

Alliance Anti Traffic: anti-sexual exploitation and human trafficking NGO

We live in a changing world. With the onslaught of globalization (and rise of the internet) it has become easier to access information and travel further, faster. Inversely, that means the economic needs of families have increased as well. This puts pressure on rural or working class families to send out daughters as migrants to generate more income for the family. The current trend is that these women are trafficked for sexual exploitation from their local village or city and sent anywhere from across their country to across the world to satiate the demand for prostitution, pornography, and new forms of exploitation such as forced marriage, surrogacy, etc. National, regional and global economic differences, political instability, gender discrimination towards women, corruption of certain government officials as well as a growing demand for sex generate trans-national human trafficking rings geared around the sexual exploitation of women and minors.

Alliance Anti Traffic (AAT) works directly in the field to protect women and girls from sexual exploitation in Southeast Asia. We rescue victims from hazardous situations and prevent them, as well as other vulnerable women, from being abused. We also work to dismantle human trafficking and sex exploitation rings. AAT prioritizes the most difficult cases that without our help, would not be able to receive assistance. We also establish and test innovative pilot projects in aiming to be further used by others in and out of Thailand. We use the experience collected from grassroots level to develop further advocacy actions. We work as a multi-disciplinary team through a referral system involving Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), governments, local groups, local communities and beneficiaries.

We are a non-partisan, non-religiously affiliated, non-profit organization committed to fighting the sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and minors in Southeast Asia. We primarily protect victims from sexual exploitation by finding current as well as potential victims and rescuing them from hazardous situations. Then we prevent them from being re-trafficked or prevent other vulnerable women and girls from becoming victims by creating local preventive actions and offering vocational alternatives. We also engage in legal procedures to provide compensation to the victims and to prosecute perpetrators to prevent them from trafficking others.

Our focus on protection addresses the immediate needs of victims. Our extensive list of protective services we offer include:

- Rescue operations from brothels,

- Coordination with other countries to assist them protecting Thai and others victims, ensuring Trafficking In Persons (TIP) repatriation and reintegration back home,
- Protecting victims wrongly jailed in immigration detention centers,
- Receiving victims at the borders once they have been deported by the immigration police as illegal migrants, preventing them from being trafficked by local traffickers,
- Or intervening before the victims reach places designated for sexual exploitation.

Our protection services also work to train watchdog groups and law enforcement to identifying victims or potential victims when they enter or exit Thailand and return the women and children home. Our ability to protect women and children relies on the information we receive from our network of referrals. It is this network of family members, watchdog groups, other NGOs and government entities that notify us who to look for and where to start inquiries.

Our assistance program enables rescued victims to receive relevant care until their repatriation. It includes:

- Legal assistance through AAT expert; includes legal expert help, victims wouldn't be able to navigate the red tape and legal labyrinth they often find themselves in. For example, our legal assistance works with former victims by prepping them for impending court procedures, providing them with a lawyer, and will accompany them to court. Encouraging victims to be witnesses for a case may seem small, yet, having someone with legal expertise to walk a victim through a foreign process can make all the difference in encouraging them to prosecute their traffickers.

Our proudest legal accomplishment is working with victims so that they can receive compensation for the harm done by traffickers. The experiences many victims have are traumatic and disruptive to their lives, being denied wages exacerbates these problems. By generating collaboration with other agencies, we are able to prosecute perpetrators and bring justice to victims by enforcing that their traffickers must pay victims for their work and trauma incurred during their time as a TIP.

- Our empowerment activities focus on another form of assistance. We organize activities with former victims to encourage self-esteem and self-confidence building. We focus on leadership building activities and life planning skills as well. Throughout these trainings we stress information on how women can protect themselves from exploitation and human trafficking in the future. We walk them through repatriation

procedures from Thailand while introducing vocational training or discussing career alternatives. It is through these trainings that we prepare victims for safe return home to their origin countries. Their reintegration into society is critical to our mission at AAT.

Our prevention program hones in on two missions. We first set up local community groups to watch over their community and report on perpetrators or human trafficking activities or possible abuses. We also provide our beneficiaries career alternatives in order to help them increase the income of their family and develop the economy within their local communities.

- Our prevention program reaches out to communities at risks (mostly the ones of our target group) as well as communities at borders areas in order to build up watchdog groups. Our team builds the capacity of local volunteers as well as volunteering beneficiaries. Then we support them in organizing actions for their community to prevent vulnerable groups from human trafficking. Our aim is to train volunteers in communities to detect traffickers or human trafficking activities and to report them to our team so we can take the appropriate measures to protect targeted women and children.
- Our prevention program also offers deterrence in a less conventional method. Our socio-economic empowerment model supports microbusiness in communities and provides vocational alternatives through network of the private sector. One example of this occurs in Bangkok. At the ASEAN Women Center we explore career opportunities to Thailand like barista and cook. Exploring vocational opportunities is a form of prevention.

We understand that these are high standards to set for our organization so we have objectives to evaluate how well we are pursuing our mission statement. In many ways, the central themes of our organization double up as our objectives. We use elements of empowerment and community building to protect and assist women. We want to bring girls home to start the healing process and protect them from further subjugation. Most importantly, we want to take actions in the community that prevent trafficking from taking root. This is done through AAT creating opportunities for growth within the community to increase awareness, show different career paths and allow for reintegration of victims into a more understanding society.

As we are all aware, human trafficking in Southeast Asia is an epidemic. It is not constrained to borders. In fact, traffickers will often exploit the close proximity of countries by taking girls away from their home countries and out of local law enforcement's hands. We at AAT, work to combat human trafficking by keeping up on all fronts through our work across the region. Alliance Anti Traffic has two regional offices stationed in Bangkok, Thailand and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. However, AAT works beyond Thailand and Vietnam throughout Southeast Asia with a special emphasis in Thailand, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. We have recently expanded our network into Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, South Africa and other select countries.

An example of our work in neighboring countries would be our special project office in Champasak, Lao PDR. Through cooperation and support with the Lao Federation of Trade Union we are able to reach out to locals to prevent and protect Lao migrant workers from trafficking. Through our efforts to train watchdog groups, at-risk communities and migrants about the dangers of human trafficking we are able to aid women and children to avoid or escape trafficking situations. The local project office of our network of Shan group in Kengtung, Shan state of Myanmar exemplifies our different tactics at combatting human trafficking. The office is community-based which means we work through the community and youth leaders in the area to prevent women and girls from sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Working with different age groups disseminates information to our target group (women and children of all ages) more effectively.

In the Southeast Asian (SEA) region, we work in "crossborder" areas between Thailand and Laos, Thailand and Malaysia and Thailand and Myanmar to prevent and protect women and children from sexual exploitation and human trafficking by working with several concerned agencies.

Trafficking becomes appealing when families are promised more wages, long term jobs, or immediate employment opportunities. Traffickers will promise jobs in the hospitality industry (as an example) and actually ensnare women into the sex industry once they leave their country. AAT protects women and children through our various rescue operations and provides them alternatives (according to their needs in their home countries) so they do not feel they need to return to prostitution. By recognizing the current trends and trajectories, AAT is able to keep up with trafficking trends on national and international levels in order to suppress human trafficking rings and networks. We can look to two current example of how AAT works to repatriate former victims of sex trafficking to understand these mentalities and larger global trends:

Our community leaders in Shan state, Myanmar, informed us of one girl travelling without any legal documents with an assumed trafficker to Bangkok. She was going to be forced into prostitution though she was not aware. Due to our network of referrals, the immigration police was able to intercept the girl, two other women and her trafficker at the Thai-Myanmar border. AAT received the women at the border and organized their safe return home by coordinating with Shan community leaders. The Shan leaders then safely escorted her home. The other women were sent to a government protection shelter in Thailand and officially repatriated some months later following government to government progress.

A closer to home example, occurred when one of our fellow NGOs asked AAT to help rescue a Thai girl being trafficked to South Korea. AAT contacted Seoul Counseling Center for Migrant Women (SCCMW), an NGO in South Korea, and asked for assistance in bringing her home. Together SCCMW and AAT were able to work with local law enforcement to rescue the girl and others being held by traffickers. After the women were secure in Korea, the girl was repatriated back into Thailand with the help of our legal assistance. AAT received the girl at the airport in Thailand and accompanied her back home to Northern Thailand.

However, cross border collaboration needs improvement:

- To dismantle trafficking rings, we need to strengthen and expand crossborder collaboration towards suppression actions.
- Secondly, mutual understanding and harmonization of laws need to be prioritized. When different countries have laws that are inconsistent among each other bilateral collaboration remains difficult and it makes it easier for the perpetrators to exploit systems and harder to retrieve girls over international borders.
- Finally, cross collaboration needs to be improved in protecting the privacy of the girls returning home. Being a victim of sex trafficking is traumatic. There is no need to retraumatize victims by forcing their victims to disclose to their communities their status as a victim of sex trafficking.

Sex trafficking is a secretive and high functioning form of organizational-crime. In order to combat such a highly-organized operation, we have to be just as organized. AAT collaborates closely with many other organizations. We cooperate together on two levels, a policy level as well as on a practical level.

For the policy level, AAT is a member of some global and regional networks such as UN-ACT and Children on the Move. On crossborder areas AAT is a committee member focused on anti-trafficking measures between Thailand and Malaysia, Thailand and Laos, Thailand and Vietnam and throughout Thailand and on various subcommittees against human trafficking. We have ample experience working with governments and non-profit organizations alike advocating for change and specific policy. Ultimately, AAT supports the Thai government to work and collaborate with governments of origin and destination countries on policy suggestions and enactment via committees to protect women and children from trafficking.

Our collaboration on an operational level includes governments, NGOs and local groups on case referrals. Through our partnerships in the region, we are able to develop the capacity of AAT expanded our network to work with private sectors in the region in prevention and empowerment programs where women and girls can develop their vocational skills and seek job opportunities.

One of AAT's newest projects has been the development of a social enterprise, a local café in Vientiane, Laos opened in March 2016. The café shop is named "Made in Mekong" to reflect its close position to the gorgeous river bordering Vientiane. This café creates social and economic opportunities for women and girls in Lao PDR. The café provides a safe place for former victims of human trafficking to gather, share their experiences, and discuss where they are in their lives. They can also consult with each other or the AAT team about their problems and find solutions for them. Additionally, we wanted to create a physical location for our community outreach and network development, "Made in Mekong" is ideal for both of these functions. The café is also a place where women and girls can develop their skills in both educational and vocational settings. Specifically, the coffee shop is connected with several businesses from the private sector ready to receive trainees or possible employees. Furthermore, beneficiaries who wish to join trainings in Thailand are provided safe travel, (transportation and legal documents are included) and received at the ASEAN Women Centers either in Ubon Ratchathani or in Bangkok. If you find yourself in Vientiane, stop in for a delicious cup of coffee and support a great cause!

Alliance Anti Traffic has banded together with the Friends of Women foundation (FOW), Labour Rights Promotion Network foundation (LPN), Mirror Foundation, Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF) and the Association for Human Rights and Women's Rights in Development (AWARD). Together we are the Anti- Human Trafficking Network of Thailand or ATN. ATN had been engaged in advocacy work with several ministries and participated notably to several new measures enforced by the Thai government such as:

- Setting up a new criminal court division especially for human trafficking. This criminal court came into effect on the 13th of June, 2015. This criminal court is able to directly receive human trafficking cases separately from other criminal offenses which results in an acceleration of the legal procedures conducted by experts in human trafficking matters.
- Creating a new law that among other things increases legal compensations for victims and must be paid directly by the perpetrators. AAT relied on two cases as cases studies in order to advocate for the enforcement of this new law: In 2005 AAT rescued seven Cambodian victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation from Pedang Besar in Southern Thailand. We were able to bring those cases to the court and conduct the legal procedures successfully until the end. It was the first case in Thailand that foreign victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation ever received compensation from the Thai government. This case was used as an example by many other organizations who could bring foreign victims to the court as witnesses. Nevertheless, the Cambodian witnesses received compensation from the Ministry of Justice of the Thai government but not from the perpetrators. The amount of the compensation was quite small. In another case, we rescued fourteen Laotian girls from a brothel in Lopburi, central Thailand in 2010. We brought these victims to the court with the objective to increase legal compensation by petitioning that the perpetrators pay wage for the physical and mental damage they caused the victims. We set up a taskforce with law officers and other officers like the ones from the health department to create compensation table that any victim of trafficking is able to use to sue their perpetrators. We consulted, discussed and proposed this idea to several law enforcement agencies (e.g. police, prosecutors, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security) in order to determine the approximate costs sexual trafficking victims were owed. Victims from Lopburi were the first victims to receive compensation from both the justice department of Thailand and the perpetrators. This case was used as an example and contributed to enforce the new law.
- Aiding in the establishment of a one year visa for foreign victims of trafficking. AAT has worked actively with the Thai government in order to encourage the participation of foreign victims as witnesses by granting them special rights. As a result, the Thai government has recently authorized providing a two year visa for foreigners and their children to allow them to stay and work in Thailand before being repatriated.
- Taking action against new forms of human trafficking. AAT has worked with the Thai government in order to extend its protection to newer forms of human trafficking that were not discovered before. As an example, AAT conducted a rescue operation where we

protected fifteen trafficked Vietnamese women who had been forced to be surrogate mothers in Thailand. Incidents like this have driven us to spread awareness about the gaps in the law concerning surrogacy. Finally, we could use this incident to encourage for bilateral collaboration with the Vietnamese police and Thailand.

Ultimately, to fight human trafficking and protect women and children in SE Asia we as allies need a game plan. This plan needs to function both in the long term while being able to address immediate needs of victims. We believe that the first step is to tackle problematic mentalities surrounding gender roles in our society. Specifically, we need to actively fight the objectification of women. When women are viewed as sexual objects, it creates a market for prostitution and sexual exploitation. In South Korea, you can support victims of trafficking by starting conversations in your home, your neighborhood, your city and South Korea writ large. Teach your children about gender issues and to treat women with respect. Be courageous enough to risk the discussion with your peers so you can talk about the dehumanizing nature of trafficking. When we create awareness about subjects that are often taboo we can create change through petitioning local governments and shifting public consciousness.

Beyond this long term plan, we believe Koreans can support victims of trafficking by getting law enforcement to crack down on punishment for the customers who solicit sex. Too often law enforcement prosecutes women in prostitution and ignores the customer of the sex industry. To end prostitution we need law enforcement to crack down on customers. If there are consequences buying into the sex industry that will deter future participants in this illegal activity. Researchers and activists in Korea can devote time and effort into encouraging their governments for this change and to uprooting women's commodification as sexual objects.

Eradicating human trafficking rings is a tireless process. Traffickers don't stop at borders so to dismantle their operation requires a myriad of groups (national governments, NGOs, local communities, watchdog groups, and empowered victims) working in unison to pursue the goal of protecting our women and children in SE Asia. AAT has worked tirelessly with action spanning from advocacy to direct intervention for victims. As a result, we have protected more than 3,000 victims with an average of 100 to 200 victims per year. From these counts, we have worked with 70 to 150 women develop career alternatives per year. We could not do what we do without our network and our partnerships. We look forward to gaining new partners and strengthening old ties as we work, hand in hand to protect women and children in SE Asia from sexual exploitation.