living and working in horrid conditions at a Chinese tire factory in Serbia. All 500 migrants had paid brokerage fees up to US\$4,000 (€3,240) to secure the work contracts and for their travels. After the discovery, the migrants had to decide to go back to Vietnam, stay with the factory in Serbia, or irregularly migrate to other European countries. With debt stemming from the brokerage fees, many felt they had very limited options to choose from.

Through our work on the ground, Pacific Links Foundation has identified three key issues, especially when vulnerable people search for jobs far away from home: 1) fake news, 2) misinformation and 3) false job opportunities. A term that is often linked to false job recruitment is “*việc nhẹ, lương cao*” (“easy work with a high salary”). A typical story of deceit could involve making upwards of £3,000 (€3,542) a month working in a nail salon in the UK, which they could then use to pay off their debts.

In addition, the resulting economic impact of COVID-19 since 2020 has left more people searching for work far from home, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation. Industrial zones, for example, reduced working hours or laid off thousands of workers due to COVID-19 restrictions or a reduction in orders from buyers. This left many unemployed or underemployed at home, where they may be spending more time on social media and exposed to false job promises.

What is promised to job seekers and potential migrants may not be their reality once they leave Vietnam. Once trapped by the false narrative, they are essentially locked into debt bondage, struggling to find any means to pay off the huge amount owed.

All Vietnamese migrants in Europe who we have spoken with have expressed going into debt to fund their journey. Many women have encountered dangerous situations. They often do not inform their families back home in Vietnam for fear of having them worry or putting their families in danger. By staying quiet about the dangers and mistreatment they encountered in their journey, potential migrants in Vietnam are unaware of the true situation in Europe. Migrants may inadvertently perpetuate the myth that overseas work is more lucrative than seeking a job domestically, when in reality it may not be better than jobs at home in Vietnam. Therefore, the work of preventing unsafe migration in the origin country is important now more than ever.

Empowerment as a form of prevention

Pacific Links Foundation is an American non-governmental organization (NGO) with over 20 years of experience delivering innovative, evidence-based solutions to increase access to education and prevent human trafficking in Vietnam and transit and destination countries across Europe and Asia. Since 2001, we have served over 200,000 youth, women, and men in communities, factories, and schools with culturally competent content. Over the years, we have built a diverse network globally in the public and private sectors to build capacity while incorporating technology to scale reach.

We know that access to reliable information is key to reducing trafficking and unsafe migration. Throughout all of our prevention and protection programs for at-risk communities, we empower beneficiaries with the knowledge and skills to make the right decisions for themselves and their families.

Empowerment in supply chains

In recent years, Vietnam has become one of the fastest growing markets for manufacturing and sourcing. As a result, there is a steady increase in youth migrating from rural areas to industrial/urban areas. Many of these workers are vulnerable to smugglers and traffickers posing as labor brokers falsely promising better jobs. As a response to the issues, we developed Factory Awareness to Counter Trafficking (FACT), PAXU safe migration and workers' well-being app, and Empower Migrants (EMMI) as solutions to sustainably reduce forced labor and trafficking risk for low-wage labor workers in Vietnam and beyond.

The FACT Training Program equips factory managers and workers with the knowledge they need to protect themselves, their workplace, and communities from human trafficking and forced labor risks.¹ FACT also helps brands and suppliers better comply with international supply chain transparency laws on modern slavery. FACT training modules include:

1. the current state of forced labor and human trafficking;
2. tactics used by traffickers and the different forms of exploitation;
3. laws on modern slavery and supply chain transparency;
4. safeguarding oneself and one's families and coworkers from trafficking/forced labor;
5. recommendations for managers on protecting their workers and proactively monitoring recruitment channels; and
6. financial literacy to prevent debt bondage.

The EMMI programme transforms women migrant workers into leaders, giving them, their families and their communities the skills and networks needed for safe migration and recruitment. We also strengthen the capacity of stakeholders in companies, factories, provincial recruitment offices and legal aid centres to protect workers from trafficking and forced labour in the supply chain. Through EMMI, we are establishing more robust systems of ethical recruitment to improve access to safe economic opportunities and reduce the vulnerability of communities at risk to trafficking and forced labour.

Case study: Meet Kim

Kim* is a migrant worker participating in Empower Migrants (EMMI) program activities since 2018. Back then, Kim did not prioritize attending EMMI activities because she wanted to spend time with her family during the weekend. After attending several leadership training sessions, she realized that EMMI activities improved her knowledge about caring for her family and protecting relatives and friends from human trafficking and forced labor. She became an enthusiastic member and tried to learn everything the trainers taught her.

¹⁷⁵ We make distinctions based on the definitions outlined by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR)'s Palermo Protocol of 2000 (for human trafficking or trafficking in persons") and the International Labour Organization's Forced Labor Convention of 1930 (for "forced or compulsory labour"). In the Anti-Trafficking Review's 2015 Issue 5, they laid out the importance of acknowledging overlapping and distinguishing factors between the terminology—for example, in combating the systemic differences, biases, interventions, and punishments; and how victims are received and protected.

Since Vietnam's worst Covid-19 wave hit in May 2021, Kim had her work hours reduced. When factories shut down, she quarantined at home. She used her free time at home to complete 10 online courses through Pacific Links Foundation's online learning platform. She learned more about safe migration and Covid-19 government support—information she shared with others in her EMMI group.

Kim also used this opportunity to participate in local Covid-19 prevention efforts to support community members facing hardships, including sharing information on Covid-19 vaccines and complying with public health measures. "Awareness is the best vaccine," Kim shared.

*Name changed for confidentiality

Empowerment through continual learning

Vietnam's Revision of the Law on Contract-Based Vietnamese Overseas Workers, also referred to as "Law 69," contains provisions on the rights and protections for migrant workers seeking work or currently working abroad. Included in Law 69 is a provision prohibiting excessive costs related to brokerage fees to obtain an overseas work contract. With the law adopted in November 2020 and enacted in January 2022, migrant workers may not be aware of the constantly changing news regarding their rights.

Our safe migration and workers' well-being app, PAXU, enables users to think through their decision to migrate for work far away from home. The proliferation of fake news and misinformation, driven by social media, may lead people to make dangerous, life-changing decisions based on this misleading information; therefore, PAXU is pertinent to fight against misinformation by providing vetted information to users, which is constantly updated.

Information related to Law 69, for example, is provided on PAXU. The self-learning feature in the app focuses on workforce readiness skills such as financial literacy and English language through microlearning. All aspects of the app continually provide updated information pertaining to job seekers' migration journey.

Empowerment through cross-sector and cross-border partnerships

We recognize the importance of partnerships across borders and sectors in trafficking prevention, especially because the act of human trafficking itself transcends boundaries. Our Capacity Building for Responders (CaRes) program provides tools, resources, and training for frontline responders. Through our cultural competency training, available as in-person or online real-time training workshops and as modularized online self-paced courses, we equip responders with the knowledge and culturally sensitive skills to identify and provide Vietnamese migrants and victims of trafficking (VoTs) with timely and proper care through adopting an empathetic approach.

Our goal is to make resources available on an ongoing basis with flexibility for responders. Our pocket guide, which contains interview questions in both Vietnamese and English or another European language, is a tool responders can use to break down language barriers. Our online support line is supported by our culturally fluent mediators who help facilitate conversations with Vietnamese migrants and advise frontline responders and organizations on cases involving Vietnamese migrants and VoTs.

Our previous cross-border partnership with two UK-based nonprofit organizations, ECPAT UK and Anti-Slavery International, resulted in the 2019 "Precarious Journeys" report, which outlined the vulnerabilities Vietnamese migrants face at each stage of their journey from Vietnam to Europe. In addition, we supported ECPAT UK with releasing their three-minute fiction video, "The Secret Gardeners," on a Vietnamese boy's journey to the UK and subsequent exploitation.

In collaboration with The British Council Vietnam and 021 Station, we released a Vietnamese language podcast called “Bước tới tương lai (Step to the Future),” for youth and local communities in Vietnam to better understand the different facets of safe migration and human trafficking prevention. Topics explored include working abroad, studying abroad, visiting another country, and financial literacy.

Case study: Effective cross-border collaboration

In January 2020, Pacific Links Foundation partnered with Allison*, a law enforcement officer based with an embassy in Berlin, to organize an in-person training for frontline responders. We invited her to partake in our online training for German police and customs officers in May 2021 with an updated curriculum to reflect the current realities.

“Really interesting to see how you have adapted/expanded the presentation. And very cool that so many police colleagues have joined from all across Germany!” Allison said. “Everyone in the break-out and networking sessions seemed motivated and interested. These workshops can make a real difference, making the officers look at the migrants from a different perspective. Impressive work from all of you.”

Through surveys and focus group discussions, participants have often expressed to us that they found the group discussions to be most helpful: “To have the experiences of other colleagues, to hear their problems, to hear their solutions, from the research perspective it was like a workshop we normally do in the course of our project.”

**Name changed for confidentiality*

Look into the future

Throughout our decades of prevention activities, a common theme is that constant exposure and continual information are needed to keep at-risk communities up-to-date. This is supported by all of our programs; now that target communities have easier access to new technologies, we are able to provide information from trusted sources and train those communities on the dangers of trafficking. Prevention is key in countries of origin like Vietnam to give us a chance at preventing at-risk individuals from falling victim to traffickers’ promises of high-paying, easy work abroad.

Pacific Links Foundation is an American non-governmental organization based in Vietnam. More information about our work can be found on our website <http://www.pacificlinks.org> and our Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/PacificLinks>. Our team can be contacted via email at cares@pacificlinks.org or through our 24/7 support line (+84 988 488 000).