The Social Ecology of Human Trafficking: A Theoretical Synthesis with Evidence from Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This study investigates the structural factors driving human trafficking patterns across four Southeast Asian countries—Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore—using a quantitative comparative analysis of data from 2014 to 2024. Drawing on secondary data including international tourist arrivals, GDP per capita, gender inequality indices, female vulnerable employment rates, and detected trafficking victims, the research reveals significant regional variations. The research employed standardized victim rates to eliminate the impact of population size differences and therefore facilitate cross-national comparisons; it suggested that average annual number of identified victims per million people in Singapore consistently remained below 60. In contrast, this rate was significantly higher in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, with Cambodia peaking at 925 per million in 2022 and Thailand reaching a peak of 868 during the COVID-19 pandemic. These disparities are explained through an integrated theoretical framework: Economic vulnerability, including low GDP, fuels poverty, while weak enforcement reflects broader policy weaknesses, as measured by the 3P Index. State fragility further amplifies risk through displacement and corruption. Routine activity theory explains how high tourism can bring motivated offenders into contact with suitable targets, while structural violence highlights the role of gender stereotypes and professional blind spots. World system theory situates these vulnerabilites within global demand and the exploitation of peripheral economics. Finally, women's rights deficits capture the strong association between gender inequality and elevated trafficking. The findings indicate that human trafficking in Southeast Asia is not an isolated crime but a systemic outcome of interconnected structural conditions, like economic instability, institutional gaps, and gendered labor vulnerabilities, varying by national context. Policy implications highlight the need to address these root causes, while limitations in relying on reported cases suggest future research should explore unreported trafficking and expand country coverage for broader insights.

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Contextualization and Historical Background of Human Trafficking

Slavery can be traced back to ancient societies long before 500 CE, including ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The earliest recorded mention of slavery comes from the ancient Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, which preserves around 450 paradigmatic decisions that were primarily concerned with slave-masters and commercial practice.[1] The persistence of slavery has spanned subsequent historical periods, from the transatlantic slave trade of the 16th century, in which millions of Africans were forcibly transported and commodified, to the deep entrenchment of Black slavery in the legal, political, and economic systems of the United States, leaving long-lasting structural consequences that echo in modern forms of exploitation.[2] Although legal slavery has been abolished in most parts of the world, practices very similar to slavery persist. The elimination of the system did not mean the end of exploitation itself; on the contrary, it has continued in a more concealed form. Human trafficking is one of the most direct contemporary extensions of slavery, as it contains the same core elements: treating people as commodities, depriving them of their freedom through coercion or deception, and extracting profits from their labor or bodies. Therefore, international organizations such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organization classify human trafficking, forced labor, sexual exploitation, and debt bondage under the general term "modern slavery." People are objectified and treated as commodities against their will. They are kidnapped, trafficked, imprisoned, and transported through violence.[3] This historical coninutiy has taken on a distincly global character: Today, human trafficking activites cross national boarders and span virtually every region of the world.[4] According to recent estimates, human trafficking is one of the world's largest criminal industries, generating an estimated US$236 billion in illegal profits annually from forced labor alone. Children, minorities, and immigrants are particularly vulnerable to extreme forms of exploitation, including slavery and trafficking.[5] The high returns associated with human trafficking have promoted its practice, leading to the emergence of numerous sophisticated human trafficking markets.[6] Human trafficking is intertwined within a broader social ecosystem. Understanding what factors lead to human trafficking and what structural conditions perpetuate this phenomenon remains a crucial question for academic research and policy intervention.[7]

The Direction of the Research

[1] Lenski, Noel. "Slavery in the Roman Empire." *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery throughout History*,. (2023): 87–107. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13260-5_5.
[2] Bradley, Keith, and Paul Cartledge, eds. *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*. Vol. 1, *The Ancient Mediterranean World*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-world-history-of-slavery/C3D56D72DE3608479792744125C63F84.
[3] North Central Texas College. "Human Trafficking Awareness Month." North Central Texas College, (Accessed October 2026). https://www.nctc.edu/awareness/human-trafficking.
[4] Allain, Jean, ed. *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*. Oxford University Press, (2012). https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199660469.001.0001.
[5] Blue Campaign. "What Is Human Trafficking?" U.S. Department of Homeland Security, (2022). https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking.
[6] International Labour Organization (ILO). "Profits and Poverty: The Economics of Forced Labour." International Labour Organization, (2024). https://www.ilo.org/publications/profits-and-poverty-economics-forced-labour.
[7] Ruth Conniff, "Enslaved Workers Are Making Your Breakfast: Wisconsin Confronts Labor Trafficking," Wisconsin Examiner, (2023), https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2023/02/28/enslaved-workers-are-making-your-breakfast-wisconsin-confronts-labor-trafficking/.

Numerous studies and data already exist that broadly outline the factors contributing to human trafficking and offer various explanations for its continued existence and uneven global distribution. These include the most frequently cited factors, such as economic inequality, labor shortages, or institutional weaknesses. From an economic perspective, statistics indicate a correlation—rather than a causal link—between a destination country's GDP and the percentage of victims trafficked there from other regions. Richer countries attract victims from abroad, whereas less affluent countries are mainly affected by domestic or sub-regional trafficking flows. This pattern indicates that economic inequality not only determines people's vulnerability to human trafficking but also influences the direction and geographical scope of trafficking flows.[8] Immigration restrictions can also contribute to irregular migration, thus increasing the risk of trafficking. The visa system is tied to employers, and temporary workers are prohibited from freely changing jobs. Leaving an employer who engages in exploitative practices could jeopardize a worker's legal immigraiton status, putting them at risk of detention or deportation. In this situation, they are more easily threatened and controlled, so legal status itself becomes a tool of exploitation.[9] Such employer-bound visa systems create structural vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit, particularly in temporary worker programs. National instability often triggers displacement and migration as people flee poverty and crisis, thereby increasing the risk of human trafficking. Some of the most common factors include local conditions that push populations to migrate in search of better conditions: poverty, oppression, lack of human rights, lack of social or economic opportunity, danger from conflict or instability, etc.[10] Another common contributing factor is when institutional deficiencies lead to weak governance capacity and regulatory enforcement which may exacerbate human trafficking issues through corruption or lack of accountability.[11] Human trafficking is inherently an extremely complex phenomenon, driven and influenced by various economic, social, and cultural factors. It has long existed in many countries, but with different degrees of severity and patterns. To verify the reliability of these theories, I chose to use a sampling survey method for screening. Southeast Asia has long been considered the region most severely affected by human trafficking. Furthermore, victims from East Asia and South Asia are detected in all regions of the world, suggesting these flows have a global reach.[12] Southeast Asia is simultaneously a source, transit point, and destination for human trafficking, with intra-regional flows dominating but global connections evident.[13] Different countries exhibit different patterns, and there are significant variations in the scale, form, and visibility of human trafficking. These uneven distributions indicate that domestic and structural differences in Southeast Asian countries lead to different outcomes.

[8] Wheaton, Elizabeth M., Edward J. Schauer, and Thomas V. Galli. "Economics of Human Trafficking." *International Migration* 48, no. 4 (2010): 114–41. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00592.x.
[9] Waldrauch, Harald, and Christoph Hofinger. "An Index to Measure the Legal Obstacles to the Integration of Migrants." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 23, no. 2 (1997): 271–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.1997.9976590.
[10] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "What Are the Root Causes of Trafficking?" (2008). https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Toolkit-files/08-58296_tool_9-2.pdf.
[11] David, Fiona, Katharine Bryant, and Jacqueline Joudo Larsen. "Migrants and their Vulnerability to Human Trafficking, Modern Slavery and Forced Labour." IOM, (2019). https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrants_and_their_vulnerability.pdf.
[12] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "Trafficking in Persons." (2024). https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/glotip.html
[13] Caballero-Anthony, Mely. "Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia." Finance & Development (IMF), (2018). https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2018/09/human-trafficking-in-southeast-asia-caballero

Southeast Asia's natural conditions make it an excellent place to study the dynamics and causes of human trafficking. The differences between countries allow for better comparisons of human trafficking trends in different regions, thus providing a good testing ground for theories and hypotheses. Against this backdrop, this study proposes three hypotheses to reveal the key mechanisms of human trafficking patterns in the region.

The Hypotheses

Based on all the theories above, this study does not view human trafficking as the result of a single factor, instead conceptualizing it as a risk influenced by three interconnected structural dimensions. These dimensions together form a structured framework that allows us to move beyond descriptive studies of human trafficking in Southeast Asia and construct a comparative framework capable of capturing the internal variations within the region. This study identifies three key analytical dimensions: economic vulnerability, labor-related pressures, and institutional capacity. Based on this, the study proposes three hypotheses: H1, H2, and H3.

H1: Countries with lower per capita GDP are more likely to have higher rates of human trafficking.
H2: Countries with a higher number of international tourist arrivals are more likely to have higher rates of human trafficking, especially sex trafficking.
H3: Countries with higher levels of gender inequality, a higher proportion of women in vulnerable employment, and lower levels of education are more likely to be victims of human trafficking.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research methodology employs comparative quantitative analysis, using cross-sectional data collected through secondary datasets. The analysis focuses on four ASEAN countries: Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore, spanning the period from 2014 to 2024. These countries were selected to adequately represent differences in economic development levels and for their roles in regional human trafficking patterns. Cambodia and Vietnam were chosen to represent relatively low-income economies primarily serving as source countries for human trafficking, while Thailand and Singapore represent relatively high-income economies primarily serving as destination or transit countries.[14] This selection allows for a structured comparison within the same regional context, highlighting how structural variations influence trafficking outcomes. The significant differences among Southeast Asian countries in economic structure, governance capacity, and roles in human trafficking allow this case combination to facilitate a structured comparison of human trafficking scenarios within the same region, focusing on both source and destination countries. By examining countries with varying levels of economic development and roles in human trafficking that share the same regional environment, this study can assess how structural

[14] Kiss, Ligia, Nicola S Pocock, Varaporn Naisanguansri, et al. “Health of Men, Women, and Children in Post-Trafficking Services in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam: An Observational Cross-Sectional Study.” The Lancet Global Health 3, no. 3 (2015): e154–61. https://doi.org/10.1016/s2214-109x(15)70016-1.

differences (rather than just broad regional factors) influence human trafficking patterns. This study includes one dependent variable and four independent variables, corresponding to three research hypotheses. The human trafficking rate serves as the dependent variable, while the independent variables include GDP per Capita (2014-2024 $US dollars), International Tourist Arrivals, Female Vulnerable Employment Rate, and Gender Inequality Index UNDP.

Variable Chart

Variable	Source	Corresponding Hypothesis
Human Trafficking Rate	U.S. Department of State	Dependent
GDP per capita (current US$)	World Bank	H1
International Tourist Arrivals	- Cambodia Ministry of Tourism - Thai National Statistical Office - Vietnam national authority of tourism - Singapore Tourism Board	H2
Vulnerable Employment, Female (%)	World Bank	H3
Gender Inequality Index (GII)	Our World in Data	H3

Variables Analysis

Data Period:

The data used is from is from 2014 to 2024 (10 years), with some variables providing data only up to 2023. Due to differences in reporting methods among different databases, all indicators have been standardized to the closest ten-year period (2014-2024). In order to maintain comparability over time, adjustments have been made for some minor differences (± 1 year). The ten-year data period in the studies is sufficient for this study to analyze trends and structural characteristics.

Human Trafficking Rate

Due to how many human trafficking cases remain unreported or undiscovered, reliable quantitative data on human trafficking are very limited. Therefore, this study relies on the number of officially reported human trafficking cases as a proxy indicator. Drawing on secondary data including international tourist arrivals, GDP per capita, gender inequality indices, female vulnerable employment rates, and detected human trafficking victims per million population, the research reveals significant regional variations. Using standardized victim rates to enable cross-country comparison despite population differences, Singapore consistently records fewer than 60 detected victims per million population annually, whereas Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand report substantially higher rates, peaking at 925 in Cambodia (2022) and 868 in Thailand during the COVID-19 period. Note that exact annual victim counts are not consistently reported across all years, reflecting the challenges in detection and recording.

GDP per Capita (current $US dollars)

Hypothesis H1 states that the lower a country's GDP per capita, the higher its rate of human trafficking. This emphasizes economic disparities between countries, rather than differences in domestic cost of living or purchasing power. Therefore, using GDP data in current US dollars reflects internationally comparable monetary income disparities, best illustrating the push and pull factors. The measure reflects the average income of a country calculated at market exchange rates, directly reflecting cross-national economic attractiveness. Using a unified currency (US dollars) facilitates comparison and clearly shows the "rich country-poor country" gap.

International Tourist Arrivals

Compared with Tourism Revenue, this research uses International Tourist Arrivals to measure H2 because it better reflects the scale of tourism activity. Tourism Revenue is money earned from inbound tourists and is a measure of economic impact and spending power. The International Tourist Arrivals metric measures the number of foreign visitors entering the country. H2 predicts that the larger the scale of the tourism industry (the more tourists there are), the higher its rate of human trafficking. The key information here is the number of tourists, not the amount they spend. More people means greater population demand.

Female Vulnerable Employment Rate

This variable represents the proportion of vulnerable forms, such as self-employed/unpaid household workers, among women. The higher the proportion is, the easier it is for women in these vulnerable employment conditions to be exploited by intermediaries.

Results and Data Analysis

Results

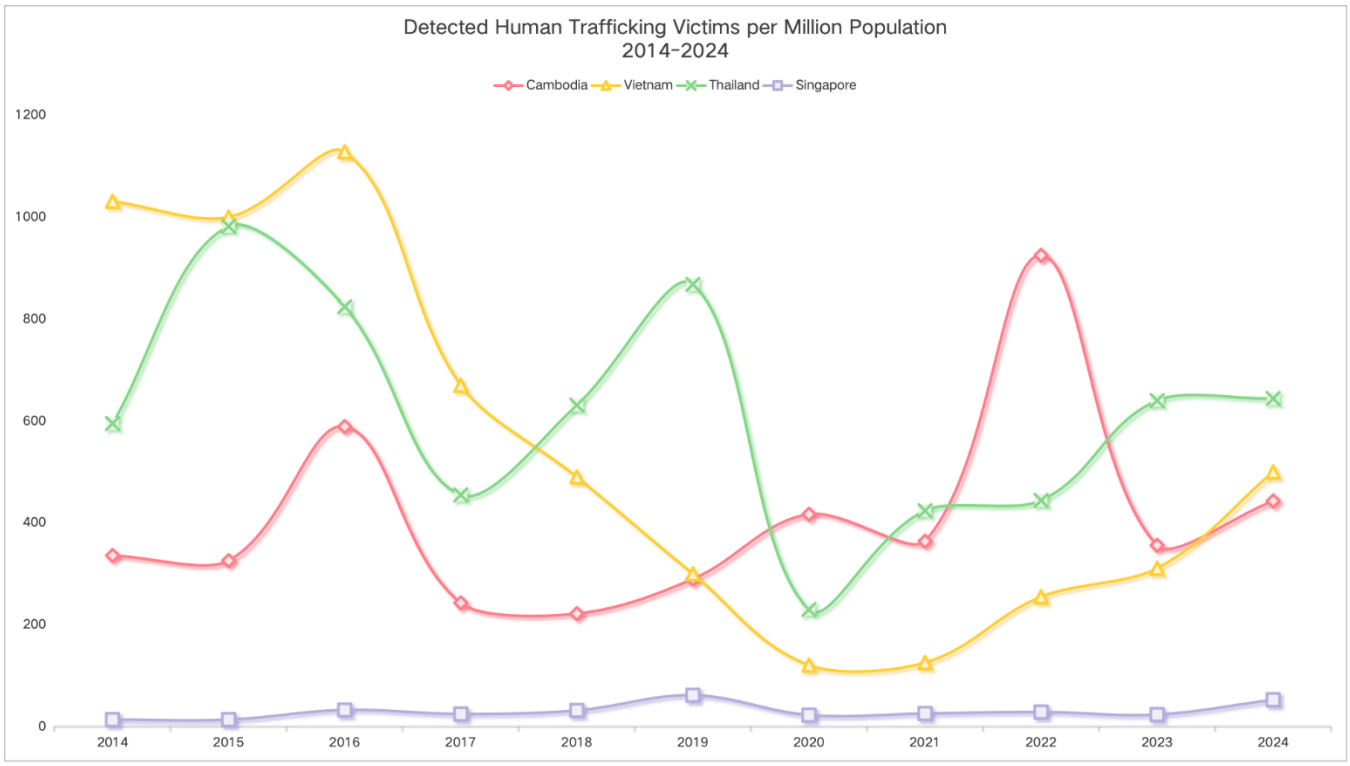


Figure 1. Detected Human Trafficking Victims per Million Population

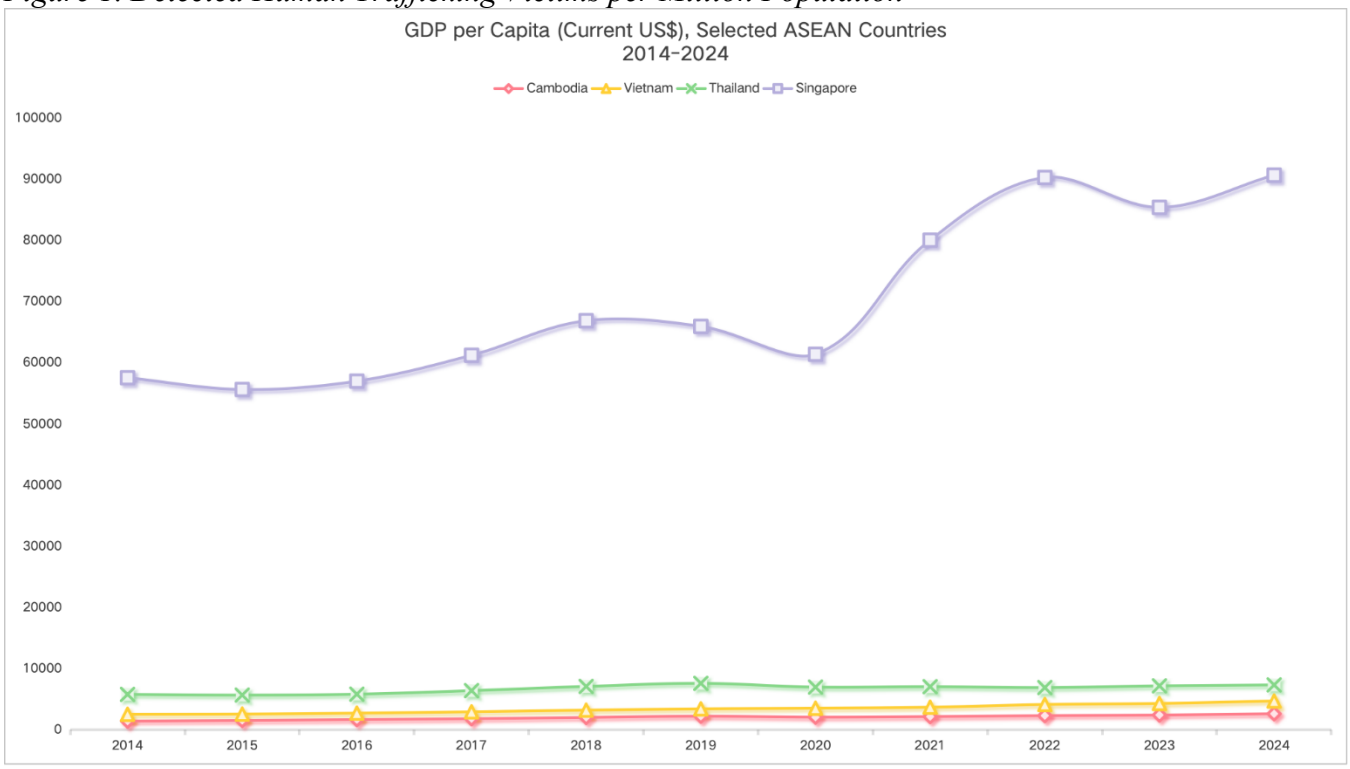


Figure 2. GDP Captia (Current US$)

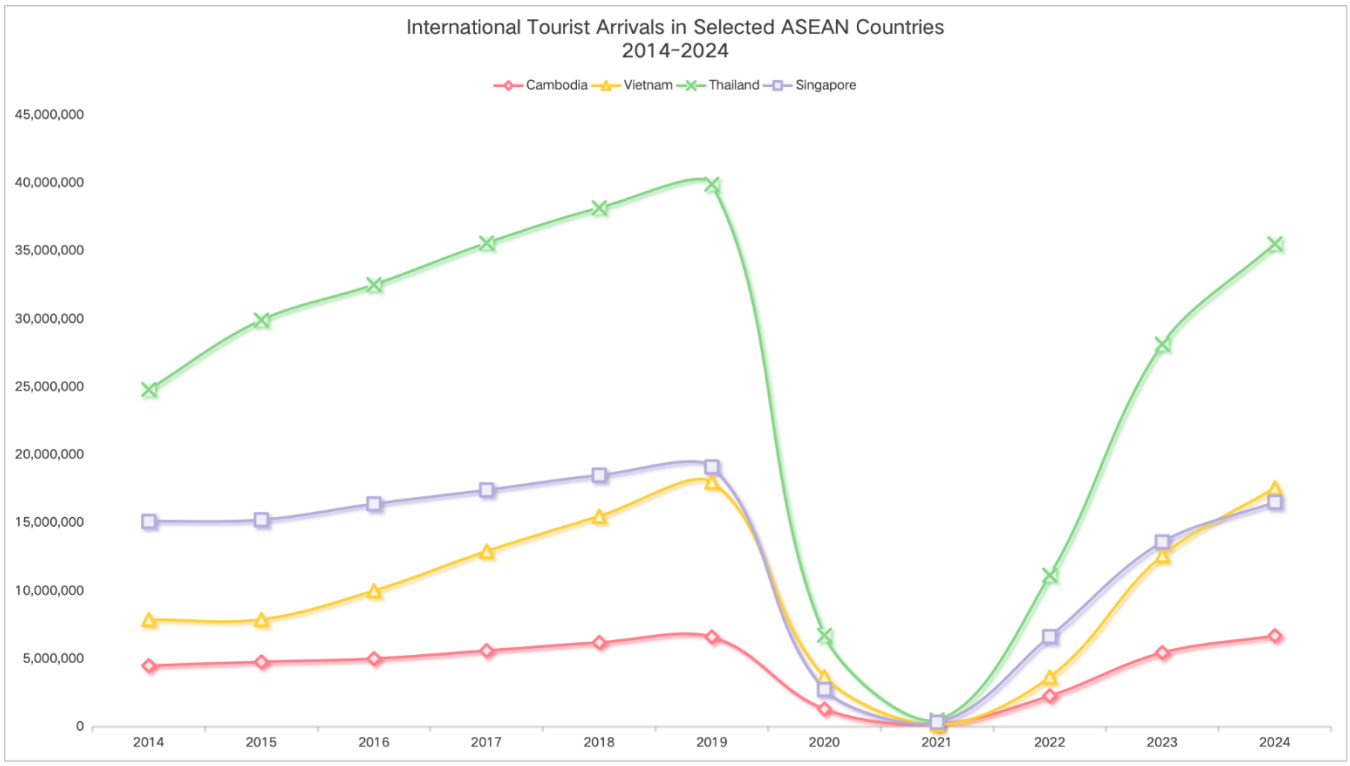


Figure 3. International Tourist Arrivals



Figure 4. Female Vulnerable Employment Rate (% of Female Employment)

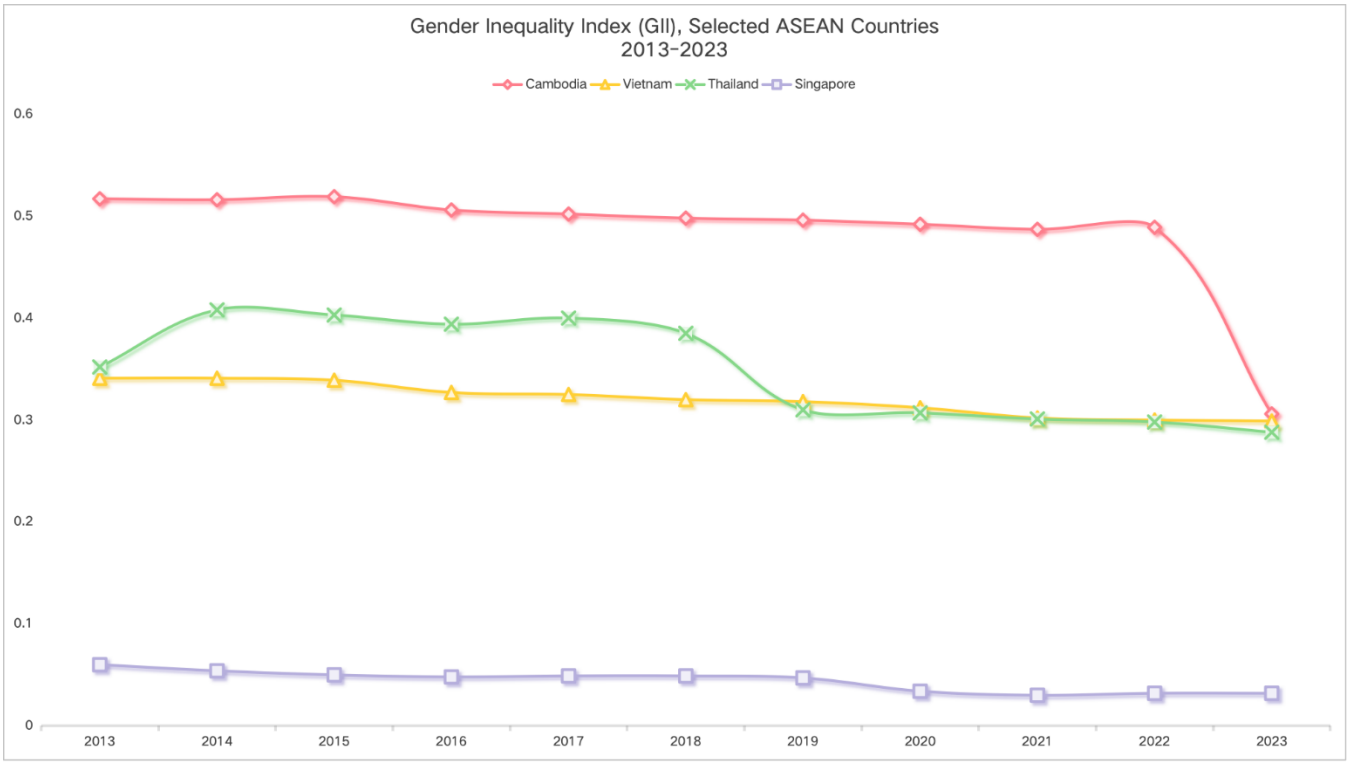


Figure 5. Gender Inequality Index (GII)

Data Analysis

In the ten-year summary of detected trafficking victims, Singapore's data shows a trend with little year-to-year variation, remaining consistently stable. This is in stark contrast to the other three countries. In absolute numbers, Singapore still has fewer detected victims than the other three countries; however, given the vast differences in population size among the countries, comparisons should also be made using other indicators. During the pre-COVID-19 period of 2014-2018, Vietnam reached its highest value in ten years at 1128 victims in 2016, before gradually declining until the pandemic began, and then gradually recovering after the pandemic subsided. Thailand showed extremely volatile fluctuations, reaching its highest value of 868 during the pandemic and maintaining a higher number of victims than Vietnam until 2024. Cambodia's annual human trafficking victim count did not fluctuate much but did reach 925 in 2022. A clear trend is that the total number of human trafficking cases in Singapore has always been low, while the human trafficking rates in Cambodia and Vietnam remain high. Based on the collected dependent variable data, we can then connect it to the independently collected data of our independent variables. In terms of GDP per capita, there are observable differences between the four countries, with Singapore's per capita GDP remaining distinctly different from the other three. Singapore's GDP per capita has been at a consistently high level, reaching approximately $90,000 by 2024. Except for a temporary decrease in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has maintained an upward trajectory. In contrast, the GDP per capita of the other three countries has remained relatively stable, with little year-to-year variation. However their GDP per capita is only a fraction of Singapore's. Thailand's GDP per capita is considerably higher than either Vietnam’s or Cambodia’s, but it is still very low overall. A comparison between GDP

per capita and the number of human trafficking cases apprehended reveals a general trend: High-income countries tend to report fewer victims. Conversely, the human trafficking rates of the other three countries, while the exact rates vary from year to year, are still several times higher than Singapore's, and their GDP per capita remains very low.

The Tourism Flow shows Thailand's dominant position in the tourism industry: Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand received more than 30 million international tourists annually. Tourist numbers plummeted between 2020 and 2021 due to global travel restrictions, before beginning a gradual recovery after 2022. Comparing this with the figure of human trafficking rates, a positive correlation can be observed: Countries with developed tourism industries often have higher rates of human trafficking, particularly in the sex and entertainment industries. However, Singapore is an exception; despite its large number of international tourists, its robust regulatory framework effectively mitigates trafficking risks.

Although Cambodia and Vietnam have high female labor force participation rates, their human trafficking rates are also high. Traditional beliefs may suggest that a high female labor force participation rate represents equality and emphasis on female labor, with a correspondingly lower rate of human trafficking. However, in reality, Figure 4 effectively refutes this conclusion: Even if the labor force participation rate of women is high, it does not necessarily mean that their rights are guaranteed. For example, according to the data, vulnerable employment rates for women in Cambodia and Vietnam both exceed 50%, indicating the prevalence of informal and unpaid work. Such situations undermine women's economic independence and increase their risk of exploitation within transnational human trafficking networks. This means that the gender structure of these societies is more unequal, and women have weaker economic independence, making them more likely to be victims or exported laborers in cross-border trafficking chains. Figure 5 clearly shows the differences in gender inequality among the four countries. Cambodia has the highest gender inequality index (GII), at 0.517 in 2013, and remained close to 0.5 through 2022 before declining sharply to 0.306 in 2023. By 2023, the indices for Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand had narrowed to 0.306, 0.299 and 0.288, respectively. In contrast, Singapore has the lowest GII, declining from 0.060 in 2013 to 0.032 in 2023, and remained below 0.1 throughout the period.

Discussions

Economic Factors and Corruption

Economic factors and human trafficking rates are highly correlated, exhibiting a linear relationship. Low GDP signifies weak national capacity for labor regulation, law enforcement, and anti-trafficking monitoring, leading to poverty, inadequate social services, and weak law enforcement, thus increasing the risk of human trafficking. Countries with lower levels of corruption tend to have stronger anti-human trafficking policies. The fundamental logic behind any transaction is profit, and human trafficking itself is a highly profitable industry, with transnational trafficking yielding even higher profit margins than drug trafficking. Whether an act is considered criminally advantageous depends on: expected profit > expected cost = probability of arrest × punishment. Human trafficking is a low-risk, high-reward crime due to the high level of difficulty required for authorities to identify and protect its victims. In highly corrupt countries, where police can be bribed, border control officers can be bought off, and local officials collude with criminal groups (especially those involved in immigration, prostitution, and factories), traffickers

face less obstacles at border crossings or internal checkpoints.[15] Thus, the success rate of cross-border trafficking undoubtedly increases. We can imagine scenarios where passport officials accept bribes to forge identities or police deliberately fail to inspect trucks, hotels, and factories. Such scenarios would mean that officials would be directly or indirectly involved in human trafficking networks. Their complicity in combination with their authority and influence would reduce trafficking costs and allow for larger-scale operations. Thus, trafficking can also become part of the underground economy. In some countries, human trafficking involves black market labor or the sex industry. When these industries form networks of interests with local officials, state institutions also become complicit, treating human trafficking as an economic activity or source of profit, rather than a crime. In these cases, human trafficking not only exists but is also structurally protected. Such protection makes it even more difficult to report cases of human trafficking. Faced with powerful oppression, reporting cases becomes even harder. Victims are often afraid of the police and therefore cannot obtain timely asylum or protection. This reveals a harsh reality: Without reporting, there are no cases. This economic profit and corruption loop directly feeds into policy weaknesses, as seen in anti-trafficking indices.

Anti-Trafficking Policy Weakness

The Anti-Trafficking Policy Index (3P Index) measures the efforts of different countries in "prosecution, victim protection, and trafficking prevention" and examines which factors determine the strength of a country's anti-trafficking policy. The 3P Index indicates that the protection dimension is the weakest link in South Asia, which is a key reason for its low overall score.[16] Why is the score particularly low in South Asia? Protecting victims requires substantial resources, a robust legal system, shelters, healthcare, and social services. South Asian countries generally face resource shortages, weak traditions of human rights protection, and severe gender inequality. Many victims are identified as illegal immigrants rather than victims. Countries prioritize border security and immigration control over protecting exploited victims. This protection policy shortfall ties directly to state fragility, where a lack of capacity in law enforcement and judicial systems further enables trafficking.

State Fragility as a Driving Factor

Another cause of human trafficking is the state fragility theory. When a state lacks capacity, legitimacy, and accountability, it cannot effectively provide public services, maintain the rule of law, or protect its citizens. In this environment, criminal organizations, armed forces, and corrupt networks expand rapidly, and human trafficking is more likely both to occur and flourish. Authority, capacity, and legitimacy are three dimensions that reveal whether a government can control violence, provide public services, maintain public trust, and govern legitimately. A lack of authority leads to a lack of security, which in turn leads to the expansion of human trafficking as armed groups and criminal gangs control certain areas and function as exploiters. Thus, human trafficking networks can operate more easily.[17] The

[15] Auethavornpipat, Ruji. *Addressing the Root Causes of Conflict-Driven Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia*. East-West Center, 2017. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17386.

[16] Cho, Seo-Young, Axel Dreher, and Eric Neumayer. "Determinants of Anti-Trafficking Policies: Evidence from a New Index." *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 116, no. 2 (2014): 429–54. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43673673.

[17] Warria, Ajwang'. "Trafficking and Exploitation of Children in Fragile Environments: Is Prevention Possible?" *Intervention* 20, no. 1 (2022): 5. https://doi.org/10.4103/intv.intv_1_21.

channels through which human trafficking occurs can be broadly divided into three types: First, violence and the collapse of security lead to the displacement of people. This escape process increases the risk of being exploited by human traffickers. Second, when the economic system collapses, it leads to survival migration. If a country faces economic pressure, it will also face debt and insufficient family income. The resulting consequences include child labor and human trafficking. Third, government corruption and lack of legitimacy increase the risk and effect of human trafficking.[18]

Routine Activity Theory Application

Another related cause of human trafficking is routine activity. Routine Activity Theory (RAT) explains crime as a situational event requiring the convergence of three elements: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. Offenders are motivate when there is high reward and low risk. These conditions—fueled by corruption, weak law enforcement, and cross-border complexities—help explain why human trafficking has become one of the most profitable global illicit markets, attracting economically motivated criminals. In this context, victims are willing to accept risky immigration jobs, making them "low-risk, high-reward" targets for human traffickers. When victim groups lack family or community protection, traffickers can more easily manipulate and control them. Vulnerable legal status groups (e.g., undocumented immigrants) are extremely easy for authorities to overlook and unlikely to actively seek help, which undoubtedly directly reduces the risk of such offences being discovered. Additionally, victims often lack effective guardians. Guardians may include family, community, police, social service agencies, and medical personnel. Social stigmatization further hampers victim support; when society views victims as 'willing participants,' the public's inclination to intervene or report the crime diminishes. Another important factor is institutional exclusion; for example, medical personnel may fail to identify victims, or social workers may have difficulty monitoring vulnerable families, creating a typical lack of guardians situation.

Structural Violence Interruption

Human trafficking is essentially a form of structural violence, where social structures or institutions harm individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. The connection between human trafficking and structural violence can be seen in gender stereotypes in media coverage. The media often focuses solely on sexual exploitation, portraying women as "passive victims" or "sex objects," while neglecting labor, domestic, and criminal exploitation. This constitutes structural violence in the cultural sphere. Simplified narratives lead to some victims being overlooked, and policies focus only on "sexual exploitation," ignoring other forms of human trafficking. This subtly deepens public misconceptions, thereby reducing the likelihood of successful rescue. Public misconceptions reinforce the common logic of victim-blaming: believing that human trafficking is an immigration problem, victims are "willing participants" (especially in sex trafficking), and human trafficking does not exist in their communities.[19] The public also lacks understanding of victims' rights. This is a classic example of structural violence, as

[18] Martin-Shields, Charles. "State Fragility as a Cause of Forced Displacement: Identifying Theoretical Channels for Empirical Research." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2017. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3087980.

[19] Gebrewold, Belachew. "Human Trafficking and Structural Violence." *Human Trafficking and Exploitation*, September 22, 2017, 13–28. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315212449-2.

incorrect social perceptions hinder the identification of victims, allowing them to continue suffering exploitation. One problem endemic to structural violence is the lack of knowledge among adjacent professionals, which creates systemic blind spots. These blind spots may range from police misclassifying human trafficking as other crimes, to medical professionals failing to identify high-risk indicators, to social workers lacking specialized training.[20] The knowledge gap among professionals is not an individual problem, but a systemic one. Without proper training, victims are overlooked and unprotected. It can be argued that misconduct by law enforcement exacerbates the risks experienced by victims.

World System Theory and Global Exploitation

In Wallerstein's World System Theory, the global capitalist system is composed of "core," "semi-periphery," and "periphery" regions. A country's position within this system determines its economic structure, labor relations, and degree of external dependence. Applying this theory to human trafficking reveals that it is essentially a global mechanism for labor exploitation and a byproduct of the persistent inequalities created by the global capitalist system. Core countries (such as Western Europe, North America, and Japan) possess highly developed sex industries, agricultural supply chains, domestic care industries, and entertainment industries, all of which have a continuous demand for cheap, replaceable, and indispensable labor (including sexual labor). For example, Japan has a strong demand for sex workers from Thailand, Laos, and Nepal, while Europe and the United States have a growing demand for laborers and sex workers from Eastern Europe and Africa. In the global system, the high-profit business models of core regions depend on the exploitation of cheap human resources, labor, and sexual services from peripheral regions. World System Theory argues that the wealth of powerful nations stems from the systematic exploitation of weaker nations.[21] Common problems in peripheral regions include extreme poverty, inadequate education for women, gender inequality, state fragility, and structural violence. These factors collectively create a large vulnerable population, such as children trafficked into forced labor and women trafficked into the sex trade due to poverty and lack of employment opportunities. Countries like Malaysia and Thailand serve as both destinations and transit points. Wallerstein points out that semi-peripheral countries are characterized by both absorbing cheap labor from peripheral regions and supplying labor to core regions. This perfectly aligns with the human trafficking model, where semi-peripheral regions act as trafficking corridors.

Women's Rights and Gender Inequality

The final structrual factor, which underlies almost all the issues discussed above, is women's rights. The vast majority of victims of human trafficking are women, whether through sexual exploitation, forced labor, or marriage trafficking. In countries with low levels of women's rights, women face limited options. Limited educational and employment opportunities make them more susceptible to deception or recruitment and increase the likelihood of them being forced into dangerous migration. Women are also

[20] Hamill, Kathleen. "Trafficking of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A Legal Analysis." KAFA (Enough) Violence & Exploitation, 2011. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265231705_Trafficking_of_Migrant_Domestic_Workers_in_Lebanon_A_Legal_Analysis.

[21] Rahman, Majeed A. "Human Trafficking in the Era of Globalization: The Case of Trafficking in the Global Market Economy." Transcience Journal 2, no. 1 (2011): 54–71. https://www2.hu-berlin.de/transcience/Vol2_Issue1_2011_54_71_Glossary.pdf.

discriminated against through marriage and inheritance systems, making them more vulnerable to being sold or abandoned by their families. Their low legal status also makes it difficult for them to obtain any protection[22] from law enforcement agencies, courts, and other government agencies. Therefore, the social structure itself creates a vulnerable group. The less a country prioritizes victim protection policies, the less likely those policies are to be implemented. The lack of legal aid and access to medical or psychological services further exacerbates the victims' plight.[23]

From a political perspective, female legislators are more likely to advocate for gender-based violence policies and victim rights policies. However, in countries where women's rights are weak, the number of female legislators is small, women's policy issues are neglected, and anti-human trafficking policies are not considered a public priority. This means that the government is less inclined to view human trafficking as a "human rights issue" but rather as a "security issue." In contrast, high-income countries focus on justice and prevention, basing victim protection on a human rights framework and gender equality principles.

Conclusion

This study aims to examine the structural factors shaping human trafficking patterns in Southeast Asia through quantitative comparative analysis. By focusing on economic development, tourism-related migration, and gendered labor vulnerabilities, it seeks to understand the root causes and socio-ecological context of human trafficking, thereby providing a more systematic understanding of why human trafficking risks differ across countries within the same region.

The findings indicate that human trafficking in Southeast Asia is closely linked to broader structural conditions, rather than being an isolated criminal activity. Differences in economic development, tourism-related migration, and labor vulnerability (particularly among women) correspond to varying trafficking patterns across countries. While the direction of these relationships varies, the overall results support the view that human trafficking is rooted in economic and institutional structures that collectively shape the supply of and demand for exploitative labor.

Economic inequality, migration, and institutional weaknesses are not competing explanations, but rather interconnected factors that explain vulnerability and exploitation. Significant variations exist within Southeast Asia and against this backdrop. Similar regional conditions can lead to vastly different human trafficking outcomes when underlying national structures differ. From a policy perspective, efforts to combat human trafficking must address the structural drivers identified in this study, including economic instability, unregulated labor markets, and gendered employment vulnerabilities. At the same time, this study has some limitations. Reliance on secondary data and reported trafficking cases may underestimate the true scale of human trafficking, and the limited number of countries restricts broader generalizability. Future research could expand the analysis by including more countries, alternative indicators of human

[22] Lerum, Kari, and Barbara G. Brents. "Sociological Perspectives on Sex Work and Human Trafficking." *Sociological Perspectives* 59, no. 1 (2016): 17–26. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26340165.

[23] Hodge, David R. "Assisting Victims of Human Trafficking: Strategies to Facilitate Identification, Exit from Trafficking, and the Restoration of Wellness." *Social Work* 59, no. 2 (2014): 111–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swu002.

trafficking, or longitudinal research methods to further explore causal mechanisms. In conclusion, human trafficking persists not only because of criminal intent, but also because structural conditions continuously fuel exploitation. Understanding and addressing these structural conditions are crucial for developing effective and sustainable responses to modern forms of slavery.

Directions for the Future Research

This study is mainly based on publicly available data and cross-country comparisons within the same time period, so there is still room for further improvement in depth and breadth. Future research can shift towards broader and longer-term tracking analysis, such as continuously monitoring changes in economic level, tourism flow, and anti-trafficking policies across more timepoints or more countries. Meanwhile, as official statistics often only capture a portion of real events, researchers can try to collect and supplement data through diverse channels such as non-governmental organizations, community monitoring, or anonymous reporting to avoid bias caused by excessive reliance on reported cases. Finally, the research scope can be expanded to other Southeast Asian countries, which can help test whether the conclusions drawn still hold true in different environments and geopolitical contexts.

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