

## "Bound by debt": smuggling and trafficking of Vietnamese victims

*In 2019, 39 Vietnamese nationals died in a refrigerated lorry during their illegal journey from their home country to the United Kingdom. It is this tragic event, also known as the Essex tragedy – examined by Ghent Court of Appeal on 22 December - that Myria, the independent national rapporteur on trafficking in human beings, evokes in its annual evaluation report "Bound by debt".*

The smuggling and trafficking of Vietnamese nationals to and within Europe has risen sharply in recent years. Recruited by smugglers on the basis of false promises of employment, these migrants incur heavy debts for this purpose. Often smuggled into the United Kingdom, putting their lives at risk, they are exploited during their journey (including in Belgium) and/or upon arrival to pay off the smuggling debts: this is known as *debt bondage*.

### Considering illegally employed Vietnamese workers as presumed victims of human trafficking

In light of this, Myria recommends that frontline services who discover Vietnamese nationals working illegally in certain sectors - such as nail bars, exotic restaurants, and probably also cannabis plantations - should consider them, on the basis of relevant indicators, as presumed victims of human trafficking. They should subsequently apply the national referral mechanism for victims so that the latter can be referred to the specialised reception centres. In some cases, the victims may be trapped in debt bondage situations by the smugglers. At the reception centres, victims can be made to feel safe and regain control of their lives.

Moreover, Vietnamese victims in this situation are very vulnerable and highly dependent on their exploiters. They often have no freedom of movement or self-determination and are socio-culturally isolated, their exploiters being Vietnamese themselves in most instances. In the Essex case, the victims were even locked up in safehouses, namely in Brussels. It is unlikely that they would be able to take the initiative to present themselves as victims to a frontline service or reception centre.

### Ongoing training in trafficking indicators is essential

It is therefore vital that frontline services are made aware of these indicators and that they have the necessary means to investigate and intervene, which isn't currently the case. Ongoing training of frontline services in human trafficking indicators is also crucial, with a particular focus on the cultural context of Vietnamese nationals, in order to more easily gain the victims' trust. The training of all stakeholders by NGOs with expertise in Vietnamese culture, as has already been organised, is an example of a good practice to be continued.

Finally, the use of social media, financial investigations and international collaboration, as demonstrated in the Essex case, are key elements in the collection of evidence.

Download the [2022 Annual report trafficking and smuggling of human beings](#). The publication is available on Myria's website: [www.myria.be](http://www.myria.be).

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