

MIGRATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

A Call to Action for Christians



**LOVING THE SOJOURNER
RESISTING SYSTEMS THAT HOLD THEM CAPTIVE**



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

ELCA Service and Justice
Asia Pacific Desk



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. *Introduction*
2. *Lutheran Hope Cambodia Organization Story*
3. *What Does the Bible Say?*
4. *What Drives Migration and Human Trafficking?*
5. *Testimonies*
6. *New Life Center Foundation Story*
7. *Empowerment of Women and Girls*
8. *Responding As Faith Communities*
9. *What Can We Pledge to Increase Awareness and Action?*

1. Introduction

Migration and human trafficking pose serious questions to which Christians must respond in a faithful manner. On the one hand, these are not new problems: the Old Testament patriarch Joseph, for instance, was trafficked to Egypt, and generations later, Jesus and his family fled as migrants to this same region. On the other hand, the issues of migration and trafficking have grown in scope and complexity since ancient times, demanding renewed attention today.

It is important to understand key differences between migration and human trafficking. Migration, as defined by the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Glossary on Migration" (2019 edition), is defined by "the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State." The term "migrant" includes reference to a range of clear, legally defined categories, determined by international law and conventions, such as refugees, victims of trafficking, migrant workers, and those engaged in numerous other forms of human mobility: internally displaced persons (IDPs); displaced persons; asylum-seekers; international migrants; and more.

There is no universally accepted definition of a migrant because definitions vary by situational context and temporal setting. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees master glossary defines forced migration or displacement as "the movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to leave their homes or places of habitual residence (whether within their own country or across an international border), in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters." This is contrasted with the IOM's interpretation of forced migration, which generally describes it as a movement whose drivers can be diverse, involving force, compulsion or coercion. The IOM discourages a dichotomous view of voluntary/involuntary migration to distinguish between these forms, recognizing the "continuum of agency that exists."

The international protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in people, especially women and children, under the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime covers the legal definition of human trafficking, distinguishing it from other forms. Human trafficking is a human rights violation and a crime against the dignity of the trafficked victim. Human trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation and harboring of a human being for the purposes of exploitation, especially for financial gain. To accomplish their aims, traffickers may threaten and use violence and deportation. Contrary to popular belief, trafficking does not necessarily involve the crossing of a border; people can be trafficked in their home country. Human trafficking takes various forms that have aptly been called modern-day slavery, including sex trafficking and other types of forced labor.

There are many misconceptions about human smuggling and human trafficking. It is important to consider that smuggling involves cross-border movement (transnationality); parties are engaged in transactional relationships between a person paying another for smuggling services to move across borders (consent and profit). Human trafficking is an ongoing crime of exploitation committed against the individual, where the trafficker derives a financial or other material benefit (profit and exploitation). That is not to suggest that migrants paying for smuggling services are not made vulnerable to exploitation by smugglers. Migrants can become victims of crimes and violations, such as violence, rape, theft, kidnapping, extortion, neglect and trafficking of people.

To some extent, migration and human trafficking have gained increased attention and scrutiny in recent decades. Many institutions are involved in this response, and the church too has an important

role to play in promoting safe migration and in stopping worldwide human trafficking. Animating the church's response is the belief in God's gift of human dignity to all people. Guided by this good news, Christian faith-based organizations and religious institutions are called to confront human trafficking and other destructive forms of migration.

2. Lutheran Hope Cambodia Organization Story

Lutheran Hope Cambodia Organization (formerly Life With Dignity)

Focus: Transborder migration/trafficking issues

Interview with: Ms. Bone Thay (tbone@lwd.org.kh)

Title: Program director

Realizing its vision of "people living in peace, dignity and harmony in a democratic and just society united in diversity and empowered to achieve their universal rights," Lutheran Hope Cambodia Organization (LHCO) is leading programs that alleviate suffering caused by human trafficking and reduce the challenges of migration in Cambodia.

"We are taking part in this so that we can take care of the prevention measures so that people do not engage in migration," said Bone Thay, director of LHCO. "Migration puts people at risk of exploitation."

Lutheran Hope Cambodia Organization is a nongovernmental organization that implements projects to improve the livelihood of poor rural people in Cambodia. LHCO works in cooperation with governmental agencies, such as Cambodia's Counter Human Trafficking in Persons (CHTIP) and with church partners.

"LHCO takes care of the prevention of human trafficking, awareness about the realities of migration and exploitation and empowerment through our job-training programs."

For over 30 years, LHCO has operated to "facilitate the empowerment of vulnerable rural people to claim their universal rights." LHCO began as a Department for World Service of the Lutheran World Federation Cambodia country program and gained autonomy in 2011.

"Our partners initially supported the mission of LHCO, which has long been to provide rural community development support, but as we began to recognize that migration is concerning, and incorporated issues of migration into our work, our partners continued to support LHCO."

The Agriculture Cooperative and Women's Entrepreneurship programs are two initiatives that act as "prevention" against harmful migration.

"We support people in their livelihood so that they have a good income, so that they do not choose to travel away from their families for work," Thay adds. "It is not to say that every migration is bad, but in rural areas people tend to choose to leave because the rural areas do not have ways to earn a livable wage."

"Our philosophy is that if they have more choices, they can make more informed decisions whether they go or not. And if they do decide to migrate, they will migrate with skills and knowledge so that they are at less risk of exploitation."

Located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city, LHCO serves the surrounding rural population. According to the National Institutes of Health, 80% of the Cambodian population resides in rural areas.

Thay said that Cambodia's migration problem is mostly in-country, but a few people travel to countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Korea. She gave an example of the exploitation that happens when young men and boys leave for Thailand, a typical long-distance route for rural Cambodians.

"These boys usually go to the fishing industry in Thailand, where they are taken away from port and cannot return home, trapped on fishing boats. Some become drug users."

"Taking care of returnees is also another aspect of our work."

LHCO provides grants for agricultural small businesses, such as raising pigs and chickens, to assist returnees in reestablishing themselves with viable, income-generating opportunities. As of August 2024, LHCO had assisted 247 households with small businesses raising pigs, chickens, cows, fish, ducks and vegetable gardens.

Of the 247 households, 99 raise chickens and 134 raise pigs.

3. What Does the Bible Say?

As Christians, we look to the Bible as the primary source of wisdom when wrestling with how to respond to human suffering that both causes and results from migration and trafficking. The Bible informs and forms Christians so that they can act in ways that assist our neighbors who are suffering from the trauma brought about by enduring these conditions. In the ancient stories and teachings in the Bible, we have a living framework that links our commitments and hope to concrete actions in the face of human vulnerability and injustice.

How do we begin to reflect on these matters biblically and theologically? First, it is important to understand that forced migration and trafficking blatantly violate God's gift of dignity and God's vision of abundant life for all humanity. Scripture tells us that all human beings are created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). We believe all humans to be made in the image of God (imago Dei), and regardless of our differences — race, ethnicity, citizenship, language or migration status — we are all recipients of the fundamental love of God. Those who perpetuate human trafficking disparage the image of God in others and in themselves, but they cannot erase God's gift of dignity. This leads to a second guiding principle for Christians: because God loves each of us unconditionally, we are moved through gratitude and freedom to go and do likewise, to love and serve our neighbors in need. As the New Testament reads, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:1-2). Christians honor and reveal the dignifying image of God in others through their loving care for victims of trafficking and through their resistance to people and systems that foster trafficking.

Much of this can be translated into more secular terms. Forced labor and slavery are an affront to fundamental human rights. As is well-documented, human trafficking and forced migration adversely affect the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of individuals and communities, causing trauma to victims that can take a lifetime to address — if people even have the resources to do so. People, communities and governments can act on their commitment to human rights by helping those who

suffer in this way, by confronting the causes of such suffering and by championing the well-being of all people.

Many other parts of the Bible build on these beliefs about the dignity of all people and God's empowerment of Christians to love their neighbors. Throughout the Bible, God's laws direct people of faith to care for those who are vulnerable and suffering. These teachings are often similar to ethical teachings in other religious traditions, and this opens pathways for interreligious dialogue.

For instance, the Bible demonstrates unequivocally that God loves migrating people and wants them to be protected and treated with dignity and respect. The Bible also makes clear that those who forsake the oppressed are to be cursed (Exodus 22, 23, 27; Deuteronomy 23, 24, 27; Jeremiah 7, 22; Zechariah 7; Ezekiel 22; Psalm 146; Malachi 3; Matthew 25). Further, the Bible repeatedly calls us to love and care for the stranger because we too were once strangers (Exodus 22; Leviticus 19, 24; Deuteronomy 6, 10; Psalm 105). Remembering that we were once strangers invites us into a deeper sense of empathy and understanding of what it means to "do to others as you would have them do to you," which includes loving the stranger, the foreigner and the sojourner (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31). We are also instructed that the body of Christ should accept strangers with open arms (Romans 15:7-9) and treat them as equals (Colossians 3:11).

4. What Drives Migration and Human Trafficking?

There are various critical causes that lead to the contemporary forms of slavery we are discussing here.

Among these, poverty is the strongest predictor of vulnerability to being trafficked. Especially when combined with a lack of access to education or scarce employment opportunities, poverty can be devastating. Not infrequently, the victims of human trafficking and slavery are people looking for a way out of extreme poverty. Misled by false promises of employment, they often end up in the hands of criminal networks that mastermind human trafficking.

Another cause is corruption on the part of people willing to do anything for financial gain. Corruption happens when money, and not the human person, is at the center of the system. Slave labor and human trafficking often require the complicity of those who are supposed to be protecting vulnerable people, including law enforcement, government organizations and military institutions.

Further causes of slavery include armed conflicts, violence, criminal activity and terrorism.

5. Testimonies

Lutheran Hope Cambodia Organization (formerly Life With Dignity)

Focus: Vath Tha and Khun Thou

Both in their 50s, Vath Tha and her husband, Khun Thou, used to be Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand. One of their four daughters was lured by a human trafficking broker to work in Thailand and went missing from their community in Tuol Snuol, a village in Battambang province, Cambodia, for over a year.

From her own experience in Thailand as a migrant worker, Vath Tha suspected that her daughter was a victim of labor human trafficking and alerted authorities. Her daughter was returned home safely.

Unfortunately, due to poverty and lack of education about the risks of migrant work and the factors that make rural populations vulnerable to human trafficking, many rural families have had similar experiences but without the same outcome.

As part of LHCO's initiatives to resettle returnees, Vath Tha's family received four piglets and agricultural training in 2023 and now run a home-based pig-raising business. Recipients of these businesses are coached and monitored monthly by LHCO staff. In the first year of their business, the family sold three adult pigs and earned \$477 in supplemental income. When Vath Tha bred one female pig, the return was 14 piglets.

"I am very happy that I have a home-based business which enables me to earn extra money for my family without migration," Vath Tha said. "I have also increased my knowledge about trafficking in persons, safer migration and money management. I am thankful for LHCO and its partners."

Lutheran Hope Cambodia Organization (formerly Life With Dignity)

Focus: Horn Yol

For 22 years, Horn Yol migrated from Roka Koun Sat, a village in Prey Veng province, Cambodia, to Phnom Penh, where he found construction work. But due to failing health, he had to stop migrating and find another means to care for his family. Living in a remote village without skills, he might have watched his family slide into poverty and risk unsafe migrating practices and exploitation.

Thanks to the LHCO's Cambodia Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) initiative, he received agricultural technical training and small, in-kind grants for a home-based business raising chickens. Along with the training, he was given cage materials and 76 chicken breeds. He even developed his own local chicken feed mix, using vegetables, paddy rice, and corn and rice bran. This crafted chicken feed helps him keep the cost of production low.

"I have the potential to earn \$245 for three months and keep 8% of income for scaling up the roosters and hens, which would result in more than 54 chicks," Horn Yol said. "During an outbreak of livestock disease, most chickens die quickly. But my chickens are less affected because of my technical training from LHCO."

One of the LHCO technical courses teaches chicken safety, proper hygiene, and water and feeder cleaning, using local remedies.

"Lemon, ginger and galanga are natural medicines fed to the chickens," Horn Yol explained, "and I learned other techniques to protect my chickens."

Horn Yol appreciates this opportunity to maintain an income without migrating.

"I am happy, I have freedom, and my family is safer because I don't need to subject myself to risky jobs outside of my community."

Trafficking statistics in Asia

It is essential to understand how these issues affect us right in our own communities and region. In recent years, Asia has seen some particularly alarming trends in human trafficking. More than 85% of human trafficking victims from East Asia and the Pacific are trafficked from within the region, and more than half the victims in East Asia are trafficked a short distance. Worldwide, Asia and the Pacific make up about 63% of the total victims of human trafficking. By one estimate, there are 24.9 million people living in modern slavery in Asia and the Pacific. People who are trafficked tend to be those who are socially and economically impoverished in their own communities.

6. New Life Center Foundation Story

New Life Center Foundation — Thailand

Focus: Women

Interview with: Temchan “Bee” Kamonklapachon

Title: Program director

Statistics show that the majority of those who fall prey to human traffickers in Asia are marginalized girls or women, and they are not solely involved in the sex industry or domestic work. Many find themselves entangled in illegal operations that are equally harmful and distressing.

In 2023, police in Thailand and Myanmar raided an illegal call center in Myanmar for cyber scams perpetrated by phone, social media, and fraudulent sales, investment and banking schemes online. Of the 111 Thai people arrested, 10 had outstanding arrest warrants for online crime and were detained by the police. The remaining 101 people were victims of forced labor who thought they had applied for legitimate jobs but upon arrival were forced by gunpoint to participate in the call center’s illegal operations. The victims reported being forced to work long hours with restricted access to food and with physical punishments for missed quotas or low performance. Thirty-three of the victims were women.

New Life Center Foundation (NLCF), a humanitarian organization recognized by the Thai government, serves over 200 women each year through educational and residential services, vocational and life-skills training, and therapeutic recovery programs to eradicate the exploitation and trafficking of ethnic tribal women.

NLCF states that it is committed to empowering tribal women to build healthy, resilient families and communities while celebrating and preserving their cultural heritage. The foundation implements social work, human trafficking prevention, and development, protection and reintegration care programs to achieve its goal of empowering tribal women.

NLCF states that its educational campaigns and community development programs focus on structural change through education and training, where attendees learn about the potential dangers of unsafe migration and about strategies to protect themselves. These strategies include knowing their rights and how to report violations of those rights.

“Marginalized people often tolerate unsafe or unjust living and working conditions because they do not know about the laws and community resources that are available to protect them,” reads a 2024 report from NLCF.

Community and church leaders and nongovernmental organization workers also attend training, where they learn about their legal, moral and religious obligations to protect marginalized and

exploited people and to include them in the development of services intended to assist and support them.

Additionally, NLCF collaborates with the public and private sectors to address cases of human trafficking, violence against women and children, and statelessness, and to provide victim identification. NLCF staff also provide Karen ethnic language interpretation services for state and private agencies to ensure that the voices of marginalized people are heard and that victims of human trafficking, domestic violence and drug cases receive support services.

Recently NLCF was asked to assist the Chiang Rai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security in cases of child trafficking, further extending NLCF's cooperation with local governments to end trafficking.

In June 2023, NLCF and the Cambodian government launched an investigation into the exploitation of children, focusing on a residential home for orphaned and impoverished children that was associated with a local school in Ang Thong province. The investigation revealed that over 126 tribal children from Myanmar had been smuggled into Thailand to help the school meet its government enrollment quotas and secure funding. The smuggled children's parents had been told that their children would receive free education and boarding at the school, yet none of the children could speak Thai. They suffered from malnourishment, poor hygiene and visible wounds. The younger children were not even potty-trained.

While police and government social workers tried to trace the children back to their families, the Department of Children and Youth of the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security asked the NLCF to provide 35 of the children with temporary shelter and therapeutic support.

"The children received comprehensive service management and shelter until they could be safely repatriated to Myanmar, and reintegrated with their families," the report stated.

Economic desperation is one driving factor that increases vulnerability to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Therefore NLCF provides education and vocational training to alleviate the suffering caused by trafficking.

"A young Karen woman named Skye received a scholarship funded by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and was able to pursue training as a nurse's aide," said Temchan "Bee" Kamonklapachon, NLCF program director. After graduation, she said, Skye secured employment working at a convalescent care center in Chiang Mai.

"Purposeful work helps promote safety, human dignity, and gender equality," Kamonklapachon said. ***"Education empowers women to discover their own voice, potential, and bargaining power, which decreases their risk of victimization."***

7. Empowerment of Women and Girls

Human trafficking disproportionately affects women and girls. By one estimate, at least 70% of the 40 million people trapped in slavery around the world today are women and girls who are forced to work in dangerous and exploitative conditions. Progress on addressing gender-specific concerns has been slow throughout the antitrafficking and wider antislavery sector due to the inherent patriarchy of our systems.

Unfortunately our understanding of the gender dimensions of trafficking and slavery is often simplistic. For instance, narratives concerning gender and trafficking are sometimes limited to discussions of the “vulnerability” of women and girls and to highly gendered sectors such as prostitution and domestic work. In reality, gender and trafficking are more complex, reaching many other labor sectors. One key reason that antislavery work lacks a stronger gender perspective is because there is no investment in women’s leadership. Many communities are highly patriarchal, and even antitrafficking organizations can destructively replicate gendered power structures. The result is that very few women are empowered to voice their own lived experiences, and the patriarchal worldview is often perpetuated through organizations trying to help.

Investing in women’s leadership means prioritizing and centering the perspectives of women. The deeply personal knowledge that women have of such gendered power structures are the key to fully understanding vulnerability and to preventing exploitation. In addition, we need to promote the leadership of women from diverse and marginalized groups who can authentically speak with and for those who are most directly affected by trafficking and slavery. For too long, taking a gender perspective to trafficking and slavery has meant disempowering women and girls. We need to reverse this by investing in women to lead the antislavery movement and to challenge the gender norms and power structures that allow exploitation to thrive.

New Life Center Foundation — Thailand

Focus: Women

Interview with: Temchan “Bee” Kamonklapachon

Title: Program director

“If one ethnic woman can change a village, a village can change the world” is a mantra that Temchan “Bee” Kamonklapachon, program director for New Life Center Foundation (NLCF), repeats often to herself, her staff and the women in the program.

Kamonklapachon has always understood that the majority of those subjugated by human trafficking in her village are girls and women. Her life’s work at NLCF is to change one village at a time, making the world a safer place for females.

The first Thai national and Karen ethnic woman to serve as NLCF program director, Kamonklapachon said that the NLCF was founded in response to the widespread exploitation of ethnic minority women in Thailand, which continues today.

Economic desperation is one driving factor that increases vulnerability to human trafficking and other forms of abuse. Despite the entire leadership team of NLCF being composed of women, Kamonklapachon said, **“there is still a prevailing bias in both Thai and tribal cultures that men are inherently superior to women.”** One of her co-workers at the NLCF remembers asking to be educated and the men who ran her village exclaiming, “Educating a girl is a total waste of time and resources.”

Kamonklapachon believes that the grace of God placed her in an unusual tribal family: **“My parents understood the value of education. So after I graduated from the local village school and expressed an interest in continuing my schooling, my parents enrolled me in the seventh grade in Mae Sariang, nearly 100 kilometers [62 miles] away from home.”**

Kamonklapachon was academically behind the Thai students when she entered school and had to catch up; nevertheless she was able to finish her studies and enroll at Payap University, which made

her only the third person in her mountain village to receive a bachelor's degree. She was employed by NLCF as an administrative assistant in 2002.

"The NLCF has supported me and provided many opportunities for my personal and vocational development, through training, knowledge and exposure to new experiences," she said. "More importantly, I have grown spiritually mature at NLCF, and since my youth, God has guided me every step of the way."

Kamonklapachon is also grateful for the support of her husband, whom she describes as a "truly humble and kind man of God." She said that her husband set an example for other tribal men to support their wives when, at the height of Kamonklapachon's career, he stayed home to raise their daughter.

"Things have changed over the years, and this is now considered more socially acceptable, but it was a radical choice at the time for my husband."

Since the NLCF was founded in 1987, all its directors and senior administrators have been women. Even the chairperson of the NLCF board is a female school principal.

"Given that the majority of those who fall prey to human trafficking in Thailand are marginalized girls and women, it makes sense that antitrafficking organizations like NLCF should be led by ethnic minority women," she continues. "As I have said before, 'If one ethnic woman can change a village, a village can change the world.'"

KAREN TRIBAL PEOPLE

The Karen live primarily in the highlands of Thailand, near the Thai-Myanmar border. Among the towns and cities, they inhabit are Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. They also live in Kayin State, Myanmar.

8. Responding As Faith Communities

The church's response to human trafficking is twofold. First, the church brings its distinctive theological outlook, especially its proclamation of the image of God in all people. Second, the church engages in network building and active partnerships with others because it recognizes the special expertise and callings that God has given to these various partners. We must collaborate with others in different sectors, valuing their contributions and acknowledging that no individual or organization can do everything, yet we each have an important part to play. Every response is important, regardless of the scale. Thus faith communities function as networks of partners for justice, who build communities of human flourishing.

There are some actions that can be taken by people who, though not experts on these issues, have a commitment to addressing them. Possible partners include other religious institutions, government organizations, law enforcement and the media. Be transparent about any projects undertaken, to ensure that appropriate boundaries are being respected and that the work will be most effective.

9. What Can We Pledge to Increase Awareness and Action?

Antitrafficking work must be comprehensive. It must include knowledge and action that relate to both emergency assistance and prevention. The list here is not comprehensive, but it moves roughly from emergency response to prevention and longer-term strategies. We must:

- Mobilize faith communities to be aware of trafficking and to recognize and report signs of it to relevant authorities.
- Identify ways to provide housing and trauma counseling.
- Provide holistic, systematic capacity development and humanitarian assistance to victims of human trafficking so they can reintegrate with their communities and live with dignity and self-esteem.
- Advocate for effective legislation against trafficking. Make sure communities know about such legislation and how to engage politically to bring change. Establish a policy-driven mechanism and strategy for the prevention and resolution of human trafficking.
- Expand and strengthen networking and cooperation among churches, program units, government agencies and nongovernmental organizations.
- Reduce people's vulnerability to being trafficked and build community resilience through education and empowerment.