

Trafficking and Prostitution of Indonesian Women in Malaysia: Insights from the Victims

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Abstract

Human trafficking, especially involving women, is a planned and transnational crime that spans various countries, including Southeast Asia nations like Malaysia and Indonesia. Trafficking of Indonesian women forced into prostitution in Malaysia is deeply concerning. It requires aggressive and comprehensive government actions to combat the crimes. This preliminary study identifies the root causes of the trafficking of Indonesian women into forced prostitution in Malaysia and the actions taken by the Malaysian government to address this issue.

To achieve these objectives, primary data was collected through interviews conducted from May 2023 to August 2023. Four Indonesian women who were victims of trafficking and employed as prostitutes in Malaysia participated in these interviews. Additionally, this study is supported by the report data, including the UNODC Report and the US TIP Report.

The study found that the primary factor leading them to become trafficking victims is economic desperation. Economic factors are both the reason they became victims and the reason they resigned themselves to their situation, continuing their work as prostitutes even after realizing they had been deceived and trafficked. To address this issue, the Malaysian government has undertaken several efforts, including the establishment of the Council for Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants (MAPO), the enactment of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM 2007), the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act (Amendment) 2022 (Act A1644), the launch of the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (2010-2015), the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (2016-2020), and the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons 2021-2025 (NAPTIP 3.0).

Keywords: Women trafficking, Prostitution, Malaysia government, economic factor, MAPO

Introduction

Human trafficking has actually plagued the world for thousands of years, taking the form of slavery. History shows that human trafficking has occurred in regions like Southeast Asia since the colonial era. This can be seen, for example, through women from Japan and

China who migrated through Singapore to other Southeast Asian countries to work as sex workers (Van de Glind & Kooijmans, 2008). Today, the issue of human trafficking is a serious global scenario. Human trafficking has reached an increasingly alarming level, with an estimated 2.5 million people from 127 countries being trafficked worldwide per year (Zinin, 2010). Human trafficking takes various forms, including sexual exploitation, bonded labor, forced domestic servitude, organ trafficking and baby trafficking (Yaakob, 2015).

According to the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2022), which reports on the global issue of human trafficking, out of 51,675 trafficked victims from 166 countries, 38.7% were women subjected to sexual exploitation. This case is only slightly below the number of trafficked victims forced into labor, which is 38.8%. These figures indicate that trafficking and sexual exploitation of women are alarmingly high.

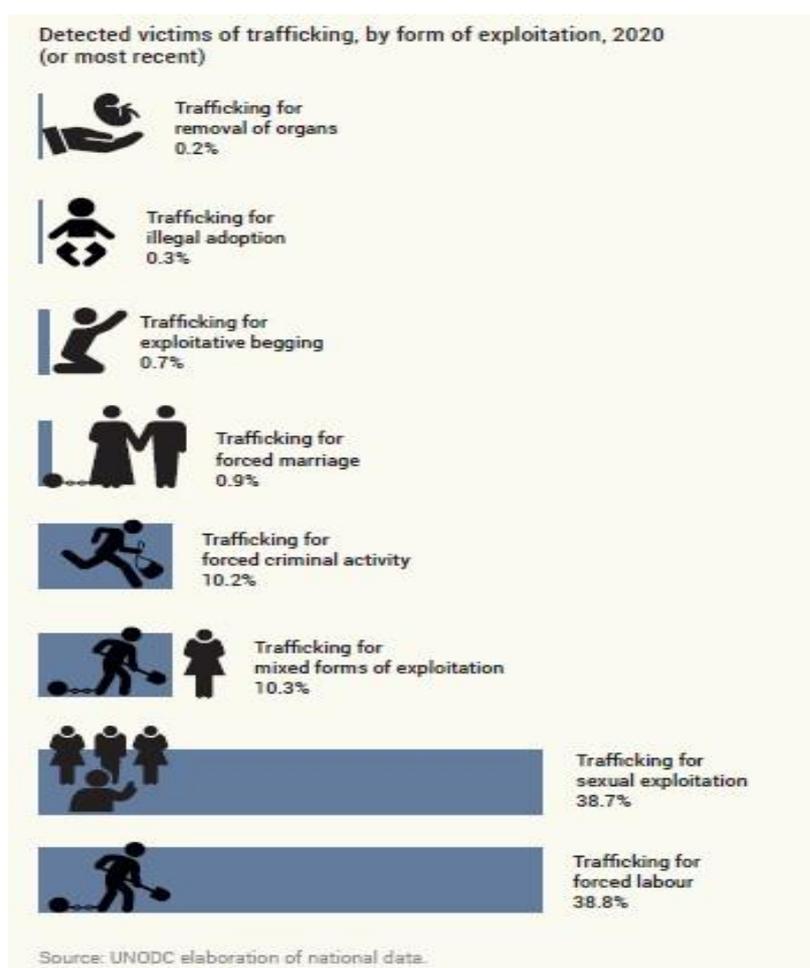


Fig. 1: Detected Victims of Trafficking, by Form of Exploitation, 2020
Source: UNODC (2022)

Human trafficking is actually a form of modern-day slavery (Hart, 2009). Individuals are compelled to work regardless of time, without receiving fair compensation (Cullen-DuPont, 2009). Most human trafficking victims come from impoverished areas and countries. The activity of human trafficking can have negative impacts on countries and provide significant profits to syndicate groups in regions like Southeast Asia, Japan, China, and India (Shelley, 2010). Human trafficking occurs due to human greed for easy profits (Marshall & Thatun, 2005), poverty (Jones et al., 2009), economic instability (Banovic, 2012), internal

conflicts within a country (Clark, 2003), limited knowledge and skills (Jones et al., 2009), and unemployment (Banovic, 2015).

In the context of Malaysia, human trafficking is defined by Section 2 of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act, 2007 as an act involving the acquisition or retention of a person's labor or services through coercion, such as recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, providing, or receiving an individual (Laws of Malaysia, 2014). The issue of human trafficking brings various adverse effects to the country and involves human security. The Malaysian government has implemented several steps to address this issue. These steps include establishing the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Council (MAPO), and enacting the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM 2007).

However, cases of human trafficking are seen to be increasing year by year. Former Deputy Secretary-General (Policy and Control) of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Fauzi Md Isa, stated that according to the data, reported cases have surged dramatically compared to the previous years. "We are witnessing an increasing trend in human trafficking cases, with 115 cases reported in 2021, compared to 17 in 2008," he said. He added that the statistics from the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Council (MAPO) showed that between 2015 and June 2022, there were 1,972 reported cases, with 2,902 individuals detained in connection with these cases (Free Malaysia Today, 2022).

This study focuses on cases of trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. The aim is to narrow down the study to a more specific, targeted, and systematic scope. Trafficking involves recruiting several women and young foreign girls ostensibly for legitimate work in Malaysian restaurants, hotels, and beauty salons, or for arranged marriages, but instead forcing them into commercial sex. Refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless individuals who lack the ability to secure legitimate employment in Malaysia are also vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking. All of them are coerced into engaging in commercial sex (US Embassy in Malaysia, 2022).

Based on this background, the objectives of this study are:

- (1) To identify the root causes of the trafficking of Indonesian women forced into prostitution in Malaysia.
- (2) To identify the actions taken by the Malaysian government to address the issue of human trafficking, specifically those forced into prostitution.

Theoretical Framework

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking has been defined by the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Human Trafficking, Especially Women and Children, which complements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol), adopted in the year 2000:

"Human trafficking shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, or the removal of organs."

ILO, 2008: ?

This definition may seem complex but can be broken down into the following elements:

1. Activities: recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons
2. Means: force, fraud, abduction, coercion, threat, abuse of power, or vulnerability

3. Purpose: exploitation, including forced labor or the removal of organs (ILO, 2008).

According to the definition provided by the Malaysian government through Section 2 of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act (2017), human trafficking involves any act that entails the acquisition or maintenance of a person's labor or services through coercion, including acts of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, providing, or receiving a person for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation encompasses all forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery, practices similar to slavery, servitude, any unlawful activity, or the removal of human organs.

Human trafficking typically involves elements of coercion, deception, and bondage, and victims are exploited in various ways, including forced labor, organ trafficking, child trafficking, and sexual exploitation. Needless to say, Indonesian women who are trafficked are intended to be exploited as prostitutes in Malaysia.

Impact of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking has multi-faceted impacts as follows.

Impact on individuals: Most victims suffer trauma and fear, along with profound psychological effects. Their fear can continue to affect them even after they have been freed from this situation. Emotional and physical abuse leaves deep scars and can have long-term consequences. Some victims also experience physical injuries and health problems.

Impact on families: The families of victims are at risk of losing family members who have been deceived or kidnapped and turned into victims of human trafficking, solely for the purpose of earning a living. Indirectly, the families of victims cannot continue to lead normal family lives.

Impact on society: Human trafficking creates a society with low moral values, both spiritually and physically imbalanced. This would hinder the development of the community's character and would create a group that lacks empathy, ultimately promoting regression and impeding progress.

Impact on the economy: The government allocates significant financial resources for prevention, awareness, prosecution, education, and providing protection for victims. Additionally, corruption rates may increase, and the country's revenue may decrease due to money being sent abroad, resulting in tax revenue losses.

Impact on the nation: The issue of human trafficking has a negative impact on the image of a country involved in such crimes. Typically, if reports are made by foreign countries, they can influence international perceptions of that country, leading to economic losses and affecting bilateral relations with other nations. The issue of human trafficking can also have an impact on national security because this transnational crime is carried out by agents who operate across national borders. Therefore, as mentioned by Rahman et al. (2018) that national security is a very important element as the goal of a state to continue its survival in international relations.

Rivew of Literature

Several researchers have conducted investigations related to human trafficking in Malaysia. For example, Shaari (2011) points out that cases of human trafficking can lead to security issues, particularly social security. Among the elements involved in social security are fraud, prostitution, smuggling, extortion, illegal investment, promiscuous sexual activities, rape, drug abuse, and more. According to her, essentially, there is no shortcut to addressing the social problems stemming from the influx of human trafficking cases, except through the involvement of all relevant parties such as Immigration Department, Police, Maritime Enforcement Agency, Customs Department, communities, as well as government and non-governmental organizations. Approaches involving the implementation and enforcement of

laws are the appropriate path that the government should take to address this issue, in addition to awareness operations and programs implemented by the government.

Jamil et al. (2012), discuss Islam's view on the crime of human trafficking, which is seen as conflicting with Shariah objectives and human values. Her writing also delves into statistics and the existing legal provisions in Malaysia that address this crime. Similarly, Noorazman & Annuar (2017) discuss the aspect of threats to human security, which is a major issue when discussing the increase in the trafficking of women in the sex sector in Malaysia. They also pay attention to the issues that contribute to the rise in the trafficking of women for sex, including economic, political, and social factors. In contrast, Hamzah et al. (2019) focus on the government's efforts to address the issue of human trafficking in Malaysia. They conclude that the government has undertaken various efforts; however, enforcement needs to be strengthened to prevent recurring issues.

Izani et al. (2021) study the suffering of human trafficking victims in Malaysia. They find that trafficking victims experience physical, mental, and spiritual suffering, especially during the trafficking period. As a result, they suggest the establishment of a specific action plan to prevent human trafficking, raise public awareness, and combat this crime. Similarly, Arnakim and Zulhadis (2021) study the Malaysian government's response to human trafficking crimes in Malaysia from 2010 to 2015. They show that the government has introduced specific policies to combat human trafficking. These policies related to the issue of human trafficking are crucial in assessing the extent to which the government is working to curb this transnational crime. According to them, law enforcement by the country's main enforcement agencies is a response or action stemming from the policies outlined by the government. With the cooperation established through the Enforcement Committee under the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Council (MAPO), these enforcement agencies are seen as having the strength and capacity to assist one another in enforcing laws related to human trafficking.

Thus, it can be concluded that there has not been a specific study that examines the issue of women being trafficked for sexual exploitation. Even if such a study exists, it might have exceeded a duration of 5 years and therefore may no longer reflect current patterns and needs. Furthermore, above research does not focus on the trafficking of women from Indonesia who are forced into prostitution in Malaysia. On the contrary, this paper specifically examines the criminal activities of trafficking Indonesian women who are turned into prostitutes in Malaysia.

Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative study in which data is collected using primary and secondary sources. Qualitative methods were employed to obtain comprehensive, accurate, and clear data and produce descriptive statements regarding the aspects being studied (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Primary data comes from semi-structured interviews. The interview method was chosen as it can provide the desired information to the researcher more clearly. The conducted interviews provide qualitative questions to be directed at the informants. These questions serve as a guide for open-ended interviews that only cover the general outlines of the questions. This allows for the possibility of developing further related and in-depth questions that may arise during the interview. The interviews are conducted in both Malay and Indonesian languages as the backgrounds of the victims and informants are all from Indonesia.

The informants consist of four women who have been victims of trafficking and have been forced into prostitution in the Klang Valley areas namely Kajang and Kuala Lumpur. To facilitate the interview, the researchers posed as clients in their premises. However, the interview sessions could not be recorded due to concerns that the victims might not be willing to reveal their identities. The interview outcomes were recorded in a notebook provided at the end of each interview session. The data collection process for interviews commenced in May 2023 and continued until August 2023.

It's important to note that these interview sessions were conducted without the knowledge of the victims and were kept confidential. As a result, their real names and actual operational locations cannot be disclosed.

Another category of primary data includes document reports. These reports are original documents available on websites. Among these reports are documents from ILO Report, UNODC Report and the US TIP Report on human trafficking issues.

This study also used reputable sources such as books, journals, newspapers, and the internet to complement and strengthen the primary data. These sources were collected, then assessed and analyzed according to the specified themes. They were coded, and thematic methods were used. Some of the themes include the history of prostitution in Malaysia, human trafficking in Malaysia, and the Malaysian government's actions in addressing this issue. These themes were then summarized in the discussion section.

By tapping into a diverse range of secondary sources, the research benefits from a wider spectrum of information that has already undergone scrutiny, analysis, and academic evaluation. This integration of secondary data helps bridge gaps in understanding, contextualize the primary findings within a broader framework, and offer a more holistic perspective on the complex issue of human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Malaysia.

Findings

Informants Background

This study does not involve trafficking victims who have been rescued by the Malaysian government. This is because the researchers aim to delve into the actual circumstances and events experienced by trafficking victims who are employed as sex workers. Therefore, in this preliminary study, the researchers chose to interview victims who are still employed as sex slaves in Malaysia, particularly in the Klang Valley area. The Klang Valley area was selected as the research location because it is home to many brothels where individuals work as sex workers, either willingly or forcibly.

There were a total of 4 female informants involved in this study, all of whom are from Indonesia. Two of them are widows and have children, while the other two are unmarried. They are aged between 25 and 29 years old. Three of them are from Sumatra, and one is from the island of Java in Indonesia. Interviews were conducted from May 2023 to August 2023.

Table 1: Informants Background

Source: Authors

Informant	Marital Status	Age	Country
Informant 1	Unmarried	25	Sumatera, Indonesia
Informant 2	Widow	29	Sumatera, Indonesia
Informant 3	Unmarried	23	Java, Indonesia
Informant 4	Widow	27	Sumatera, Indonesia

Based on the interviews, all informants claimed that they were recruited to work in Malaysia through deception. Two informants claimed that they were promised jobs at a gaming centre, while the other two were promised jobs at an SPA treatment centre. However, when they arrived in Malaysia, what was promised did not turn out as expected. In the end, they were forced to work in a brothel.

"When I was in my village, I was offered a job at a gaming centre, but it turned out to be a scam, and I was forced to work like this (as a prostitute)."

Interview with informant 1, May 24, 2023.

"Yes, sir, in Indonesia, I was promised a job at a gaming centre, but when I got to Malaysia, I ended up as a prostitute."

Interview with informant 3, August 3, 2023.

"I was initially offered a job at an SPA centre, sir, but when I arrived in Malaysia, I was forced to work like this (as a prostitute)."

Interview with informant 2, June 22, 2023.

"I was offered a job at an SPA centre in Malaysia, but suddenly I ended up working in a place like this (a brothel)."

Interview with informant 4, August 23, 2023.

When they arrived in Malaysia, they were employed as prostitutes in prostitution premises around Kajang and Kuala Lumpur. The fee charged to the customer for one shot is between RM80 to RM170 (USD20 – USD45). For each customer, the victim of this trafficking will get wages between RM35 to RM60 (USD8.5 - USD15). The wage payment given to them is once every two weeks or once a month.

"For each customer I get RM35 (USD8.5) sir"

Interview with informant 4, August 23, 2023.

"From that RM170 (USD45), I only got RM60 (USD15) of it. All the wages I get will be collected and paid every month"

Interview with informant 2, June 22, 2023.

These victims also stated that they were recruited by agents in Indonesia, some were also recruited by their own friends who acted as agents. Agents and friends who act as agents are the ones who deceive and sell them to agents in Malaysia to be enslaved as prostitutes.

"I was taken and placed in a location before being sent to Malaysia by this agent"

Interview with informant 1, May 24, 2023.

"My friend invited me to Malaysia to work at a gaming centre. Until here (Malaysia) it turns out to work like this (as a prostitute)

Interview with informant 3, August 3, 2023.

Some of the victims were burdened with debt by the agents who recruited them. Agents in Malaysia bought these victims from agents in Indonesia. When the victim is bought by an agent in Malaysia, the purchase fee is then charged to the victim. This means that it becomes a debt that the victim must pay to the agent. The debt is of various amounts. It ranges from RM2,000 to RM6,000 (USD500 – USD1,500). They admit that the debt can only be paid off within a year or so. This is because the payment they receive for each customer is small. Their income is based on how many customers want them. The income should then be divided for food and drink, remittances for family members in the country of origin and the remainder to pay debts to the agent.

"I owe the agent here around RM6,000 (USD1,500) sir. This has not been paid off, maybe it will be a year before I can pay it all".

Interview with informant 1, May 24, 2023.

"The agent in Malaysia bought me. So, I owe RM4,000 (USD1,000). It feels like more than a year before I can pay it all. Part of my income here I pay debts, for my living needs here and I send it to my children in the village. But now it's paid off".

Interview with informant 2, June 22, 2023.

According to the interviews, it can be concluded that the main reason they come to Malaysia is because of economic factors. The small salary in the country of origin and difficulty in finding a job are their reasons why they want to work in Malaysia. Their pure and good purpose to support their families in Malaysia was apparently taken advantage of by irresponsible parties. They are sold for a certain amount of money to be employed as prostitutes in Malaysia. Their fate is unfortunate. In the end, they gave up on the situation and continued working as prostitutes.

"Yes, sir, it's hard to work in Indonesia, the salary in factory is low. I wanted to work in a factory, but was cheated by an agent, had already paid a certain amount of money but was not even called to work. Now I am okay to work like this (as a prostitute), collect enough money and then I'll go back to the village and start my own business".

Interview with informant 1, May 24, 2023.

"My debt was actually paid off a year ago sir, but I continue this work to collect money and when I have enough money, I want to go back to the village and open my own business in the village".

Interview with informant 2, June 22, 2023.

"My debt has been paid, sir, but I want to collect money first. Keep working like this, and later go back to the village and start my own business".

Interview with informant 3, August 3, 2023.

Based on the information provided by the informants above, it can be concluded that they were trafficked from Indonesia for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Malaysia. The method used is to deceive them by promising jobs at gaming centers and SPA treatment centres. However, when they reach Malaysia, they are then prostituted. They are also burdened with a sum of debt that they never incurred and they must pay it to the agent who recruited them in Malaysia. They gave up and continued working as prostitutes because they were burdened by debt and at the same time kept the dream of opening their own business from the money they made from prostitution. A general overview of Indonesian women's trafficking activities for the purpose of sexual exploitation can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: General Overview on Indonesian Women Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Malaysia

Source: Authors

Informant	Recruitment Approach	Recruiter	Debt	Factor
Informant 1	Deceived	Agent	USD1,500	Economic problems
Informant 2	Deceived	Agent	USD1,000	Economic problems
Informant 3	Deceived	Friend	USD1,000	Economic problems
Informant 4	Deceived	Agent	USD500	Economic problems

If summarized from the results of the interviews above, it shows that economic factors or the need for a livelihood are the primary reasons why these victims want to work in Malaysia. According to Micheal (2013), the main factor causing someone to leave their home country is the pursuit of better opportunities, such as migrating to high-income countries to support their families back home. This is due to factors such as poverty, low educational levels, economic needs, and the desire to increase their income. Besides economic factors, they are attracted to come to Malaysia because Malaysia is seen as a rapidly developing country with many industrial sectors established here. This certainly opens up broader employment opportunities for the victims, without them realizing that they are actually being

deceived. It is this element of deception that categorizes them as victims of human trafficking. At the same time, there is a high demand in the prostitution industry. Many customers seek women to satisfy their desires. Due to the high demand, providers of prostitution services are forced to recruit women from foreign countries, including Indonesia.

In a report in 2022, the Selangor Police (Klang Valley) cracked down on prostitution activities by arresting 1,059 individuals in raids from January 2022 to December 2022. They consisted of 41 men and 1,018 women from various nationalities, including locals. Investigations revealed that the male suspects detained were believed to play roles as premise workers, agents, or runners, while the female arrests involved Guest Relations Officers (GROs), prostitutes, and masseuses (Awani, 2022). These facts indicate that prostitution activities in Malaysia, especially in the Klang Valley area, are quite prevalent. Among the thousands of prostitutes arrested by the police, some are undoubtedly victims of the women trafficking.

Discussion

The practice of women being commodified for the purpose of fulfill the needs of men in Malaysia has a long history, dating back to the time of the Melaka Sultanate in the year 1400 AD. The Malay Peninsula had a complex and extensive trade network that stretched from Africa to China. Due to the long sea trade routes and male-dominated workforce, the sex industry has existed for a considerable time. In Melaka, there were traders from Western and Eastern India, the coastal regions of Myanmar, Java, and China, totaling 100,000 people in the early 16th century. With such a large population of traders far from home, the sex industry has become active to fulfill the sexual needs of these traders. The presence of sex workers providing sexual services is first mentioned in the "Hikayat Abdullah". In his writings, he portrayed sex workers as "loose women" who approached traders and sailors to offer the sexual services needed by men (Noor, 2013).

The demand for sex workers was high in the tin mining areas of Perak, rubber plantations in Johor, and in Singapore. Girls were sent to Taiping, Klang, and Kuala Lumpur (Lim, 1998). In the year 2000, it was estimated that as many as 74,616 Indonesians, primarily women, had become victims of human trafficking. Traffickers often forged documents and coerced victims to make them easier to control and reluctant to report to authorities out of fear of arrest and prosecution. Traffickers used force against women and girls and threatened them to prevent them from escaping. Victims were also trapped in escalating debt to the traffickers (Rahim et al., 2015).

Most cases involved victims who migrated voluntarily and legally to Malaysia with the intention of finding better employment opportunities than in their home countries. They were promised contract jobs with substantial pay. However, these victims were instead forced into the sex trade (Micheal, 2016). Therefore, the exploitation and trafficking of women for sex in Malaysia are also seen as a transnational or cross-border crime involving multiple countries in organized criminal groups, posing threats to individuals on both personal and societal levels.

It's not surprising that Malaysia is known today as a destination, source, and transit country for men, women, and children who are subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. Loose border controls have made it easy for syndicates to enter the country and bring victims in (Noorazman & Annuar, 2017), in addition to the high demand from customers seeking prostitutes.

MAPO has identified a total of 323 human trafficking cases involving sexual exploitation in Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur was listed as the area with the highest number of sex trafficking cases, totaling 74 cases, followed by Selangor with 58 cases, and Sabah and Sarawak with 39 and 35 cases respectively. Most of the victims willingly and legally migrated to Malaysia with the intention of finding better job opportunities compared to their impoverished home countries. They were promised contractual work along with decent payment. However, the victims were exploited as sex workers (Micheal, 2016). In the U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, Malaysia was reported to remain

at Tier 3, which is the lowest ranking in the report. The report revealed that the government failed to meet the minimum standards in efforts to eliminate human trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Furthermore, the government through enforcement agencies such as the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), Immigration Department (JIM), Labour Department (JTK), Customs Department (Kastam), and Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APMM) has intensified enforcement operations and prosecutions against offenders involved in human trafficking crimes. Additionally, the government continues to tighten border controls at all entry points, including 'rat routes' (Sinar Harian, 2022).

The Malaysian government has also taken several steps to address this issue, including the establishment of the following.

The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Council and Anti-Migrant Smuggling Council (MAPO)

This is an agency established in 2008 as provided for in Section 6(1) of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act 2007 (Act 670). An amendment to the act in 2010 changed the agency's name to the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Council and Anti-Migrant Smuggling Council (MAPO). MAPO is tasked with coordinating and implementing the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Migrant Smuggling Act (ATIPSOM) and formulating policy and protection programs to combat human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Under MAPO, several secretariats exist, including the Legislative Committee, Enforcement Committee, Victim Protection and Rehabilitation Committee, Special Committee on Labor Trafficking, and the Media and Publicity Committee.

The Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Migrant Smuggling Act (2007)

This act was enacted on July 18, 2007, with the aim of preventing and combating human trafficking. This includes providing protection and support to trafficking victims, prosecuting offenders, establishing anti-human trafficking councils, and related matters (Talib, 2015). However, the act was amended in 2010 and renamed the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Migrant Smuggling Act (ATIPSOM). The amendment was made to address international syndicates that used Malaysia as a transit country for human trafficking and smuggling before taking victims to third countries, especially Australia (Samuni & Kanyo, 2013). This act empowers the government to prosecute and impose penalties, including imprisonment for up to 20 years and fines of up to RM50,000 (Yakoob, 2015).

The National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (2010-2015):

As a continuation of ATIPSOM, the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (2010-2015) was launched. This plan was created to complement the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Migrant Smuggling Act (ATIPSOM) to ensure the smooth and effective implementation of national initiatives over a five-year period, starting from 2010 to 2015. Among the objectives of this plan were to set strategic directions for the five-year period, define strategic goals to guide and drive national efforts to combat human trafficking, and identify program areas to support and ensure the effectiveness of the implementation of strategic goals. There were five guiding principles in this plan, including government responsibility, involvement of civil society, victim-centered services based on human rights, coordination among various government agencies and international organizations as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and systematic assessment and resilience. The launch of this plan directly reflected Malaysia's commitment and aspirations to combat human trafficking (Hamzah et al., 2019).

The National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (2016-2020):

The National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (2016-2020) was launched on August 15, 2016. This plan is the second phase of the 2010-2015 plan, aiming to ensure that Malaysia strives to achieve Tier 1 status in the Trafficking in Persons Report issued

annually by the U.S. Department of State. This plan involves the cooperation of various ministries, departments, and agencies combating human trafficking. Furthermore, the plan prioritizes the welfare and protection of human trafficking victims in accordance with international recommendations. It will serve as a reference and basic guide for government ministries and agencies as well as NGOs involved in addressing human trafficking issues in Malaysia, while also planning effective enforcement strategies (Hamzah et al., 2019).

The National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (2021-2025):

Known as NAPTIP 2021-2025, serves as a policy reference that outlines guiding principles, strategic goals, and actions to be implemented from 2021 to 2025. It is a forward-looking plan designed to combat human trafficking in Malaysia. In this context, the Malaysian government has demonstrated its commitment to addressing this crime through the enactment of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Migrant Smuggling Act 2007 (ATIPSOM). ATIPSOM 2007 has been the main act in force since 2008 to control and combat human trafficking and migrant smuggling. It has been amended three times in the past, in 2010, 2015, and 2022, to enhance enforcement, prosecution, and victim protection elements. Several clauses in the existing ATIPSOM 2007 have been improved to ensure its relevance and enhance convictions in cases of human trafficking and forced labor in Malaysia. Amendments include harsher penalties and prison terms exceeding 20 years for members of human trafficking and migrant smuggling syndicates.

The efforts made by the Malaysian government reflect its responsibility to combat the crime of human trafficking and protect women from being enslaved as sex workers in the country.

Conclusion

The cases of human trafficking in Malaysia continue to increase every year, with many of the victims being forced into prostitution by these syndicates. Based on the results of interviews with informants in this study, it can be concluded that they are trafficked from their home country, Indonesia, to be exploited and forced into prostitution in brothels in Malaysia. These syndicates employ deceptive methods in recruiting them, such as promising jobs at gaming centres or spa treatment centres. It is only after they arrive in Malaysia that they realize they have been deceived. The work they are given is not as promised, and they are burdened with debts they had no prior knowledge of, which they must repay to the agents who recruited them in Malaysia.

To address this issue, the Malaysian government has implemented several actions. Some of these include establishing MAPO, ATIPSOM 2007, amending the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Migrant Smuggling Act with the 2022 amendment (Act A1644), launching the NAPTIP (2010-2015) and NAPTIP (2016-2020), implementing NAPTIP (2021-2025) known as NAPTIP 3.0. Government of Malaysia is also increasing enforcement operations and prosecution against individuals involved in human trafficking crimes. Besides, continuously tightening border controls at all entry points into the country, including unofficial routes. These efforts demonstrate Malaysian government commitment to combating human trafficking and ensuring the safety and well-being of individuals at risk of exploitation.

This study is very important and relevant because its findings show that the trafficking of women to be used as prostitutes still exists in this country. The strength of this study is focusing on interviewing victims who are still employed as sex slaves, providing a valuable insight into their actual experiences. This firsthand perspective is crucial for understanding the dynamics of human trafficking and prostitution. The study also provides specific details about recruitment methods, debt burdens, and the economic factors that led these women to seek work in Malaysia. These details offer a nuanced view of the circumstances surrounding human trafficking.

However, the authors realize that this study still has weaknesses. Among the weaknesses that can be mentioned here are the study primarily focuses on the perspectives of

the trafficking victims. It would be beneficial to include insights from law enforcement, government agencies, or non-governmental organizations involved in anti-trafficking efforts to provide a more well-rounded view of the issue. Besides, the study involves only four informants, which is a very small sample size. So it is recommended for future studies to involve more informants so that the research conducted obtains a comprehensive and diverse perspective.

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