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Help groups say there is room for improvement



Sex workers in an illegal brothel. Non-governmental organisations here wish to raise awareness of the plight of trafficking victims. PHOTO: LIANHE WANBAO

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Tan Tam Mei (mailto:tammei@sph.com.sg)

At age 14, she left her country in South-east Asia in hopes of a better future as a performer in Singapore. But as soon as Kim (not her real name) stepped out of Changi Airport, she was met by two men and thrown into a van.

Kim soon found herself locked in a dingy room - which she later realised was a brothel - with other distressed girls. Over the next few months, Kim was forced to provide sexual services to multiple men, until she escaped one day and sought help from the authorities.

In line with World Day against Trafficking in Persons by the United Nations that falls today, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) want to raise awareness of the plight of trafficking victims like Kim - who cannot be identified to protect her from reprisals from trafficking syndicates - to better combat the problem.

"Some Singaporeans find it hard to believe that trafficking happens here, and that survivors like Kim exist here," said Mr Michael Chiam, executive director of Hagar Singapore.

The Singapore arm of Hagar International runs recovery and reintegration programmes to help trafficking survivors. Over the years, Singapore has made an increased effort in identifying victims like Kim but the Republic is still in the "early stages" of addressing the issue of human trafficking, said Mr Chiam.

With the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act enacted in 2015, more cases have been clearly defined as trafficking and there have also been more prosecutions, said Ms Mrinalini Venkatachalam, a spokesman for the Singapore Committee for UN Women.

Some of Singapore's efforts include training law enforcement to identify trafficking victims, and funding shelters and victim care arrangements by NGOs and voluntary welfare organisations.

However, there is room for improvement, said organisations that help trafficking victims here.

Mr Alex Au, treasurer of Transient Workers Count Too, said at present, there is a lack of feedback about cases that the authorities choose to investigate and classify as trafficking, and he hopes this can be made clearer in future.

Ms Sheena Kanwar, executive director of Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, said that for Singapore to progress in the fight against human trafficking, the authorities and NGOs need to be on the same page with a "clear understanding of trafficking, which can be done through dialogues and even workshops".

"We have to fine-tune our understandings and come to an agreement," she said, adding that she hopes Singapore can adopt a more victim-centric approach to trafficking cases by offering even greater protection, so those who are afraid will speak out and seek help.

Tan Tam Mei

Correction note: An earlier version of the story said that Hagar Singapore runs a shelter for trafficking survivors. It does not. It runs recovery and reintegration programmes to help victims of trafficking. We are sorry for the error.

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