

# Emerging Patterns in the use of Technology for Labour Trafficking in Southeast Asia

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### Foreword

This report was originally conceived to be an exploratory analysis of case data on trafficking and exploitation in Southeast Asia that begins online, trying to understand if recruitment is occurring via social media, messaging apps and websites and, if so, in which countries and to what extent. We attempted to examine and analyze information on the ways in which digital technology has changed the human trafficking landscape, including the profiles of victims, the sectors they work in, geographical patterns, and the tactics traffickers use.

However, what we discovered was that very little data are available on the role that social media and digital technology play in trafficking. This kind of information is not being widely recorded, leading to knowledge gaps which create a major issue for our sector. Without this kind of recorded evidence, it is very hard to take the action needed to prevent what our partners report seeing on the ground – their anecdotal evidence suggests that an increasing number of victims of trafficking in persons were initially recruited through websites or social media.

As a consequence, we instead conducted interviews with frontline NGOs working with trafficking victims in

Southeast Asia, to discover what they were seeing and hearing from their clients and colleagues around online recruitment. What we now offer in this paper is a general overview of the role that digital technology currently plays in human trafficking based on the information gathered in interviews with five representatives from four NGOs. The most obvious conclusion, however, is that far more data need to be collected for us, as a community, to be able to tackle this issue with any effectiveness.

### Introduction

Southeast Asia is increasingly embracing the online world, with more than 460 million internet users<sup>[1]</sup> in 2022, many of whom became first-time digital consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>[2]</sup>. While restrictions on movement may have initially affected traffickers' activities, this increase in internet usage ultimately offered opportunities for them to cast their nets wider for victims<sup>[3]</sup>. This paper discusses the online recruitment of trafficking victims in Southeast Asia following the increased use of digital platforms while COVID-19 restrictions were in place. The aim is to understand the role technology plays in recruitment, and what this looks like in the region, as witnessed by our partner NGOs.

## Methodology

This report has been produced in collaboration with four organizations working in Southeast Asia on awareness, prevention and protection, and explores the patterns and trends they have observed on the ground. We interviewed experts from The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), A21, Transient Workers Count 2 (TWC2) and International Justice Mission (IJM) – organizations which have all done extensive anti-trafficking work in the region. Our interviewees were Borislav Gerasimov, Communications and Advocacy Officer, GAATW, Mallika Karunan, Survivor Advocate, A21 Thailand; Alex Au, vice-president, TWC2; Gideon Cauton, Director of National Law Enforcement Development at IJM Philippines; and Eric Heintz, Global Analyst in IJM's Global Fusion Center. We thank them all for their time.

GAATW is a network of more than 80 NGOs from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America. The GAATW International Secretariat is based in Bangkok and coordinates activities, collects and disseminates information, and advocates on behalf of the alliance at regional and international levels. A21 works extensively in Southeast Asia on breaking the cycle of trafficking through a three-pronged approach of reach, rescue and reform. TWC2 promotes fair treatment for migrant workers in Singapore. IJM is a global not-for-profit organization that has a significant presence in South and Southeast Asia and works to protect migrant workers from trafficking.

## Adoption of technology across the region and the increase in trafficking opportunities

COVID-19 has created a new reality in which technology has become essential to everyday life. But while technology improves lives and grows economies, it also comes with trafficking risks, and safe usage and privacy is still a work in progress<sup>[4]</sup>.

We assume that the extent to which this increase in digital activity created trafficking opportunities during the pandemic and beyond varied from country to country – the nature and length of lockdown measures differed across the region, as did identification processes and movement both within states and across borders, and this likely contributed to differing patterns in technology and recruitment across different geographical areas. Furthermore, our discussions with organizations in the region suggest that each country's sociocultural and economic factors also played a part. For instance, Singapore is far more technologically advanced than other countries in Southeast Asia and

many of its residents were already informed users of social media and the internet. On the other hand, those living in India and Bangladesh, which are source countries with a significant number of victims trafficked to Singapore, had limited technological experience. We are not sure if this lack of digital literacy contributes to one's risk of being trafficked, but the experience of the experts we spoke to highlights these emerging issues and suggests that more research is needed.

In Thailand, the internet became a way in which to socialize and connect with others during lockdowns, which led to an increase in the online recruitment and exploitation of young people in particular<sup>[5]</sup>. For example, practitioners in the field of CTIP have seen teenagers looking for part-time work online falling victim to scams, and recruiters reaching out to young women and girls, pretending to be modeling agents. While trafficking and forced labour occurs within Thailand, as noted by Mallika Karunan of A21, thousands of young Thai people are also being trafficked into neighboring countries such as Cambodia and Laos where, typically, they are forced to work in cybercrime compounds extorting money from members of the public<sup>[6]</sup>.

Throughout the region, this increase in online activity also expanded trafficking opportunities because connections formed gradually over the internet can allow trust to be built, in the same way that a potential employer appears more trustworthy if introduced by a family member<sup>[7]</sup>, notes Mallika Karunan. This meant that traffickers were able to reach those who might not have been so susceptible in offline situations. As people from a wide range of backgrounds spent more time online, it became easier to attract a diverse group of victims using targeted misinformation and deceit – social, economic and educational status, as well as age, became far less relevant as determinants of who was vulnerable and likely to be targeted, she says.

A21 has seen instances of online trafficking in which victims had above average or high economic status, whereas previously the majority of victims were from less educated and lower income households. For instance, job seekers with a strong grasp of technology are recruited through online platforms, ostensibly to work in legitimate jobs in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. They are given extensive interviews but, after traveling to their destinations, their passports are taken, and they are trafficked into the hands of criminal gangs who imprison them in compounds and force them into fraudulent activities and scams, as previously mentioned. Victims are chosen based on their multilingual abilities, for example, victims from Malaysia

are targeted because their knowledge of Mandarin allows them to access the Chinese market.

## **How technology is used in labour trafficking**

From the experience of our partners, there appear to be two stages to victim recruitment using technology. First, jobs are advertised on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter; second, contact is made with interested individuals on secondary platforms – often instant messaging systems such as Line, Telegram and WhatsApp – which are most likely used to nurture one-to-one relationships and gain trust.

From what our partners have seen, Facebook advertisements are common starting points – recruiters pretending to be employment agents will hook users in with content that appears to be legitimate, using impressive looking pictures and other official sounding details; they then build trust with individual users before deceiving them into signing up under different terms from those advertised or recruiting them into an entirely different job. Alex Au described an online advertisement for a restaurant industry job in Singapore which was advertised with aesthetically appealing pictures, and a legitimate contact address and license number supposedly mandated by the government. However, the address was located in the middle of a lake, and it was not possible for those living outside the country to verify the license number. He also described a case in which a worker, having responded to a job advertisement on Facebook, was ultimately paid less than half the advertised wage.

Part of the issue in Singapore is its system for the employment of migrant workers, in which the employer applies for an In-Principle Approval work permit (IPA) without the involvement of the employee – workers can end up with little choice but to accept whatever pay and conditions they are given, as no other employer can apply for an IPA until the first one expires. Although the employer needs the workers' details, such as their passport number, in order to apply for the IPA, TWC2 says it is customary for this information to be requested by agents upfront, in order to proceed with a job application. A fake recruitment agent on Facebook can then use this information to entrap workers by linking them to IPAs for jobs they may not have agreed to do<sup>[8]</sup>.

Other platforms are reportedly also used. For example, Thailand is a key market for the instant messaging platform Line<sup>[9]</sup>, which is very popular for both personal and professional communication, with 50 million users in 2021<sup>[10]</sup>. Mallika Karunan says that, in the course of its

work in Thailand, her organization has noticed a pattern in which job advertisements on Line are deemed to be trustworthy, and it appears to have become a platform on which recruitment thrives.

According to Gideon Cauton of IJM, his organization has seen that text messaging is still largely used for recruitment in the Philippines, along with job advertisement websites, Facebook and Twitter posts, and WhatsApp groups. However, during the pandemic, Telegram was also used for victim recruitment. According to a report published last year by GRETA<sup>[11]</sup>, traffickers target its job search groups which are private and unregulated, while child protection agencies point out that its disappearing messages feature engenders a false sense of confidence in young people – who may then be more likely to share personal details – while also making it harder to capture evidence of exploitation or abuse<sup>[12]</sup>.

Singapore is advanced in adapting to technology and so the demographic of the victims looks different from that of other countries, according to Alex Au of TWC2, who notes that low-wage workers in Singapore, many of whom are from India and Bangladesh, typically have around eight years of education. However, a lack of rights for migrant workers in Singapore<sup>[13]</sup> means that, despite their educational background, they often cannot access the assistance they need.

## **Keeping people safe online**

We asked our interviewees what changes they would like to see to help protect internet users in Southeast Asia from trafficking risks. Mallika Karunan suggests that “awareness programs extend beyond educating just children on the safe use of technology. It is important to ensure adults are also aware of how to use it. Greater outreach efforts to keep adults informed on how to spot malicious scams and report them to the right authorities are vital. Online recruitment creates language barriers, and it is important that recruiting agencies provide the appropriate language support to ensure that people understand everything in the contract and terms they are signing.”

Gideon Cauton and Alex Au argue that both social media platforms and the state should have a duty of care to ensure the implementation of more effective mechanisms to protect victims from false advertisements. Alex also advocates for countries to have a limited number of online platforms on which job opportunities can be shared, with the onus on the state to ensure that businesses are legitimate and have the appropriate licenses to recruit employees.

This, TWC2 believes, would also help in protecting a diverse workforce, as technology has made it easier for traffickers to connect to the general population. Eric Heintz proposes that there should be targeted locations for awareness campaigns, and these should also be produced in regional languages to ensure that victims are given reliable information. For example, he suggests putting advertisements in airports and targeted ads on social media platforms as effective places in which to reach diverse audiences who are susceptible to trafficking. Gideon also strongly recommends that awareness campaigns should shift from knowledge-driven to survivor-led. In his experience, he has noted that victims accept the risks that come with online recruitment, and believes it is important to value that perspective and ensure that those experiences are at the core of awareness and prevention programs.

## The response from tech companies

Meta, which owns Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, told us the company is working to prevent traffickers from recruiting through its platforms, that it works with governments to ensure that legitimate organizations have a blue tick of authenticity, and that IJM is given advertisement credits to help with its awareness campaigns. It also works with law enforcement agencies and allows high-risk content to be taken down, blocks and offers warnings on searches for terms connected to exploitation, and looks for and removes exploitative and/or abusive materials and misinformation – this is done in collaboration with NGOs who help compile lists of high-risk words or phrases. Further, Meta has roundtables with various UN agencies in order to help it understand smuggling, labour exploitation, and trafficking for labour, including their regional contexts. All reports of high-risk content, either through automated systems or reports from users, are checked by people who are specifically trained to understand the context and sub-messaging.

Although more research is required on the impact of such measures, further collaboration between governments, NGOs and tech companies would likely be a significant step in keeping people safe from trafficking and exploitation that begins in the digital realm.

## Conclusion

In general, efforts to prevent trafficking and to ensure adequate protection of affected and at-risk individuals are notoriously slow in adapting to the changing behavior and tactics of perpetrators, due to the complex nature of the issue. While progress has been made in many areas due to persistent advocacy and investment

in research to enable evidence-based strategies, the current rate of innovation is so rapid that our collective counter-trafficking efforts are in danger of being outpaced by the effects and consequences of technological advances.

Increasing buy-in from governments, policymakers and the technology sector is crucial to counter the misuse of technology and wider societal and economic risks. However, without the data and evidence to illustrate the nature of the problem, its scale, and the many ways in which it manifests online, this kind of stakeholder engagement and collaboration remains challenging. As we found during this research, information is largely based on anecdotal reports, yet advocacy and protection strategies should only be designed or implemented with something concrete on which to base them.

For civil society, a concrete practical step would be to prioritize the collection of relevant information alongside other case data which is already being recorded as standard practice. For example, the Human Trafficking Case Data Standard (HTCDS)<sup>[14]</sup>, a global format and common approach to collecting and recording case data related to human trafficking – with a goal to enable organizations around the world to collect and potentially share information related to human trafficking cases in a consistent way – includes relevant fields in which to record the method of recruitment and relevant websites and apps. Ensuring this information is recorded for each case would address the lack of data availability that we encountered in producing this case study.

Further, specific research, for instance a new research report by Urban Light<sup>[15]</sup> that looks at the online sexual exploitation of males and SOGIE-diverse young people in northern Thailand, should be applauded and further encouraged.

Beyond more effective advocacy, increasing the evidence available will also help to make the case for greater awareness about technology-facilitated trafficking among all stakeholders, and for investment to develop the technical skills needed to respond appropriately to practical challenges in relation to IT security, the digital modus operandi of traffickers, and the obtaining of digital evidence, among others.

Despite the current lack of available information, we hope this study helps put a spotlight on these issues, encourages stakeholders to consider the need for an expansion of data collection efforts in this area, and sparks discussions around a potential response to any trends and patterns identified.

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