

Human Trafficking Prevention: Improving Interventions to Combat Forced Labor and Human Trafficking

LESSONS FROM RIGOROUS EVIDENCE

Introduction

Efforts to prevent human trafficking and protect exploited persons have disproportionately focused on increasing public awareness about human trafficking. Prevention interventions are among the most popular and well-funded anti-trafficking interventions globally, though there has been limited research to date about their impact. The few impact evaluations that have been conducted have demonstrated that how awareness-raising campaigns are designed is critical, as poorly designed campaigns could have undesirable unintended effects. Well-designed awareness campaigns, however, can improve knowledge with regard to people’s rights and entitlements, as well as available resources and services. With that said, a few studies have shown that even well-designed campaigns can have limited effects on highly vulnerable communities, as awareness-raising is often an insufficient alternative for tackling the intricate challenges associated with addressing the economic, political-legal, and socio-cultural foundations of exploitation.

In this evidence brief, the Human Trafficking Research Initiative (HTRI) has compiled rigorous evidence¹ from 19 pilot and full impact evaluation studies on prevention interventions and their impacts on knowledge, behaviors, and practices related to human trafficking. Due to the limited number of existing studies to date that focus specifically on preventing human trafficking, this evidence brief includes more information related to adult migration and topics that are trafficking-adjacent, such as unsafe or irregular migration, than findings from studies on prevention of labor and sex trafficking. While migration is often voluntary and can have a positive impact on individuals and societies, irregular migration² increases the risk of human rights violations and human trafficking (IOM, 2019). The findings from these studies – as well as emerging themes, trends, and evidence gaps – contributed to a set of research questions, available here. It is important to note that trafficking can take many forms and impact all genders and age groups. Further research across the spectrum is needed to build the evidence base around trafficking prevention. HTRI is providing research funding for academics, researchers, donors, and policymakers to pursue and support further research around these topics.

Key lessons from existing research



- 1. Information and awareness-raising campaigns** may improve knowledge but have limited effects on changing unsafe migration practices or reducing vulnerability to human trafficking. Additionally, campaigns may be more effective in raising awareness when they utilize “empowering” narratives – i.e., narratives that underscore the steps individuals need to take to avoid negative outcomes.
- 2. Interactive, personalized information provision and counseling for migrants** may be more effective than short pre-migration or pre-departure training in increasing knowledge and reducing unsafe migration intentions and trafficking, but more rigorous research is needed.
- 3. Fair recruitment practices and targeted information provision for both employers and employees** may improve labor conditions for migrant workers and reduce exploitation in destination countries.
- 4. Increasing the availability of information on worker conditions in factories** may lead to improvements in labor conditions and worker rights and reduce vulnerability to trafficking.
- 5. Coupling improved information with the provision of alternatives to unsafe migration** (such as cash transfers) may be more effective than information provision alone in reducing unsafe migration practices and vulnerability to trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

Detailed findings from existing research

1. Information and awareness-raising campaigns may improve knowledge but have limited effects on changing unsafe migration practices or reducing human trafficking.

Information and awareness-raising campaigns are commonly used to reduce irregular migration, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where high rates of regional and out-migration have prompted numerous studies of the effectiveness of these campaigns (Dennison, 2021; Hahn-Schaur, 2021; Tjaden et al., 2018; Tjaden and Dunsch, 2021). The effect is primarily measured via self-reported intentions to migrate given difficulties in measuring actual migration behavior (Dennison, 2021; Tjaden et al., 2018), and evidence has shown migration intention to be highly correlated with actual migration behavior (Bah and Batista, 2020; Dennison, 2021; Docquier et al., 2014; Tjaden & Laczko, 2019). Many irregular migrants from West African countries travel to Europe through the “backway,” which is a treacherous route entailing migrants to cross the Sahara Desert to reach Libya, where they then cross the Mediterranean Sea (Bah et al., 2022; Bah and Batista, 2020; Hebie, Sessou and Tjaden, 2023; Obi et al., 2019).

In Nigerian secondary schools, an information campaign utilizing both oral and visual mediums (oral presentation plus leaflet, or oral presentation plus video) improved all knowledge and perceived risk outcomes associated with human trafficking and irregular migration (Obi et al., 2019). Both information medium combinations significantly reduced intention to migrate irregularly (oral plus leaflet combination much higher), increased perceived ability to avoid human traffickers (oral plus video combination much higher), and increased decisions to pursue safe alternatives to irregular migration such as applying for study scholarships (oral plus video combination much higher).

Pilot projects (Migrants as Messengers) in Guinea (Bia-Zafinikamia et al., 2020) and Senegal (Tjaden and Dunsch 2021) screened movies to inform potential migrants of the serious risks and realities of irregular migration.

A key feature of the projects was the peer-to-peer messaging, which leveraged the experiences of returnees. Afterward, audience members were able to discuss the movie and ask questions. Both projects increased participant knowledge related to migration and reduced intentions to migrate irregularly. A second phase of the Migrants as Messengers project in Gambia, Guinea, and Senegal³ consisted of peer-to-peer messaging, community engagement, and awareness-raising activities to inform potential migrants, their families, and their friends about the risks associated with irregular migration, frameworks for regular migration, and safe alternatives to irregular migration (Hebie, Sessou and Tjaden, 2023). The activities varied across countries but generally included town hall meetings, video testimonials, theater, movie screenings, educational talks, or street art projects. The intervention had no effect on participants' intention to migrate irregularly or attitudes towards irregular migration in any country and had varying effects on knowledge and perceptions in each country. The peer-to-peer messaging aspect was effective as across countries, participants trusted returning migrants as good sources of information. The intervention was effective in improving knowledge about safe migration and perceptions of risk in Guinea and Senegal but seemed to have significantly decreased knowledge about safe migration in the Gambia. Participation in activities was low, and the diversity of activities as well as differences in their implementation in each country complicated the evaluation and prevented a causal

¹Please find a description of the methodology at the end of the document.

² Movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit, or destination

³The project was also conducted in Nigeria, but very low attendance and compliance rates prevented an estimation of the intervention effects.

analysis of which awareness activities worked most effectively or which participants were most positively impacted. This evidence suggests more research is needed to better understand the drivers of success and failure to achieve desired goals.

When positive effects of awareness-raising activities were observed, these effects did not consistently withstand the test of time. A documentary in Indonesia on the risks of unsafe migration, including human trafficking, had some promising impacts on knowledge and attitudes, but these impacts disappeared within four months (USC, 2014). There was no treatment effect on the intention to migrate safely. Providing information and testimonials about the risks of unsafe migration via documentary in the Gambia improved knowledge about backway (irregular) migration in the short term but had small and statistically insignificant effects on longer-term intentions to take the backway to Europe (Bah et al., 2022). A media awareness campaign on all forms of trafficking in Nepal increased knowledge about trafficking, ability to identify trafficking, and sense of urgency and concern around the issue, but most of these effects dissipated within three to six months (Archer, Boittin and Mo, 2016), highlighting that one-shot awareness-raising efforts are not sufficient for a sustained durable effect. Important learnings from Nepal are that narratives are more effective in awareness-raising than fact-based tools. Additionally, narratives designed to empower individuals (i.e.,

narratives that underscore the steps that individuals may take to avoid negative outcomes) may be more effective than narratives that induce fear (i.e., narratives that underscore the terrifying realities of forced labor and human trafficking), in engendering desired behaviors. While not an information campaign, evidence from a lab-in-the-field game in the Gambia suggests that providing accurate information on the risks of migration can change migration intentions and behavior of potential irregular migrants (Bah and Batista, 2020). A game that required players to make migration-related decisions found that potential migrants overestimated both the mortality risk and the probability of gaining legal residence after migrating irregularly. Correcting people's understanding of the mortality risk of irregular migration, which was found to be lower than what Gambian migrants assumed, significantly increased willingness to migrate irregularly. The actual probability of gaining legal residence status after migrating using irregular channels was less than what people had believed and updating people's initial beliefs significantly decreased migration intention. Follow-up data one year later show that reported migration intentions correlate well with actual migration decisions, although the magnitude of this correlation is small. This study points to the importance of understanding people's pre-existing knowledge and expectations when considering the potential effects of awareness-raising campaigns.



2. Interactive, personalized information provision and counseling may be more effective than short training sessions in increasing safe migration knowledge and reducing unsafe migration intentions and trafficking, but more rigorous research is needed.

Pre-migration or departure training interventions provide information on travel procedures and safety and legal information to individuals who have already arranged to legally immigrate. As such, these studies often measure outcomes associated with knowledge of safe travel and socio-economic integration rather than unsafe migration intentions. Nevertheless, these studies are of interest as people who immigrate legally can still be exploited by malicious actors, which is common for foreign domestic workers, for example ([Blaydes, 2023](#); [Boittin et al., 2023, under review](#)). Online/telephone counseling and outreach sessions provided by counselors through migrant resource centers (MRCs) in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, and Pakistan aimed to discourage irregular migration, raise awareness of safe regular migration practices, and protect migrants ([Dennison, 2021](#)). Notably, online and telephone counseling offered those considering migrating an opportunity to directly ask questions on a free and confidential basis. Outreach sessions were targeted to students at technical and vocational schools who had already arranged to emigrate, with content tailored to the destination country and focused on travel procedures, safety information, and legal information. All the activities across the four countries led to large and significant reductions in self-reported likelihood of migrating irregularly and an increase in awareness of safe options and who to contact. In contrast, [Barsbai et al., \(2021\)](#) found that short (2.5 hour) pre-departure orientation seminars, which are required under the Philippine government's immigration process, had no effect on the integration outcomes of employment, settlement, or subjective well-being. Individuals with finalized travel arrangements are required to attend the seminars, which cover topics related to longer-term socio-economic

integration such as building a support network, finding a job, and managing finances. Researchers found that the training actually led to a decrease in social network connections, with individuals having significantly fewer friends and acquaintances in their destination country and receiving less support from organizations. Authors note that individuals reduced their efforts to expand and acquire social networks, which, in turn, reduced the effects of improved information on other outcomes.

In India, a quasi-experimental study of a set of community empowerment interventions (in which groups identified their own key priorities) to reduce forced and bonded labor did not have an impact on forced and/or bonded labor outcomes ([Gausman et al., 2016](#)). The targeted communities developed locally appropriate educational opportunities, generated alternative labor training in new skill sets, and sought to increase understanding of legal rights. The interventions reduced indebtedness, improved food security, and increased the use of government services, though they did not have a significant effect on forced and/or bonded labor outcomes.⁴

An assertive counseling program in Nigeria taught secondary school students how to be assertive and defend their rights under Nigerian law and significantly reduced their vulnerability to trafficking as measured by an instrument developed by the researchers ([Uwah and Udom, 2016](#)). However, the paper outlining this study's results was brief and did not provide sufficient detail about the sampling, treatment implementation, or measurements. There was also no reported balance of randomization, attrition, or any other measure of counterfactual outcomes, making this study suggestive at best and pointing to the need for additional research around information provision for minors.

⁴Forced/bonded labor outcomes included whether individuals report being forced to work to pay off debt, unable to change employers or to move, unable to refuse to work, and whether they make under the minimum daily wage

3. Fair recruitment practices and targeted information provision for both employers and employees may improve labor conditions for migrant workers and reduce exploitation in destination countries.

A fair recruitment program for Nepalese individuals migrating to Jordan provided job-match screening, the elimination of recruitment fees, and a month-long pre-departure training covering job details, terms of their contract, work conditions and skills training (Babbitt et al., 2019). Fair recruitment improved contract understanding, reduced contract deception, and reduced migration-related debt. Fairly-recruited migrants reported greater comfort seeking help from their supervisors, fewer conflicts with supervisors, and less physical abuse and sexual harassment. Fair recruitment benefitted employers, too, as fairly-recruited migrants were more likely to reach their production targets and less likely to be absent, late to work, or attempt to quit their jobs. An awareness campaign in Hong Kong significantly increased knowledge of migrant domestic worker (MDW) labor rights and reduced tolerance of MDWs' mistreatment among the general public and employers (Boittin et al., 2023). The studied campaigns had little impact on MDWs, given high baseline levels of rights awareness and resignation that some mistreatment is inherent to their job. The study points to the importance of assessing baseline knowledge levels before launching an awareness-raising campaign. At least in Hong Kong, awareness-raising efforts had limited practical impact, as MDWs have high levels of awareness of rights and regulations, and as such, awareness is not a binding constraint on having better working conditions. Additionally, the study underscores the potential power of rights-awareness campaigns to improve MDW work conditions and reduce the exploitation of MDWs by shaping the views of individuals who employ or interact with MDWs. In other words, awareness-raising should not simply target vulnerable populations.

To reduce mistreatment by employers in Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia, Filipino women working as domestic workers were encouraged to show their employer a photo of themselves together with their immediate family members to signal to the employer that the worker is a human being with a family and personal background (Barsbai et al., 2022). The intervention led to workers reporting higher satisfaction with their employer, a higher likelihood of remaining with the initial employer, and a more positive view of international labor migration. There was not a significant effect on the index of treatment, which



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incorporated verbal and physical abuse, working conditions, and timeliness of wage payments, in the full sample, but in Hong Kong, the intervention significantly improved treatment. A fair recruitment program for Nepalese individuals migrating to Jordan provided job-match screening, the elimination of recruitment fees, and a month-long pre-departure training covering job details, terms of their contract, work conditions and skills training (Babbit et al., 2019). Fair recruitment improved contract understanding, reduced contract deception, and reduced migration-related debt. Fairly-recruited migrants reported greater comfort seeking help from their supervisors, fewer conflicts with supervisors, and less physical abuse and sexual harassment. Fair recruitment benefitted employers, too, as fairly-recruited migrants were more likely to reach their production targets and less likely to be absent, late to work, or attempt to quit their jobs.

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4. Increasing the availability of information on worker conditions in factories may lead to improvements in labor conditions and worker rights and reduce trafficking.

A study in Jordan (under ILO's Better Work program) analyzed the impact of compliance with national labor law and international labor standards within Jordan's garment exporting factories, specifically changes resulting from the implementation of a transparency

program that made compliance assessments publicly available (Robertson, 2019). The researchers found that compliance increased in 28 critical areas, such as child labor, discrimination, forced labor, compensation, and safety.

5. Financially supporting alternatives to unsafe migration, along with improved information, may be more effective than information provision alone in reducing unsafe migration practices and vulnerability to trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

In The Gambia, information about the risks of irregular migration combined with six months of tuition-free vocational skills training or facilitated legal migration to Senegal (via labeled cash transfers and migration support) led to long-term impacts on migration knowledge and intentions (Bah et al., 2022). The vocational training program significantly reduced intentions to migrate illegally and reduced the number of concrete steps (such as saving money, asking someone for help finding a job or accommodation, or making a travel plan) taken towards attempting illegal

migration. In contrast, information only — in the form of a documentary that included testimonials about the risks of unsafe migration to Europe — improved knowledge about backway (irregular) migration in the short term but had small and statistically insignificant effects on longer-term intentions to migrate to Europe. The limited impact of campaigns alone on potential migrants highlights that awareness raising is no substitute for the more complex tasks of addressing the economic insecurity underpinnings of irregular migration (Bah et al., 2022).

Key takeaways and recommendations for further research:

- 1 The majority of prevention-focused impact evaluations to date focus on international labor migration and labor trafficking; more studies are needed that focus on interventions to address forced labor (including bonded labor that is not migratory in nature), trafficking of children for both labor and sexual exploitation, online sexual exploitation (of both children and adults), and sex trafficking of children and adults (men, women, and LGBTQI+ individuals).
- 2 More studies are needed to show the long-term effects of trafficking incidence from behavior change interventions (changes in behavior and practices, not only knowledge and attitudes).
- 3 Researchers should initiate new studies to examine the impact of interactive, personalized information provision and counseling for migrants, refugees, and other groups that are vulnerable to trafficking on knowledge, attitudes, and practices
- 4 Additional studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of pre-departure trainings offered by governments and recruitment agencies on migration outcomes and trafficking incidence
- 5 More studies are needed to examine the impact of trafficking prevention programs that focus on improving financial, vocational, and educational opportunities for prospective migrants deemed to be at risk of labor trafficking.



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Methodology

In this rapid review, HTRI searched Cochrane Library, Campbell Collaboration, Google Scholar, and a number of institutional repositories including but not limited to: Research to Action (RTA) Evidence Gap Maps, 3ie Development Evidence Portal, IOM Evaluation Repository, Promising Practices Database, ILO i-eval Discovery, ILO Publications, ILAB Impact Evaluations, OECD iLibrary. In addition, the “snowballing” method was used to identify references from eligible studies. We included studies using experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluation methods.

Ongoing research funded by HTRI is exploring various prevention interventions, with results expected in the next few years.

HTRI is funding new and expanded studies that explore the role of information and awareness campaigns on irregular migration in Nigeria (Scacco et al.), reducing vulnerabilities for refugees and asylum seekers in Greece ([Hartman et al.](#)), reducing children’s exposure to

commercial sexual exploitation in Brazil (Kiss et al.), as well as the impact of offering microloans to micro-contractors on rates of forced labor in India’s construction sector (Shah, et al.). More information can be found [here](#).

This review was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State

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Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy nonprofit that discovers and promotes effective solutions to global poverty problems. IPA designs, rigorously evaluates, and refines these solutions and their applications together with researchers and local decision-makers, ensuring that evidence is used to improve the lives of the world’s poor. IPA has established the Human Trafficking Research Initiative (HTRI) in partnership with the Program to End Modern Slavery (PEMS) at the U.S. Department of State. HTRI aims to address the notable lack of evidence on effective programs to reduce trafficking and support victims.

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