

**Forum:** Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice  
**Issue:** Combating human trafficking in Southeast Asia  
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## Introduction

Human Trafficking is one of the most profitable criminal enterprises in the world, generating over \$150 billion in profits a year. According to “Youth Underground”, over 40 million people are living as slaves worldwide, which is five times the population of Switzerland. In short, the amount of people shackled to the human trafficking industry is the highest number of slaves in human history. Modern day slavery is defined as the usage of force, coercion, or fraud, to obtain some type of labor or sexual favor. Since it is an extremely profitable enterprise, the industry is rapidly growing at an alarmingly high rate. One of the most notorious regions for this industry is South East Asia. Countries such as India, Malaysia, and Thailand maintain some of the highest rates of human trafficking, allowing them to be major human trafficking hubs. From there, many victims are then transported and shipped to markets across the world, from Japan to Brazil. According to the World Bank, “The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that over 150,000 people are trafficked annually in South Asia” (*World Bank, 2022*). The level of poverty and third-world conditions prevalent in the region leaves people incredibly desperate, vulnerable, and susceptible to human trafficking. The Human Trafficking Industry is an extremely complex and well oiled machine. Factors such as corruption, migration, globalization, economic inequality, and poverty all play an instrumental role in its prevalence.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Sex Trafficking

The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act. The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons for the purpose of exploitation. Trafficking is a crime against a person.

### Prostitution

The practice or occupation of engaging in sexual activity with someone for payment.

### Pimp

A person who controls and financially benefits from the commercial sexual exploitation of another person. The relationship can be abusive and possessive, with the pimp using techniques such as psychological intimidation, manipulation, starvation, rape and/or gang rape, beating, confinement, threats of violence toward the victim’s family, forced drug use, and the shame from these acts to keep the sexually exploited person under control.

### Brothel

A location used for the purchase of, and engagement in sexual acts.

## **Child Trafficking**

Forms of child trafficking include trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, labor trafficking, removal of organs, illicit international adoption, trafficking for early marriage, recruitment as child soldiers, use in begging, and recruitment of athletes.

## **Coercion**

Threats of serious harm to or physical restraint against any person or someone they care about.

## **Exploitation**

The act of treating someone unfairly in order to benefit from their work. Exploitation can be used interchangeably with the term trafficking.

## **Slavery**

The state of being under the ownership or control of someone where a person is forced to work for another.

## **Fraud**

False promises regarding employment, wages, working conditions, love, marriage, or better life.

## **Red-light Districts**

An area of a town or city containing many brothels, strip clubs, and other sex businesses.

## **Background**

Human trafficking in Southeast Asia has emerged as an immensely lucrative enterprise, generating annual revenues in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Within the region, countries like Thailand have gained notoriety as hotspots for human trafficking, leading to the branding of certain cities as 'sex trafficking capitals,' thereby associating these locations with cultures of sex trafficking. This association has become so prominent that the image of Thai city Pattaya, for instance, has increasingly become linked to its sex trafficking culture rather than its local attractions. Consequently, the city's local attractions now inadvertently allude to its prevalent red light districts. The normalization of this sex trafficking culture in Southeast Asia is further exemplified by the existence of guides such as 'How to Survive Pattaya if you're not a sex tourist,' underscoring the deeply entrenched association and acceptance of sex trafficking within the region.

## **Factors for Human Trafficking**

### *Corruption*

Human Trafficking's process and motivations are incredibly complex, drawing from countless various individuals, industries, and actors. The individuals involved range from criminal organizations that conduct the trafficking, to government aristocrats and officials, and rich businessmen. One claim states that removing corruption could erase almost half of all human trafficking in SouthEast Asia overnight (Vice News). In countries such as Thailand, high ranking military officials have been convicted of involvement in human trafficking, and in Myanmar the military openly participates in the industry (Vice News).

Countless people from businessmen to nameless citizens have also been widely involved in the supply chain, from guarding slaves to distribution (Vice News). The involvement of high profile individuals and actors in the sex trafficking industry attests to why combating human trafficking is so complex and oftentimes even controversial. High profile individuals like to participate in the industry, as it not only poses an opportunity to amass even more monetary gain and economic influence, but amass that wealth at the expense and exploitation of a helpless, vulnerable individual. Allowing them to feel ‘in control’, and powerful. By participating in/economically supporting trafficking operations, individuals can maintain power, exert influence, and perpetuate systems of exploitation and oppression over individuals and communities. In some cases, wealthy or powerful individuals may exploit their positions of power to facilitate or protect human trafficking operations. These powerful individuals often receive legal immunity, allowing them to further perpetuate and support these systems of modern day slavery. According to the *UNODC*, corruption exists in the trafficking chain through ways such as: “ the recruitment of victims, the provision of documentation (identity papers, visas, permits), the transport of victims, which may include border-crossing, their exploitation, as well as the laundering of the proceeds of the crime.” (UNODC 7). Since these wealthy and powerful individuals receive legal immunity, they receive no repercussion or punishment for participating in the trafficking chain, allowing them to increase the operations of the chain. Especially since human trafficking is an extremely lucrative criminal enterprise, many wealthy individuals are attracted to the economic gain that the industry possesses.

### *Poverty*

According to the *World Bank* “South Asia accounted for 29% of the people living in extreme poverty worldwide (216 million extreme poor in South Asia out of the estimated 736 million extreme poor worldwide). The extremely high poverty rates across the region make citizens extremely vulnerable and susceptible targets. In many cases, individuals are deceived into slavery with fraud and the telling of false promises of work in a big city. For instance, “in Rakhine State, Myanmar, traffickers deceive victims with offers of transportation to international job markets, but ultimately force them into slavery or sell them for ransom” (*Vice News*). Poor living conditions make individuals desperate for work, making them susceptible to fraud. The lack of economic opportunities in underdeveloped regions, also allows for sex work to be a more attractive option, when compared to work in sweatshops and factories.

### **Prostitution and Sex Work**

The poverty stricken region makes citizens extremely vulnerable and susceptible targets. In many cases, individuals are deceived into slavery with fraud and the telling of false promises of work in a big city. For instance, “in Rakhine State, Myanmar, traffickers deceive victims with offers of transportation to international job markets, but ultimately force them into sex slavery. Prostitution constitutes the largest portion of human trafficking, around 79% worldwide (United Nations). Women and children make up the majority of individuals involved in prostitution, often being sold or kidnapped into service. These vulnerable women and children play a pivotal role in staffing a

booming sex tourism industry. Transported from remote villages to big cities, prostitution is an unavoidable fact of life to many. From countries such as Myanmar and Thailand, prostitutes are trafficked regionally and internationally to other booming sex industries in countries such as China or Japan. Prostitution is extremely complicated, as many victims sell themselves intentionally. Victims intentionally exploit themselves in hopes of a better socioeconomic future, or because their current jobs pay below the poverty line. In places like Cambodia, working at a sweatshop would only earn someone less than \$260/month, making prostitution a more economically attractive option. This reality implies that some involved individuals are intentionally participating rather than coerced or kidnapped like in forced labor. Whether or not they are intentionally trafficked, the realities of this industry is extremely terrifying and harrowing. The human trafficking industry is characterized by unimaginable horrors and abuses that victims endure. They face physical and psychological violence, sexual exploitation, and loss of autonomy. Traffickers manipulate and control their victims through threats, deception, and coercion, making it difficult for victims to escape or seek help. The constant fear, trauma, and degradation experienced by those trapped in this industry leave lasting scars on their lives. Moreover, the human trafficking industry thrives in the shadows, operating clandestinely whilst evading law enforcement, making it extremely challenging to locate and identify victims. Not to mention that many criminals will not be prosecuted due to corruption within legal systems (especially true in developing countries.) The harrowing nature of the industry is evidenced through the complex dynamics of the entire system (recruitment, prosecution, identification..)

### Child Trafficking

According to *World Watch*, 'Asia is the center of child prostitution with an estimated 60,000 child prostitutes in the Philippines, 400,000 in India, and 800,000 in Thailand' (*Sachs, World Watch*) Children are extremely vulnerable to human trafficking, as they are taken out of protective environments, and preyed on by traffickers for their innocence and susceptibility for the purpose of exploitation (often sexual). It is estimated that over one-third of the prostitutes in Cambodia are under the age of 18. Girls are subjected to torture by pimps to keep them compliant and ready to work even when in intense pain. In a publicized case of victimization in Cambodia, "a woman trafficker poked out an eye of a young girl who would not have sex immediately after a painful abortion. Torture chambers housed underneath the brothels were used by the madams to keep the girls smiling for customers" (*Shelly, 2010* ). In some cultures, young prostitutes are in particular demand due to the myth that youngsters are somehow relatively virgin and bereft of infection with sexually transmitted diseases. This instance demonstrates the realities of an industry that may seem more attractive than legal work, but in reality is governed by a culture of slavery. As the most vulnerable members of society, traffickers take advantage of their innocence.

## Major Parties Involved

### Thailand

According to the Global Slavery Index, Thailand is home to about 610,000 human trafficking victims. It is known for having some of the 'best' red light districts in the world. It is home to sex trafficking capital Pattaya. Forced labor and sexual exploitation are the two major forms of human trafficking in Thailand. The sex trade is

common in Thailand's large tourist cities where prostitution is legal. Illegal and rampant, however, is the sexual exploitation of children. The prostitution culture there stems from poverty, low levels of education, and its popularity as a vacation beach destination.

### **Cambodia**

Cambodia is known to be a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking. Cambodia shares borders with Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos, creating opportunities for cross-border trafficking. Traffickers take advantage of porous borders and weak law enforcement to facilitate the movement of trafficked individuals, particularly for forced labor and sexual exploitation purposes. They have a particularly large number of child prostitutes, a UNICEF survey concluded that 35% of Cambodia's 15,000 prostitutes are children under the age of 16.

### **Myanmar**

Myanmar (also known as Burma) is recognized as a source country for human trafficking, particularly in the form of forced labor and sex trafficking. Similar to Cambodia, Myanmar's borders with neighboring countries, including Thailand, China, Bangladesh, and Laos, facilitate cross-border trafficking. Individuals, including women and children, are trafficked for various purposes, such as forced labor, commercial sexual exploitation, and forced marriage. The movement of people across these porous borders provides opportunities for traffickers to exploit vulnerable individuals. The Rohingya crisis, involving the persecution and displacement of the Rohingya Muslim minority, has further exacerbated the vulnerability of this population to trafficking. Rohingya refugees, both within Myanmar and those who have fled to neighboring countries, are at heightened risk of being trafficked for forced labor, sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse.

### **International Labor Organization (ILO)**

The International Labour Organization is a United Nations agency whose mandate is to advance social and economic justice by setting international labour standards. Founded in October 1919 under the League of Nations, it is one of the first and oldest specialised agencies of the UN. The ILO addresses forced labor and labor exploitation in Southeast Asia. They work with governments, employers' organizations, and trade unions to promote decent work, eradicate forced labor, and ensure the protection of workers' rights.

### **Hug Project Thailand**

Based in Thailand and internationally recognized as one of the leading non profit organizations working to combat human trafficking in Thailand, they passionately pursue safety, protection and justice for children through partnerships with government policy makers, law enforcement, the justice system, NGO partners and the Thai school system. They also work directly with survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse to see that their rights are honored, they are treated with dignity, and they receive justice without enduring further trauma. They help them make the most of the opportunities they receive to restore their lives with their families and communities.

### **Global Business Coalition Against Human Trafficking (GBCAT)**

A coalition of businesses committed to combating human trafficking in company operations and supply chains. The mission of GBCAT is to harness the power of business across sectors to prevent and reduce human trafficking, and support survivors. GBCAT has created free, downloadable templates for businesses across industries who seek to adopt a company-wide policy and commitment to prevent child labor and to address risks of modern slavery in their business operations and supply chains. The coalition consists of: Google, Amazon, Marriott, Meta (among other companies)

### **Eden Jewelry**

A regional non-governmental organization (NGO) and a social enterprise. Working hand in hand with women who have been rescued from human trafficking, they collaboratively craft exquisite jewelry that embodies their personal narratives. Every purchase of these meaningful pieces contributes directly to Eden Jewelry's outreach and prevention programs, which are actively conducted throughout Southeast and East Asia, encompassing countries such as Myanmar, China, and Hong Kong. By conducting outreach programs specifically in red light districts, their aim is to illuminate the lives of those trapped in captivity with compassion and kindness.

### **Mekong Club**

The Mekong Club is a business-driven NGO working to eradicate modern slavery, including human trafficking, in the Greater Mekong Subregion. They engage the private sector in efforts to promote ethical business practices and supply chain transparency.

## **Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

As mentioned before, human trafficking is an extremely complex criminal enterprise. Although there are laws and legislation against human trafficking, corrupt individuals may often receive legal immunity. This is especially common in poorer developing countries which have weaker legal institutions. Despite the alarmingly high numbers of human trafficking victims in the region, most countries have signed treaties and legislation to prevent forced labor and sexual exploitation. For instance, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic have criminalized sex and labor trafficking (*Trajano 2018*), while Pakistan has banned the emigration of domestic servants under the age of 45, which has discouraged almost all illegal migration (Paul and Hasnath 2000). Malaysia's anti-trafficking law has been twice amended and improved, imposing stronger penalties and enhancing the rights of the victims (*Saad and Salman 2014*)

Aside from legal action, there are also many non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations actively working in the region, enacting prevention programs and joint collaborations with local law enforcement to strengthen the crackdown on human trafficking and prostitution. NGOs focus most of their programs on victim support and trauma-focused therapy, rehabilitating them back into society.

## **Possible Solutions**

1. **Technology Solutions:** Promote the development and implementation of innovative technological solutions to combat human trafficking. This could include the use of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and blockchain technology to track and identify patterns of trafficking, as well as to provide secure and anonymous reporting mechanisms for potential victims and witnesses. With the rise of AI, technology can be leveraged to analyze big data sets to identify targets and high risk potential victims. This concept is already being utilized in India, where *My Choices Foundation (NGO)* is using big data analysis to analyze and identify which Indian villages are most at risk of human trafficking. They then work on implementing prevention programs and hotlines that villagers can use to communicate with law enforcement. They work on educating the people, and teaching them the signs and frauds that traffickers might employ to traffic people.
2. **Mobile Applications:** Support the creation of mobile applications that provide information and resources on human trafficking, including awareness materials, reporting mechanisms, and access to support services. These applications can be designed for both vulnerable communities and law enforcement agencies to facilitate communication and coordination. Many traffickers are also using technology and social media to lure and deceive girls, developing mobile applications and reporting mechanisms in high risk areas are extremely necessary.
3. **Tourism Initiatives:** Collaborate with the tourism industry to promote responsible and ethical tourism practices. Encourage hotels, travel agencies, and tour operators to undergo training on identifying and reporting potential trafficking situations. Develop tourism campaigns that highlight the importance of ethical travel and encourage tourists to support businesses that actively combat human trafficking. This applies especially to popular vacation destinations such as Thailand, where sex trafficking and partying go hand in hand. Especially in areas like Pattaya, which is more known for its brothels and red light districts than its pristine beaches, its important to promote cultural vacation spots rather than the promotion of brothels.
4. **Entrepreneurship Programs:** Support social enterprise/entrepreneurship programs for survivors of human trafficking, providing them with training, resources, and mentorship to start their own businesses. This initiative promotes economic empowerment and sustainable reintegration into society, reducing the risk of re-victimization. [Eden Jewelry](#), a regional non-governmental organization (NGO), exemplifies the concept of a social enterprise. Working hand in hand with women who have been rescued from human trafficking, they collaboratively craft exquisite jewelry that embodies their personal narratives. Every purchase of these meaningful pieces contributes directly to Eden Jewelry's outreach and prevention programs, which are actively conducted throughout Southeast and East Asia, encompassing countries such as Myanmar, China, and Hong Kong. By conducting outreach programs specifically in red light districts, their aim is to illuminate the lives of those trapped in captivity with compassion and kindness.
5. **Engaging the Private Sector:** Encourage businesses and industries to adopt responsible business practices and join business coalitions such as the [Global Business Colation against Human Trafficking](#), which is a coalition of businesses committed to combating human trafficking in company operations and supply chains.

6. Education: Collaborate with local institutions and high schools to help provide free education or educational videos and tools to help educate people and offer them alternate pathways to end the cycle of poverty and illiteracy.

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