



International  
Labour  
Organization



# Work in Freedom

**Reducing vulnerability to trafficking of women and girls  
in South Asia and the Middle East**

*Supporting informed migration, fair recruitment and decent work*



UK Department for International Development (DFID)

## Women and girls on the move in South Asia

For millions of poor people in South Asia, migration is an important alternative to the realities of home. People move long distances in pursuit of jobs for varying reasons ranging from economic aspirations or loss of habitat resulting from processes of economic transformation, poverty, climate change, gender based violence or conflict. While some migrate internally, many also migrate abroad. For women and girls, especially of indigenous, dalit or low-income backgrounds, the experience of further impoverishment and discrimination makes migration a viable option. While many are able to improve their livelihoods in cities at home or abroad, many also face deception by recruitment intermediaries or exploitation by employers – practices that amount to forced labour.

The Work in Freedom programme adopts an integrated and targeted approach to reduce vulnerability to trafficking of women and girls in South Asian countries of origin (Bangladesh, India and Nepal) and in selected destination countries (India, Jordan and Lebanon). It expects to reach to at least 200,000 women and girls by 2018.

### The challenge

Domestic work and the garment sectors in the Middle East and India employ women and girls from South Asia. Reports of abuse from these workplaces include unpaid wages, confiscation of identity documents, long working hours without days off, restrictions on movement, deception about terms and conditions of work, sexual violence and intimidation – all indicative of instances of forced labour and trafficking. ILO estimates that 12.3 million of the nearly 21 million women, men and children in forced labour globally are found in the Asia and Pacific and Middle East regions. The majority are exploited in economic activities outside the sex industry, such as domestic work or the textile and garment sector. Some 55 per cent of all victims of forced labour are women and girls.

Key factors contributing to situations of forced labour include weak labour protections for migrant garment and domestic workers, ineffective recruitment and contracting policies and practices, poor access to basic services in source communities, and information asymmetries shaping labour markets.

To address these challenges, the Work in Freedom Programme has set up a series of interventions engaging migrants, civil groups, businesses and regulators in a collaborative effort to begin addressing the multiple facets of forced labour in source and destination areas of migrant domestic and garment workers. Interventions are designed to reduce vulnerability to forced labour along those channels and shape fairer labour markets. Activities focus on promoting mobility by choice, fair recruitment to decent jobs and safety and dignity for migrant workers.

**Work in Freedom uses an integrated approach to promote mobility by choice among women and girls from destination countries (India, Bangladesh and Nepal) to decent jobs with safety and dignity of workers in destination countries (India, Lebanon and Jordan) through fair recruitment processes.**



Project duration: 2013-2018



Project budget: £8.3 million

## **It's about mobility by choice**

The programme includes context tailored interventions to support more informed and prepared migration both by directly targeting migrants and by working with groups and institutions that work with migrants.

On the one hand interventions strengthen both migrants' and aspiring migrants' understanding of their own rights in the context of patriarchy, mobility and work. This includes building women's capacity to assert their rights in likely situations of potential disempowerment such as access to entitlements, relations with relatives, labour recruiters, agents of different types, border officials, employers and other stakeholders. From another angle the programme provides guidance and referral support for local and regional groups and institutions to better guarantee labour mobility and livelihood options for migrating women.

The programme has partnered with international organizations such as the Global Alliance Against Trafficking of Women (GAATW), Anti-Slavery International (ASI), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), and multiple national organizations and social partners. More than 170,000 women in Bangladesh, Nepal and India have already benefited from interventions such as door to door visits, orientation sessions, referral services, pre-decision counseling sessions, street drama, life skill training and other outreach initiatives to promote more informed migration and livelihood choices. The programme builds-on, rather than adds-on, community groups, structures and programmes that support women's empowerment, employment and social protection.

The programme also strengthens migrant collective support networks through worker centres, organizing, training and information.

## **It's about fair recruitment to decent jobs**

In South Asia, the pathways to jobs in domestic, garment and other similar sectors within the region or to the Middle East are intersected by various agents or contractors in an environment shaped by multiple rules and practices determining the mobility of aspiring workers. The fluidity and segmentation of labour supply chains are such that none of the key stakeholders such as labour recruiters, regulators and even employers can guarantee on their own, a fair migration outcome for any worker. In spite of strong public calls to protect migrating women from the pitfalls of trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery, in practice the presumed responsibility of ensuring fair migration outcomes is eroded among multiple formal and informal stakeholders. Migrants therefore face multiple risks and challenges in their efforts to find jobs such as paying exorbitant fees, taking out high-interest loans ahead of their departure that can lead them into debt bondage, lengthy transit routes to avoid travel bans, deception about the nature and conditions of work, having contracts substituted by less favourable ones on arrival, having passports confiscated, being subject to illegal wage deductions, threats or physical violence.

Work in Freedom works with employers, with labour recruiters, workers and regulators both in the places of origin and destination of migrant workers, to support better regulation and practices of recruitment. It reviews laws and regulations on foreign employment and recruitment, and it also tests and assesses recruitment practices. It also works with migrant rights organizations and trade unions to increase accountability in the recruitment process.

The programme is part of the Fair Recruitment Initiative of the ILO and has partnered with organisations such as the International Confederation of Private Employment Agencies (Ciett), the Institute of Human Rights and Business (IHRB), Verite and the International Training Centre of the ILO and trained over 100 members of private recruitment agencies including recruitment agency associations. It is also developing operational parameters to assess fair recruitment practices for possible scale-up or replication.

## It's about dignity and decent work for workers

There are multiple, overlapping laws, policies and practices spanning across borders that generate environments where migrant garment and domestic workers are herded and trapped into forced labour. These laws and regulatory practices affect working and living conditions, migration options and mobility. They differ considerably across countries, mobility regimes, contracting practices, sectors of employment and labour practices.

The Work in Freedom Programme has and is developing strategic alliances with programmes and organisations such as Better Work Jordan, the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, Migrant Forum Asia (MFA), GAATW, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), Ministries of Labour, Local Governments and other social partners in order to review current gaps in decent work and propose evidence based solutions.

Policy briefs, round tables and coordinated advocacy efforts by partner organisations on areas such as domestic work and women's mobility have played an important role in guiding migration, foreign employment and labour policies and practices in Nepal and India. The programme is also working on policy reviews and advocacy in policy domains that can significantly aggravate or diminish vulnerability to forced labour such as gender based violence, discrimination, social protection, collective bargaining, living wages and anti-trafficking laws relating to domestic and garment work.

## Producing evidence for better policies and practices

Interventions draw upon a robust evidence base on what works and what doesn't. Building up such an evidence base is an important component of Work in Freedom. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) is working in close collaboration with ILO by conducting a formative research assessing intervention in communities. Qualitative and quantitative methods are applied to assess the effectiveness of interventions focused on influencing decision making and capacity to identify and act on risk factors influencing migrant women at different stages in their migration experience. The Work in Freedom Programme has published other studies on recruitment, domestic workers and migration bans:

No Easy Exit, Migration Bans affecting Women from Nepal (ILO, 2015)

Indispensable yet unprotected: working conditions of Indian domestic workers at home and abroad (ILO, 2015)

For a fee: the business of recruiting Bangladeshi women for domestic work in Jordan and Lebanon (ILO, 2015)

Intertwined: Employers and migrant domestic workers in Lebanon (ILO, 2016)

Resisting servitude and gradual shifts toward recognition and dignity of labour: A study of employers of domestic workers in two metropolitan cities of Delhi and Mumbai (ILO, 2016)

Further publications are expected in areas of recruitment, employers of domestic workers and policy determinants of forced labour.

### For more information please contact:

Igor Bosc, Chief Technical Advisor, Work in Freedom, ILO DWT for South Asia and Country Office for India, Core 4B 3rd Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodi Road, New Delhi 110 003, India.

Email: [bosc@ilo.org](mailto:bosc@ilo.org)

[www.ilo.org/forcedlabour](http://www.ilo.org/forcedlabour)