A REVIEW OF TIP RESEARCH IN THE MEKONG REGION (2008-2018)

In 2019, the NEXUS Institute, in partnership with USAID Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons Program (USAID Asia CTIP), produced two reviews of research conducted on Trafficking in Persons (TIP) in the Mekong region between 2008 and 2018:

1. Quality and rigor in TIP research in the Mekong region: Assessing the evidence base; and

2. Exploring the Evidence: A Review of Research on Trafficking in Persons for Agriculture, Construction and Domestic Work in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam.

Both reports reviewed 480 studies published between 2008 and 2018 on TIP in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam (please see the report here for full methodology.). Together, they provide an overview of existing research gaps and the quality and rigor of TIP research in the Mekong region. Mapping the landscape of this TIP research (in scope and nature) is essential in determining what already exists and what research may be needed.

MAIN FINDINGS

Overrepresentation of Particular Economic Sectors

Findings from the reviews showed that while considerable research has been conducted on TIP, substantial knowledge gaps persist. Some economic sectors were overrepresented while others were underrepresented. For example, trafficking for agriculture, construction, and domestic work in the Mekong region have received minimal consideration when compared with trafficking for sexual exploitation, fishing, and manufacturing. Of the 480 TIP studies published between 2008 and 2018 only 92 included some information about human trafficking in agriculture, construction, and/or domestic work, but with varying levels of specificity. Furthermore, this research was generally conducted in conjunction with other economic sectors analysis. This research was generally not sector-specific nor presented in a way that enhanced an understanding of important aspects, such as how TIP takes place in that sector, where specific risks and vulnerabilities lie, and what the protection and prosecution needs of victims exploited in that sector might be.

Very few studies (37 of 480) focused exclusively on one of the three sectors – 23 studies on TIP in agriculture, 10 on TIP for domestic work and four on TIP in construction. This contrasts sharply with the 111 studies focused exclusively on trafficking for sexual exploita-tion and 50 studies on TIP in the fishing industry. Other economic sectors are also less studied, including mining and forestry. Also, TIP for marriage, begging, forced criminality, and forced labor for the military are underresearched. While TIP research is limited, media reporting in the same period noted exploitation in these sectors, sometimes rising to the level of human trafficking, indicating that lack of research should not be taken to mean lack of TIP in these sectors.

Limited Focus on Particular Trafficking Trends and Patterns

Another noticeable finding is that research tends to focus on specific trends and geographical movement patterns. For instance, the few studies that focus solely on agriculture are limited in geographical scope, with destination countries outside of the Me-kong region (to Israel, Finland, South Korea, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States). For example, nine of the 23 studies on trafficking for agriculture were about Thai and Vietnamese nationals exploited in Sweden and Finland for berry picking. The ten studies on trafficking for domestic work predominantly centered on adult female workers from the Mekong (Cam-bodia, Myanmar, Thailand and

Viet Nam) trafficked in East and Southeast Asia (Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand) and neglected male and child victims. Studies on TIP in the construction sector are also focused on a particular trend; three of the four studies exclusively on this topic described the exploitation of adult males from Thailand in the construction industry in United Arab Emirates. While focusing on particular patterns and trends, particular-ly over time, can generate in-depth understanding, it may also make these appear more prominent and mean that others go unacknowledged and unstudied.

Quality of TIP Research is Variable

Alongside gaps in research on TIP, the research re-views found that of the 480 studies published on TIP, not all were technically sound, methodologically rig-orous, and/or ethically robust. As a result, the overall quality of TIP research and data collection is limited.

A number of the reviewed studies did not appropri-ately define terms and concepts and in some cases, they were inconsistently applied. For example, varying terms would be used to describe the same phenom-enon (e.g. "human trafficking", "modern slavery", and "forced labor"). This may lead to confusion in understanding the issue and ambiguity towards who is considered a trafficking victim.

The data sources used in the studies were not always suitable to answer the proposed research questions, leading to inappropriate use of data and incomplete conclusions. Many studies presented research questions that could not feasibly be addressed by the data sources used and research questions remained unanswered. Moreover, many studies included data sets and research samples that were not clearly disaggregated or explained, leading to a lack of information on the sample size and characteristics of respondents, such as age, gender, occupation, and so on. Many studies also did not transparently discuss their research approaches, methods, and limitations. Half of the studies that included primary data clearly described the research methods, data sources, and research instruments, while the other half provided only a vague description of the research approach, method and processes.

A significant number of studies did not include discussions of ethical considerations or approaches. Only 39 per cent of the studies that included primary data col-lection (91 studies) discussed ethical considerations, less than half of which (41) provided clear and detailed explanation of ethical protocols and procedures. Few studies (only 29%) discussed practices and procedures for quality assurance throughout the research process and most studies did not provide any information about the review process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations point to ways that high quality and relevant TIP research can be conducted in the Mekong region going forward.

- Generate evidence about TIP in under-researched economic sectors, including agriculture, construction, and domestic work.
- Identify and access varying data sources and data providers to contribute to the knowledge base on TIP.
- Clearly explain how data was collected and analyzed (the approach, methods, and process).
- Conduct a thorough literature review to prepare for all TIP research and to support analysis.
- Ensure that data sources utilized are appropriate for answering research questions.
- Include clearly articulated limitations in data collection, analysis, and overall findings of the research.
- Consider when and if it adds value to conduct repeat studies on the same pattern and trend, to design research that builds on current research base, or to conduct research in new or underrepresented areas.
- Clearly identify and define terms and concepts used in TIP research.
- Adhere to legal and ethical requirements for all TIP research and explain how they were followed.

For the full methodology and bibliography, please visit:
https://www.winrock.org/document/quality-and-rigor-in-tip-research-in-the-mekong-region/