Inside the Crime of Sex Trafficking in Sabah, Malaysia

Ravi Mahalingam & Jatswan S. Sidhu

To cite this article: Ravi Mahalingam & Jatswan S. Sidhu (2020): Inside the Crime of Sex Trafficking in Sabah, Malaysia, Journal of Human Trafficking, DOI: 10.1080/23322705.2019.1710069

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2019.1710069

Published online: 28 Jan 2020.
Inside the Crime of Sex Trafficking in Sabah, Malaysia

Ravi Mahalingam and Jatswan S. Sidhu

Department of International & Strategic Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The crime of sex trafficking is a phenomenon that affects almost every region of the world. The crime is fundamentally a process of convergence between different individuals with distinct characteristics at a specific time and location. Often, the victim or aspects of victimization receive more attention in sex trafficking research, while other individuals or elements that initiate the crime get little focus. Hence, the purpose of this article is to examine the individuals as well as elements that initiate the crime of sex trafficking in Sabah, Malaysia using the routine activities theory. The qualitative data for this project was collected through interviews with law enforcement personnel from the various Malaysian government agencies, ex-traffickers, former victims, and academicians, as well as government and news reports. By utilizing the routine activities theory, this study demonstrates the applicability of the theoretical construct in anatomizing the macro-level elements, namely the motivated offenders (sex traffickers), the suitable target (trafficking victims), and the absence of capable guardians (corrupt enforcement personnel) that are involved in the crime of sex trafficking in Sabah. In addition, this study implies that routine activities in the commercial sex industry, particularly the demand for sex labor, could initiate the crime of sex trafficking in Sabah.

KEYWORDS

Sex trafficking; routine activities theory; motivated offenders; suitable targets; capable guardians

Introduction

From the United States to Europe and Asia, a heinous crime that affects millions of men, women, and children as well as human society at large is the anguish of human trafficking, and particularly sex trafficking. A global report on trafficking in persons highlighted that data from 142 countries between 2014 and 2016 shows sex trafficking as the most prevalent form of human trafficking (UNODC, 2018). It is also often constructed as a common form of modern-day slavery which occurs when people are forced into the commercial sex trade against their will. The crime typically involves numerous individuals of different ages, genders, ethnicities and nationalities (Salt, 2000). According to Kara (2009), sex trafficking is a phenomenon that is poorly understood by many people, such as international leaders, policymakers, and even academicians, due to its illicit nature. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) defines sex trafficking as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act (United States, 2000). Sabah, a state in East Malaysia and located on the northern part of the Borneo Island, is increasingly becoming a hotspot for the crime of sex trafficking and commercial sex trade (Lee, 2018). The impact of globalization, the growth in world population, and transnational migration have created a pool of ‘slave-able’ people, especially in the developing Southeast Asian states. According to Bassiouni, Rothenberg, Higonnet, Farenga, and Invictus (2010), human traffickers or trafficking syndicates typically target economically competent states with feeble law enforcement because these places offer more conducive operation bases. Moreover, Sabah’s multiethnic culture and fluid social and economic boundaries with the Philippines and Indonesia facilitates the flow of illegal migrants as well as...