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The experience of male labor exploitation: voices from Ukraine

Numerous of labour exploited men do not consider themselves to be victims of trafficking and/or forced labour survivors and do not refer for assistance. Nevertheless, some studies provide evidence that they experienced awful labour and living conditions, nourishment as well as lack of medical aid. Moreover, some of them experienced different types of abuse. To address the problem, social workers should use the holistic approach while working in the following four interrelated areas: prevention, prosecution, protection, and partnership.

According to the recent statistic data, 21 million people across the world became victims of forced labour, amongst which 11.4 million women and girls and 9.5 million men and boys (ILO, 2016). However, these figures do not provide any understanding of the precise number of victims of human trafficking for the purpose of labour (Hofmeister & Rueppel, 2014).

In Ukraine, there is no official statistics which could describe the real situation, but there is a number of those receiving support e.g. the Victims of Trafficking of Human Beings (VoT). For instance, more than 2.5 thousand males have received assistance from the International Organization for Migration within the last five years. Since males do not consider themselves as victims of trafficking and do not refer for assistance, the number of them may be significantly higher.

The current article is based on the study outcomes which was held by the author in 2016 in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus (Gusak, 2016) show that the main country of destination for the victims of trafficking is Russian Federation; 15-20% of victims return from the countries-members of the European Union and the scope of domestic THB is less than 3%. Furthermore, most of males were exploited during the period between one to three months in construction work as well as in agriculture, forest sector and at gas supply facilities. The main sources of information on the work related to exploitation were relatives, friends and acquaintances. Moreover, most victims did not have enough preliminary information on potential work, its location, conditions etc. and, as a rule, they were not making any attempts to check the work they had as they fully trusted the recruiters and relied on them for everything.

Within the study framework there were 116 male victims of THB from Ukraine interviewed on their experience of exploitation. The following topics have been chosen for the analysis: labour conditions, living conditions and nourishment, medical aid and abuse experience.

Labour conditions

Labour conditions of men, as a rule, did not meet the standards of labour laws and safety code requirements. Most of them worked in dangerous conditions and had a large workload.

Working hours were irregular and the employers could make people work extra time at any time by providing the following rationales for it: the requirements of the working process, the need to maintain the schedule of commissioning the construction site to the customer. In general, for most people the working day was between 12 and 16 hours. In addition, many men were voluntarily agreeing to work extra time as they were convinced that they would be paid more and it would enable their quick return home. While working extra time over the norm, most respondents did not have any holidays, and some of them indicated the lack of breaks for rest during the working day. Though part of them indicated that they had an opportunity to have at least one day off weekly, but they had not used it. One of the reasons was their willingness to earn more, the other – lack of costs and impossibility to leave the area where they stayed. More than half of respondents did not have an opportunity to leave the construction site territory where they were exploited. Thus some of them were restrained by employers in movement by being forbidden to leave the territory and threatened with punishment (beating or penalty), and the others were threatened by the employers with possible negative consequences. Part of them could leave the territory only under strict control i.e. being accompanied by a guardian or a foreman, and some men were under permanent supervision and were not able to move freely even across the site territory.

Living conditions and nourishment

Most men lived at the territory of the site where they worked. Most of those who worked at the construction lived at the unfinished premises of the site where they have been exploited. Quite a widespread practice was living in trailers and barracks located at the sites, as well as in the premises not intended for living, such as greenhouses, basements, garages and storage rooms (barn). There was the practice of living in hostels quite often used by men working at enterprises and factories. In some cases the respondents independently rented lodging.

Almost in all the places there were inappropriate living conditions, such as lack of conditions to store and to cook food, to manage personal hygiene, rest etc. Living conditions of those who were exploited during the autumn-spring period were even worse as there was a no heating in the premises where they lived. Some respondents mentioned that there was a lack of drinking water.

Two-thirds of men informed that they cooked food for

the construction crew members on their own, from the food brought by the employer. In addition to that they mentioned the low quality of food products which was even worsened with the time being, as well as its low calorific value. They were having mainly porridges, potatoes, flour-based food etc. Meat and fish were almost lacking. If at the beginning the workmen could enhance their ration with the food they brought from home (pig fat ('salo'), canned food etc), but eventually they ran out of these supplies.

The significant part of those working in agriculture had to eat mainly the food which was gathered (tangerines, grapes, apples etc). Some men indicated that they had chronic diseases resulted from such kind of nourishment (diabetes, problems with teeth, diseases of the digestive tract).

Medical aid

Almost all the respondents indicated that they did not have any access to adequate medical aid when being exploited. Most of those who had complicated situations (traumas, acute conditions of chronic diseases, colds etc.) treated themselves on their own buying their own medicine or using folk remedies. At the same time if the health condition did not have a significant effect on working capacity, the men continued working without referring for medical aid. Only few respondents indicated that there was a first-aid station there or a first-aid kit at the construction site, and the resources of the latter were very limited.

In the case of workers' serious traumas or diseases, the employers applied the strategy when they were taking the men out of the site territory and informed the emergency on their condition and location.

Experiencing abuse

The most widely spread form of male abuse was an economic one which concerned remuneration of labour. Most men informed that employers promised payments for the work of no less than 500 dollars a month. However, none of the respondents received it in full.

Part of the men did not receive any payments for the whole period of exploitation. It specifically concerns those who worked at the enterprises and were eating at the cafeteria and with the food delivered to them to the construction site. In some cases, employers were explaining that the entire amount earned was spent on the allowance for men (food, accommodation, paying fines), and they do not owe anything to them. In other cases, employers used different means of postponing payments, specifically they promised to pay the entire amount immediately after the whole scope of work would be done, commissioning the building site, receiving costs from the customer etc. In addition, there were cases when respondents were hired for the unpaid trial period.

There were other cases when men were not receiving any payments on their own initiative as they hoped to receive the full amount on completion of their work or did not have any conditions to keep the earnings safe, and they were trusting it to the employer. Some of

them hoped that the money would be transferred to their bank account.

Other respondents were able to receive only a small part of earned money. Some of them were paid in advance and they used the payment for subsistence and vital functions during this period. Sometimes all the remuneration for the work was limited to the size of this advance payment. In many cases reimbursement of the return ticket home was the only thing provided to victims. Employers/exploiters were buying return tickets to the home city by themselves or were given the amount equal to their cost.

One of the types of economic abuse experienced by the men was that employers were taking away their mobile phones and tablets from them which could be used for communication with relatives.

Most of the respondents interviewed had immediate experience of physical abuse. Men were abused in order to make them work when they did not agree with the work conditions suggested or in cases when they violated the employers' requests (were leaving the territory without permission, were late for work etc) as well as in case of their attempt of escape.

Psychological abuse was manifested via threats and intimidation, and, as a result, the respondents experienced fear for their life and health and had to work further for free.

Conclusion and social works response

Firstly, social workers should develop the special emphasis on preventing male trafficking in cooperation with government agencies from the social and education systems, law enforcement, other international organizations as well as a network of civil society organizations. Because male VoT in fact have lack of information on their rights, peculiarities of crossing the border, requirements on employment in the country of destination and groundless trust to occasional acquaintances that make them vulnerable to THB. Consequently, the actual need is in informing on the need to consider the risks while getting employed abroad, specifically, on the following: do not handle the documents to anyone, to have costs for the return ticket home and to put money on the mobile phone account, to inform close people on one's own place of stay, contacts of employer and negotiator etc.



Secondly, social workers can suggest special training programs to police, investigators, prosecutors, and the judiciary system representatives.

Thirdly, comprehensive reintegration assistance should be provided to VoTs, depending on individual needs, which includes legal consultation and representation in criminal and civil court; medical care, psychological counselling, shelter, vocational training, a small-grant programme supporting those trafficking survivors who aspire to set-up their own business and other forms of assistance. For instance, the actual services could be the following: legal (the ways of verification of employers; assistance in making contracts; methods of collecting evidence base on labor exploitation); information services (placing the information on dishonest employers at the Internet/ social networking sites; informing on the organizations providing assistance to VoT; informing on risks and coping strategies to address risk situations in which the males being exploited could get into); behavior skills training for risk situations.



Representatives from government agencies, international organizations, civil society, private companies etc. at the IOM Conference, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2018.

Finally, all the above would be possible due to close cooperation between various stakeholders: government agencies, international organizations, civil society, private companies and individuals.

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(left) Students of the School of Social Work created several posters considering different aspects of human trafficking. At the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine, 2017