

Cyber-Enabled Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia: A New Frontier of Exploitation

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Abstract

Human trafficking in ASEAN has evolved into a hybrid system that combines traditional forms of exploitation with rapidly expanding digital infrastructures. Despite growing attention to trafficking and cybercrime, limited research explains how digital technologies structurally reshape trafficking operations across Southeast Asia. This study addresses this gap by analysing the intersection of trafficking and cyber-enabled crime, focusing on online recruitment, encrypted communication, and digital financial systems. The research employs a qualitative design integrating doctrinal legal analysis, comparative case studies, and socio-digital mapping of trafficking patterns across selected ASEAN countries. It draws



on regional legal instruments, national regulations, and documented cross-border cases. The findings reveal that cyber-enabled trafficking accelerates victim recruitment, strengthens transnational coordination, and increases profitability through mechanisms such as scam compounds, livestreamed exploitation, and cryptocurrency-based laundering. At the same time, ASEAN responses remain constrained by fragmented cybercrime laws, limited digital forensic capacity, and weak cross-border cooperation. This study contributes an integrated analytical framework linking legal-institutional gaps with evolving digital practices and offers policy-relevant recommendations, including harmonised cybercrime definitions, enhanced regional data systems, and strengthened investigative collaboration.

Keywords

Trafficking in Person, Labor Migration, Cybercrime, ASEAN Framework.

Introduction

The rapid digitalization of Southeast Asia has transformed the region into one of the world's fastest-growing digital economies, characterized by widespread mobile connectivity, expanding internet penetration, and the integration of digital platforms into everyday socio-economic life¹. As of 2024, ASEAN hosts more than 460 million internet users, with Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand leading digital expansion in the Global South². While this transformation has accelerated economic growth and regional integration, it has simultaneously enabled new forms of criminal exploitation, particularly the convergence between human trafficking and cyber-enabled crime.³

Traditionally, human trafficking relied on physical recruitment, coercive intermediaries, and cross-border movement through deception or

¹ Beni Suranto et al., "State of Digitalization in the Southeast Asia Region – Bibliometric Analysis," *Quality & Quantity* 60, no. 1 (2025): 1053–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-025-02296-3>.

² Google et al., *E-Conomy SEA 2023: Reaching New Heights: Navigating the Path to Profitable Growth* (Google, Temasek, and Bain & Company, 2023).

³ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2023* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023).

force.⁴ However, digital technologies have reconfigured these dynamics by shifting recruitment, coordination, and financial transactions into online environments.⁵ Social media, encrypted messaging, and digital payment systems now facilitate deception, anonymity, and scalability, giving rise to a hybrid form of trafficking that combines physical control with digital enablement.⁶ In ASEAN, this shift is evident in the emergence of cybercrime syndicates and online scam compounds, where trafficked individuals are exploited for forced labour in transnational fraud operations.⁷ At the same time, digital sexual exploitation, particularly involving children, has intensified through live-streaming and anonymous payment systems.⁸

Despite growing recognition of these trends, existing literature remains fragmented. Studies on human trafficking tend to focus on legal definitions and victim protection, while cybercrime scholarship emphasizes technological aspects of online offenses. Few works systematically examine how these domains intersect, particularly in the ASEAN context where regulatory fragmentation, uneven enforcement capacity, and cross-border jurisdictional gaps persist.⁹ As a result, the concept of cyber-enabled trafficking remains under-theorized, and its implications for legal frameworks and regional governance are insufficiently addressed¹⁰.

This article addresses this gap by advancing a conceptual and analytical integration of human trafficking and cybercrime. It asks: how has digitalization reshaped the structure and operation of trafficking in ASEAN¹¹, and to what extent do existing legal and institutional

⁴ UN, *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* (United Nations, 2000).

⁵ Europol, *Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA) 2022* (Europol, 2022).

⁶ Interpol, *Global Crime Trends Report 2024* (Interpol, 2024).

⁷ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2023*.

⁸ ECPAT, *Online Child Sexual Exploitation in Southeast Asia* (ECPAT International, 2021).

⁹ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics* (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

¹⁰ Aktieva Tri Tjitrawati and Mochamad Kevin Romadhona, "Living beyond Borders: The International Legal Framework to Protecting Rights to Health of Indonesian Illegal Migrant Workers in Malaysia," *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 20, no. 2 (2024): 227–45, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHSC-04-2023-0038>.

¹¹ Mochamad Kevin Romadhona et al., "The Indonesia's Paradox of Refugees Rights to Health," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, April 16, 2026, 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-bja10279>.

frameworks respond to this transformation? Positioning itself at the intersection of criminology, digital governance, and Southeast Asian studies, this study contributes to the literature by bridging doctrinal legal analysis with socio-digital perspectives. It argues that cyber-enabled trafficking represents not merely a technological extension of traditional crime, but a structural transformation requiring multidimensional regulatory and policy responses. To achieve this, the article first develops a conceptual framework linking trafficking and cybercrime, then analyses regional patterns and case studies, and finally evaluates ASEAN's legal and institutional responses to identify key enforcement gaps and policy implications.

Despite the seriousness of these developments, ASEAN continues to confront persistent structural and regulatory challenges. The region suffers from fragmented legal frameworks, with anti-trafficking, cybercrime, and data protection laws varying widely across member states. Law-enforcement capacities remain uneven, particularly in the areas of cyber forensics, digital evidence collection, and cross-border investigative procedures. The absence of a unified regional mechanism for digital evidence sharing further constrains efforts to combat transnational online trafficking networks, which often operate across multiple jurisdictions simultaneously¹². These disparities create enforcement gaps that traffickers actively exploit, enabling them to conduct operations with minimal risk of prosecute.¹³

Against this backdrop, the article pursues several research objectives. First, it aims to analyses the evolving relationship between traditional human trafficking and cyber-enabled exploitation within the ASEAN region. Second, it examines the operational structures of cybercrime syndicates and their reliance on trafficked labour, highlighting how digitalization has reshaped trafficking trajectories and victimization

¹² Irfan Wahyudi et al., "Biosecurity Infectious Diseases of the Returning Indonesian Migrant Workers," *Global Security: Health, Science and Policy* 9, no. 1 (2024): 2358756, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23779497.2024.2358756>.

¹³ ASEAN-ACT, *Regional Review on Cyber-Enabled Trafficking in Persons in Southeast Asia* (ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking Initiative, 2022).

patterns.¹⁴ Third, it evaluates the legal, institutional, and technological responses adopted by ASEAN and its member states, identifying gaps that hinder effective enforcement.¹⁵ The significance of this study lies in its contribution to an emerging field of inquiry that unites criminology, digital governance, human rights, and Southeast Asian security studies. By providing an integrated analysis of human trafficking and cybercrime, the article seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how digitalization is reshaping regional vulnerabilities and what policy reforms are necessary to address them. The structure of the article proceeds systematically, beginning with a conceptual and theoretical review, followed by regional data analysis, case studies, legal evaluation, and policy recommendations.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates doctrinal legal analysis with socio-digital data mapping to examine the intersection of human trafficking and cybercrime in the ASEAN region. The doctrinal component analyzes key regional and national legal instruments, including the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, the Palermo Protocol, and domestic cybercrime laws, to identify regulatory fragmentation, definitional inconsistencies, and gaps in cross-border enforcement.¹⁶ Complementing this, the empirical component utilizes socio-digital data mapping to trace patterns of cyber-enabled exploitation and the operation of trafficking networks within digital environments. The analysis draws on a triangulated set of data sources, including UNODC Global Reports on Trafficking in Persons, ASEAN TIP Reports,

¹⁴ Mochamad Kevin Romadhona et al., "Time to Travel: Climate Migration in the Course of History," *Cogent Social Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2026): 2656564, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2026.2656564>.

¹⁵ Sri Endah Kinasih et al., "Climate Migration and Local Conflicts: The State of Internally Displaced Persons in Mount Semeru Lumajang, East Java, Indonesia," *GeoJournal* 91, no. 2 (2026): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-026-11624-5>.

¹⁶ R. Yahdi Ramadani et al., "Humanitarian Commitment: Indonesia's Policy on Refugees' Rights to Health," *Healthcare in Low-Resource Settings* 12, no. s2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.4081/hls.2024.12603>.

national cybercrime records, judicial decisions, and NGO documentation from organizations such as ECPAT, ASEAN-ACT, and Human Rights Watch. The study applies thematic content analysis, digital network analysis, and comparative policy analysis to identify recurring patterns, map network structures, and assess variations in legal and institutional responses across ASEAN member states. Despite limitations related to data inconsistency, restricted access to cyber-forensic evidence, and underreporting, this mixed-method approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of cyber-enabled trafficking in the region.

Result and Discussion

A. Human Trafficking in ASEAN

Human trafficking in the ASEAN region is best understood as a contemporary transnational crime sustained by legal fragmentation, weak enforcement, and rapidly evolving digital infrastructures.¹⁷ At the regional level, the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) establishes a shared normative framework emphasizing prevention, protection, and prosecution.¹⁸ However, its implementation remains uneven across member states, reflecting what recent scholarship identifies as fragmented cross-border governance that weakens coordinated responses to trafficking. Similarly, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol) provides the internationally recognized definition of trafficking,¹⁹ yet its effectiveness depends on domestic legal harmonization, which remains inconsistent across ASEAN jurisdictions.

¹⁷ Suleman Lazarus et al., “What Do We Know About Human Trafficking and Scam Compounds in Southeast Asia (2020–2025)? A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis of Coercive Deviant Enterprises,” *Deviant Behavior*, January 6, 2026, 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2025.2604138>.

¹⁸ Ranyta Yusran, “The ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons: A Preliminary Assessment,” *Asian Journal of International Law* 8, no. 1 (2018): 258–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2044251317000108>.

¹⁹ Linimose N. Anyiwe and Eghosa O. Ekhator, “The Protection of Human Trafficking Victims in the UK: The Role of the Palermo Protocol and State Obligations in the International Law,” in *Harmful Practices and Human Rights: An International Perspective*, ed. Ebenezer Durojaye et al., Human

Recent studies show that trafficking in Southeast Asia is increasingly embedded within transnational criminal systems characterized by regulatory asymmetries, weak governance, and corruption.²⁰ Empirical findings indicate that porous borders and inconsistent law enforcement create opportunities for traffickers to operate across jurisdictions with minimal risk of prosecution.²¹ These conditions reinforce what transnational crime scholarship describes as jurisdictional “safe spaces,” where legal diversity and limited coordination undermine enforcement effectiveness.²² At the domestic level, ASEAN countries have adopted anti-trafficking legislation, including Indonesia Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of the Criminal Act of Trafficking in Persons²³, Philippines Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003 (RA 9208) as amended by RA 10364²⁴, and Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E. 2551.²⁵ While these frameworks formally align with international standards, their implementation is constrained by structural factors such as weak institutional capacity, inconsistent victim identification mechanisms, and limited access to justice²⁶. Migration-focused research further highlights that trafficking is deeply embedded in informal labour migration systems,

Rights Interventions (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-90333-5_10.

²⁰ Joseph Lelliott and Rebecca Miller, “The Nexus Between Corruption, Migrant Smuggling, and Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia,” in *Migration in Southeast Asia*, ed. Sriprapha Petcharamesree and Mark P. Capaldi, IMISCOE Research Series (Springer International Publishing, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25748-3_11.

²¹ Guangyu Qiao-Franco, *UN-ASEAN Coordination: Policy Transfer and Regional Cooperation against Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023).

²² Suleman Lazarus et al., “Pathways, Pressure, and Profit: Adaptive Innovation and Strain in a Convicted Cybercrime Academy Called Hustle Kingdom,” *Deviant Behavior*, September 12, 2025, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2025.2551790>.

²³ Nur Aisyah Abdurrahman et al., “Justice Beyond Borders: Strengthening International Alliances to Eradicate Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia,” *Unnes Law Journal* 11, no. 1 (2025): 109–34, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ulj.v11i1.3293>.

²⁴ Mochamad Kevin Romadhona et al., “Palestine Under Attack: Humanitarian Principles in Case of Armed Conflict,” *Journal of Law and Legal Reform* 6, no. 2 (2025): 693–756, <https://doi.org/10.15294/jllr.v6i2.19692>.

²⁵ Supang Chantavanich, “Thailand’s Challenges in Implementing Anti-Trafficking Legislation: The Case of the Rohingya,” *Journal of Human Trafficking* 6, no. 2 (2020): 234–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2020.1691825>.

²⁶ Rachmah Ida et al., “Women’s Involvements in Communication Forum for Disaster Management and Resilience in Eruption of Mount Semeru, Lumajang, East Java,” *Discover Social Science and Health* 5, no. 1 (2025): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44155-025-00307-0>.

where regulatory oversight is minimal and enforcement tends to prioritize border control over victim protection.

Sector-specific exploitation further illustrates enforcement gaps. In fisheries and domestic work, legal protections are difficult to enforce due to jurisdictional limitations and the private or transnational nature of these sectors²⁷. These conditions allow exploitative practices to persist despite the existence of formal legal prohibitions. Moreover, existing international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provide jurisdictional guidance but remain insufficient in addressing labour exploitation occurring beyond territorial waters.²⁸

The emergence of cyber-enabled trafficking introduces additional legal challenges. Recent research highlights the increasing use of digital platforms, encrypted communication, and online payment systems in facilitating trafficking activities, requiring integrated legal responses that bridge anti-trafficking and cybercrime regulation. In particular, the rise of forced criminality in online scam operations often described as cyber slavery demonstrates how trafficking has expanded into digital domains that existing legal frameworks struggle to regulate effectively. Although laws such as Indonesia Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE Law) address cyber-related offenses²⁹, they are not fully harmonized with anti-trafficking provisions, creating enforcement gaps in cases involving digital exploitation. At the regional governance level, ASEAN has also adopted soft-law instruments³⁰ such as the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant

²⁷ Jerneja Penca, "Transnational Localism: Empowerment through Standard Setting in Small-Scale Fisheries," *Transnational Environmental Law* 8, no. 1 (2019): 143–65, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2047102518000328>.

²⁸ Angela Del Vecchio and Roberto Virzo, eds., *Interpretations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea by International Courts and Tribunals* (Springer International Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-10773-4>.

²⁹ Brandon Romano Abast et al., "Cybercrime as a Threat to National Security: A Review of the Role and Preparedness of the Indonesian Police," *Proceedings of Police Academy* 1, no. 1 (2025): 119–31.

³⁰ Muhammad Gaidy Wiratama et al., "Implementation of Legal Efforts Consumer Protection and Dispute Settlement of Social-Health Insurance Participants for Indonesian Migrant Workers," *Malaysian Journal of Medicine & Health Sciences* 12, no. SE12 (2023).

Workers.³¹ However, its non-binding nature limits its effectiveness in ensuring compliance among member states. Research on regional governance further emphasizes that civil society organizations play an important but constrained role in addressing trafficking, particularly in victim protection and advocacy, due to the absence of strong enforcement mechanisms.

Structural inequalities continue to underpin trafficking vulnerability. Gender-based analyses show that women and children remain disproportionately affected, reflecting broader disparities in access to economic opportunities and legal protection.³² These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by economic disruptions and crises, which increase reliance on informal migration channels and heighten exposure to exploitation. Human trafficking in ASEAN reflects a complex interaction between legal fragmentation, weak enforcement, and technological transformation. While regional and international instruments provide a normative foundation, their effectiveness is limited by inconsistent domestic implementation and insufficient cross-border coordination. The rise of cyber-enabled trafficking further underscores the need for legal innovation, particularly in harmonizing anti-trafficking and cybercrime frameworks, strengthening regional cooperation, and adopting more effective victim-centered approaches. Addressing these challenges is essential for understanding how trafficking networks continue to adapt and operate within the ASEAN region.

B. Cybercrime and Digital Exploitation

The rapid expansion of digital technologies across Southeast Asia has not only transformed socio-economic interactions but also reshaped the operational modalities of criminal networks.³³ Within the ASEAN region, the convergence between cybercrime and human trafficking has produced

³¹ Mochamad Kevin Romadhona et al., “Labor Migration Policy in ASEAN States,” *International Law Discourse in Southeast Asia* 4, no. 1 (2025): 81–128, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ildisea.v4i1.23485>.

³² Aktieva Tri Tjitrawati et al., “Integrative Social-Health Security for Indonesian Migrant Workers: Does Fully Covered and Protected?,” *Malaysian Journal of Medicine & Health Sciences* 19 (2023).

³³ Aktieva Tri Tjitrawati et al., “The Palu Disaster and Indonesia’s Obligation to Ensure the Right of Adequate Housing and Land Rights: Mission Accomplished?,” in *The Asian Yearbook of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law*, ed. Matthias Vanhullebusch et al. (Brill | Nijhoff, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004706477_011.

diverse typologies of cyber-enabled exploitation, each characterized by distinct mechanisms of recruitment, control, and profit extraction mediated through digital platforms.³⁴ Rather than focusing on legal classification or evidentiary concerns, this section maps the principal forms through which such exploitation manifests in practice. One of the most prominent typologies is online recruitment. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, and WhatsApp are widely used to disseminate fraudulent job advertisements that promise high salaries and safe working conditions.³⁵ These offers frequently target individuals seeking overseas employment or financial stability and often lead to situations of forced labour, sexual exploitation, or involvement in cybercrime operations.

Recent regional reports indicate that online recruitment has become the dominant initial point of contact between traffickers and victims, gradually replacing traditional face-to-face brokerage systems.³⁶ Another significant typology is sextortion, which involves coercion through threats of exposure, manipulation, or blackmail.³⁷ Perpetrators typically operate through fake identities, hacked accounts, or deceptive online interactions to obtain intimate material from victims.³⁸ Once such material is secured, victims are pressured to provide money or additional content under the threat of dissemination.³⁹ This form of exploitation disproportionately

³⁴ Irfan Wahyud et al., “Biosecurity Infectious Diseases of the Returning Indonesian Migrant Workers,” *Global Security: Health, Science and Policy* 9, no. 1 (2024): 2358756.

³⁵ Yayu Feng, “Revisiting Social Media Ethics: The Impact of Platform Design on Human Solidarity, Expression, and Interaction,” *Journal of Media Ethics* 40, no. 1 (2025): 59–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2025.2445355>.

³⁶ Towera Jessica Moyo et al., “Investigating Human Trafficking Recruitment Online: A Study of Fraudulent Job Offers on Social Media Platforms,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 9, no. 2 (2025): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3711016>.

³⁷ Ian Baker et al., “Blackmail and Sextortion,” in *Sexual Crime and the Internet*, ed. Craig A. Harper et al., Sexual Crime (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-95844-1_3.

³⁸ Roberta Liggett O’Malley and Karen M. Holt, “Cyber Sextortion: An Exploratory Analysis of Different Perpetrators Engaging in a Similar Crime,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, nos. 1–2 (2022): 258–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520909186>.

³⁹ Bambang Sugeng Ariadi Subagyo et al., “Can Indonesia’s Laws Keep Up? Protecting Consumer Rights in Digital Transactions,” *Journal of Law and Legal Reform* 5, no. 3 (2024): 869–90, <https://doi.org/10.15294/jllr.v5i3.4202>.

affects young people, particularly those with limited digital literacy, and relies heavily on psychological pressure and social stigma.

Romance fraud represents a further evolution of digitally mediated exploitation, combining emotional manipulation with financial deception.⁴⁰ Offenders construct fictitious online personas to establish trust-based relationships with victims, eventually persuading them to transfer funds under fabricated circumstances, such as medical emergencies or business opportunities. In Southeast Asia, this typology is increasingly linked to organized scam operations, where individuals conducting the fraud may themselves be operating under coercive conditions. The growth of crypto-based operations has introduced another layer of complexity to digital exploitation. Cryptocurrencies are utilized to facilitate anonymous financial transactions, enabling the movement of illicit funds across borders with minimal traceability.⁴¹ These mechanisms support a wide range of exploitative activities, including ransom payments, investment fraud, and the monetization of illicit digital content. The decentralized and often weakly regulated nature of digital financial ecosystems in parts of the region further amplifies these risks.⁴² Dark web trafficking constitutes an additional typology, involving the use of anonymized online environments to distribute illegal services and exploitative material.⁴³ These hidden networks host marketplaces for forged documents, stolen data, and various forms of abusive content, including child sexual exploitation material.⁴⁴ Although access to such platforms requires specific technical knowledge, they are increasingly

⁴⁰ Cassandra Cross and Rebecca Layt, "I Suspect That the Pictures Are Stolen?: Romance Fraud, Identity Crime, and Responding to Suspicions of Inauthentic Identities," *Social Science Computer Review* 40, no. 4 (2022): 955–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439321999311>.

⁴¹ Mohammed Ahmad Naheem, "Do Cryptocurrencies Enable and Facilitate Modern Slavery?," *Journal of Money Laundering Control* 24, no. 3 (2021): 491–501, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMLC-07-2020-0073>.

⁴² Bambang Sugeng Ariadi Subagyo et al., "Regulatory Framework on Ocean Threats – Transportation Law Analysis to Multiple Oil-Spill Cases in Indonesia," *Transactions on Maritime Science* 13, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.7225/toms.v13.n02.w08>.

⁴³ Shubhdeep Kaur and Sukhchand Randhawa, "Dark Web: A Web of Crimes," *Wireless Personal Communications* 112, no. 4 (2020): 2131–58, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11277-020-07143-2>.

⁴⁴ Joshua S. Long, "Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse of Children," in *Handbook on Crime and Technology*, ed. Don Hummer and James Byrne (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800886643.00025>.

integrated into broader transnational criminal operations that rely on cross-border collaboration.

A particularly distinctive development in Southeast Asia is the emergence of scam compounds in countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and, to a lesser extent, Thailand.⁴⁵ These compounds function as centralized hubs for large-scale online fraud operations. Individuals are recruited through deceptive digital means and subsequently transported to controlled environments where they are compelled to conduct scams, including investment fraud, cryptocurrency schemes, and romance scams. The operations are typically organized, high-volume, and technologically coordinated. Within these compounds, victims are subjected to conditions of forced labour, including long working hours, strict performance targets, and punitive measures for non-compliance. The organizational structure of these operations reflects a high degree of coordination, with clearly defined roles in communication, financial management, and technical support. The scale and efficiency of these activities highlight the industrialization of cyber-enabled exploitation in the region. The typologies of cyber-enabled exploitation in Southeast Asia demonstrate a rapidly evolving landscape shaped by digital connectivity and transnational criminal adaptation. Online recruitment, sextortion, romance fraud, crypto-based operations, dark web activities, and scam compounds collectively illustrate how exploitation is increasingly mediated through technology. These forms are not isolated but often interconnected, forming complex ecosystems of digital exploitation that operate across borders and sectors.

⁴⁵ Sri Endah Kinasih et al., "Human Migration, Infectious Diseases, Plague, Global Health Crisis - Historical Evidence," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 11, no. 1 (2024): 2392399, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2392399>.

C. Human Trafficking Trends in ASEAN

Human trafficking in the ASEAN region has evolved into a complex, multidirectional phenomenon shaped by longstanding migration patterns, structural inequalities, and the rapid digitalization of Southeast Asian economies.⁴⁶ Trafficking flows occur into, within, and out of ASEAN, reflecting the region's role as both a source and destination for victims. Historically, ASEAN has been characterized by extensive labour mobility, with millions of low-skilled workers migrating from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines to wealthier economies such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore.⁴⁷ These well-established migration corridors remain vulnerable to exploitation, as smugglers and trafficking syndicates frequently operate along the same routes, taking advantage of porous borders, weak governance, and differential wage structures.⁴⁸ At the same time, outbound trafficking from ASEAN to East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe continues, particularly among migrant domestic workers, seafarers, and women coerced into sexual exploitation.⁴⁹ Intra-regional trafficking persists as a major concern, with Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore functioning as key destinations, while Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia serve as significant source countries.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Tri Joko Sri Haryono et al., "Exploitation of Child Domestic Workers in Ngenger Culture of Javanese Society in Indonesia," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 26, no. 4 (2024): 2.

⁴⁷ Dina Sunyowati et al., "Indonesia-Timor Leste Maritime Boundaries on Exclusive Economic Zone: Equitable Principle," *Lex Scientia Law Review* 7, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.15294/lesrev.v7i1.66126>.

⁴⁸ UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Southeast Asia: Evolving Threats in the Digital Era* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022).

⁴⁹ Aktieva Tri Tjitrawati and Mochamad Kevin Romadhona, "Affliction in the Post Palu Disaster: State Failure to Implement Human Rights Standard on Disaster Management," *Cogent Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2023): 2233255, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2233255>.

⁵⁰ ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Report on the Implementation of ACTIP and APA* (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020).

**Table 1. Estimated Human Trafficking Trends in ASEAN
(2019-2023)**

Country	Estimated Annual TIP Cases Recorded*	Primary Forms of Exploitation	Notes/ Patterns (2019-2023)	Sources
Indonesia	900 – 1200 cases per year	Online sexual exploitation, migration worker exploitation, domestic servitude	Significant rise in OSEC cases and exploitation of women migrant workers, increased online recruitment via Facebook or Whatsapp	UNODC (2022); ECPAT (2021)
Philippines	1300 – 1700 cases per year	Online sexual exploitation of children, labour trafficking	One of the world's highest OSEC caseloads; transactions conducted through e-wallets and livestreaming platforms	UNODC (2022); ECPAT (2021)

Thailand	400–700 cases per year	Fishing sector, sexual exploitation, forced labour	Major transit and destination country; increasing cases involving migrants from Myanmar and Laos	UNODC (2022); ILO (2019)
Cambodia	350–600 cases per year	Forced labour in scam centres, sexual exploitation	Surge in scam-compound trafficking since 2021; victims sourced from Southeast and East Asia	UNODC (2023); HRW (2022)
Laos	150–300 cases per year	Forced labour in scam compounds, child trafficking	Vulnerabilities concentrated in border regions; reported cases increased after 2020	UNODC (2023)
Myanmar	500–900 cases per year	Forced labour, cyber-scam trafficking,	Political conflict has escalated forced recruitment and cross-	UNODC (2022)

		sexual exploitation	border trafficking	
Vietnam	400–600 cases per year	Labour trafficking, sexual exploitation	Victims trafficked to China, ASEAN countries, and Europe; rise in online recruitment scams	UNODC (2022)
Malaysia	300–500 cases per year	Migrant labour exploitation, domestic servitude	Majority of victims originate from Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar	ASEAN Secretariat (2020)
Singapore	50–90 cases per year	Labour exploitation, domestic work	Strong enforcement reduces caseload but cases remain recurrent	UNODC (2022)
Brunei	10–20 cases per year	Domestic work exploitation	Small but persistent caseload; victims mostly domestic workers	ASEAN Secretariat (2020)

Note: * *Estimates compiled from UNODC Global TIP Reports, ASEAN TIP Reports, and NGO datasets. Figures may vary due to underreporting across ASEAN.*

One of the most notable shifts in recent years is the increasing role of digital technology in facilitating trafficking flows, particularly in sectors involving online sexual exploitation, cyber-enabled forced labour, and fraudulent recruitment through social media.⁵¹ The online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) has surged in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam, driven by high internet penetration, digital payment systems, and global demand for livestreamed abuse.⁵² These crimes often involve transnational buyers, digital intermediaries, and family facilitators, creating a complex ecosystem of exploitation that transcends physical borders⁵³. Similar patterns appear in cases of online grooming and recruitment, where traffickers use messaging apps, gaming platforms, or dating sites to target vulnerable individuals before coercing them into sexual or labour exploitation across borders⁵⁴. As shown in Table 1, Indonesia and the Philippines consistently record some of the highest numbers of trafficking cases, driven primarily by online sexual exploitation, migrant labour abuse, and domestic servitude. The Philippines, in particular, remains one of the global epicentres of online sexual exploitation of children, where digital payment systems, livestreaming platforms, and encrypted communication tools facilitate transnational sexual abuse markets (ECPAT 2021). Meanwhile, cases in Thailand and Malaysia remain tied to long-term structural labour dependencies, particularly in fisheries, manufacturing, and domestic work,

⁵¹ Aktieva Tri Tjitrawati and Mochamad Kevin Romadhona, “Re-Assessing Human Rights Issues in Palu Disaster Management: An International Legal Foundation,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Human Rights* 9, no. 1 (2025): 81–121, <https://doi.org/10.19184/jseahr.v9i1.46166>.

⁵² ECPAT, *Online Child Sexual Exploitation in Southeast Asia*.

⁵³ Eni Sugiarti et al., “Contesting Sovereignty: The State-Indigenous Relations at the Indonesia - Timor-Leste Borderlands,” *JAS (Journal of ASEAN Studies)* 12, no. 2 (2024): 439–60, <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v12i2.11467>.

⁵⁴ Sri Endah Kinasih et al., “Gender-Based Education to Addressing Child Marriage,” *Jurnal Pengabdian Hukum Indonesia (Indonesian Journal of Legal Community Engagement) JPHI* 8, no. 2 (2025): 569–616, <https://doi.org/10.15294/jphi.v8i2.23633>.

where debt bondage and confiscation of documents persist.⁵⁵ Scam-compound-related trafficking, which surged dramatically after 2021 in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, further demonstrates the convergence of labour exploitation and cyber-enabled criminal economies.

**Table 2. Main Categories of Exploitation in ASEAN
(2019–2023)**

Exploitation Type	Key ASEAN Countries	Characteristics	Estimated Trend	Sources
Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC)	Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam	Livestreamed abuse, paid content, familial involvement	Strong increase from 2019 to 2023	ECPAT (2021); UNODC (2022)
Forced Labour in Scam Centres	Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand	Online fraud, crypto scams, confinement, torture	Sharp rise since the COVID-19 pandemic	UNODC (2023)
Migrant Worker Trafficking	Indonesia → Malaysia; Myanmar/Laos → Thailand	Debt bondage, document confiscation	High and relatively stable	ILO (2019); UNODC (2022)
Sexual Exploitation	Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia	Cross-border sex trafficking, online grooming	Persistent but increasingly digital	UNODC (2022)

⁵⁵ ILO, *Ship to Shore Rights: Baseline Research Findings on Fishers and Seafood Workers in Thailand* (International Labour Organization, 2019).

Organ Trafficking	Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines	Illegal organ sales, coercion of impoverished victims	Limited but documented	UNODC (2020)
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The regional landscape becomes even more complex when examining the types of exploitation prevalent across ASEAN, as summarized in Table 2. Online sexual exploitation primarily in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam has escalated rapidly, driven by high internet access, pandemic-induced economic pressures, and global online demand for child sexual abuse content.⁵⁶ At the same time, forced labour within scam centres has emerged as one of the most alarming trends, where thousands of victims from across Asia are trafficked into guarded compounds, coerced into online fraud, and subjected to torture, forced confinement, and the sale of their labour to criminal syndicates.⁵⁷ Migrant worker exploitation remains widespread in Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore, while sexual exploitation persists in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam through both physical trafficking and online grooming.

The forced labour associated with scam centres particularly in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and to a lesser extent Thailand represents one of the most rapidly escalating trafficking trends in the region. These scam compounds are often operated by organized crime groups that recruit workers from across Asia under the pretext of legitimate employment opportunities, only to confine them in guarded compounds where they are forced to participate in online fraud schemes, including romance scams, cryptocurrency fraud, and investment manipulation.⁵⁸ Many victims report being subjected to physical abuse, movement restrictions, debt bondage, and forced work quotas, reflecting severe forms of trafficking that merge cybercrime with traditional coercive labour practices.⁵⁹ The cross-border nature of recruitment, transport, and operational activities

⁵⁶ Vena Safira Adelita et al., “Medical Services Through Online Media In Health Law Perspective,” *Malaysian Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences* 19 (2023): 25–33, Scopus.

⁵⁷ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2023*.

⁵⁸ Nir Kshetri, *Cybersecurity Management: An Organizational and Strategic Approach* (University of Toronto Press, 2021).

⁵⁹ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2023*.

complicates law enforcement efforts, particularly where scam centres are located in areas outside full state control, such as Myanmar's border zones. Migrant worker exploitation remains one of the most pervasive forms of trafficking across ASEAN.⁶⁰ Millions of workers continue to seek employment in construction⁶¹, fisheries⁶², domestic work⁶³, and manufacturing⁶⁴, where they encounter exploitative recruitment fees, passport confiscation, wage withholding, and unsafe working conditions.⁶⁵ The fishing sector especially in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia has long been associated with severe trafficking⁶⁶, including cases of forced labour on distant-water vessels where victims are isolated for months with little oversight.⁶⁷ Domestic workers, predominantly women from Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, remain vulnerable to exploitation due to the private nature of household work, limited legal protections in some jurisdictions, and the reliance on informal recruitment channels.⁶⁸ Although less widespread, organ trafficking has been documented in ASEAN, particularly involving the trafficking of impoverished individuals from Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines who are coerced or

⁶⁰ Amarjit Kaur, "Labour Migration in Southeast Asia: Migration Policies, Labour Exploitation and Regulation," *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 15, no. 1 (2010): 6–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13547860903488195>.

⁶¹ David Segall, "Human Rights and the Global Construction Sector: Deconstructing the Challenges Faced by Low-Wage Workers," in *Research Handbook on Global Governance, Business and Human Rights*, ed. Axel Marx et al. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788979832.00024>.

⁶² Aniello Iannone et al., "Unequal Exchange and Labour Exploitation: Indonesian Migrant Workers in Taiwan's Fishing Industry," *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 21, no. 2 (2025): 211–43, <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2025.21.2.11>.

⁶³ Toby Shelley, *Exploited: Migrant Labour in the New Global Economy* (Zed Books, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350220003>.

⁶⁴ Benjamin Hopkins, "Migrant Workers in Manufacturing," in *Research Handbook on Migration and Employment*, ed. Guglielmo Meardi (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839107245.00021>.

⁶⁵ ILO, *Ship to Shore Rights: Baseline Research Findings on Fishers and Seafood Workers in Thailand*.

⁶⁶ Zezen Z. Mutaqin, "Modern-Day Slavery at Sea: Human Trafficking in Thai Fishing Industry," in *ASEAN International Law*, ed. Eric Yong Joong Lee (Springer Nature Singapore, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-3195-5_26.

⁶⁷ Agung Sujatmiko et al., "Patents at the Crossroads: Legal Pathways for Advancing Technology Transfer in Indonesia," *LAW REFORM* 21, no. 1 (2025): 94–119.

⁶⁸ Liberty L. Chee, "Introduction: Trade in Workers Who Make All Other Work Possible," in *Merchants of Migrant Domestic Labour*, by Liberty L. Chee, IMISCOE Research Series (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-03353-6_1.

deceived into selling organs, often under illegal and unsafe conditions.⁶⁹ While the number of confirmed cases remains relatively low compared to labour and sexual exploitation, the clandestine nature of organ trafficking and the involvement of transnational medical brokers make it an ongoing concern that warrants attention.⁷⁰ Overall, human trafficking trends in ASEAN demonstrate a convergence of traditional exploitation patterns with new forms of digital-enabled crimes⁷¹. These developments reflect broader socio-economic pressures, the rapid expansion of online platforms, and the adaptive strategies of criminal networks. The intersection of physical and digital exploitation underscores the need for integrated policy responses, improved data collection, and strengthened cross-border cooperation to address the evolving trafficking landscape in Southeast Asia.

D. Legal Institution Framework

The convergence of human trafficking and cybercrime in ASEAN reveals a central structural problem, the region's legal and institutional frameworks remain fragmented and technologically misaligned, thereby limiting their effectiveness in addressing cyber-enabled trafficking.⁷² While ASEAN states formally adhere to a multilayered system of international, regional, and domestic instruments, these frameworks have not evolved at the same pace as the digital transformation of trafficking practices.⁷³ At the international level, the Palermo Protocol provides a foundational legal definition of trafficking and establishes obligations for criminalization and

⁶⁹ Zezen Zaenal Mutaqin, *Indonesia Trapped in the Global Organ Harvesting Network* (East Asia Forum, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.59425/eabc.1749117600>.

⁷⁰ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2023*.

⁷¹ Hai Thanh Luong, "'Simple Job, High Salary': Unveiling the Complexity of Scam-Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12, no. 1 (2025): 1305, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05605-1>.

⁷² Monica Nila Sari, "Cybercrime in Association of Southeast Asian Nations," *Journal of Information Policy* 14 (September 2024): 568–98, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jinfopoli.14.2024.0016>.

⁷³ Made Wirawan and Dian Novikrisna, "Legal Instrument Under the ♦ASEAN Way♦: The Case of ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons," *Indonesian Journal of International Law* 22, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.17304/ijil.vol22.1.1726>.

victim protection.⁷⁴ However, its framework is primarily designed for conventional, physically mediated forms of exploitation. Similarly, the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons reinforces regional cooperation through mechanisms such as mutual legal assistance, victim repatriation, and coordinated enforcement. Yet, despite acknowledging evolving trafficking patterns, ACTIP does not explicitly regulate cyber-enabled trafficking, creating a normative gap between legal commitments and digital realities. Instruments such as Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties further demonstrate this misalignment, as they often lack clear provisions on digital evidence handling, including data preservation, cross-border access, and real-time information sharing.

This structural gap becomes more pronounced at the domestic level, where ASEAN member states exhibit significant divergence in legal scope, enforcement capacity, and technological readiness. Indonesia, for instance, combines Law No. 21/2007 on trafficking with its Electronic Information and Transactions Law⁷⁵, yet still lacks explicit recognition of cyber-trafficking and clear accountability mechanisms for digital platforms. The Philippines has developed one of the most comprehensive regimes through the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act and the Cybercrime Prevention Act⁷⁶, but persistent cases of online sexual exploitation of children reveal a gap between legal sophistication and enforcement capacity. In Thailand, existing legislation is relatively robust, yet limited digital forensic resources and inconsistent victim identification weaken implementation.⁷⁷ Cambodia illustrates a different dimension of the problem, where legal frameworks have been slow to respond to emerging forms of cyber-slavery

⁷⁴ Ling Han, "Addressing Child Trafficking Adopting a Human Rights-Based Approach," in *Child Trafficking in China*, by Ling Han (Springer Nature Singapore, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-3717-8_2.

⁷⁵ Maya Shafira et al., "Multi-Regime Law Enforcement of Transnational Organized Fisheries Crime: A Comparative Study of Indonesia and Australia," *IJCLS (Indonesian Journal of Criminal Law Studies)* 10, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.15294/ijcls.v10i2.22516>.

⁷⁶ Kanchana Chandran, "Cyber Slavery in Malaysia: The Dark Side of Digital Exploitation," in *Combating Modern Slavery*, ed. Priya Sharma et al., Sustainable Development Goals Series (Springer Nature Singapore, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-1466-3_11.

⁷⁷ Zico Junius Fernando et al., "Cyber Victimology and Legal Gaps in Southeast Asia," *International Law Discourse in Southeast Asia* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ildisea.v4i1.20147>.

linked to online scam operations.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Malaysia faces jurisdictional overlaps that complicate investigations into transnational online syndicates, and Singapore, despite its advanced cyber governance, still encounters constraints in coordinating cross-border enforcement.⁷⁹ Taken together, these variations support the core argument that the primary challenge in ASEAN is not the absence of legal instruments, but the lack of coherence, harmonization, and digital adaptability across jurisdictions. Some states possess strong statutory frameworks but insufficient technical capacity, particularly in cyber investigations and digital forensics.^{80,81} Others face definitional inconsistencies, especially regarding the legal recognition of cyber-trafficking, which complicates prosecution in cases involving encrypted communication, virtual platforms, and transnational data flows.⁸² Overlapping jurisdictions and fragmented legal standards further exacerbate these challenges, particularly when crimes span multiple countries and rely on offshore data infrastructures.⁸³ Therefore, the comparative differences outlined in the following table are not merely descriptive; they substantiate the broader claim that ASEAN's current legal architecture is structurally inadequate to address the hybridization of trafficking and cybercrime, and that meaningful reform requires not only stronger laws but also regional harmonization, technological integration, and coordinated enforcement mechanisms.

⁷⁸ Priya Sharma et al., eds., *Combating Modern Slavery: A Global Perspective*, 1st ed. 2025, Sustainable Development Goals Series (Springer Nature Singapore, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-1466-3>.

⁷⁹ Lim Jia Jia and Muhamad Helmi Md. Said, "Modern Slavery and Money Laundering in Malaysia: A Legal Appraisal," in *Combating Modern Slavery*, ed. Priya Sharma et al., Sustainable Development Goals Series (Springer Nature Singapore, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-1466-3_9.

⁸⁰ Mochamad Kevin Romadhona et al., "Assessing Corporate Social Responsibility From the Perspective of the Local Community," *ASEAN Journal of Community Engagement* 8, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.7454/ajce.v8i1.1196>.

⁸¹ Mochamad Kevin Romadhona et al., "Riding the Wave of Innovation: A Qualitative Analysis of Public Transport Drivers' Adaptation to Online-Based Transportation Services," *Biokultur* 13, no. 1 (2024): 16–25, <https://doi.org/10.20473/bk.v13i1.54162>.

⁸² R. Yahdi Ramadani et al., "The Rights to Health for All: Is Indonesia Fully Committed to Protected Refugees and Asylum Seekers?," *Jurnal Hubungan Luar Negeri* 8, no. 2 (2023): 55–80.

⁸³ Rachmah Ida et al., "Empowering Youth as Vaccine Advocates: Harnessing the Power of Educational Videos," *Jurnal Pembelajaran Pemberdayaan Masyarakat (JP2M)* 5, no. 1 (2024): 86–95, <https://doi.org/10.33474/jp2m.v5i1.21423>.

Table 3. Comparative Overview of Anti-Trafficking and Cybercrime Laws in ASEAN

Country	Anti-Trafficking Legal Basis	Cybercrime Legal Basis	Identified Gaps
Indonesia	Law No. 21/2007 on TIP	Electronic Information and Transactions Law	Absence of cyber-trafficking terminology; limited digital forensics capability
Philippines	Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (RA 9208, RA 10364)	Cybercrime Prevention Act	Enforcement gaps in OCSE cases, overloaded cyber units
Thailand	Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act	Computer Crimes Act	Weak victim screening and digital evidence procedures
Cambodia	Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking	Draft cybercrime law pending full implementation	Slow response to scam compounds; limited cross-border investigations

Malaysia	ATIPSOM Act	Communications and Multimedia Act	Jurisdictional fragmentation and slow MLAT processes
Singapore	Penal Code; Prevention of Human Trafficking Act	Cybersecurity Act; Protection from Harassment Act	Limited regional harmonisation; challenges obtaining overseas evidence

The table 3 underscores the fragmentation within the region, reflecting uneven legal maturity and divergent priorities among states. While Singapore and the Philippines have relatively advanced cybercrime statutes, countries like Cambodia and Laos lag behind, particularly in regulating online platforms and digital evidence. These disparities create loopholes exploited by transnational crime syndicates, which strategically relocate operations to jurisdictions with weaker oversight. At the regional level, ASEAN has established several cooperation mechanisms aimed at strengthening responses to cyber-enabled trafficking. The ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) serves as a central platform for policy dialogue, coordination, and the formulation of joint strategies against trafficking and cybercrime⁸⁴. Complementing this, the ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy promotes harmonisation of cybersecurity standards and fosters capacity building among member states.⁸⁵ Despite these advancements, persistent weaknesses hinder effective implementation. Data protection laws remain inconsistent across ASEAN, complicating cross-border digital investigations and the collection of digital evidence. Differences in legal thresholds for search, seizure, and data interception often delay MLAT processes, undermining

⁸⁴ Kwan Yuen Iu and Vanessa Man-Yi Wong, “The Trans-National Cybercrime Court: Towards a New Harmonisation of Cyber Law Regime in ASEAN,” *International Cybersecurity Law Review* 5, no. 1 (2024): 121–41, <https://doi.org/10.1365/s43439-023-00105-x>.

⁸⁵ ASEAN, *ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy* (ASEAN Secretariat, 2018).

timely interventions in fast-moving cybercrime cases.⁸⁶ The absence of a unified regional cybercrime protocol results in fragmented cooperation, leaving each country to rely on bilateral arrangements with varying levels of efficiency and political will. Overall, the legal and institutional framework in ASEAN reflects both significant progress and critical gaps. While the normative structure for addressing traditional trafficking is well established, the shift toward cyber-enabled exploitation requires deeper harmonisation of laws, enhanced digital forensic capabilities, and more robust regional mechanisms for real-time information exchange. Without these reforms, ASEAN's capacity to combat the rapidly evolving nexus of trafficking and cybercrime will remain limited.

Conclusion

Human trafficking in ASEAN has increasingly evolved into a hybrid crime that combines traditional physical exploitation with digitally mediated processes. The rise of social media recruitment, online job scams, encrypted communication, and crypto-based financial flows has accelerated the speed and scale of trafficking operations throughout the region. Instead of replacing conventional trafficking routes, digital tools have strengthened them, allowing criminal networks to operate more efficiently across borders. This hybrid transformation exposes persistent gaps in ASEAN's legal and operational frameworks. Differences in national cybercrime laws, limited investigative capacity, and the lack of coordinated regional mechanisms have created vulnerabilities that trafficking syndicates continue to exploit. At the same time, online platforms have not yet developed sufficient safeguards to prevent the spread of deceptive recruitment, grooming, and digital exploitation. Given these developments, ASEAN requires a more unified and technology-driven response. Building stronger regional cooperation on cyber-forensics, digital evidence handling, and platform regulation is essential to reduce the advantages currently held by trafficking networks. Future research should focus on developing artificial intelligence tools for early

⁸⁶ INTERPOL, *Online Child Sexual Exploitation: Global Assessment* (INTERPOL, 2023).

detection, strengthening models of platform governance, and designing more effective systems for cross-border digital investigations. The overall trajectory of this study shows that human trafficking in Southeast Asia now operates within a deeply interconnected digital-physical ecosystem, and only equally sophisticated strategies will be able to address it effectively.

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GENERATIVE AI STATEMENT

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author utilized generative artificial intelligence as a supportive tool to assist in translation and to improve the quality of English writing. Following its use, the author conducted a thorough critical review, editing, and validation to ensure accuracy and scientific integrity. Full responsibility for the final content remains with the author. The use of artificial intelligence was limited to a supportive role and is not recognized as constituting authorship. No data analysis or substantive interpretation was carried out by artificial intelligence without human oversight.

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