

Vulnerability of Migrants in the ASEAN Migration System: A Human Security Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the relationship between human trafficking and cross-border migration flows in Southeast Asia using a human security approach. This phenomenon is increasingly urgent given the high number of undocumented migrants and the weak protection mechanisms for vulnerable groups, particularly women and children. This study employs a qualitative method with an exploratory case study design, based on document analysis and data triangulation from reports by international organizations such as the UNODC, IOM, ILO, AICHR, and the ASEAN Secretariat. The analytical framework integrates the Human Security theory, Securitization theory, and Migration Systems Theory to understand how policy structures, informal networks, and labor market dynamics interact in shaping migrants' vulnerability to exploitation. The research findings indicate that human trafficking in the ASEAN region is systemic, driven by development gaps, securitization practices that frame migration as a threat, and weak legal migration channels that fuel the role of informal agents and institutional corruption. These findings underscore the need for ASEAN migration policy reforms grounded in human security principles, strengthening cross-border protection mechanisms, and engaging non-state actors in policy formulation. This study contributes theoretically to expanding the application of the human security approach to migration issues in Southeast Asia, while providing practical recommendations for building a more responsive, inclusive, and equitable regional migration governance framework.

Keywords: human trafficking; migration; human security; ASEAN; securitization



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INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking has become the focus of multidisciplinary studies because it reflects structural inequalities in the global system. This phenomenon has even developed into a complex global issue, especially in the context of increasing international migration. The definition of human trafficking is essentially contained in the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons*, which is part of the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* or the Palermo Protocol. This protocol defines human trafficking as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, through the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, for exploitation" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2024). This definition serves as the primary reference for many countries and international organizations because it emphasizes exploitation as the core element of human trafficking.

Meanwhile, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) expands this understanding by highlighting the role of unsafe and undocumented migration as a primary pathway for human trafficking practices. The IOM emphasizes the importance of protecting the vulnerability of individuals within the global migration system, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women, children, and refugees (International Organization for Migration, 2022).

Furthermore, many academics have contributed to enriching this issue's conceptual understanding. Louise Shelley (2010), for example, defines human trafficking as a shadow economy that thrives on weak regulation, poverty, and market demand for cheap labor. She emphasizes that human trafficking is a product of economic globalization that is not inclusive. Meanwhile, Kevin Bales (1999), an expert on modern slavery, states that human trafficking is "slavery in its modern form," meaning control over a person's life for economic exploitation through coercion. Bales introduces the

concept of “disposable people” to describe how victims are seen as worthless and easily replaceable in the global market. An essential addition comes from Bridget Anderson (2013), who highlights how developed countries' migration and labor policies actively create exploitative working conditions, even without the involvement of criminal syndicates. Anderson emphasizes that focusing solely on criminalizing perpetrators obscures the role of state institutions in creating vulnerability.

Although Shelley, Bales, and Anderson offer different perspectives, they share a standard view that human trafficking is not merely the result of individual criminal acts, but also a product of an unequal economic and political system. The differences lie in their focus: Shelley views it from the perspective of organized crime, Bales from morality and humanity, while Anderson focuses on inequalities in the labor market structure and state policies. These three perspectives enrich our understanding that human trafficking is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be narrowly analyzed through a legal approach alone. Thus, this definition is interconnected, particularly in highlighting the importance of the human security approach, which integrates structural, legal, and personal perspectives in understanding how cross-border migration in Southeast Asia creates conditions conducive to the proliferation of human trafficking (Capaldi, 2023; M. Indraswari, 2024).

The latest data from UNODC (2024, p. 15) shows that around 38% of human trafficking victims globally are cross-border migrants, many of whom come from Southeast Asia. ASEAN, as a region with high migration dynamics, faces significant challenges in tackling these exploitative practices, particularly in the form of forced labor, sexual exploitation, and child trafficking (Surwandono & Maksum, 2025). The *Global Slavery Index* identifies Indonesia, Myanmar, and Cambodia as countries with a high risk of human trafficking, both as source and transit countries (Walk Free Foundation, 2023, p. 22). This phenomenon indicates that human trafficking is not merely a legal violation but also touches on broader humanitarian aspects, ranging from social vulnerability, structural poverty, to the failure of state protection for vulnerable citizens.

Regionally, Southeast Asia has its complexities in managing migration and preventing human trafficking. The migration system in this region is asymmetrical, with countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand acting as magnets for migrant workers, while countries such as Myanmar, Laos, and Indonesia are the primary sources of vulnerable migrants (Capaldi, 2023). Development disparities, weak migration governance, and limited cross-border cooperation in migrant protection mechanisms exacerbate the situation. In the case of the Thailand-Myanmar border, for example, human trafficking networks operate dark routes that are difficult for law enforcement to access (M. Indraswari, 2024). Additionally, cultural and social factors such as patriarchy and a preference for cheap labor further reinforce the cycle of exploitation. Therefore, an integrated analysis that is not only legally based but also considers social, cultural, and human security dimensions in an integrated manner is necessary.

To date, approaches to human trafficking have tended to be dominated by a legal-formal perspective, with a primary focus on criminalizing perpetrators and rescuing victims. While important, this approach often overlooks the structural and systemic dynamics that underlie migrants' vulnerability to exploitation (Lelliott & Miller, 2023a). Available literature indicates a gap in integrating a holistic *human security* approach that encompasses individuals' economic, health, personal, and political security (Song & Cook, 2015). It is where the urgency of an interdisciplinary approach lies, combining human security theory (United Nations Development Programme, 1994), *securitization* theory (Buzan et al., 1998), and migration system theory (Castles & Miller, 2009) to understand how cross-border migration and human trafficking are interconnected and reinforced by an unequal international system.

The *human security* perspective emphasizes that threats to humans do not always originate from state or military actors, but also from non-state actors, economic structures, and social vulnerabilities. This approach is relevant in Southeast Asia, which is rife with “non-traditional security threats” such as human trafficking, narcotics, and climate change (Caballero-Anthony, 2012; Rosana & Sahide, 2025). Meanwhile, *securitization* theory explains how issues such as migration and human trafficking can be perceived as security threats, both by states and societies requiring extraordinary measures. When migrants are securitized as “threats,” states tend to implement exclusionary policies that ironically increase migrants' vulnerability to exploitation (Lobasz, 2009). In this combination, the *Migration Systems Theory* perspective allows us to see how migration flows are shaped through transnational economic-political networks that are not always linear or one-way.

Previous studies on human trafficking in Southeast Asia, such as Ford & Lyons (2012), Shelley (2010), de Haas (2020), Idris (2021), and Park (2022), have primarily focused on legal aspects, law

enforcement, or quantitative statistics on victims. There is a significant gap in qualitative research exploring the subjective experiences of migrant victims of human trafficking and how they perceive security in their lives. Additionally, little research has been mapping the relationship between migrants' structural vulnerabilities and state failures in providing cross-border protection. It leaves an essential space for qualitative exploration that can delve deeply into the social processes shaping human trafficking networks within the context of international migration. A study in Malaysia by Idris (2021), for example, shows how a lack of awareness of rights and dependence on migration agents exacerbate the conditions of Bangladeshi migrant workers who are victims of exploitation.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between human trafficking and cross-border migration in the ASEAN region through a multidimensional human security approach, with by attempting to answer the main question: *how can the link between human trafficking and cross-border migration in Southeast Asia be explained through the perspectives of human security, securitization, and migration systems theory, and how does ASEAN respond to these challenges through migration and protection policies?* The primary focus of this study is how undocumented or vulnerable migration is exploited by non-state actors in human trafficking practices, as well as how states respond to this phenomenon within the framework of policy and security. By emphasizing a human security approach and using the lens of securitization theory and migration systems, this study seeks to answer how structures, actors, and discourses shape human trafficking practices in Southeast Asia.

Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the scope of human security theory, which is often considered abstract and normative, by testing it empirically in concrete cases of human trafficking in Southeast Asia. In this regard, the *securitization* approach developed by Buzan, Wæver, dan de Wilde (1998) allows for an analysis of how human trafficking is constructed as a security threat and how this construction's political and social consequences impact migration policy. Meanwhile, *migration systems theory* provides an analytical framework for understanding the interactions between migrants, sending institutions, receiving countries, and informal networks that act as intermediaries in the migration process. Practically, the findings of this research are expected to provide input for the formulation of migration policies and human trafficking prevention measures that are more responsive to the human dimension and individual experiences of migrants.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is important to distinguish between *human trafficking* and *migrant smuggling*, as the two often overlap in practice. According to UNODC (2023), migrant smuggling focuses on facilitating the illegal crossing of borders with the consent of migrants, usually ending upon arrival in the destination country. In contrast, human trafficking always involves exploitation, whether through forced labor, slavery, or sexual exploitation, with or without the initial consent of the victim. This distinction is important to ensure that the analysis of migrant vulnerability in this study focuses on the dynamics of exploitation, rather than merely on illegal cross-border mobility.

This study uses three approaches as analytical tools to examine the relationship between human trafficking and cross-border migration in the ASEAN region through a multidimensional human security approach. The first approach is *human security*, which is the main conceptual framework of this study. The UNDP first introduced this concept in *the Human Development Report* (1994) as an alternative paradigm emphasizing that security is not only protection for the state but primarily for individuals. Human security encompasses seven dimensions: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security. Gasper expanded this concept (2020), emphasizing that human security is a comprehensive effort to reduce vulnerability and enhance social protection capacities for individuals, not states. In the context of Southeast Asia and human trafficking, this approach is essential because it allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the vulnerability of migrants, who are often beyond the reach of state protection, where human trafficking frequently involves vulnerable groups such as undocumented migrants. Using the human security lens, the issue of human trafficking is not only seen as a criminal act but as a failure of social protection systems and fair migration (Caballero-Anthony, 2024).

Furthermore, the theory of *securitization* developed by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) in their work *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, *this study's second theoretical framework*, explains how an issue becomes a security issue when it is constructed as an existential threat by political actors and requires extraordinary measures beyond the usual political boundaries. In the context of migration

and human trafficking, securitization can occur when states construct migrants as threats to social and economic stability, which in turn gives rise to exclusionary policies (Lobasz, 2009). As a result, migration policies become more restrictive than humanitarian. It is reinforced by Park's research (2022), which shows that in Southeast Asia, securitization rhetoric against migrants leads to reduced access to protection and basic services. This perspective is essential in research because it allows for analyzing how state discourse and policies contribute to migrants' vulnerability to exploitation. The securitization process also has implications for who is entitled to protection and who is deemed "illegal," which often serves as the starting point for structurally legitimized human trafficking practices.

Furthermore, the *Migration Systems Theory* developed by Castles and Miller (2009) emphasizes that migration is not only the result of individual decisions, but is shaped by the interaction between macro structures (such as economic conditions, conflicts, and state policies) and micro actors (families, migration agents, informal networks). This theory, as explained by de Haas (2020), emphasizes the interaction between structures (e.g., the economic and political conditions of a country) and the social networks of migrants that form migration systems. This study uses this theory to understand how informal networks, migration agents, and structural inequalities in development between ASEAN countries create migration systems that are vulnerable to exploitation. Capaldi's study (2023) shows that in ASEAN, the migration system is asymmetrical, with countries like Malaysia and Thailand acting as magnets for migrants due to labor needs. In contrast, countries like Myanmar, Laos, and Indonesia serve as suppliers due to domestic economic constraints. This theory helps analyze how migration flows create "vulnerability corridors" that are easily exploited by human trafficking syndicates. The interaction between migration systems and security policies, often exclusionary, is crucial in this research, as it shows how the systems contribute to systematically exploiting migrants. To facilitate understanding of the integration of the theories used in this study, the following diagram illustrates the integration of the three theories used:

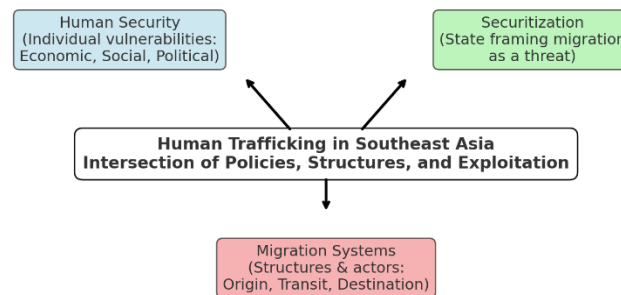


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Source: compiled by the author, 2025

Several relevant studies have reinforced and supported the relevance of these three theories in understanding the interconnection between migration and human trafficking. A study by Lelliott and Miller (2023b) shows that structural corruption and weak legal systems in Southeast Asia reinforce the link between unsafe migration and human trafficking. Meanwhile, Indraswari (2024) uses a human security approach to analyze border management in the Mekong region, concluding that an excessive focus on state security exacerbates migrant vulnerability. A third study by Idris (2021) examines the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia and shows how securitized migration policies directly impact the exclusion and exploitation of workers. Song & Cook (2015) also show that neglecting security policies' personal and community dimensions has made migrants the most unprotected group.

However, these studies remain partial, as none systematically integrate the three theoretical approaches, *human security*, *securitization*, and *migration systems* theory, into a single conceptual framework to analyze human trafficking as a complex transnational phenomenon. The theoretical and empirical gap addressed in this study employs a combined theoretical approach to understand the

structures and actors within the migration system. This framework is used to analyze how the interaction between state policies, informal migration networks, and security narratives contributes to the persistence of human trafficking practices in Southeast Asia. With this integration, it is hoped that this research will contribute theoretically in the form of a new, more holistic analytical model on the issue of human trafficking and practically in formulating more equitable and human rights-based migration policies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory case study design to understand the relationship between cross-border migration flows and human trafficking practices in Southeast Asia through a human security perspective. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore the social, political, and structural contexts that influence migrants' vulnerability to exploitation (Yin, 2018).

The research data is entirely sourced from official documents and credible academic publications. The primary sources include the *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024; 2023), the *World Migration Report* and *Regional Migration Overview* from the International Organization for Migration (2022; 2024), the International Labour Organization report on *Labour Migration in ASEAN* (2023), as well as the annual reports of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (2023, 2024) and *ASEAN in Figures* from the ASEAN Secretariat (2024). In addition, academic literature on migration and human security was used as supporting material, including Castles & Miller (2009), de Haas (2020), Caballero-Anthony (2012, 2024), Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde (1998), Ford & Lyons (2012), as well as recent studies on corruption, policy, and migrant vulnerability in Southeast Asia (M. Idris, 2021; A. Indraswari, 2024; Lelliott & Miller, 2023b; Park, 2022).

Data collection techniques were conducted through document analysis and *secondary interviews*. The term *secondary interviews* in this study refers to the testimonies of victims and actors that have been documented in official reports from international institutions (UNODC, IOM, ILO, AICHR), not the results of primary interviews conducted directly by the author. Data validation was conducted through triangulation of sources and methods, comparing data from international reports, national policies, and academic publications to ensure consistency of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014). An audit trail was also applied to trace the analysis process and maintain methodological transparency. All data were then analyzed using *thematic analysis* (Nowell et al., 2017), with a focus on integrating three theoretical frameworks: Human Security, Securitization Theory, and Migration Systems Theory. This integration enables the construction of an interpretive narrative on how policies, migration structures, and exploitative practices shape the systemic vulnerability of migrants in the ASEAN region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study seeks to describe the phenomenon of cross-border migration in Southeast Asia, which is part of global dynamics influenced by economic inequality, social change, and limited access to decent work in countries of origin. In this context, undocumented migration flows have developed in response to financial needs and employment opportunities, but at the same time have opened up opportunities for human trafficking. This situation is exacerbated by weak migration governance, policy inconsistencies between countries, and a lack of comprehensive regional protection mechanisms. This study focuses on analyzing how the structure of the migration system in the region forms "vulnerability pathways" that are exploited by state and non-state actors for exploitation, highlighting the interlinkages between illegal migration patterns, human trafficking practices, and ASEAN policy responses that are still dominated by a securitization logic rather than a human security approach, with the following sub-discussions:

Systemic Construction of Human Trafficking in Illegal Migration Flows and Exploitation

Undocumented migration in Southeast Asia forms a complex transnational mobility system, with layered route patterns from countries of origin such as Indonesia, Myanmar, and Cambodia to destination countries such as Malaysia and Thailand via informal transit points. This phenomenon is exacerbated by economic development disparities and job opportunities between countries, which drive economically driven migration patterns (Capaldi, 2023). Development gaps are evident, for example,

in Malaysia's GDP per capita of USD 11,109, compared to Myanmar's USD 1,197 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024, p. 8). The *ASEAN in Figures* report (2024, p. 8) also notes that there are over 4.8 million undocumented migrants in the region, with over 60% working in the informal sector, such as construction, fishing, and domestic work. In an interview quoted from the IOM report (2022), a migrant from Myanmar stated, "We know we do not have documents, but there is no choice in the village. Everyone goes to Thailand." This statement reflects structural drivers such as poverty, internal conflict, and weak domestic labor market infrastructure that fuel migrant outflows. Meanwhile, the pull factors, such as the demand for cheap labor in Malaysia's informal sector, make the country a magnet for vulnerable migrants. *Migration Systems Theory* explains that these flows are not merely the result of individual decisions but part of a structural system created by global imbalances (Capaldi, 2023; de Haas, 2020).

Within this system, informal networks and local social institutions serve as the main drivers in recruiting and organizing the illegal mobility of migrants. The ASEAN-ACT report reveals that more than **35% of victims** were recruited by people they knew, such as neighbors, religious leaders, or close family members (Denney & Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). On the other hand, the role of state actors cannot be ignored. UNODC (2024, p. 33) reports that **45% of human trafficking cases** involve official authorities, including immigration officers and security personnel. Even interviews cited in the UNODC report (2024) also indicate that immigration officers often receive bribes to "turn a blind eye" to the departure of undocumented migrants. It highlights the weakness of cross-border oversight and the inefficiency of national legal systems, which make human trafficking part of systemic practices. In the logic of Migration Systems Theory, informal agents and institutional corruption are not deviations but functional components of the migration system that emerge due to the absence of efficient legal channels (Lelliott & Miller, 2023a).

It can be seen in several Southeast Asian countries. A *Human Rights Watch* report (2022b, p. 12) notes that 78% of undocumented female migrants in Malaysia experience forms of exploitation, such as unpaid wages, forced labor, and sexual violence. As revealed by a former female migrant worker from East Nusa Tenggara in the investigative report, she was promised domestic work in Malaysia. However, she was instead forced to work in a nightclub without pay. In Thailand, land routes are a high-risk area, as many victims are transported using cargo trucks by cross-border syndicates with strong connections in border regions. For example, in Thailand's fishing sector, over 30,000 migrants work under extreme conditions, including 18–20-hour workdays without permission to return to land (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2023). Furthermore, a migrant from Cambodia described their situation: "We live on the boat like prisoners, not knowing when we can go home." Migration Systems Theory views this exploitation as a direct consequence of a migration system driven by market needs but not balanced by adequate legal protection (Ford & Lyons, 2012).

Policy disparities among ASEAN countries reinforce these systemic vulnerabilities. This situation demonstrates that the absence of a legal and safe regional migration system exacerbates the conditions of migrants in the region. The lack of minimum standards for migrant protection leads to fragmented and unsynchronized policies among countries, as outlined in the ILO report (2021, pp. 10–12). For instance, Malaysia enforces strict deportation policies, with over 36,000 migrants deported in the first half of 2024, while Thailand implemented a limited amnesty policy for undocumented migrants (International Organization for Migration, 2024, pp. 10–14). These differing approaches highlight the absence of a harmonized regional migration framework. Jetschke (2019) emphasizes that the non-intervention principle within ASEAN hinders the development of a collective framework for migrant protection. Policy inconsistencies within the migration systems framework in countries of origin, transit, and destination create gray areas exploited by syndicates and reinforce structural injustice (Castles & Miller, 2009).

At the micro level, undocumented migrants face living conditions that are highly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including arbitrary detention, overstay, and deportation without due process. In Malaysia, data from SUHAKAM (2023) shows that more than 7,000 migrants were detained for overstaying without legal representation. Investigations in migrant shelters in Malaysia reveal that many victims lack access to legal assistance or recovery mechanisms (M. Idris, 2021). A former migrant from Myanmar interviewed in the ASEAN ACT report stated, "After being arrested, we did not know who to contact. No one helped us." This vulnerability is exacerbated by the absence of state protection for its citizens abroad and the securitization discourse that constructs migrants as a threat (Denney &

Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). The IOM (2024, pp. 12–13) also notes that only 12% of victims were able to access rehabilitation programs. This situation reflects the weakness of protection mechanisms and how the migration system disregards aspects of justice and humanity (Lobasz, 2009). In migration theory, systems explain that protection cannot be solely the responsibility of the destination country but must be viewed as a shared responsibility distributed within the transnational migration system.

These findings indicate that human trafficking in the context of illegal migration is not a sporadic criminal act, but rather the result of an unequal and institutionalized regional migration system. Migration Systems Theory states that these systems are reactive and adaptive, explaining that when legal systems fail to respond to mobility needs, informal channels will develop as systemic alternatives (Castles & Miller, 2009). In this context, human trafficking syndicates, local recruiters, and structural corruption are merely actors filling the void left by the state and inadequate policies. Thus, this study reinforces the argument that migration systems theory must be integrated with a human security perspective to address the complexity of exploited migrants' realities.

Therefore, the solutions cannot solely focus on law enforcement or border tightening. Structural reforms are needed to develop safe and transparent legal migration channels, increase capacity for protection diplomacy, and establish a human rights-based regional migration framework. The calls by UNODC (2024) and IOM (2023) for ASEAN to immediately develop a collective migration system underscore the importance of an approach that transcends national sovereignty and prioritizes human security. By integrating migration system theory and a human security approach, this study emphasizes that migration is not merely mobility, but a manifestation of global inequality that requires systemic, cross-sectoral, and cross-border responses.

Human Security and ASEAN Policy Responses

The state security approach to migration and human trafficking in the ASEAN region still dominates, prioritizing securitization over individual protection. This study found, for example, that countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia often resort to mass deportations, indefinite detention, and raids against undocumented migrants. Data from the UNODC (2024, p. 15) shows that Malaysia deported more than 25,000 migrants throughout the year without conducting proper identification of victims of human trafficking. This situation reflects the application of the "threat" logic as explained in the securitization theory by Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde (1998), where migration is constructed as a national security issue rather than a human rights issue (Park, 2022). The implications of this securitization are significant, as migration policies, rather than strengthening protection for victims, reinforce vulnerability, restrict access to services, and create opportunities for exploitation.

This paradigm of securitization has resulted in policy responses that tend to be repressive, prioritizing immigration control and political stability over human security. The IOM report (2022) reveals the testimony of a Myanmar migrant who stated, "We are treated like criminals simply because we lack documents, even though we fled war and poverty." It aligns with the findings of Hemming and Piper (2004), highlighting that victims' experiences are often overlooked in policy design. In a human security study developed by the UNDP and reinforced by Caballero-Anthony (2012), individual security encompasses economic, personal, community, and political dimensions. However, this approach has not been integrated into ASEAN regional policies, resulting in the majority of human trafficking victims in Southeast Asia being undocumented cross-border migrants, with women and children being the most vulnerable groups. The latest Global Slavery Index report states that in 2023, over 680,000 people were living in conditions of forced labor or exploitation in Southeast Asia, with the highest numbers in Indonesia, Myanmar, and Cambodia (Walk Free Foundation, 2023).

This study also found a consistent policy pattern among ASEAN countries, such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, emphasizing repressive measures over protection. The rapid deportation policy in Malaysia and mass detention in Thailand, as documented in Human Rights Watch's report (2022a), demonstrate how "security" measures exacerbate the trauma and insecurity of victims. A study by Idris (2021) shows that many Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia have been exploited by recruitment agents and subsequently deported without a fair legal process. Additionally, thematic studies indicate a lack of reintegration and rehabilitation programs for victims, particularly in Indonesia, where social protection institutions remain unintegrated with the migration system (M. Indraswari, 2024). From a human security perspective, this situation reflects the state's failure to fulfill its basic obligations in ensuring the personal and community security of migrants (Gasper, 2021). A comparison with international

standards such as the Palermo Protocol shows that ASEAN's approach still lags in mainstreaming individual protection in migration policies and human trafficking responses.

Although ASEAN, as a regional organization, has adopted instruments such as the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), the effectiveness of this policy is still questionable. The implementation of ACTIP at the national level is hindered by the principle of non-interference, which is a diplomatic norm of ASEAN (Emmers, 2003). The ASEAN Secretariat report (2023) shows that only a few member states have active national committees and integrated monitoring systems in implementing ACTIP. The lack of monitoring and accountability systems has led to a significant gap between normative commitments and actual implementation. For example, in the case of the forced return of Rohingya migrants from Thai waters to Myanmar in 2022, no sanctions or regional accountability mechanisms were enforced. It demonstrates that *human security* has not yet become an ethical foundation in regional governance. While *securitization* theory explains how the logic of state security continues to dominate, the *human security* approach critiques the absence of regional solidarity in addressing complex and transnational migration issues (Lelliott & Miller, 2023b). It renders ACTIP more symbolic than a substantive protection mechanism. Most member states have not developed comprehensive reintegration programs for victims, except for the Philippines, which has formulated a community-based humanistic approach and vocational education for victims (Song & Cook, 2015; Ullah, 2013). Meanwhile, Malaysia and Thailand still implement punitive rather than protective policies.

Comparisons between ASEAN countries reveal significant variations in the implementation of ACTIP. For example, the Philippines is known to have adopted a community-based protection model, providing reintegration programs, vocational training, and counseling services for victims of human trafficking, which is more in line with the principle of human security (Song & Cook, 2015; Ullah, 2013). In contrast, Thailand still emphasizes a control approach, through mass detention and rapid deportation of undocumented migrants, which ironically increases the vulnerability of victims to further exploitation (Human Rights Watch, 2022a; Park, 2022). These differences confirm that policy harmonization at the ASEAN level remains a major challenge. Another fundamental problem is the lack of involvement of non-state actors, including NGOs and migrant communities, in policy formulation and evaluation. Documentary studies found that 60% of national policies studied in Southeast Asia had no mechanisms for public consultation or civil society participation (Hemming & Piper, 2004). On the other hand, policies formulated in a closed and elitist manner risk creating policy dislocation from the reality on the ground, widening the gap between legal norms and implementation practices. Various reports, including the Global Slavery Index (2023), also note that mechanisms for public participation in ASEAN policies are minimal (Walk Free Foundation, 2023). Local NGOs active in rescuing and assisting victims of human trafficking are often not formally involved in the legislative process. It highlights structural biases that favor an elitist approach prioritizing national stability over victim protection (Ford & Lyons, 2012). Narratives from victims documented in the AICHR report (ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, 2024) state, "*Policies are made without knowing what we experience on the ground.*"

It often results in victims of human trafficking being subjected to double criminalization as "illegal migrants" and victims of exploitation (Ramcharan, 2025). However, the human security perspective formulated by the UNDP (1994) emphasizes the need for comprehensive protection of individuals across seven dimensions, including economic and community security. In other words, the roots of human trafficking lie not only in criminal acts but also in flawed migration systems, development disparities, and the absence of adequate social safeguards (Curley & Wong, 2008; Gasper, 2020). Therefore, alternative community-based and participatory approaches need to be developed, where NGOs, migrants, and civil society are involved as key actors in a fair migration system (Caballero-Anthony, 2018).

An uneven and unsynchronized regional migration system among ASEAN countries exacerbates this situation. Malaysia and Thailand have become migration destinations due to informal job opportunities, while Myanmar, Laos, and Indonesia remain labor-sending countries due to vulnerable domestic economic conditions (Capaldi, 2023). In this context, migration is often driven by structural factors such as poverty and conflict, but is framed as a threat requiring repressive responses. Informal migration agents exploit the weaknesses of this system to trap migrants in exploitation, while states fail to provide oversight and protection mechanisms. According to de Haas (2020), such

migration systems are the result of complex interactions between micro-actors (migrants and agents) and macro-structures (markets and policies) that create systemic vulnerabilities.

Therefore, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of integrating three analytical frameworks. The human security perspective shows that migrants' vulnerability stems not only from criminal actors but also from the state's failure to provide basic protection. Securitization theory explains why state policies often frame migrants as threats that must be controlled rather than as individuals who need protection. Meanwhile, migration systems theory shows how asymmetrical structures between countries of origin, transit, and destination, as well as the role of informal agents and institutional corruption, shape migration systems that are vulnerable to exploitation. With this approach, ASEAN can develop migration policies that are responsive, inclusive, and fair, not only from a legal perspective but also from social and economic perspectives. Unfortunately, to date, most policies remain trapped in the dilemma between national sovereignty and the urgency of regional solidarity, hindering the formation of an effective and sustainable cross-border protection system (Emmers, 2008; Rizal, 2008).

This study recommends shifting the ASEAN policy paradigm from state security to human security. Policy reforms must be carried out by strengthening the capacity of victim protection agencies, creating independent monitoring systems, and designing morally and politically binding human rights-based protection indicators. These steps should also be accompanied by strengthening the involvement of non-state actors such as NGOs, migrant communities, and diaspora in policy-making. Good practices in the Philippines, as well as community-based programs such as job training in Sabah and migrant organizations in Mindanao, can serve as relevant local protection models for adoption in the region.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that human trafficking in cross-border migration flows in Southeast Asia cannot be understood solely as a criminal act, but rather as a structural consequence of development inequalities, weak human rights protection, and the dominance of the state security paradigm. The integration of human security, securitization theory, and migration systems theory shows that migrant vulnerability is shaped by the interaction between policies that securitize migration, the absence of legal migration channels, and the role of informal agents who exploit these gaps. Thus, the paradigm shift from state security to human security is not only a normative urgency but also a practical necessity to protect the dignity and rights of migrants.

To increase policy relevance, this study recommends concrete steps. At the ASEAN level, harmonization of migrant protection standards, the establishment of independent regional monitoring mechanisms, and strengthening the implementation of ACTIP through measurable protection indicators are needed. At the national level, governments need to develop safe and transparent legal migration channels, strengthen institutional capacity for investigation and victim protection, and reduce counterproductive practices of mass detention and deportation. For civil society actors, it is important to expand engagement in policy formulation, implementation monitoring, and the development of community-based programs that support victim reintegration.

Furthermore, the issue of human trafficking in cross-border migration is also closely related to borders and belonging. The securitization discourse that frames migrants as a threat undermines their sense of security and social inclusion, creating a form of "symbolic restriction" that hinders integration in the destination community. Conversely, a human security approach that emphasizes economic, social, and community dimensions can open space for policies that build a sense of belonging for migrants, while strengthening ASEAN regional solidarity. In this way, borders are no longer understood merely as lines separating countries, but also as political and social spaces where protection, inclusion, and security for migrants must be realized in concrete terms.

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