Sexual Exploitation in the Women Trafficking in Klang Valley, Malaysia: Challenges and Recommendations

Riki Rahman[1]*, Muhammad Amirul Abd Rahaman[1], Nor Shela Saleh[1], Ridhoul Wahidi[2]

[1] Pusat Pengajian Umum dan Kokurikulum,
 Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400 Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor, MALAYSIA

[2] Universitas Islam Indragiri, Tembilahan, Indragiri Hilir, Riau, INDONESIA

*Corresponding Author: riki@uthm.edu.my
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30880/jstard.2025.07.01.005

Abstract

Klang Valley, as a rapidly developing metropolitan area, offers various job opportunities that often attract foreign migrants. However, behind the economic progress, the region has also witnessed an increase in cases of women being trafficked for sexual exploitation. Factors such as poverty, lack of education, and gender inequality are often the main reasons women fall easily into the traps of human trafficking. This study examines the issue of women being trafficked for sexual exploitation in Klang Valley, Malaysia, focusing on proposed solutions to combat the crime of sexual exploitation of trafficked women and the challenges faced. This qualitative study uses descriptive analysis through secondary data such as books, reports, journal articles, newspaper clippings, and credible internet sources. The findings show that significant challenges such as lack of resources, weak law enforcement, and social stigma against victims remain the main barriers to combating the crime of trafficking women for sexual exploitation. To overcome these challenges, closer collaboration between all involved parties and the implementation of more effective strategies are essential to reduce and ultimately eliminate this issue in Malaysia.

1. Introduction

The trafficking of women for sexual exploitation has become a global issue attracting the attention of many scholars. According to the 2022 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons by UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), out of 51,675 human trafficking victims from 166 countries, 38.7% were women sexually exploited. This figure is almost equal to the number of victims trafficked for forced labor, which was 38.8% (UNODC, 2022). These statistics show that trafficking and sexual exploitation of women are alarmingly high.

In Malaysia, human trafficking, particularly women for sexual exploitation, is an escalating problem, especially in metropolitan areas like Klang Valley. Trafficking activities are often concealed behind the night entertainment industry, massage parlors, and rapidly growing illegal prostitution services in these areas. The trafficking of women has been a pressing issue in Malaysia for years. Women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, raising concerns about their safety in the country. In the Malaysian context, human trafficking is defined by Section 2 of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 as any act involving the acquisition or retention of labor or services through coercion, including recruiting, transporting, transferring, sheltering, providing, or receiving a person (Laws of Malaysia, 2014). This issue has far-reaching negative consequences for national security.

Such cases often involve women from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who are exploited through promises of lucrative jobs or better life opportunities. In reality, they often end up in modern slavery, forced to work as sex workers against their will. Human trafficking can occur due to human greed for quick and easy profits (Marshall & Thatun, 2005), poverty (Jones et al., 2009), economic instability (Banovic, 2012), internal conflict within a country (Clark, 2003), limited knowledge and skills (Jones et al., 2009), and unemployment (Banovic, 2012). Although the government has implemented various measures to combat this issue, such as establishing the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Council (MAPO), enacting the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act, creating the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons, and enforcing protection for trafficked women, weak implementation and enforcement often diminish the effectiveness of these laws.

Therefore, this study identifies the challenges faced by the government in combating the issue of trafficking women for sexual exploitation. The study also proposes ways to strengthen the government's efforts to combat this crime.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study uses an interview approach. The data in this study are divided into primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from semi-structured interviews. The interview method was chosen because it provides clearer desired information. The conducted interviews included qualitative questions directed at informants. These questions served as a guide for open-ended interviews that only covered the main questions, allowing the possibility to develop more in-depth questions that may arise during the interview.

The researcher interviewed an expert, Dr. Nafisah binti Ilham Husin, a senior lecturer at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). She has extensively researched human trafficking and sexual exploitation. The interview with this expert was necessary to explore different perspectives related to the trafficking of women for prostitution and delve deeper into the issue, particularly from a comprehensive academic standpoint. The interview was conducted online for approximately two (2) hours via the Zoom Meeting platform on March 22, 2024.

Meanwhile, secondary data were analyzed descriptively by collecting information from reports, government documents, books, journal articles, and credible internet sources. This approach was chosen to deeply understand the issue of sexual exploitation in the trafficking of women in Klang Valley and to identify emerging patterns and trends.

3. Discussion

The sexual exploitation and trafficking of women in Malaysia are transnational crimes involving several countries within organized crime groups, indirectly threatening human security and national safety. Malaysia is now recognized as a destination, source, and transit country for men, women, and children who fall victim to forced labor and sex trafficking. Loose border controls have facilitated the entry of syndicates into the country, allowing them to bring victims in (Noorazman & Annuar, 2017). Moreover, the high demand from clients seeking pleasure with prostitutes (Hussin, 2024) exacerbates the problem.

Several factors have been identified as contributing to the trafficking of women, including:

-Poverty

As a rapidly developing country, Malaysia has attracted many foreign workers. Women are particularly vulnerable to being deceived by trafficking syndicates promising high-paying jobs, only to end up trapped in cycles of sexual exploitation. Poverty remains the primary driver, pushing them to seek job opportunities abroad.

-Education Level and Awareness

Lack of knowledge and awareness about human trafficking risks means that many women are unaware of the dangers awaiting them. Trafficking syndicates often target women with lower levels of education, making them easier to manipulate and exploit.

-Law Enforcement

Weak law enforcement and inconsistent implementation of existing laws enable human trafficking syndicates to flourish. Although Malaysia has strict laws, such as the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007, limitations in enforcement, such as a lack of resources and training for law enforcement officers, continue to hinder progress.

Challenges in Combating Women Trafficking

The challenges in addressing trafficking for sexual exploitation in Klang Valley are varied and complex:

-Resource and Support Shortage

One of the most significant barriers in combating human trafficking is the lack of sufficient resources and support. Many NGOs that assist victims operate with limited funding, restricting their ability to provide necessary aid like shelter, medical care, counseling, and rehabilitation programs. This shortage hampers efforts

to help victims break free from exploitation and rebuild their lives. Inadequate funding also limits the scope of awareness campaigns and prevention programs.

-Social Stigma Against Victims

Social stigma poses a significant obstacle for trafficked women. Often, victims are viewed as criminals or 'prostitutes' rather than as individuals exploited against their will. This negative perception extends beyond society to law enforcement officers, making victims hesitant to seek help or report their experiences due to fears of discrimination or legal consequences.

-Sophisticated Syndicate Operations

Human trafficking syndicates have become increasingly sophisticated, using modern technology like social media and digital communication platforms to recruit and control victims, as well as to conceal their identities. Syndicates operate through extensive cross-border criminal networks, making it difficult for authorities to track and prosecute them.

-Weak Law Enforcement

Although Malaysia has stringent laws, their implementation is often lacking due to inadequate training for law enforcement officers in recognizing and handling trafficking cases. There are also reports of corruption among officials, undermining efforts to combat human trafficking. Complex criminal networks make it difficult to prosecute cases due to a lack of solid evidence or the reluctance of witnesses to come forward. Additionally, poor coordination among various government agencies hinders effective action against these crimes.

These challenges necessitate comprehensive and collaborative solutions, involving government agencies, NGOs, civil society, and the private sector. Only through continuous collective efforts can the issue of sexual exploitation in human trafficking be tackled more effectively in Malaysia.

Recommendations to Strengthen Government Efforts in Combating Trafficking

To aid the government's comprehensive efforts in fighting the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation, several solutions are proposed:

-Strengthen Legal and Enforcement Framework

Laws like the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 must be enforced more consistently. Law enforcement officers, including police and immigration, need specialized training to recognize and handle trafficking cases effectively. Moreover, improving law enforcement coordination and ensuring corrupt practices are curbed are essential.

-Enhance International Collaboration

Human trafficking often involves cross-border crime syndicates. Therefore, international cooperation is critical, particularly with source countries of trafficked victims. Intelligence-sharing, joint operations, and partnerships in prosecution and rehabilitation processes should be strengthened through bilateral and multilateral agreements.

-Expand Public Education and Awareness

Public awareness campaigns should be carried out at all levels, emphasizing the risks and signs of human trafficking, especially among vulnerable groups like women. Media, schools, and social platforms should be used to educate people, empowering them to recognize and avoid traffickers' tactics.

-Increase Support and Rehabilitation for Victim

Shelters for trafficking victims need adequate facilities, including medical care, psychological counseling, and legal support. Rehabilitation programs must also focus on empowering victims economically, through skill-building and job opportunities, to help them establish stable lives after escaping exploitation.

-Involve the Private Sector

The private sector can play a vital role through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, supporting anti-trafficking programs, and offering financial aid to NGOs. Companies can also offer training and job opportunities to survivors of sexual exploitation.

-Leverage Technology and Innovation

Digital platforms and apps can be developed to help victims report trafficking cases anonymously. Facial recognition technology and location tracking can assist authorities in monitoring syndicates' movements. Big data and artificial intelligence can be employed to identify suspicious patterns in human movements, aiding in prevention efforts.

-Holistic and Integrated Collaboration

A holistic approach involving the government, private sector, NGOs, and civil society is necessary. Regular meetings and workshops should be held to coordinate strategies and ensure actions complement each other. Community engagement is also crucial in identifying and reporting trafficking cases, with the community being seen as an active partner, not just a passive recipient of information.

By consistently implementing these proposed solutions, Malaysia could significantly reduce trafficking cases and create a safer environment for everyone in the country.

4. Conclusion

The issue of sexual exploitation in the trafficking of women in the Klang Valley is complex and requires a comprehensive approach to be effectively addressed. Despite efforts by authorities and NGOs, challenges such as resource shortages, social stigma, and weaknesses in law enforcement persist. This research highlights the importance of strengthening collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and civil society. Additionally, there is a need to reinforce existing laws and ensure more effective enforcement. Improved education and training for law enforcement officers, along with increased public awareness, are also crucial steps in reducing cases of human trafficking.

Acknowledgement

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

All authors confirm contribution to the paper. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

References

Banović, B., & Bjelajac, Ž. (2012). Traumatic Experiences, Psychophysical Consequences and Needs of Human Trafficking Victims. Vojnosanitetski Pregled, 69(1), 94-97.

Clark, M. A. (2003). Trafficking in Persons: An Issue of Human Security. Journal of Human Development, 4(2), 247-263.

Hussin, N. I. (2024). Interview. Online interview on 22 March by Zoom Meeting.

Jones, L., Engstrom, D., Hilliard, P., & Sungakawan, D. (2011). Human Trafficking Between Thailand and Japan: Lessons in Recruitment, Transit and Control. International Journal of Social Welfare, 20(2), 203-211.

Laws of Malaysia. (2014). Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007. The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia.

Marshall, P., & Thatun, S. (2005). Miles Away: The Trouble with Prevention in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region. In Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered. Routledge. 1-20.

Noorazman, S. H. A., & Annuar, S. N. S. (2017). Pemerdagangan Seks Wanita di Malaysia: Satu Jenayah Globalisasi. Jurnal Wacana Sarjana, 1(1), 1-19.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2022). Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022. United Nations.