

In-Transit: The Cross-Border Human Trafficking in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand

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ACTIP	ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons
ACWC	ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ACTIP
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
COMMIT	Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking
C-TIP	Countering Trafficking in Persons
ECPAT	End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes
EU	European Union
FDA	Foreign Development Aid
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IT	Information Technology
MoSVY	Ministry of Social Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSDHS	Ministry of Social Development and Human Security
NCCT	National Committee for Counter Trafficking
NGO	Non-Government Organisations
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
SEZ	Special Economic Zones
UN	United Nations
UN-ACT	United Nations Action for Cooperation Against Trafficking in Persons
UNIAP	United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region

UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WPCVOT	Welfare Protection Centre for Victims of Trafficking

INTRODUCTION

In-Transit: The Cross-Border Human Trafficking in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand provides an in-depth analysis of human trafficking within the Greater Mekong Subregion, focusing on Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. The report examines the socio-economic factors, legislative frameworks, and enforcement challenges that contribute to the persistence of trafficking in persons across these countries. It also considers the regional and international dynamics that influence trafficking flows and demand.

The report identifies key vulnerabilities, including poverty, statelessness, and gender and age disparities, which increase the risk of exploitation. It evaluates gaps in legal protections and operational enforcement that allow traffickers to operate with relative impunity. Additionally, it highlights notable cases that illustrate the complex nature of trafficking networks and the challenges faced by governments and civil society in addressing these issues.

Recent developments in capacity building, victim-sensitive approaches, and survivor engagement are reviewed, alongside the impact of reductions in foreign development aid on anti-trafficking efforts. By providing a comprehensive overview of existing challenges and progress, the report aims to inform policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders engaged in combating human trafficking in the region.

2. CAMBODIA



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2.1 Overview of Human Trafficking in Cambodia

In the latest report made by the US State Department on human trafficking, Cambodia was included in the list of Tier 3 countries, which are countries that do not meet the minimum standards of alleviating human trafficking and are not considered to have made any significant progress (U.S. Department of State, 2024a). According to the report, while the government has taken steps to address the problem, government officials themselves have impeded the implementation of such policies by undermining law enforcement efforts, thereby decreasing the protection afforded to victims. Some of the reasons for the gap in enforcement is the lack of a centralised database for trafficking cases and the lack of effective investigation of suspects (U.S. Department of State, 2024b).

2.2 Forms of Trafficking

01 *Trafficking in Persons*

According to a report made by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Cambodia is a “source, transit and destination country for trafficking in persons” (UNODC, 2017). One of the main causes of human trafficking is the migration of Cambodians to Thailand for labour and economic reasons; however, this has made Cambodians vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (UNODC, 2017).

Cambodia’s slow economic growth and low gross domestic product also contributed to the emigration of Cambodians to other countries. The lack of job opportunities, high

unemployment rates, and low wages have pushed citizens to migrate to Thailand, with some cases falling under irregular or illegal migration (UNODC, 2017). This is due to the fact that undergoing a legal migration channel is much more expensive and involves government bureaucracy or additional mandatory training. These factors deter people from using proper channels, leading them to migrate illegally.

02 *Sexual trafficking*

There are reports that young, vulnerable Cambodian women and men are being exploited in sex trafficking schemes, but the reports have been mixed regarding the exact number of females and males who were trafficked from Cambodia to other countries (UNODC, 2017). For example, some women are being recruited by traffickers to enter into fraudulent marriages in China; however, the women incur high debts to facilitate this transaction, which results in them being sexually exploited to repay their debts (U.S. Department of State, 2024b). Moreover, sex trafficking operations are usually clandestine, and the victims are brought to various establishments such as massage parlours, salons, and entertainment establishments (U.S. Department of State, 2024b). Child sex trafficking and online child sexual exploitation have also been prevalent, with reports indicating that 11 percent of children (ages 12 to 17) who use the internet have experienced online abuse. Orphanages have also become a channel for exploitation, where children are being purchased for the purpose of sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2024b).

03 *Labour trafficking*

Labour trafficking occurs when workers are exploited and abused, such as when Cambodians are being smuggled as labour migrants to other countries. Cambodian men are often trafficked in the agricultural and fishing sector, while women are trafficked for domestic and hospitality services (UNODC, 2017). Recently, the UN expressed its concerns regarding labour trafficking occurring in scam centres that proliferate cybercrime across Southeast Asia, including Cambodia. In these scam centres, workers are subjected to substandard living conditions and are at risk of violence and deprivation of liberty (United Nations, 2025).

According to the US Department of State, the Cambodian government has contributed to the rise of labour trafficking for the following reasons: it has failed to screen Cambodian workers for potential cases of trafficking and prosecute labour traffickers, with some government officials having been linked to own online scam operators, directly or indirectly, which have been notorious for exploiting workers (2024b). According to reports, while the anti-trafficking law requires a long period of imprisonment for convicted labour traffickers, in practice, most traffickers were only fined or given a sentence for a short period. Thus, systemic corruption in the government contributes to the prevalence of trafficking in Cambodia (US Department of State, 2024b).

2.3 Government and National Response

01 *International Treaties*

In its Report to the Secretary-General of the UN on Trafficking in Women and Girls, the Royal Government of Cambodia reaffirmed its commitment to combating human trafficking, particularly targeting vulnerable groups (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2024a). This commitment has been formalised through the country's ratification of significant international treaties. Notably, Cambodia ratified the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children in 2015, and the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers in 2017 (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2024a).

Furthermore, Cambodia has concluded several bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries. In 2014, it signed a bilateral agreement with Thailand on the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on Case Management of Repatriation and Reintegration of Victims of Human Trafficking and the Development of the Joint Plan of Action on SOPs. Similarly, Cambodia has signed a bilateral agreement with Vietnam on Bilateral Cooperation on Counter Trafficking in Persons and Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking. Most recently, Cambodia also concluded a bilateral agreement with China on Strengthening Cooperation in Counter Trafficking in Persons (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2024a).

02 *National Policies*

In terms of national policy frameworks, Cambodia has laid down several important policies to combat human trafficking. One of the major policies is the National Strategic Plan for Counter Trafficking in Persons (2024-2028). This plan aims to enable the government to effectively resolve crimes involving human trafficking through a flexible approach. According to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sar Sokha, this policy is important because the problem of trafficking is a major concern. He claims that,

The nature of global transnational crime is to have perpetrators who form strong interconnected networks and embed them everywhere, creating greater potential to commit crimes and leveraging modern technology systems to target victims, all of which makes it easier to hide their activities (David, 2024).

Aside from tackling trafficking in persons, the Cambodian government also aims to prevent violence against women migrant workers by increasing awareness and enacting regulations to protect their rights. The Five-Year Strategic Plan for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (Neary Rattanak VI) aims to implement policies that leads to the empowerment of women and girls, through a gender-transformative approach, in a wide set transformation of areas such as the economy, social and family values, legal protections, leadership and governance, and climate change (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2024b).

Another similar plan is the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and this aims to reduce gender-based violence through targeted interventions (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2024a).

The government of Cambodia also established a National Committee for Counter Trafficking, chaired by the Ministry of Interior, to help coordinate stakeholders such as national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in resolving this issue at a sub-national level (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2024a). While there has indeed been significant strides in the government's action towards combating trafficking, the government acknowledges that challenges remain in implementing these policies, especially in terms of women migrant workers who are victims of violence. Thus, much work needs to be done in order to strengthen cooperation with other countries and to be able to properly address these problems.

3. LAOS



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3.1 Overview of Human Trafficking in Laos

Between 200,000 and 450,000 individuals are estimated to be the victims of trafficking annually within the Greater Mekong Subregion (SENGSAVANG, n.d.). Human trafficking is one of the most persistent and prevalent challenges in Laos, with girls and young women representing a major part of the victims every year. Within the region, the country serves as a key transit point (U.S. Department of State, 2024; SENSAVANG, n.d.).

Human trafficking in Laos takes different shapes. Sex trafficking and forced labour are amongst the most prevalent, though cyber scams, forced surrogacy, and forced marriages are also significant challenges. Amongst the most vulnerable, young people across the globe are notably more at risk of becoming victims of trafficking as a significant portion are part of a great migration wave, venturing in other places looking for the hope and promise of a better future as a result of poverty, low access to education, and economic opportunities (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Many are promised alluring economic opportunities, but are eventually tricked, cheated, or forced into exploitation after crossing the borders (SENGSAVANG, n.d.). Moreover, Lao women and girls, children, migrant workers, and foreign nationals are vulnerable to human trafficking.

Human trafficking in Laos often begins with the voluntary movement of the victim. However, the traffickers use deceptive recruitment, social media, debt bondage, the use of brokers, all forms of abuse, and victim recycling as methods to increase trafficking and the numbers of victims (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

3.2 Forms of Trafficking

01 *Sex Trafficking*

Sex trafficking is one of the most prevalent and persistent challenges in Laos. In the 2024 Concluding Observations of the CEDAW, the committee emphasised their concern for the increasing trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation in the country (CEDAW, 2024). It is argued that the accumulation of poverty, weak child protection laws, corruption, increasing internet use, and ease of travel in Laos increase opportunities for sex offenders (Alliance Anti-Traffic and ECPAT International & Human Rights Council, 2020). There is an increasing demand for young women and girls both in Laos and outside the borders, with many girls transported to Thailand for commercial sex trade (UCA News, 2024; Alliance Anti-Traffic and ECPAT International & Human Rights Council, 2020; SENGSAVANG, n.d.).

Potential victims of sex trafficking are not only Laotian women and girls, but also foreign nationals and undocumented migrants, who are vulnerable to exploitation not only in other countries, but also in urban centres, border areas, casinos, and Special Economic Zones (SEZs). The sexual exploitation may take the form of commercial sex work and prostitution, child sexual exploitation (including pornography), child sex tourism, coercion through debts and threats, and other forms of abuse (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

02 *Forced Labour*

In Laos, many face vulnerable economic situations, resulting in them having to participate in informal employment. The pandemic has exacerbated the susceptibility of Laotians, but also many around the globe (The Centre for Child Rights and Business, 2024).

Financially vulnerable Lao nationals and migrant workers, in the hope of alleviating the strain on their economic situation, can sometimes become victims of forced labour. Several mechanisms are employed, including debt-related coercion, promises of high-paying jobs, informal migration, confiscation of identity documents, wage docking, and threats (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Forced labour occurs across several sectors. In agriculture, workers can be exploited on, notably, banana and rubber plantations, which are often foreign-owned or foreign-operated. The mining and construction sectors also present risks. Lao women are especially vulnerable to exploitation in garment factories and domestic work. Lao men and boys face forced labour in the fishing industry in Thai and Indonesian waters (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Evidently, the working conditions across many of these sectors in Laos have been described as inhumane. News articles relating the stories of individuals from India or Rwanda have emphasised the difficulty of the situation, where people were initially offered promising, high-paying jobs, but in reality they were forced into a job without the ability to reach their families and devoid of their passports. Some of those persons have been rescued through their embassies, though many are still trapped in their arduous forced labour (Ngarambe, 2025; Mwiza, 2025; Tewari, 2024).

03 *Forced Marriages and Surrogacy*

Beyond Lao women victims of forced marriages (RFA Lao, 2025a; RFA Lao, 2025b), Laos has the highest prevalence of child marriage in East Asia with **more than 30 percent of women married under the age of 18** (Lister & Rosenthal, 2024; Save the Children, 2021; Alliance Anti-Traffic and ECPAT International & Human Rights Council, 2020). However, because marriages are considered private and familial matters, it is difficult to estimate how many are victims of trafficking (Lister & Rosenthal, 2024). Child marriage is not always associated with trafficking, yet it is often intertwined as certain features of the arrangements increase the risk of children being trafficked for forced marriage with payment of the bride and dowry, ‘sham or fraudulent marriage practices used to facilitate irregular migration can lead to exploitation of the child, including trafficking’ (Lister & Rosenthal, 2024).

Similarly, with the promise of idyllic marriages, victims of forced surrogacy can be recruited. The women and girls are typically coerced into bearing children for others without informed consent or adequate healthcare. A key trend regarding forced surrogacy is its extension to the marriage trafficking pattern (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

04 *Online Scam Operations*

Online scam operations in Laos are an increasingly concerning form of trafficking (IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2023). Victims include both men and women from Laos and abroad, with reports of individuals from Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and South America being targeted. Among them are young Lao people from rural areas who often have higher education but face limited employment opportunities. These scams are commonly based in SEZs and commercial compounds in Laos, particularly in the Golden Triangle.

Victims are recruited through false advertisements for high-paying jobs in customer service or technical support, often spread on social media and online platforms. Once they arrive, they are forced to participate in online gambling, cryptocurrency fraud, internet scams, and telephone schemes (Vientiane Times, 2025). Those who fail to meet quotas face threats, physical punishment, wage deductions, or even imprisonment. Many victims are trapped in

debt bondage and sold between criminal networks. Some are even made to recruit others as a condition to escape (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

3.3 Government and National Response

The 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report by the US Department of State has ranked Laos in Tier 2 Watchlist, illustrating the fact that the country does not currently meet the requirements for effectively combating human trafficking. However, it is making significant efforts to do so, through, for instance, increasing investigations (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Moreover, awareness efforts are ongoing, particularly in relation to forced child marriages (Alliance Anti-Traffic and ECPAT International & Human Rights Council, 2020). The establishment of the National Committee on Anti-Trafficking in Persons and other similar mechanisms reflects an important step in the battle against human trafficking (UCA News, 2024).

Following the 2024 Concluding Observations of CEDAW, Laos emphasised its efforts for battling the issues, especially with regards to sexual and labour exploitation through legal and policy frameworks, institutional mechanisms, international and regional cooperation and support (Vientiane Times, 2025), and the national assistance hotlines (UN Economic and Social Council, 2024; CEDAW, 2024).

Legal frameworks such as Article 215 of the Penal Code criminalise human trafficking, also condemning sex and labour trafficking (Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2017), or the 2013 Lao Labour Law, which prohibits forced or compulsory labour, and provides further restrictions regarding child labour (Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2013).

NGOs and civil society organisations have also played an important part in the battle against human trafficking. Indeed, organisations such as Sengsavang (SENGSAVANG, n.d.), The Lao Women's Union (ASEAN-ACT, 2022; Lao Women's Union, n.d.), The Lotus Project (Lotus Education Fund Ltd, n.d.), Village Focus International (Village Focus International, n.d.) have provided support, shelter, legal advice, and protection to victims of human trafficking.

Despite significant efforts to tackle this issue, several limitations and shortcomings have been highlighted, for instance, in the 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Thus, international institutions have made important recommendations to protect, prevent, and prosecute in the fight against human trafficking in Laos (CEDAW, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024; Alliance Anti-Traffic and ECPAT International & Human Rights Council, 2020).

4. THAILAND



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4.1 Overview of Human Trafficking in Thailand

The profiles of victims of human trafficking in Thailand are diverse, with both nationals and foreigners being exploited. Those who are at high risk include ethnic minorities, families who lost their livelihood due to the pandemic, and those affected by political instability and violence. Among the industries that induce children to work are agriculture, fishing, domestic work, poultry farming, the trade sector, and street begging (U.S. State Department, 2024).

Thailand also serves as a transit country for illegal recruiters who employ people from various countries, falsely luring them with well-paying jobs. The victims are then transferred to nearby states and are taken in cyber scam operations. Skills sought after have evolved, and recently, demand for more information technology (IT) skills has increased, with recruiters integrating technology into their activities (Preputnik et al., 2024). Many human trafficking operations are run by charging aspiring workers with fees to be paid to brokers and recruitment firms, which is done either before or after setting foot in Thailand. Strategies to intimidate them into labour may include fraudulent hiring, physical violence, and unauthorised salary deductions. Their personal identifiable documents are also seized to compel them to stay while receiving below the minimum wage with no rest days (US State Department, 2024).

4.2 Forms of Trafficking

01 *Child labour*

Children are at higher risk of being taken advantage of by illegal recruiters, especially with the prevalence of employment shortage and the military conflict in Myanmar, which has led to soaring numbers of migrants (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). **An average of 158,000 Thai children between 15 and 18 years old are involved in child labour.** This is particularly concerning because, instead of attending school, children are placed in hazardous settings and subjected to excessive working hours. Some are also pressured by brokers and even their parents to go onto the streets to sell flowers or ask for money. Alarming reports reveal that children are being recruited by secessionist groups in Southern Thailand to participate in their insurgent operations (U.S. State Department, 2024).

02 *Sexual exploitation*

It has been revealed that about 400,000 children aged from 12 to 17 were taken advantage of and sexually abused in 2021. Children are coerced to perform sexual acts over the internet in exchange for money and gifts. Most of them were contacted by perpetrators through social media platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, and X. Unfortunately, countless victims and guardians are not reporting this kind of mistreatment, as they are not familiar with the process and the competent authorities to contact (UNICEF Thailand, 2022). A police operation aimed at a smuggling gang unveiled the inducement of underage girls from ethnic groups in northern Thailand who were brought to Bangkok to participate in prostitution with Chinese clients (Bangkok Post, 2024).

03 *Forced labour*

Nationals of neighbouring countries experiencing political turbulence are vulnerable to illegal work that often exposes them to a dangerous environment. This is prevalent across borders, where informal employment and seasonal opportunities are more common. Numerous Thai nationals are illegally sent to foreign countries to work in forced labour and are taken advantage of to work irregular hours with no days off. Due to constraints in their work permits, they face difficulty switching to new employers, and sometimes their passports are also retained (U.S. State Department, 2024).

On the other hand, given the ongoing political turmoil in Myanmar, this has heightened the abuse of the Burmese people, as the dire situation has resulted in civil unrest, financial crisis, and migration. Hence, these migrants are desperate to land jobs and become

susceptible to shady brokers. The situation in the fishing industry has also been unscrupulous, particularly for men and boys. Apart from inconsistent payment and below minimum wage, forced labourers struggle with work seven days a week for as long as 18 to 20 hours per day, and with insufficient supplies of food and water. In some cases, captains physically abuse the workers with beatings and drug them so that they are compelled to toil longer. Since they are operating in desolate places and have meagre earnings, it is often complicated for them to return home, and with some employers, they are forbidden from leaving (U.S. State Department, 2024; ITF, 2024).

It has been disclosed that thousands of Thai nationals are recruited yearly to be berry pickers in Sweden and Finland, where the harvest season lasts from July to October, and they are promised generous pay. The presented offer appears irresistible as they could earn more for a few months of work compared to their annual income in Thailand (Thongnoi, 2022). This is very timely for Thai farmers as it transpired during the offseason of rice production, allowing them to gain an additional source of revenue. To their dismay, it has been revealed that some employers in Sweden did not provide the agreed-upon salary, and the berry pickers had unexplained deductions from their earnings. Aside from that, they had to endure lengthy work schedules and insufficient food rations that were not enough to energise them for their physically demanding tasks. Meanwhile, their living conditions are also terrible, as they have to share overcrowded accommodation with many people (Boonbandit, 2025).

04 *Surrogacy*

Thailand has banned commercial surrogacy and surrogacy for foreign couples because it garnered ethical and regulatory concerns regarding the reproduction procedure. Despite this, it did not deter illicit networks from operating, even involving healthcare professionals. They have been responsible for the recruitment of young women to earn money as surrogates for couples from Thailand and abroad. Several medical practitioners assisted in carrying out the implantation of human embryos into the surrogate mothers without valid permits. This is a highly contested topic, as critics maintain that illegal surrogacy exposes women to risks by breaching medical regulations and compromising the health and rights of the surrogates (The Star, 2024).

4.3 Government and National Response

Amid the rampant occurrence of human trafficking, the government has fortified its efforts by setting up specialised anti-trafficking units in numerous offices, for instance, the Bangkok Criminal Court, the Department of Special Investigation, and the Royal Thai Police (Safe Child Thailand, n.d.). The government is coordinating with other stakeholders, such as NGOs, international organisations, and other experts, to strengthen investigation proceedings, scientific testing, and victim support. Training and workshops are offered to promote interagency liaison and to enhance the capacity of officers in handling trafficking cases. In light of this, groups of prosecutors knowledgeable about trafficking litigation serve as

mentors for others with less experience, and they are typically dispatched immediately to guide local authorities whenever an arrest is made (U.S. State Department, 2024).

Furthermore, the government is optimising the use of modern technology by establishing an online informal labour support channel, a renowned digital communication platform in Thailand. It became a medium for users to be aware of and exchange important information about child labour. On top of that, Thailand has an Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force that enacted an awareness campaign on child trafficking through the creation of assistance and monitoring networks, reaching out to students in both public and private schools (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

The state-led anti-trafficking campaign has focused its efforts on the media and public relations actors as well. Awareness events are conducted to give participants a better understanding of the National Referral Mechanism, which is a guideline on how to assist and safeguard survivors of human trafficking. Enhancing awareness through the media and public relations is instrumental, particularly as social media has worsened the population's vulnerability to illicit recruiters. It is therefore essential to disseminate accurate information in order to combat this (The Phuket News, 2024).

5. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia have in place national and international legal frameworks to combat human trafficking, recognising it as a cross-border crime affecting vulnerable populations across all the regions. Each country has its own domestic legislation criminalising the offence, outlining procedures for prosecution and support services for the victims (UNODC, 2024). They complement this protection with international frameworks, having engaged in bilateral agreements and participated in multilateral initiatives, such as the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT) (UNDP, 2015).

Unfortunately, these instruments often fall short in practice, with corruption within governments and law enforcement agencies undermining their implementation. This chapter will analyse the most relevant domestic and international laws, outline the practical challenges that limit their effectiveness and present real-life cases as examples.



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5.1 National Anti-Trafficking Laws

Cambodia's national legal framework for human trafficking is primarily based on the 2008 'Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation'. It replaced the 1996 'Law on Suppression of Kidnapping, Human Trafficking/Sale of Human Being and Exploitation of Human Being', which contained many gaps and unclear provisions (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2008). The law criminalises both sex and labour trafficking, and prescribes penalties ranging from seven to 15 years' imprisonment for offences involving adult victims, and 15 to 20 years for those involving children. It also

entrusts authorities with more comprehensive powers (U.S. Department of State, Cambodia, 2024).

Laos' national legal framework criminalises both sex and labour trafficking under Article 215 of the Lao Penal Code, prescribing penalties of five to 15 years imprisonment and substantial fines, which increase when the victim is a child (U.S. Department of State, Laos, 2023). The 2015 'Lao Law on Anti-Trafficking in Persons' complements it by criminalising all related acts with penalties ranging from life imprisonment to capital punishment for aggravated cases, and mandating the identification of victims (National Assembly of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2015).

Concerning Thailand, the 2008 'Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E. 2551' criminalises all forms of trafficking, both sexual and labour exploitation, and imposes severe penalties, including higher sentences for offences involving children, organised criminal groups or committed by officials. It also establishes a framework for victim protection and a dedicated fund. It was further amended by the 'Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (No. 2) B.E.' of 2015 and the 'Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (No. 3) B.E. 2560' of 2017 (Royal Thai Government, n.d.).

5.2 Bilateral/Multilateral Agreements

Some of the most extensive and diverse human trafficking patterns occur within and between the six countries of the Greater Sub Mekong region, including Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, with new practices of exploitation regularly emerging (UNDP, 2015).

This is why joint efforts are essential, which led to the creation of the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT) in 2004. This intergovernmental body brings together six countries—Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—and is aimed at combating human trafficking in the Greater Mekong Subregion. It facilitates regional cooperation through shared action plans and joint initiatives to address cross-border issues. The COMMIT is supported by the United Nations Action for Cooperation Against Trafficking in Persons (UN-ACT), a regional project that serves as its secretariat (UNDP, 2015). Despite the organisation's efforts, the detection of victims and the conviction of offenders have declined in recent years (UNODC, 2024).

**In 2022, the
detection of
victims dropped
by**

46%

**compared to
pre-COVID
(UNODC, 2024).**

In addition, some bilateral agreements are also relevant. In 2003, Cambodia and Thailand signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) committing to eliminating trafficking in children and women and assisting victims of trafficking, agreeing that trafficked children and women should not be treated as immigration offenders, but as victims entitled to protection and support (Royal Government of Cambodia & Royal Government of Thailand, 2003). They signed a second one in 2019, the MoU on strengthening the management of the repatriation and reintegration of human trafficking victims. It covers guidelines on repatriation and victims' support, complying with international standards, as well as the roles and responsibilities of both countries in the process (Royal Government of Cambodia & Royal Government of Thailand, 2019).

5.3 Law Enforcement Practices and Corruption Issues

Despite the existing legal frameworks and cross-border agreements, their implementation in the regions remain inconsistent and under-resourced. Authorities often fail to prosecute trafficking cases under the relevant laws, instead relying on less stringent provisions, particularly in labour trafficking cases, resulting in minimal penalties such as small fines or short detentions. In Laos, courts did not convict any traffickers in the most recent reporting year, despite active investigations and prosecutions. Although the Ministry of Public Security has police units dedicated to investigating human trafficking cases, officials reported they lacked adequate equipment and training to pursue the ringleaders of trafficking syndicates, often only arresting low-level members (U.S. Department of State, Laos, 2023).

Moreover, widespread corruption and official complicity, including among high-ranking officials, have consistently created obstacles for enforcement, resulting in impunity for perpetrators and insufficient protection for victims (U.S. Department of State, Cambodia, 2024).

Some notorious corruption cases include:

01

Cambodia

A former Deputy Director of the Police Anti-Human Trafficking Department was convicted for involvement in trafficking activities and received a five-year prison sentence; two of his subordinates were also convicted and were sentenced to seven years imprisonment (UNODC, 2021).

02

Laos

In a 2018 case, a massage parlour was raided by the Royal Thai Police. Over 100 people from Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and China were found inside the building, including minors. Documents found

inside indicated that over 20 public officials had received free services from the parlour (UNODC, 2021).

03

Thailand

Between 2013 and 2017, over 60 individuals, including a Thai army general and multiple police officers, were convicted for trafficking Rohingya migrants in the country's largest human trafficking case to date (UNODC, 2021).

6. VICTIM SUPPORT AND PROTECTION



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6.1 Identification Processes

Identifying trafficking victims in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand reveals a disconnect between policies put in place by the respective governments and their practice (Song, 2016). In Cambodia, the 2015 Prakas (official proclamation) tasks multiple agencies with victim identification, but its implementation is weak (ASEAN, 2016). Immigration officers, police and NGOs are meant to collaborate, yet issues with misidentification persist. This is especially true where trafficking is conflated with consensual smuggling or illegal work (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

For example, Cambodian authorities officially identified only 142 trafficking victims in 2023 (plus 214 in forced marriage cases), despite much higher suspected numbers. The majority of these were found among Cambodian migrant labourers deported through the Poipet border centre (915 Cambodian victims and even a handful of Burmese) rather than through in-country detection (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This indicates a reactive system heavily reliant on foreign authorities returning victims, rather than proactive identification on Cambodian soil.

Meanwhile, since 2015, Laos has enacted several anti-trafficking laws and guidelines; however, similar to its regional neighbour, its implementation remains imperfect. In practice, identification in Laos remains largely passive and one-directional (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Most victims are identified only after their return from Thailand. For instance, the SEZs in northern Laos have become hubs for forced labour and sexual exploitation. Despite credible reports of large-scale trafficking in certain casino-led SEZs, the Lao government has officially identified very few victims from these zones (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Research into recent cases found that no formal victim identification took place during the exploitation, as victims were only recognised after escape or deportation. This is because district officials lack the capacity and protocols; the fear of fines suppresses reporting (UNDP, 2023).

Thailand has the most institutionalised victim identification system of the three. Thai law mandates multidisciplinary teams, comprising police, social workers, and NGOs, to screen potential trafficking victims using standard indicators and screening forms, and has adopted formal SOPs for initial victim identification (RTG, 2023). On the ground, however, implementation is inconsistent.

Thai authorities have historically excelled at identifying female victims in the sex trade but have struggled to identify victims of forced labour and other less visible forms of trafficking. For instance, despite reports of widespread child labour exploitation in fisheries, factories, and domestic work, the government identified only two child labour trafficking victims in all of 2021. Nonetheless, improvements are evident: in 2022, Thailand reported an increase in identified labour trafficking victims (640 victims, up from 444 the previous year) due in part to better screening of migrant workers and proactive inspections in high-risk sectors (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Additionally, Thai task forces are identifying and preventing victims of cyber-scam operations (IJM, 2023).

At the regional level, the COMMIT process has allowed for a network of bilateral MoUs that standardise how countries hand over identified victims. Cambodia and Thailand, for instance, have a long-standing MoU (renewed in 2014) to cooperate on eliminating trafficking and smoothly repatriating victims (ASEAN, 2016). This has enabled mechanisms like the Poipet Transit Centre, where Thai authorities regularly transfer Cambodian trafficking survivors to Cambodian care rather than simply deporting them. Similar agreements exist between Cambodia and Vietnam (with detailed 2009 SOPs for victim identification and return), and between Thailand and Laos (renewed in 2017) (Lao Pdr, 2019).

6.2 Regional Victim Support Mechanisms: Shelter, Legal Aid, and Psychosocial Care

Support systems vary in structure and effectiveness. In Cambodia, NGOs provide nearly all services. The Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSVY) operates transit centres, but long-term, specialised care is ultimately provided by NGOs. Additionally, shelter durations vary and are often underfunded by the government. Foreign victims, such as Vietnamese women or South Asian scam victims, often receive only temporary aid before repatriation (U.S. Mission Cambodia, 2024). Legal aid is primarily NGO-driven. Courts lack interpreters and trauma-informed psychological care is limited. Ultimately, despite government issued standards, enforcement remains inconsistent.

Furthermore, protection for foreign victims is often treated as a short-term humanitarian intervention rather than a right to long-term support. Cambodian authorities usually coordinate with the victim's embassy or the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to arrange repatriation after providing interim care. Foreign victims can access shelters and services while awaiting return, but this aid may be conditional. One report noted that only certain foreign scam victims received referrals to care, while others were promptly deported without comprehensive assistance (U.S. Mission Cambodia, 2024).

In Laos, a single main shelter in Vientiane is run by the Lao Women's Union with international aid. Services include housing and basic care, as well as psycho-social support, primarily for returning Lao nationals. Moreover, international NGOs and UN agencies tend to support the government facilities or assist victims through community-based services (World Bank, 2020). For example, the IOM and UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (UNIAP) (now UN-ACT) have helped improve the shelter's services and set up a victim assistance fund for essentials (IOM, 2019).

However, delivering on these promises is challenging in practice - much depends on the success of foreign aid projects. Coordination with regional frameworks, such as COMMIT, is evident in Laos' approach to returning victims. For example, Lao authorities closely coordinate with Thai counterparts to receive Lao victims at the border and ensure a smooth handover, accompanied by basic documentation and some welfare checks (UNDP, 2023).

The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS), on the other hand, oversees a network of shelters offering comprehensive services nationwide. However, NGOs and advocacy reports have pointed out that services for male victims (and other less common victim groups) remain limited. For instance, as of 2022, Thailand had far fewer shelter beds and programs tailored for male labour trafficking survivors compared to those for women and children (U.S. Mission Cambodia, 2023). Legal aid is enshrined in law, and NGOs often fill service gaps. In 2019, a Cambodian national was found guilty trafficking five of its own people, coercing them to work in Thailand's fishing industry. This case led to the first implementation of the Trafficking in Persons Fund, providing monetary compensation to

the victims of trafficking (IJM, 2019). Despite regulatory changes, victims report experiencing movement restrictions and limited work options, with shelter stays averaging 129 days in 2022, a decrease from the 143-day average in 2021 (RTG, 2023).

6.3 Structural and Systemic Barriers to Justice for Trafficking Survivors

Survivors face layered barriers: fear, stigma, economic pressure, and impunity. Law enforcement is widely mistrusted. In Laos, for instance, police have detained returnees for illegal migration. In both Thailand and Cambodia, undocumented migrants risk arrest simply because of their immigration status (UNDP, 2023). Language barriers and the lack of interpreters often prevent survivors from accurately conveying their experiences. Cultural stigma and shame, particularly surrounding sexual exploitation, can silence victims before they reach the justice system. At the same time, the absence of financial support discourages survivors from engaging in lengthy legal proceedings.

Institutional shortcomings add further obstacles. Witness protection remains inadequate across the region. Cambodia and Laos offer minimal safeguards, while Thailand's system often excludes foreign nationals and lower-profile witnesses. The fear of retaliation discourages participation. Cross-border cases create additional challenges, as mutual legal assistance processes are slow, and jurisdictional gaps allow traffickers to avoid prosecution (UNDP, 2023). Trials are frequently prolonged, and the limited availability of video testimony makes it harder for victims to remain involved. Moreover, deportation during the early stages of investigations is common, cutting off survivors from any opportunity to seek justice (UNDP, 2023).

These barriers are compounded by pervasive corruption. In Cambodia, senior officials have been implicated in trafficking (U.S. Mission Cambodia, 2023). In Thailand, authorities have been accused of accepting bribes and interfering with enforcement efforts. In Laos, despite credible allegations, complicity is rarely investigated (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Together, these dynamics reinforce a culture of impunity and erode survivors' confidence in the justice system.

7. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Human trafficking in Southeast Asia is a deeply transnational issue. Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand are interconnected not only by geography but by complex trafficking networks that exploit porous borders and socio-economic disparities (ECPAT International, 2022). These routes are frequently used for the movement of trafficked persons, especially women and children, due to weak border controls and differing national legal capacities (UNODC, 2023). The response to this crisis must, therefore, be grounded in strong regional and international cooperation, as emphasised by international instruments such as the Palermo Protocol and UNODC guidelines on cross-border collaboration. ASEAN mechanisms, bilateral agreements, and multilateral initiatives have been developed to address these cross-border challenges through legal harmonisation, victim protection, and law enforcement coordination (ASEAN, 2015; UNODC, 2024).

7.1 Cross-Border Collaboration

Bilateral Cooperation

Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand have all entered into bilateral agreements to address human trafficking across their shared borders. Notable examples include the 2003 MoU between Thailand and Cambodia on Bilateral Cooperation for Eliminating Trafficking in Children and Women and Assisting Victims of Trafficking, and the 2019 MoU on the Repatriation and Reintegration of Trafficked Victims, which outlines procedures for safe return and rehabilitation (UNIAP, 2004; IOM, 2019).

Between 2022 and 2024, Thailand intensified efforts to work closely with Cambodia on cross-border criminal investigations and deportation cases involving trafficked persons and irregular migrants (UNODC, 2023). Thailand and Cambodia reaffirmed their shared commitment to joint surveillance at checkpoints such as Poipet–Aranyaprathet, while Cambodian authorities have undertaken capacity-building measures for frontline officers to improve victim identification (ASEAN-ACT, 2023).

Trilateral and Multilateral Cooperation

Although less frequent, trilateral coordination has occurred within the broader COMMIT Process; however, gaps remain in real-time information exchange and repatriation protocols involving all three countries (UNODC 2023a). There is still no formal trilateral MoU specifically addressing trafficking among Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand (IOM 2019). Challenges persist in harmonising national referral mechanisms, ensuring consistent application of international standards, and addressing language barriers and bureaucratic obstacles that delay the safe return and reintegration of victims (ASEAN-ACT 2022; ECPAT International 2022).

7.2 ASEAN Initiatives

ASEAN has taken significant steps to create a regional framework to address trafficking, grounded in shared legal standards and political cooperation.

Key instruments include:

ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP), 2015	ASEAN Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons (2016–2025)	ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ACTIP (ACWC)
Ratified by Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, ACTIP obliges states to criminalise all forms of trafficking and outlines measures for victim protection and international cooperation.	Operationalises ACTIP by setting regional priorities such as cross-border case referrals, data sharing, and multi-agency training programmes.	Monitors state compliance and serves as a platform for technical exchange. Thailand has hosted several ACWC working group meetings, while Cambodia has submitted progress reports showcasing improvements in victim sheltering and prosecution statistics.

While ASEAN’s framework reflects a strong normative commitment, implementation at the national level remains uneven. Civil society actors have voiced concerns regarding the lack of transparency in enforcement, the inadequate protection of informal migrants, and the slow response to technology-facilitated trafficking, particularly in online sexual exploitation cases.

7.3 Roles of International Organisations and NGOs

International organisations play an essential role in supporting regional and cross-border cooperation. Key actors include:

- Through the Global Action to Prevent and Address Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants (GLO.ACT Asia and the Middle East), the UNODC collaborates with Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand to harmonise legal frameworks,

conduct joint investigations, train border officials, and strengthen national referral systems (UNODC 2023a, *GLO.ACT Asia and the Middle East: Progress Report*).

- The IOM plays a key role in supporting safe return and reintegration. In 2023, IOM organised a multilateral workshop on victim screening protocols involving Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, and continues to operate cross-border awareness campaigns targeting vulnerable communities (IOM 2023a, *Cross-Border Cooperation Workshop Report: Southeast Asia*).
- NGOs such as End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) International, Save the Children, and Terre des Hommes implement cross-border programmes providing legal aid, psychosocial services, and training for frontline officers. In Thailand, NGO-run hotlines have facilitated the identification of trafficking rings, prompting state-level intervention and coordinated rescues (ECPAT 2023; Save the Children 2022; Terre des Hommes 2023).
- Regional Thematic Working Groups: Under the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, the three countries have taken part in joint thematic dialogues and simulation exercises to strengthen real-time coordination and crisis response (Bali Process 2023).

Despite the increasing involvement of international actors, their impact is sometimes limited by governmental restrictions on NGO operations and donor-driven project cycles that hinder long-term programme sustainability.

7.4 Preliminary Observations and Recommendations

Despite regional efforts, a lack of standardised cross-border referral mechanisms persists. There is an urgent need for standardised cross-border referral mechanisms among Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, anchored in international legal standards and victim-centred practices. For example, the UN Trafficking Protocol and the ILO Convention No. 29 both ensure a victim-centred approach is followed from identification to reintegration (ILO, 2022; UNODC, 2023b).

ASEAN must intensify compliance monitoring of the ACTIP, including through independent evaluations and peer review mechanisms, for example by providing greater support for member states with weak enforcement capacities. This is especially critical in Cambodia and Laos, where enforcement gaps undermine regional progress (ASEAN, 2023).

Donor fatigue and fragmented funding streams threaten the sustainability of anti-trafficking programmes. Regional donors—including the European Union (EU) and Australia—should establish long-term funding frameworks prioritising border hotspots (DFAT, 2023; European Commission, 2024). International and regional donors should ensure

continuity of funding to avoid fragmented anti-trafficking responses, particularly in border regions.

Finally, institutionalising transparency and civil society engagement participation in all regional dialogues will improve accountability and victim outcomes. This includes ensuring civil society's presence in COMMIT review meetings and national policy roundtables (ECPAT, 2023).

8. CHALLENGES AND GAPS

Human trafficking in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand persists as a complex and deeply entrenched issue, fueled by systemic vulnerabilities, legislative shortcomings, and enforcement failures. As a critical transit zone within the Greater Mekong Subregion, these countries serve as both source and destination points for trafficked individuals, many of whom are funnelled into forced labour, sexual exploitation, and other forms of modern slavery (Peerapeng et al., 2013). Despite regional commitments and national laws aimed at curbing trafficking, significant obstacles remain, perpetuating cycles of exploitation (Sihotang & Wiriya, 2021; Huyen, 2020). This chapter examines the root causes of vulnerability, the gaps in legal and operational frameworks, and illustrative cases that underscore the urgent need for reform.

8.1 Contributing Factors to Vulnerability

The susceptibility of individuals to human trafficking in this region is deeply intertwined with socio-economic instability, systemic inequality, and geopolitical neglect.

01

Poverty

Poverty remains one of the most pervasive drivers, particularly in rural areas where subsistence farming and informal economies dominate. Desperate for seeking better opportunities, many individuals fall prey to deceptive recruitment schemes promising lucrative jobs in the capital city or abroad. In small provinces, for instance, impoverished families are frequently targeted by brokers who offer false contracts for work in bigger cities, only to trap victims in the vicious sex sector and conditions of debt bondage (Lainez, 2018).

02

Statelessness

Compounding this economic vulnerability is the widespread issue of statelessness, particularly among ethnic minorities. Without legal identification, these populations are rendered invisible, denied access to education, formal employment, and state protection. Traffickers capitalise on this marginalisation, using fraudulent documentation or smuggling networks to transport victims across borders undetected. The Rohingya crisis further exemplifies this dynamic, where refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar are often intercepted by trafficking rings and sold into forced labour in Thailand's fishing, agriculture, and factory work (Chan, 2018).

03

Gender and Age Disparities

Gender and age disparities also play a critical role in shaping vulnerability. Women and girls, particularly from ethnic minority communities, are disproportionately targeted for sexual exploitation. In Cambodia, the commercial sex trade relies heavily on the exploitation of young girls, many of whom are sold by their families under the guise of marriage or domestic work (Smith-Brake et al., 2021).

Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand might serve as key transit hubs, however, the broader ecosystem of trafficking involves source countries, destination markets, and international demand:

01

Push Factors from Neighbouring Countries

The flow of trafficking victims into the Greater Mekong Subregion is heavily influenced by conditions in neighbouring states. Myanmar's protracted conflicts have displaced thousands of Rohingya and ethnic minorities, making them prime targets for traffickers. Smugglers operating along the Myanmar-Thailand border often lure refugees with promises of passage to Malaysia, only to sell them into forced labour on fishing boats or rubber plantations (Chan, 2018). Similarly, Vietnam's economic disparities drive many rural provinces into Cambodia's scam compounds or Thailand's domestic work sector, where they face debt bondage and abuse (Lainez, 2018).

02

Demand from Wealthier Regional Actors

China's growing influence in the region has introduced new trafficking dimensions. The demand for brides among China's male population (due to gender imbalances from the One-Child Policy) has fueled the trafficking of women (Devasahayam, 2019). Chinese criminal syndicates also operate scam centres where victims from across Southeast Asia are forced to run online fraud operations (Lin, 2019). Meanwhile, Malaysia and Singapore serve as destination countries for trafficked labourers, particularly in construction and manufacturing, where lax oversight allows exploitative conditions to persist (Ness, 2021).

03

Global Complicity: Consumer Demand and Illicit Markets

Beyond Southeast Asia, trafficking in the region is sustained by global demand. The seafood industry, for example, supplies major markets in the US, where consumers unknowingly purchase products tainted by forced labour, which predominantly come from Laos (UNODC, 2019). Likewise,

the online scam industry, run by traffickers and workers in Cambodia and Thailand, illustrates how digital globalisation has expanded trafficking's reach (Devasahayam, 2019).

8.2 Gaps in Legislation and Enforcement

The previous section on **Legal and Policy Frameworks** highlighted the general issues in legislation and enforcement. This subsection aims to elaborate on the gaps in a more comprehensive lens.

Divergent Legal Standards Across the Region

While Thailand has relatively robust anti-trafficking laws, neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Vietnam lack equivalent protections, creating a safe haven for traffickers (Sanglee, 2025). For instance, Myanmar's weak enforcement allows recruiters to operate with impunity, while Vietnam's focus on emigration control, rather than victim protection, leaves returnees vulnerable to re-trafficking (Casalotti, 2020).

Bilateral Agreements without Teeth

Although ASEAN has adopted conventions against human trafficking (e.g., the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children), implementation remains uneven. The agreements between the Greater Mekong Subregion countries with "recipient" countries on victim repatriation often fail in practice due to bureaucratic delays and corruption (Hugot, 2024).

The Role of Non-State Armed Groups

In conflict zones like Myanmar's border regions, ethnic armed groups and militias engage in trafficking with minimal interference (UNODC, 2019). The illicit trade of people, drugs, and weapons often converges, with traffickers exploiting weak governance in areas controlled by non-state actors.

8.3 Analysis of Notable Cases From the Region

Case 1: The Rohingya Crisis and Malaysia's Complicity

In 2015, mass graves of Rohingya trafficking victims were discovered in Thailand, exposing a transnational network that moved refugees from Myanmar through Thailand to Malaysia (Human Rights Watch, 2015). While Thai authorities cracked down temporarily, Malaysia, a key destination, failed to prosecute complicit officials or provide protection for survivors, highlighting gaps in regional accountability.

Case 2: Chinese-Owned Scam Compounds in Cambodia

Recent raids in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, revealed thousands of trafficking victims (including Indonesians, Filipinos, and Vietnamese) forced to run online scams (Business & Human Rights Resource Center, 2025). Cambodian authorities, under pressure from Beijing, have been slow to act, raising concerns about China's economic influence undermining anti-trafficking efforts.

Case 3: Migrants Enslaved in Europe

Southeast Asia nationals trafficked through Laos and Thailand often end up in Poland, the UK, or Germany, where they work in nail salons or cannabis farms (GOV.UK, 2025). This demonstrates how Southeast Asia's trafficking routes are linked to global criminal networks.

9. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS (2021-2025)

9.1 Capacity Building in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand

In recent years, human trafficking has become increasingly prevalent in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, which has led to several developments in terms of government responses to human trafficking and wider transnational organised crime (Admin, 2025; PRD 2025; Punreay, 2025). The recent development included the provision of capacity training to government personnel to enhance border security and the protection of victims of trafficking (IOM, 2025). The IOM actively spearheaded in providing capacity-building projects to the government agencies (IOM, 2025).

01

Cambodia

In 2025, the IOM, in partnership with Japan, supported the Cambodian government agencies with a training initiative for frontline immigration officials to improve border management and protect vulnerable migrants. The training equipped them with skills to detect and respond to risks at the border and transnational organised crime, as well as abilities to provide immediate assistance to vulnerable migrants (IOM, 2025).

02

Lao PDR

The IOM, with funding from Australia, also supported the Laotian government in improving the SOP with a technological tool and a manual to enhance more efficient border management at international airports and border checkpoints. With the new technology, fraudulent travel documents and security features can be swiftly detected, while the manual will guide immigration officials in assessing traveller profiles and handling complex cases (IOM, 2025).

03

Thailand

The IOM, with funding from Canada, implemented the anti-trafficking capacity-building project through migration management in Thailand. This project aimed to inform law enforcement authorities of a gender-sensitive and human rights approach, enhance policy and legislation for coherent responses, and build resilience against the recruitment of victims of trafficking (IOM, 2025).

9.2 Positive Trends: Survivor Engagement and a Victim-Sensitive Approach

Survivor engagement and the victim-sensitive approach have been encouraged among Southeast Asian governments to consider the inclusion of trafficked survivors' voices in the policymaking and legal processes (ASEAN-ACT, 2024). Key stakeholders such as international organisations and NGOs have been supporting survivors of trafficking to inform policymakers and practitioners of their unique experiences and different needs. With the lived experience of survivors, prevention efforts and victim protection mechanisms can be strengthened (ASEAN-ACT, 2024). Below are the examples of survivor engagement and the victim-sensitive approach that have been translated into projects in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.

Cambodia: Chab Dai Coalition, an NGO in Cambodia, pioneered a survivor-centred model in its efforts to empower survivors of trafficking as subject experts on human trafficking in policy decisions (Freedom Collaborative, 2024). With the support from the USAID and Winrock International, Chab Dai designed a community-based survivor engagement project that provided leadership development training and discussion channels for survivors to share their experiences with confidence (Freedom Collaborative, 2024). The project consisted of the following three activities.

- 01 Survivor Care Forum**
A biannual gathering for survivors and their families for recovery workshops and building support networks.
- 02 Survivor Learning Group**
Specialised training for groups for survivors who are ready for public advocacy with the curriculum tailored from survivors' needs, including public speaking, computer skills, English language, and overall trafficking prevention.
- 03 Survivor Leadership Group**
Support for survivor participation in forums and policy dialogue at the national level, with mock panel discussions.

Chab Dai's survivor engagement has already made an impact as members of the Survivor Leadership Group recently contributed directly to government policy with their insights provided to the National Committee for Counter Trafficking (NCCT) forum (Freedom Collaborative, 2024). Their contributions included critical feedback on outreach strategies and trauma-sensitive interviewing techniques that can help reduce re-traumatisation in survivors' interactions with officials (Freedom Collaborative, 2024).

Lao PDR: The Laotian government launched the Victims Sensitive Court Guidelines in September 2023, applicable to all courts across the country. These new official guidelines were drafted by a technical working group of judges from the People's Supreme Court with support from the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking program (ASEAN-ACT, 2023).

The guidelines paved the way to gain more evidence from victims' experiences since they are the critical sources to prosecute traffickers. Without their cooperation, criminal proceedings become difficult. Therefore, it is essential that courts are inclusive, accessible, and responsive to the diverse needs of all victims (ASEAN-ACT, 2023).

Victims of trafficking require special attention during and after court proceedings. The guidelines encourage court practices to adjust to trafficked victims' needs, such as changing the layout of a courtroom to make it less intimidating and more comfortable in trials or allowing victims to choose how they participate in trials by providing testimony via video (ASEAN-ACT, 2023).

Thailand: Thailand's government-run shelters have been supported through capacity-building initiatives provided by the Safe and Fair Programme under the Spotlight Initiative (Phromkade, 2021). This programme is jointly organised by the ILO and the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in collaboration with UNODC. The Safe and Fair Programme helped government service providers, such as social workers, ensure a victim-centred approach throughout the protection process, ranging from legal assistance and psychological counselling to training sessions (Phromkade, 2021).

At the Welfare Protection Centre for Victims of Trafficking (WPCVOT) in Surat Thani, for example, women survivors of trafficking are involved in designing activities that support their path to rehabilitation, such as cooking, story-sharing, self-exploration through art, and group discussions (Phromkade, 2021). By involving survivors of trafficking, the WPCVOT aimed to bring out personal and collective changes as they gain more self-esteem, feel empowered, and continue their lives with confidence when they reintegrate into their communities or resettle in a third country (Phromkade, 2021).

Similar to the victim-sensitive approach in Laos, Thailand also released the Recommendation of the President of the Supreme Court on Guidelines for the Treatment of the Injured Person in Human Trafficking Cases B.E. 2565 (2022) (ASEAN-ACT, 2022). The guidelines will guide judges in Thailand to consider the impacts on victims of trafficking during the criminal justice process, including how to support victims at trials, handle their testimonies, and provide remedies (ASEAN-ACT, 2022).

9.3 Negative Setbacks: Foreign Development Aid Cuts

In early 2025, Western countries announced significant cuts to Foreign Development Aid (FDA), which directly impacted anti-trafficking efforts in Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. The US and the United Kingdom led the pact, followed by Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands (Tyler & Trinh, 2025).

It is worth highlighting the US suspension of the FDA, with 83 percent of programmes implemented by the USAID being cancelled in February 2025 (Tyler & Trinh, 2025). Among these programmes, human trafficking programmes also took a hit. Human trafficking has been a policy priority in the US since the adoption of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000. The amended Foreign Assistance Act (1961) also authorised the US president to provide foreign assistance with activities to eliminate trafficking in persons (Dean, 2025).

Countering Trafficking in Persons (C-TIP) has been a key component of US foreign policy, with an investment of nearly 400 million USD across 88 countries (Dean, 2025). From 2001 to 2020, USAID contributed approximately 164 million USD to C-TIP programmes in Asia, which accounted for 50 percent of its global funding (Gunia, 2025).

With the USAID cut, international organisations and NGOs faced critical challenges in rescuing victims of trafficking as the cut reduced their services and limited their investigation capacity. The funding disruption not only caused chaos among staff working on the ground to help survivors of trafficking on a daily basis but also indirectly allowed traffickers to exploit more people (Burgess & Newman, 2025). Vulnerable people to human trafficking will also likely suffer from worsening food security and healthcare access (Tyler & Trinh, 2025).

Among Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia is likely to take the worst hit due to its larger proportion of FDA compared to its economy size (Tyler & Trinh, 2025). Government agencies, NGOs, healthcare services, and humanitarian aid were the most affected sectors. Specifically in the anti-trafficking sector, the Catholic charity running a shelter for victims of trafficking, Caritas, was forced to turn away some victims and stated that it may have to stop accepting more victims due to the reduced funding (Wu, 2025). Caritas received financial support from Winrock International, a USAID partner, and IOM, which is also largely funded by the US (Wu, 2025).

Chab Dai's survivor engagement projects mentioned in the previous subsection were also forced to pause their activities. This suspension affected nine staff members and many survivors who rely on the projects. Chab Dai expressed its concern that the organisation might lose its highly skilled staff and might subsequently be unable to maintain any long-term projects (Freedom Collaborative, 2025).

Meanwhile, there was no available information regarding the effects of USAID cuts on anti-trafficking efforts in Laos at the time of writing. Nevertheless, this sector, along with disability support, energy security, and business development, did not survive. The only USAID project remaining was maternal child health and nutrition (Freeman, 2025). In the past, USAID's total portfolio for projects in Laos was 72 percent, with a combined value of 20.5 million USD. As Laos is one of the largest recipients of FDA support, the country will be forced to seek further support from its existing partners (Freeman, 2025).

In Thailand, NGOs also struggled from the shock of USAID cuts. Their shelters suffered from immediate disruption of food, medical, and repatriation support. Their training programmes for law enforcement and communities have been put on hold as they were unable to continue their work (Gunia, 2025; Freedom Collaborative, 2025).

For example, Global Alms, an Australian non-profit organisation supporting trafficked victims, lost 60 percent of its funding, all of which derived from USAID. The chief executive officers had to use their personal savings to help people cross the border, provide them with emergency kits and accommodation, and guide them through the bureaucratic process for their return to their countries of origin (Gunia, 2025). The other organisations, such as the Andaman Friendship Association, might also lose their experts in supporting Myanmar migrants who were trafficked and exploited in Thailand (Freedom Collaborative, 2025).

Although the USAID termination of anti-trafficking programmes has been felt regionwide, it does not mean that Southeast Asian countries will stop combating human trafficking and collaborating with other partners. Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand can still turn to allies such as Japan and Australia (Tyler & Trinh, 2025). Due to geographical proximity, Japan has been a long-standing partner to Southeast Asian countries, providing FDA three times as much as the US. Australia also continues its FDA to the region as the country considers security and human rights issues in Southeast Asia as one of its strategic priorities (Tyler & Trinh, 2025).

CONCLUSION

It is clear that cross-border human trafficking is a persistent problem that antagonises Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, which continues to affect thousands of individuals, including children. This report underscores the variation in human trafficking, mainly exploiting people for forced labour, online scams, paid marriage, sex work, and surrogacy. The victims are not limited to the nationals of the three countries, but also include citizens from surrounding countries, making it a complex situation that requires coordination from multiple stakeholders.

Poor financial conditions have been the key driver for many of the victims to engage with illegal recruiters or dangerous jobs, and also emboldened them to migrate despite uncertainties. This is worse for the stateless people because they are not given access to education and social services, making them reliant on informal employment and a prime target for smugglers. While both men and women are prey to these illegal activities, women and girls tend to be the subjects of sexual exploitation. Furthermore, technology is increasingly being employed in operations, especially with the widespread use of social media platforms, which adds to the vulnerability of the public, as they may not be able to distinguish between fraudulent employers.

The respective governments of the three countries made substantial efforts in engaging in agreements with key stakeholders, strengthening victim support mechanisms, which are backed by policies to put an end to human trafficking. However, some challenges persist that undermine the measures set in place, such as:

- Corruption
- Limited funding
- Regulatory bottlenecks
- Threats from non-state armed groups
- Weak law enforcement

In a positive light, new developments are emerging in supporting survivors, taking into account their firsthand experiences and sensitivities, and incorporating them into the initiatives. This presents an opportunity to empower survivors while strengthening operations to be relevant to the realities on the ground. Meanwhile, the recent partnerships with other countries and international organisations can be expected to foster capacity building and the exchange of best practices, equipping officials with the necessary expertise and knowledge. Through continued commitment and collaboration, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand can advance their responses and interrupt the recurring dynamic of cross-border human trafficking.

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