Labor Migration and Trafficking among Vietnamese Migrants in Asia

By
DANIÈLE BÉLANGER

Asia is known as a continent where human trafficking is particularly prevalent. Departing from the bulk of research on trafficking in Asia that focuses on illegal migration and prostitution, this article examines the embeddedness of human trafficking in legal temporary migration flows. This analysis uses survey and interview data to document the experiences of Vietnamese migrants who worked in East Asian countries. It identifies a continuum of trafficking, abuse, exploitation, and forced labor, and examines how exploitation begins at the recruitment stage with the creation of bonded labor. Guest-worker programs in destination countries put migrants in particularly precarious situations, which do, in some cases, qualify as trafficking. I argue that temporary migration programs may create the conditions that lead to extreme forms of exploitation among many legal migrant workers in the region.

Keywords: labor migration; unskilled labor; Vietnam; Southeast Asia

In 2010, approximately half of all international migrants migrated for the purpose of labor (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2010). A significant proportion of these migrants labored as temporary workers in unskilled or low-skilled jobs. The ILO identifies these migrants as a particularly vulnerable group, along with migrant women, trafficked persons,

Danièle Bélanger is professor of geography at the Université Laval in Québec, Canada. Her research focuses on migrants in precarious situations, including low-skilled temporary labor migrants, undocumented migrants, and marriage migrants in Asia and North America.