

State Protection and Personal Security in Indonesia's Response to Online Scam Trafficking in Cambodia, 2020–2024

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Abstract

This study examines how the Indonesian government protected Indonesian citizens affected by Cambodia's online scam industry between 2020 and 2024, with particular attention to individuals identified or documented as victims of trafficking in persons, and evaluates gaps between formal protection mandates and documented outcomes. It employs a descriptive qualitative case study and documentary analysis of 31 government, embassy, international organization, NGO, academic, and media documents. The documentary record shows that Indonesian authorities handled a substantially larger population of citizens associated with online scam cases than those formally identified as trafficking victims; these categories are therefore treated separately throughout the analysis. State protection is most clearly documented at the rescue, consular assistance, victim-identification, referral, and repatriation stages, while post-return rehabilitation, economic recovery, and long-term monitoring remain less systematically documented. The findings also show that transnational syndicates exploit digital recruitment, tourist-visa travel, indirect transit routes, debt, document confiscation, confinement, and physical, psychological, and financial coercion. Three recurring implementation gaps are identified: a temporal gap between the escalation of cases and institutional responses, a coverage gap affecting citizens who move through non-procedural migration channels, and a capacity-related gap between broad protection mandates and the publicly documented institutional resources available for implementation. The study contributes by adapting personal security analysis to the role of a migrant-origin state and by emphasizing protection continuity from prevention and identification to rescue, repatriation, and reintegration.

Keywords: personal security, Indonesian migrant workers, online scam trafficking, non-procedural migration.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana pemerintah Indonesia melindungi warga negara Indonesia yang terdampak industri penipuan daring di Kamboja antara tahun 2020 dan 2024, dengan perhatian khusus pada individu yang teridentifikasi atau terdokumentasi sebagai korban tindak pidana perdagangan orang, serta mengevaluasi kesenjangan antara mandat perlindungan formal dan hasil yang terdokumentasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif deskriptif dan analisis dokumenter terhadap 31 dokumen pemerintah, kedutaan, organisasi internasional, organisasi nonpemerintah, akademik, dan media. Dokumentasi menunjukkan bahwa otoritas Indonesia menangani jumlah WNI yang terkait dengan kasus penipuan daring yang jauh lebih besar daripada jumlah individu yang secara formal teridentifikasi sebagai korban perdagangan orang; karena itu, kedua kategori tersebut dibedakan secara tegas sepanjang analisis. Perlindungan negara paling jelas terdokumentasi pada tahap penyelamatan, bantuan konsuler, identifikasi korban, rujukan, dan pemulangan, sedangkan rehabilitasi pascakepulangan, pemulihan ekonomi, dan pemantauan jangka panjang masih kurang terdokumentasi secara sistematis. Temuan juga menunjukkan bahwa sindikat transnasional memanfaatkan rekrutmen digital, perjalanan dengan visa turis, rute transit tidak langsung, utang, penyitaan dokumen, pengurungan, serta paksaan fisik, psikologis, dan finansial. Tiga kesenjangan implementasi yang berulang teridentifikasi, yaitu kesenjangan waktu antara eskalasi kasus dan respons kelembagaan, kesenjangan cakupan terhadap WNI yang bergerak melalui jalur migrasi nonprosedural, serta kesenjangan terkait kapasitas antara mandat perlindungan yang luas dan sumber daya kelembagaan yang terdokumentasi secara publik. Studi ini berkontribusi dengan mengadaptasi analisis keamanan pribadi terhadap posisi negara asal migran serta menekankan

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kesinambungan perlindungan mulai dari pencegahan dan identifikasi hingga penyelamatan, pemulangan, dan reintegrasi.

Kata Kunci: keamanan pribadi, pekerja migran Indonesia, perdagangan manusia berbasis penipuan daring, migrasi nonprosedural.

INTRODUCTION

International migrant workers constitute one of the groups most vulnerable to contemporary non-traditional security threats (Artal-Tur et al., 2014; Piper & Withers, 2018). High levels of cross-border mobility, economic inequality, precarious employment, and uneven legal protection in destination countries expose migrant workers to exploitation, trafficking in persons, forced labor, document confiscation, fraud, physical violence, and coercion into criminal activities (Sanchez, 2021). The rapid expansion of online scam operations has intensified these vulnerabilities by linking human trafficking with transnational cyber-enabled crime (Mitsilegas & Holiday, 2018). Criminal networks no longer rely solely on voluntary participation in online fraud; they increasingly recruit, deceive, confine, and coerce workers to operate fraudulent digital schemes (Ullah et al., 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation in Southeast Asia. Criminal networks repurposed vacant casinos, hotels, and resorts as cyber-fraud compounds, while pandemic-related lockdowns increased online activity and expanded the pool of potential fraud targets (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2023). These networks initially targeted migrant workers who had lost employment or become stranded because of border closures and subsequently forced many of them to work in scam centers (United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 2024). Over time, organized online scam networks expanded across the Mekong region, particularly in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (OHCHR, 2023), prompting the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL, 2025) to identify trafficking for forced criminality in online scam operations as a major transnational security concern.

Regional evidence demonstrates the scale of this problem. The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024) reported that Vietnam recorded the highest number of trafficking victims in the region in 2023, while Indonesia ranked second. In the same year, authorities rescued 3,239 Indonesian citizens from online fraud operations across Southeast Asia and identified 1,132 of them as trafficking victims. IOM also recorded an increase from 296 cases in 2022 to 978 cases in 2023, representing a 3.3-fold rise (IOM, 2024). Cambodia has become one of the principal centers of this expanding scam economy. The United States Institute of Peace (2024) links Cambodia's 2020 prohibition on online gambling to the subsequent adaptation of criminal operators toward technology-enabled fraud schemes, including so-called "pig-butcher" scams. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime further shows that criminal syndicates exploit Special Economic Zones because these areas combine reliable electricity and internet infrastructure with limited regulatory oversight (Farrelly et al., 2022). In locations such as Sihanoukville, these conditions have enabled criminal networks to operate online scam and money-laundering facilities while maintaining connections with crime hubs in Myanmar and the Philippines (Farrelly et al., 2022). These transnational networks allow criminal operations to relocate across borders and complicate conventional law-enforcement responses.

These figures refer specifically to complaints recorded within the migrant-worker protection system and should not be treated as equivalent to the broader caseload of Indonesian citizens associated with online scam operations. Separately, the Directorate for the Protection of Indonesian Citizens recorded 6,782 online scam cases involving Indonesian citizens between 2020 and December 2024. Cambodia accounted for 4,300 of these cases, followed by the Philippines with 770, Laos with 690, Thailand with 464,

and Myanmar with 429 (Direktorat Pelindungan WNI [DPWNI], 2025). These figures represent Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam-related cases and do not, by themselves, establish that every individual was an Indonesian migrant worker or had been formally identified as a victim of trafficking in persons. Throughout this study, statistics on online scam cases, migrant-worker complaints, and formally identified trafficking victims are therefore treated as analytically distinct categories.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Cambodia accounted for by far the largest share of Indonesia's documented online scam caseload during the 2020–2024 period. The 4,300 cases recorded in Cambodia were more than five times the number recorded in the Philippines, the dataset's second-largest destination. This concentration demonstrates that Cambodia occupied a distinctive position within Indonesia's overseas protection caseload and provides the empirical basis for selecting the Indonesia–Cambodia context as the principal case examined in this study. At the same time, Figure 1 should be interpreted as showing the geographical distribution of documented online scam cases involving Indonesian citizens rather than the distribution of formally identified trafficking victims.

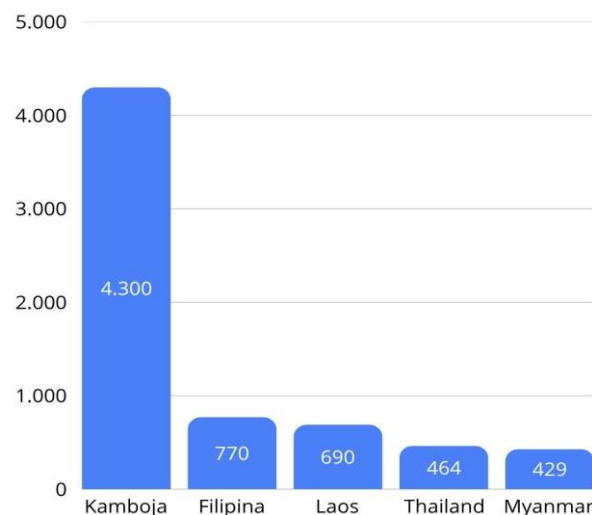


Figure 1. Documented Online Scam Cases Involving Indonesian Citizens, by Country, 2020–2024

Source: Adapted from Direktorat Pelindungan WNI (2025).

The Indonesian case also reveals that rescue and repatriation do not necessarily end victims' exposure to insecurity. The Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh has, in institutional terms, described the return of previously repatriated Indonesian citizens to Cambodia's online scam sector as the "Repeated Offender" phenomenon (DPWNI, 2025). This study treats that institutional label with analytical caution because the term "offender" can shift attention from structural vulnerability toward individual culpability. Re-entry into the same exploitative sector may instead reflect unresolved economic pressures, weak reintegration mechanisms, continuing recruitment networks, and gaps in post-repatriation protection. The problem, therefore, concerns more than cross-border criminality. It also raises a broader human security question about whether state protection enables trafficked migrant workers to achieve sustained freedom from fear after rescue. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994) defines human security through seven dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community,

and political security. The human security approach also emphasizes three interrelated principles—freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs–Human Security Unit [OCHA-HSU], 2009). Within this framework, personal security specifically directs attention to threats of physical violence and coercion against individuals, including violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors and violence directed toward vulnerable groups (Hanlon & Christie, 2016). International organizations have increasingly framed the regional online scam industry not merely as cybercrime but as a humanitarian and human rights problem involving trafficking, forced labor, coercion, and organized violence (INTERPOL, 2025; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023; Southeast Asia Public Policy Institute, 2025).

Research on migrant-worker trafficking and protection has developed along several tendencies. The first tendency applies human security perspectives to migrant vulnerability and emphasizes the relationship between mobility, economic insecurity, legal precarity, and exposure to exploitation. Fitria (2023), for example, examined Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia and Hong Kong through a human security perspective. Khadifa (2024) extended this perspective to trafficking associated with online scam operations in the Philippines. Denney and Xayamoungkhoun (2023) similarly situated migrant vulnerability within wider human security concerns. This body of research establishes that migrant insecurity cannot be reduced to immigration status or conventional labor disputes because migrant workers often face interconnected economic, legal, physical, and social threats. However, these studies primarily employ human security as a broad interpretive perspective and do not systematically operationalize personal security as a distinct framework for assessing the continuity and effectiveness of state protection.

The second tendency focuses on legal and institutional protection for victims of trafficking in persons. Putri et al. (2025) examined legal protection for Indonesian trafficking victims in Cambodia through a normative legal approach based on Indonesian Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of the Criminal Act of Trafficking in Persons and the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP). Their study identified several barriers to victim protection, including differences between national legal systems and weak mechanisms for cross-border restitution. This legal perspective provides an important basis for evaluating formal state obligations and the adequacy of the regulatory framework. Nevertheless, a normative legal approach primarily establishes what states should provide under applicable laws and agreements. It does not fully explain whether protection mechanisms operate continuously across recruitment, exploitation, rescue, repatriation, and reintegration, particularly when victims travel through non-procedural channels or re-enter exploitative networks after repatriation.

A third tendency examines the transnational political economy and organizational infrastructure of online scam operations. Reports from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023), the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (in Farrelly et al., 2022), the International Organization for Migration [IOM] (2024), the United States Institute of Peace (2024), and INTERPOL (2025) document the expansion of scam compounds, trafficking networks, forced criminality, and cross-border recruitment across Southeast Asia. These studies and institutional reports clarify how criminal syndicates use Special Economic Zones, weak regulatory environments, transnational recruitment networks, and digital infrastructures to sustain their operations. They therefore explain important dimensions of the Cambodian side of the phenomenon. However, they devote less attention to how migrant-origin states construct and implement protection for their own citizens, particularly after victims leave scam compounds and return home. As a result, the literature explains the criminal ecosystem

more extensively than it explains the continuity, limits, and implementation gaps of Indonesia's protection architecture.

These three tendencies leave a specific research gap. Existing studies have established migrant vulnerability, clarified formal legal obligations, and documented the transnational structure of online scam trafficking, but they have not sufficiently connected these dimensions to evaluate how Indonesia's protection system operates across the entire victim trajectory. Previous research has not operationalized state protection through clearly defined personal security dimensions, systematically examined repeated re-trafficking after rescue and repatriation, or conceptualized the implementation problem in terms of temporal, coverage, and capacity gaps. The literature also gives insufficient attention to victims who leave Indonesia through non-procedural migration channels, including tourist visas, even though these pathways can place migrants outside the administrative systems on which formal protection mechanisms depend. Furthermore, existing approaches provide limited explanations for why successful rescue and repatriation may coexist with subsequent re-victimization. These limitations create an analytical need to examine not only whether protective regulations exist but also whether state institutions translate them into continuous and accessible protection before, during, and after exploitation.

Accordingly, this study examines how the Indonesian government represented and implemented personal security protection for Indonesian citizens affected by online scam-related trafficking in Cambodia between 2020 and 2024, with particular attention to cases in which trafficking, coercion, forced labor, or forced criminality was documented. The analysis distinguishes among three types of administrative and empirical records: Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam cases, individuals recorded within the Indonesian migrant-worker protection system, and persons formally or substantively identified as victims of trafficking in persons. These categories may overlap, but they are not treated as interchangeable. This distinction allows the study to evaluate state protection without assuming that every Indonesian citizen recorded in an online scam case was formally registered as a migrant worker or officially identified as a trafficking victim.

This study argues that Hanlon and Christie's (2016) personal security framework remains analytically valuable for understanding online scam trafficking but requires contextual adaptation when applied to a migrant-origin state such as Indonesia. Hanlon and Christie emphasize protection from physical violence perpetrated by states, non-state actors, violent crime, and threats directed toward vulnerable groups. In the Indonesia–Cambodia case, however, Indonesia primarily occupies the position of a protection-responsible origin state rather than that of the direct perpetrator of violence. This study, therefore, reformulates the state-related dimension as state responsibility for protection and operationalizes personal security through four dimensions: state responsibility for protection, protection from non-state actors, protection from violent crime, and protection of vulnerable groups. It further argues that three structural gaps—temporal, coverage, and capacity gaps—help explain why formal protection mandates do not automatically produce sustained freedom from fear. The temporal gap concerns delays between the escalation of trafficking cases and institutional responses; the coverage gap concerns the mismatch between protection systems designed around formal migration and the needs of victims who travel outside those channels; and the capacity gap concerns the distance between institutional mandates and the resources available to implement them. This theoretical adaptation extends personal security analysis from identifying sources of threat toward evaluating the institutional conditions under which protection succeeds or fails. From this perspective, repeated trafficking after repatriation does not simply indicate individual decision-making failure; it can also reveal incomplete protection across rescue, reintegration, economic recovery, and prevention of re-victimization.

RESEARCH METHODS

The unit of analysis in this study is Indonesia's state protection architecture for Indonesian citizens affected by online scam-related trafficking and exploitation in Cambodia between 2020 and December 2024. Particular attention is given to individuals documented as victims of trafficking in persons, forced labor, forced criminality, confinement, or other forms of coercive exploitation. The study does not assume that all Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam cases were formally registered Indonesian migrant workers or formally identified trafficking victims. Instead, it distinguishes between the broader population of Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam-related cases, Indonesian migrant workers appearing in KP2MI records, and individuals specifically identified as victims of trafficking in persons. The analysis focuses on institutional policies, protection mechanisms, rescue and consular interventions, victim identification and referral, repatriation, and documented post-return assistance rather than treating individual victims as separate units of analysis.

This study employs a descriptive qualitative case study design. A descriptive qualitative approach enables researchers to provide a comprehensive account of events and experiences in accessible language while remaining closely grounded in the available empirical evidence rather than relying primarily on highly abstract interpretation (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). The case study approach is appropriate because the research investigates a contemporary and context-dependent phenomenon and seeks to explain how and why protection mechanisms operated as they did within a specific temporal and institutional setting (Kohlbacher, 2006). The study treats the protection of Indonesian migrant workers trafficked into Cambodia's online scam industry as a bounded case defined by the Indonesia–Cambodia context and the 2020–2024 study period. This design enables the analysis to connect formal protection mandates with documented implementation outcomes and to identify recurring institutional patterns within the case.

The study draws exclusively on secondary documentary data and analyzes 31 documents classified into five categories: 11 official government documents, nine reports from international organizations, two reports from non-governmental organizations, eight academic journal articles, and one mass-media news article. Government sources include documents issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh, and the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers. International sources include publications from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). Academic literature provides conceptual and empirical perspectives on human security, personal security, migrant-worker protection, trafficking in persons, and online scam operations. The study uses mass-media material only as supplementary evidence and does not treat it as equivalent to official or peer-reviewed documentation.

The study collected documents through structured searches of Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, and the official publication repositories of relevant government and international institutions. The search strategy used combinations of terms including "TPPO Cambodia," "online scam Cambodia," "online scam Kamboja," "Mekong," and "personal security through TPPO." The study applied explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to maintain analytical relevance. It included documents that provided empirical evidence or policy analysis concerning trafficking in persons connected with online scam operations in Cambodia, documented Indonesian government measures to protect Indonesian citizens in Cambodia, or reported violence and other security threats experienced by online scam victims. It excluded sources that addressed conventional cybercrime without elements of trafficking or forced labor, materials unrelated to the Southeast Asian geopolitical context, personal blog posts, and reports

from sources that lacked sufficient institutional or editorial credibility. Although the analytical period ends in December 2024, the study selectively uses sources published after the study period when they retrospectively document, verify, or consolidate events and patterns that occurred between 2020 and 2024. Post-2024 publications are not treated as evidence of developments occurring after the study period and are excluded from the empirical findings unless explicitly identified as subsequent developments in the Discussion section.

The study analyzes the documentary data using the interactive qualitative analysis model developed by Miles et al. (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data condensation, the study selects and organizes evidence concerning threats to migrant workers' personal security and Indonesia's documented responses. It then classifies the evidence according to the four operational dimensions of personal security used in this study: state responsibility for protection, protection from non-state actors, protection from violent crime, and protection of vulnerable groups. During data display, the study compares institutional responses, victim-protection mechanisms, quantitative case records, and recurring implementation problems across documents and years. The final stage identifies patterns and verifies conclusions, particularly the temporal, coverage, and capacity gaps that shape the implementation of state protection. To strengthen credibility, the study applies source triangulation by comparing evidence across government records, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, academic publications, and verified media reports (Hayashi et al., 2019). The study does not accept media reports as standalone factual evidence; it cross-checks them against official press releases, annual performance reports from the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and investigative reports from United Nations agencies such as OHCHR and UNODC. When sources report different statistical figures, the analysis preserves the discrepancy, reports the relevant range where necessary, and attributes each figure to its original source rather than artificially reconciling inconsistent data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

State Responsibility for Protection: Rescue, Repatriation, and Post-Return Assistance

documentary findings show that the Indonesian government implemented its protection mandate through rescue operations, consular assistance, victim identification and referral, repatriation, and post-return support. Between 2020 and December 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recorded 6,782 Indonesian citizens in online scam-related cases, 6,771 of whom were located in Southeast Asia. Cambodia accounted for the largest share, with 4,300 cases recorded by the end of 2024 (DPWNI, 2025). These figures describe the broader consular caseload involving Indonesian citizens and are not equivalent to the number of formally identified victims of trafficking in persons. Nor do they establish that every person recorded in these cases was formally registered as an Indonesian migrant worker. Where documentary sources specifically identify individuals as trafficking victims, migrant workers, or repatriated citizens, this study retains those classifications rather than applying them to the entire caseload.

Rescue and repatriation constituted the most clearly documented forms of state intervention. In 2022, the Indonesian government repatriated 422 Indonesian citizens who had experienced confinement in Cambodia (Direktorat Jenderal Protokol dan Konsuler, 2023). Before repatriation, government officials facilitated victim identification, psychological assessment, health services, logistical assistance, and temporary shelter. For individuals identified as victims of trafficking in persons, the government also financed repatriation through commercial flights. These measures show that consular protection

extended beyond physical extraction from scam compounds and included several forms of immediate assistance before victims returned to Indonesia.

The government also allocated financial and administrative resources to support case handling in Cambodia. In 2022, the Directorate for the Protection of Indonesian Citizens allocated IDR 4,226,762,617 from its State Budget Implementation List (*Daftar Isian Pelaksanaan Anggaran* [DIPA]) specifically for assisting Indonesian citizens in Cambodia; this amount excluded expenditures financed through the internal budget of the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh (DPWNI, 2025). In 2024, the Embassy also facilitated mediation between Indonesian citizens and companies concerning financial claims and reported successfully mediated claims totaling IDR 76.8 billion. When syndicates withheld victims' passports, the Embassy issued Travel Documents in Lieu of Passports (*Surat Perjalanan Laksana Paspor* [SPLP]) to enable their formal return to Indonesia (Budiono, 2026; DPWNI, 2025). These records indicate that state assistance included financial, documentary, and consular functions in addition to physical repatriation.

As summarized in Table 1, Indonesia's response to Cambodia-related online scam cases involved multiple forms of protection, including repatriation, budget support, financial-claim mediation, travel-document assistance, and post-return referral. These indicators reflect different populations and institutional functions; therefore, the 6,782 and 4,300 caseload figures should not be interpreted as the number of trafficking victims or as directly comparable with the more specific intervention data.

Table 1. Key Documented Indicators of State Protection for Indonesian Citizens in Cambodia's Online Scam Cases

Indicator	Documented finding	Population represented
Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam-related cases globally, 2020–December 2024	6,782 people	Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam cases
Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam-related cases in Southeast Asia, 2020–December 2024	6,771 people	Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam cases
Indonesian citizens recorded in Cambodia-related online scam cases, 2020–December 2024	4,300 people	Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam cases
Indonesian citizens repatriated from confinement in Cambodia, 2022	422 people	Repatriated Indonesian citizens
DIPA allocation for assistance in Cambodia, 2022	IDR 4,226,762,617	Institutional protection expenditure
Financial claims mediated by the Indonesian Embassy, 2024	IDR 76.8 billion	Consular mediation cases
Administrative support for undocumented return	Issuance of SPLP	Indonesian citizens requiring travel documentation
Post-return mechanism	Screening, referral, rehabilitation readiness, and empowerment support	Persons referred through relevant protection mechanisms

Source: Direktorat Pelindungan WNI (2025), Direktorat Jenderal Protokol dan Konsuler [Directorate General of Protocol and Consular Affairs] (2023), and Kementerian Sosial Republik Indonesia [Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia] (2024)

After the victims arrived in Indonesia, government agencies continued to handle the cases through a national referral mechanism. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinated with the Indonesian National Police Criminal Investigation Agency and the Ministry of Social Affairs to screen and refer individuals identified as victims of trafficking in persons (Direktorat Jenderal Protokol dan Konsuler, 2023). The government subsequently coordinated its return to its regions of origin with the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Cultural Affairs and relevant local governments (Direktorat Jenderal Protokol dan Konsuler, 2024). This process created an institutional chain linking overseas consular assistance to domestic referral and return arrangements.

Government documents also identify rehabilitation and empowerment as components of post-return protection. Government Regulation No. 59 of 2021 mandates post-employment protection, including follow-up services for returning migrant workers. In November 2024, the Ministry of Social Affairs announced its readiness to cooperate with the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers through its *Sentra* and *Sentra Terpadu* service networks to provide rehabilitation and empowerment assistance to returning migrant workers in distress (Kementerian Sosial Republik Indonesia, 2024). However, the documents examined in this study do not report how many victims repatriated from Cambodia accessed these services, what forms of assistance they received, how long the assistance continued, or whether government agencies conducted follow-up monitoring after their return.

The documentary record therefore provides substantially more detailed evidence for rescue, consular assistance, and repatriation than for longer-term post-repatriation outcomes. Government reports identify the number of cases handled, repatriation procedures, budget allocations, interagency referral arrangements, and specific forms of consular assistance. In contrast, publicly available documents provide little case-specific information on rehabilitation participation, economic empowerment, continuity of assistance, or post-return monitoring among Indonesian victims repatriated from Cambodia. Consequently, the available evidence confirms the operation of an institutional protection mechanism through the point of repatriation and initial referral, while the documented outcomes of longer-term post-return assistance remain limited.

Protection from Non-State Actors: Recruitment, Transit, and Coercive Control by Transnational Criminal Networks

The documentary findings show that non-state actors involved in Cambodia's online scam industry operate through organized transnational networks that connect digital recruitment, cross-border movement, debt creation, document confiscation, and physical confinement. Rather than recruiting workers through a single channel, these networks use multiple digital platforms to reach prospective workers in Indonesia and other countries. Recruiters circulate job advertisements through Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, and WhatsApp, and present positions such as information technology staff, digital marketing personnel, customer service representatives, computer operators, and translators as legitimate employment opportunities (Aprilion & Murdani, 2024). Recruiters commonly offer salaries substantially higher than those available to many prospective workers in Indonesia. Munte (2024), for example, reported offers reaching approximately IDR 12 million per month. These advertisements conceal

the actual nature and location of the work until recruits have entered the recruitment and transportation process.

The recruitment process also involves impersonation and interpersonal recruitment. Tempo.co (2024) documented a scheme in which perpetrators impersonated customer service personnel from established companies, including PT Telkom, before transferring victims to other perpetrators posing as police officers or prosecutors. Other records show that recruitment can extend through victims' own social networks. The Directorate for the Protection of Indonesian Citizens (DPWNI, 2025) documented cases in which workers already confined within scam operations recruited friends or relatives because syndicates pressured them to bring in additional workers as a condition for release. In the coding used in this study, these cases represent forced complicity because recruitment occurred under coercive conditions rather than through independently initiated participation. Digital techniques also became more sophisticated during the study period. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024) documented the use of technologies such as real-time face-swapping applications to falsify identities and facilitate fraudulent and sexually exploitative schemes.

After recruitment, criminal networks used indirect international routes to move prospective workers toward Cambodia. Instead of transporting recruits directly from Indonesia to their final destinations, syndicates frequently routed them through countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, often using tourist visas (Munte, 2024). Some victims first entered Thailand by air before handlers transported them across land borders into Cambodia (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2023). These transit arrangements separated the migrants' formal travel status from their actual employment destination and purpose. The networks also initially financed transportation and accommodation costs. Documentation reviewed in this study indicates that syndicates subsequently converted these expenses into debts that workers were required to repay after arrival (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024).

As summarized in Table 2, transnational online scam networks operated through a sequential but interconnected set of mechanisms, beginning with deceptive recruitment and economic inducement and continuing through cross-border transfer, debt creation, document confiscation, isolation, and physical confinement. The table also shows that these networks combined conventional coercive practices with digitally enabled techniques, allowing control to begin before victims reached Cambodia and intensify after arrival. This pattern highlights the transnational and adaptive character of the trafficking process rather than a single-stage recruitment scheme.

Table 2. Documented Operational Mechanisms of Transnational Online Scam Networks

Operational stage	Documented mechanism	Evidence identified in the dataset
Digital recruitment	Fraudulent employment advertisements	Vacancies advertised as IT, digital marketing, customer service, computer operator, and translator positions
Economic inducement	High salary offers	Offers reaching approximately IDR 12 million per month
Impersonation	False corporate and official identities	Perpetrators posed as corporate customer service personnel, police officers, or prosecutors
Coerced interpersonal recruitment	Existing workers recruit others under pressure	Friends or relatives were recruited by workers who were themselves under syndicate control

Operational stage	Documented mechanism	Evidence identified in the dataset
Cross-border transfer	Indirect transit through neighboring states	Tourist-visa travel and transit through Thailand, Malaysia, or the Philippines before entry into Cambodia
Debt creation	Transportation and accommodation converted into debt	Syndicates initially financed travel-related expenses and subsequently charged them to workers
Isolation and control	Passport and phone confiscation	Workers lost access to travel documents and external communication after arrival
Physical confinement	Restricted movement inside compounds	Movement limited between workspaces and dormitories, with additional internal restrictions reported in some compounds
Technological adaptation	Identity manipulation and digitally enabled fraud	Use of real-time face-swapping and other technologies to facilitate fraudulent operations

Source: Aprilion & Murdani (2024), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024), International Organization for Migration (2024), Tempo.co. (2024), and Munte, (2024)

Upon arrival at scam compounds, the nature of control shifted from deceptive recruitment to direct restriction of victims' autonomy. Reports reviewed in this study document the confiscation of passports and mobile phones, which restricted victims' ability to leave, communicate with relatives, or independently seek assistance (OHCHR, 2023). Syndicates also limited physical movement within compounds. Victims commonly moved only between dormitories and work areas, while some facilities reportedly prevented workers from moving freely between floors or sections of the same building (OHCHR, 2023). UNODC (2024) similarly documented highly secured scam compounds equipped with physical barriers and surveillance infrastructure. These arrangements enabled criminal networks to combine workplace supervision with control over victims' mobility and communication.

The physical environment of scam compounds reinforced these mechanisms of control. Reports describe enclosed facilities surrounded by walls, fences, controlled entrances, surveillance systems, and private security arrangements (UNODC, 2024). The documentary evidence also places a number of online scam operations in or around Special Economic Zones and casino-associated areas, including Sihanoukville. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (Farrelly et al., 2022) reported that weak local enforcement, limited oversight, and elite capture contributed to an environment in which criminal enterprises could operate with considerable freedom in Sihanoukville. OHCHR (2023) likewise documented difficulties in gaining access to some compounds and securing the release of trafficked workers. Because these claims concern the conduct or possible involvement of local power holders and authorities, this study records them as findings reported by the respective organizations rather than independently verified conclusions.

Taken together, the documents reveal a sequential pattern in the operations of non-state actors. Recruiters first attract prospective workers with seemingly legitimate job offers and high salaries; they then move recruits through indirect migration routes, convert transportation expenses into debt, confiscate documents and communication devices, and restrict movement upon arrival. The evidence further shows that these networks combine digital recruitment capabilities with cross-border transportation and physically secured workplaces. This operational structure complicates intervention because recruitment begins outside Cambodia, transit may involve several jurisdictions, and coercive

control intensifies only after victims reach privately controlled compounds. The documented findings, therefore, identify transnational recruitment, indirect mobility, financial dependency, communication isolation, and physical confinement as the principal mechanisms through which non-state actors controlled Indonesian victims during the 2020–2024 study period.

Protection from Violent Crime: Physical, Psychological, and Financial Coercion

The documentary findings show that violence formed a recurring mechanism of control within online scam operations in Southeast Asia. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2023) estimated that at least 220,000 people were being held in scam compounds in Cambodia and Myanmar in 2023. During the study period, Indonesian citizens also constituted a substantial part of the documented population affected by these operations. By December 2024, the Directorate for the Protection of Indonesian Citizens (DPWNI, 2025) had recorded 6,782 online scam cases involving Indonesian citizens, with approximately 4,300 cases concentrated in Cambodia. The documents reviewed for this study describe violence not as an isolated occurrence but as a recurring means of enforcing work discipline, restricting mobility, and compelling victims to remain within scam operations.

Victims commonly experienced prolonged working hours and punishment when they failed to meet financial or recruitment targets. Reports documented working periods ranging from approximately 12 to 20 hours per day, during which victims carried out activities such as romance scams and fraudulent cryptocurrency investment schemes (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023; OHCHR, 2023). Syndicates reportedly punished workers who failed to achieve predetermined targets, refused to continue working, attempted to contact relatives or authorities, or tried to escape. Documented forms of punishment included beatings, kicking, chaining, food deprivation, electric shocks, confinement, threats of sexual violence, and other forms of intimidation (UNODC, 2023; OHCHR, 2023). OHCHR (2023) also reported threats involving organ trafficking. The available documentation, therefore, shows that physical punishment and psychological intimidation accompanied the labor demands imposed inside scam compounds.

UNODC (2024) further documented organized forms of punishment within scam facilities, including public humiliation, confinement in so-called “dark rooms,” chaining, physical assault, electric shocks, sexual violence, and threats of rape. These practices restricted both physical mobility and behavioral autonomy. Victims could face punishment not only for refusing work but also for violating internal rules or attempting to communicate with parties outside the compound. The documentary record consequently identifies several overlapping forms of violence: physical assault, deprivation, sexual and psychological intimidation, confinement, and threats directed at victims or their families.

As summarized in Table 3, violence and coercion within online scam operations operated through multiple, overlapping mechanisms, including physical assault, confinement, deprivation, sexual and psychological intimidation, excessive working hours, debt, and family extortion. These practices functioned not only as punishment but also as instruments of labor control, intimidation, and dependency, reinforcing victims' inability to leave or resist the scam operations.

Table 3. Documented Forms of Violence and Coercion in Online Scam Operations

Form of violence or coercion	Documented practice	Function within scam operations
Physical assault	Beating, kicking, whipping, and other physical punishment	Punishing failure to meet targets, resistance, or escape attempts
Electric shock	Use of electrical devices to inflict pain	Punishment and intimidation
Confinement	Chaining, “dark-room” detention, and restricted movement	Preventing escape and enforcing compliance
Food deprivation	Restriction or denial of food	Punishment and behavioral control
Sexual violence and threats	Sexual abuse and threats of rape	Intimidation and coercion
Excessive working hours	Approximately 12–20 working hours per day	Maximizing scam output and maintaining continuous labor
Arbitrary fines and debt	Recruitment debt, transportation debt, medical charges, and workplace penalties	Maintaining financial dependency
Family extortion	Ransom demands accompanied in some cases by evidence of victim abuse	Extracting money and increasing pressure on victims

Source: OHCHR (2023), DPWNI (2025), UNODC (2024), and UNODC (2023)

Case-level documentation from the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh shows that these broader regional patterns were also documented among Indonesian citizens in Cambodia. In April 2024, two Indonesian workers in Bavet, Svay Rieng, reported that their employer accused them of stealing company funds and subjected them to approximately three hours of physical assault. According to Embassy documentation, perpetrators beat, slapped, kicked, and whipped the workers while they were handcuffed. After the two workers escaped and reported the incident, Embassy personnel documented extensive bruising on their bodies. The same records show that the workers had not received wages during their employment, worked approximately 12-hour shifts without regular rest, ate while remaining at their workstations, and faced fines when they exceeded tightly controlled bathroom breaks (DPWNI, 2025).

A separate case from Bavet further documents physical abuse and subsequent intervention. An Indonesian worker who had worked in an online scam operation since September 2023 reported experiencing physical violence by the company. After the Indonesian Embassy obtained information about the case, provincial police in Svay Rieng retrieved the worker in late November. Authorities subsequently placed the worker in a rehabilitation process before facilitating repatriation to Indonesia in February 2024 (DPWNI, 2025). These case records demonstrate that documented violence against Indonesian victims included both direct physical assault and restrictive employment conditions.

Financial coercion accompanied these physical forms of control. UNODC (2023) documented cases in which syndicates imposed debts of up to USD 25,000 for recruitment, transportation, and related expenses. Workers also faced additional charges and arbitrary penalties ranging from approximately USD 14 to USD 1,000 for medical expenses, workplace infractions, or other internally imposed costs. These deductions could substantially reduce or eliminate workers' earnings and make departure financially difficult. Reports also document syndicates demanding payments from victims' families, with reported ransom amounts ranging from approximately USD 3,000 to USD 30,000 and, in some cases, reaching USD 100,000 (UNODC, 2023). In some documented cases, perpetrators used recordings of abuse to pressure relatives into making payments. Payment, however, did not consistently result in victims' release.

The available evidence therefore shows that violent control within online scam operations operated through multiple and interconnected mechanisms. Physical assault, prolonged working hours, confinement, psychological intimidation, arbitrary fines, debt accumulation, and family extortion reinforced one another and restricted victims' ability to leave scam compounds. Case records involving Indonesian citizens confirm that these practices were not limited to regional-level reports but also appeared in Embassy-documented cases in Cambodia. At the same time, the available Indonesian documentation primarily records violence after victims escaped, were rescued, or came into contact with authorities. Consequently, the documentary dataset provides detailed evidence of violence in identified cases but does not establish the full prevalence of physical and psychological abuse among all Indonesian citizens involved in online scam operations during the 2020–2024 period.

Protection of Vulnerable Groups: Gender, Age, and Identification-Related Vulnerabilities

The documentary findings show that women and children were present among Indonesian victims of online scam trafficking in Cambodia, although the available data do not indicate that women constituted the numerical majority of documented victims. Instead, the evidence points to distinct forms of vulnerability associated with gender, age, sexual violence, and victim-identification procedures. In 2022, Indonesian authorities recorded 484 cases involving Indonesian citizens in Cambodia, at least 70 of whom were identified as victims of trafficking in persons. Four of the identified trafficking victims were women (Aprilion & Murdani, 2024). In the same year, four minors were among the 422 Indonesian citizens repatriated from confinement in online scam companies between August and November (Direktorat Jenderal Protokol dan Konsuler, 2024). These cases confirm that women and children formed part of the affected population, even though the available Cambodia-specific records do not provide a complete demographic profile.

Regional case-management data provide additional context. The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024) reported that women accounted for 24.23% of the victims it assisted across Southeast Asia in 2023, totaling 237 individuals. This figure indicates that women did not constitute the majority of documented assisted victims at the regional level. However, regional and case-level reports show that female victims could experience forms of harm that differed from those documented among victims generally, particularly sexual violence, threats of rape, and forms of coercion involving sexuality and social stigma (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2023). The available evidence, therefore, distinguishes between numerical prevalence and the specific forms of harm experienced by different victim groups.

A major limitation in the documentary record concerns the lack of demographic disaggregation. The Indonesian government reports reviewed in this study do not provide systematic gender- and age-disaggregated data specifically for the Cambodia online scam caseload. The available information on women and minors appears primarily in individual case reports, repatriation records, and selected institutional publications rather than in a consistently reported demographic monitoring system. As a result, the dataset can identify the presence of women and children among documented victims but cannot determine their complete proportion, compare their outcomes systematically with those of adult male victims, or establish whether particular forms of assistance varied by gender or age.

As summarized in Table 4, the documentary evidence confirms the presence of women and minors among affected populations but remains insufficient for systematic demographic analysis. The available records combine Cambodia-specific case data with broader regional evidence on gender-specific harm

and victim-identification difficulties. Consequently, the table is more useful for identifying vulnerabilities and gaps in documentation than for estimating the demographic distribution of victims.

Table 4. Documented Evidence on Vulnerable Groups in Online Scam Trafficking

Vulnerability indicator	Documented finding	Scope of evidence
Female trafficking victims in Cambodia	4 women among at least 70 identified trafficking victims from 484 Indonesian cases in 2022	Indonesia–Cambodia case data
Minors repatriated from confinement	4 minors among 422 Indonesians repatriated in 2022	Indonesia–Cambodia repatriation data
Women among assisted victims	237 women, or 24.23% of assisted victims in 2023	Southeast Asia regional data
Gender-specific harm	Sexual violence, threats of rape, and sexuality-based intimidation	Regional documentation
Survivor identification outcomes	20 of 78 interviewed survivors successfully completed formal victim identification	Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos
Gender- and age-disaggregated Cambodia data	No systematic public reporting identified in the documents reviewed	Indonesian government documentation
Gender-sensitive digital response	Launch of SARI (<i>Sahabat Artifisial Migran Indonesia</i>) virtual assistant	Institutional response

Source: Aprilion & Murdani (2024), Direktorat Jenderal Protokol dan Konsuler (2024), IOM (2024), OHCHR (2023), Li (2024), and DPWNI (2025).

Beyond demographic vulnerability, the evidence also identifies victim identification itself as a potentially difficult stage in the protection process. Li (2024), drawing on interviews with 78 survivors across Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, found that only 20 participants successfully completed formal victim-identification procedures. Other survivors were denied access to the process, could not satisfy evidentiary requirements, or chose not to continue because they perceived the process as distressing or retraumatizing. The same study documented concerns regarding the ability of police, embassy personnel, and other frontline actors to interview survivors who had experienced severe trauma. These findings are regional rather than specific to Indonesian victims, and the documents reviewed in this study do not establish that Indonesian victims experienced the same procedures in every case.

One case reported by Li (2024) illustrates the potential sensitivity of identification procedures for survivors of sexual violence. A Taiwanese woman in her early twenties who had reportedly experienced repeated rape inside a scam compound later underwent questioning by male police officers who asked her to recount the violence in detail. This case does not involve an Indonesian citizen, but it demonstrates the types of procedural risks documented within institutional pathways used by trafficking survivors in Cambodia. OHCHR (2023) also reported that some released victims in the region faced detention or immigration-related action after leaving scam compounds. These records indicate that post-release encounters with authorities varied and that formal identification did not always proceed smoothly for trafficking survivors.

The documents reviewed also record efforts to improve trauma-sensitive and gender-responsive assistance. IOM (2024) reported providing trauma-informed care training to personnel working with trafficking victims. At the Indonesian institutional level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with UN Women, introduced *Sahabat Artifisial Migran Indonesia* (SARI), an artificial intelligence-based virtual assistant intended to provide rapid, empathetic, and low-bias responses to migrant complaints (DPWNI, 2025). The initiative introduces a dedicated digital response mechanism that addresses sensitive complaints and supports vulnerable users.

However, the available documents do not provide Cambodia-specific SARI outcome data. They do not report how many victims repatriated from Cambodia used the service, the users' demographic characteristics, the types of complaints submitted, or whether the platform improved access to protection or follow-up services. Similarly, the documentary record does not provide longitudinal data on rehabilitation, psychosocial recovery, or reintegration outcomes specifically for women and minors repatriated from Cambodia.

The findings show that women and children were clearly represented among documented victims, but the available public data remain insufficient for systematic demographic analysis. Case-level and regional evidence identify sexual violence, age-related vulnerability, retraumatization risks during identification, and difficulties in accessing formal victim-recognition processes. At the same time, Indonesian institutions have introduced responses such as SARI and participated in broader trauma-informed initiatives. Nevertheless, the documents available for the 2020–2024 period provide substantially more information on the existence of vulnerable groups and selected interventions than on their differentiated protection outcomes after identification, repatriation, and return.

Regulatory Alignment and Implementation Gaps in Indonesia's Protection Framework

The four dimensions examined above reveal three recurring implementation gaps in Indonesia's protection architecture: temporal, coverage, and capacity gaps. As illustrated in Figure 2, these gaps arise respectively from delayed institutional responses, the limited reach of protection mechanisms beyond formal migration channels, and uncertainty over whether documented institutional resources correspond to the expanding caseload, showing how formal protection mandates may lose effectiveness at different stages of the protection process.

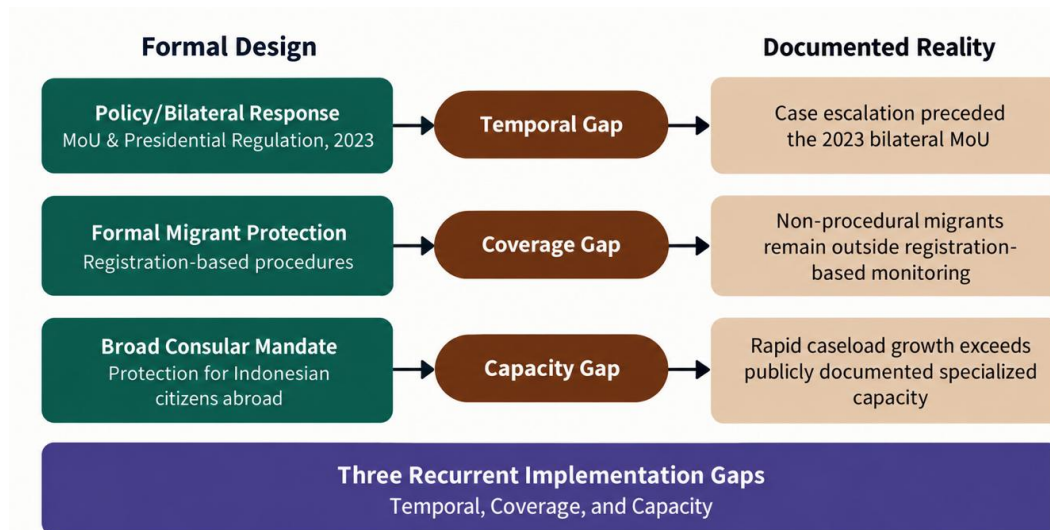


Figure 2. Implementation Gaps Between Indonesia's Formal Protection Design and Documented Conditions in Online Scam Trafficking

Source: Developed by the authors based on documentary findings.

Indonesia's regulatory framework spans constitutional, statutory, ministerial, and presidential levels. The 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (*Undang-Undang Dasar Negara Republik Indonesia Tahun 1945* [UUD 1945]) establishes the general constitutional basis for citizens' rights to employment and equal legal protection. Law No. 18 of 2017 on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers regulates protection before, during, and after employment. Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of the Criminal Act of Trafficking in Persons provides the principal criminal-law framework for addressing trafficking. Minister of Foreign Affairs Regulation No. 5 of 2018 governs the provision of protection services for Indonesian citizens abroad, including legal assistance, evacuation, and repatriation. Presidential Regulation No. 19 of 2023 established the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Handling of Trafficking in Persons for 2020–2024 within the pre-existing national coordination framework. Documentary comparison shows that these instruments provide broad formal mandates, but their operational reach differs when applied to online scam trafficking in Cambodia.

Law No. 18 of 2017 illustrates the clearest coverage issue. Its pre-departure protection mechanisms rely heavily on the formal registration of prospective Indonesian migrant workers (*Calon Pekerja Migran Indonesia* [CPMI]). However, documentary evidence from the Cambodia cases shows that many affected Indonesians traveled using tourist visas or other non-procedural pathways and therefore did not enter the formal migrant-worker registration system before departure. As a result, several preventive and monitoring mechanisms associated with formal migration could not identify these individuals during the recruitment and departure stages.

A different pattern appears under Law No. 21 of 2007. The law already provided a national criminal framework for trafficking in persons, but the Indonesia–Cambodia bilateral response developed later than the initial escalation of online scam cases. Indonesia and Cambodia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation against transnational crime in August 2023, whereas the documented increase in online scam trafficking had begun several years earlier. The documents reviewed in this study did not identify an equivalent bilateral cooperation instrument specifically addressing this operational environment during the earlier 2020–2022 period. The chronology therefore shows a temporal difference between the emergence of the problem and the consolidation of bilateral institutional cooperation.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Regulation No. 5 of 2018 provides the legal basis for diplomatic missions to assist Indonesian citizens experiencing distress abroad. In the Cambodia case, the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh became the principal overseas institution responsible for consular protection, case coordination, rescue facilitation, documentation, and repatriation. At the same time, more than 4,300 Indonesian citizens were recorded in Cambodia-related online scam cases between 2020 and 2024. The reviewed documents show a rapid expansion of case volume but provide limited information on corresponding increases in dedicated personnel, specialized case-management resources, or long-term monitoring capacity. This discrepancy forms the main documented capacity issue within the consular protection system.

Presidential Regulation No. 19 of 2023 established the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Handling of Trafficking in Persons for 2020–2024 (RAN PPTPPPO 2020–2024) within an existing national coordination architecture. The national trafficking task force had previously been established under Presidential Regulation No. 69 of 2008, and its functions were subsequently strengthened through

Presidential Regulation No. 22 of 2021, including coordination, integrated case-data management, monitoring, evaluation, and the preparation of national action strategies. Presidential Regulation No. 19 of 2023, therefore, did not create the task force but provided the national action-plan framework through which relevant ministries, agencies, and subnational governments were expected to coordinate trafficking prevention and response.

As summarized in Table 5, the regulatory framework provides different layers of protection, but the documentary evidence reveals distinct implementation challenges across them. The coverage gap is most visible where migrant-protection mechanisms depend on formal migration procedures; the temporal gap concerns the timing of bilateral and policy responses relative to the escalation of online scam cases; and the capacity-related gap concerns the limited public evidence on whether institutional resources expanded in proportion to the growing caseload.

Table 5. Regulatory Hierarchy and Documented Implementation Gaps in Indonesia's Protection Framework

Regulation	Formal protection mandate	Relevance to the Cambodia case	Documented implementation issue	Identified gap
UUD 1945, Articles 27(2) and 28D(1)	Establishes constitutional rights concerning employment and equal legal protection	Provides the constitutional basis for protecting Indonesian citizens	Operational protection depends on derivative laws and administrative mechanisms	Foundational framework
Law No. 18 of 2017	Provides pre-employment, employment, and post-employment protection for Indonesian migrant workers	Many affected citizens travelled through tourist or other non-procedural channels	Individuals outside formal placement systems may not be captured by several pre-departure monitoring mechanisms	Coverage gap
Law No. 21 of 2007	Criminalizes trafficking in persons and establishes the principal national anti-trafficking framework	Online scam trafficking involves cross-border recruitment and exploitation	Bilateral cooperation with Cambodia was consolidated after online scam cases had already escalated	Temporal gap
Minister of Foreign Affairs Regulation No. 5 of 2018	Authorizes protection, legal assistance, evacuation, and repatriation for Indonesian citizens abroad	Provides the legal basis for consular protection by the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh	Public records document rapid caseload growth but provide limited evidence on corresponding expansion of specialized resources	Capacity-related evidence gap
Presidential Regulation No. 19 of 2023	Establishes the RAN PPTPPO 2020–2024 and coordinates implementation	Provides a national action-plan framework for trafficking	The action plan was formally enacted in 2023 even though it	Temporal coordination issue

across ministries, agencies, and regional governments	prevention and response	covers the 2020–2024 period
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Source: Compiled by the authors from the regulations and documentary evidence analyzed in this study.

Table 5 shows that the identified gaps arise at different levels of the protection framework rather than reflecting a single institutional weakness. Coverage problems concern the reach of formal migration-based mechanisms, temporal problems concern the timing of institutional responses, and capacity-related concerns reflect the limited documentary evidence on whether operational resources expanded alongside the caseload.

The findings show a consistent mismatch between the administrative assumptions embedded in Indonesia’s protection framework and the migration patterns documented in Cambodia-related online scam cases. Formal regulations provide mechanisms for migrant-worker protection, anti-trafficking enforcement, consular assistance, and interagency coordination. However, the documented cases frequently involve individuals who bypass formal migration procedures, enter Cambodia through indirect routes, and become identifiable to Indonesian authorities only after exploitation has occurred. The central empirical finding is therefore not the absence of a regulatory framework, but the uneven ability of existing regulations and institutions to reach victims across recruitment, departure, exploitation, rescue, and post-return stages.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal an imbalance between the relatively well-documented capacity of Indonesian institutions to provide rescue, consular assistance, referral, and repatriation and the more limited public documentation of protection outcomes across the broader trafficking trajectory. Between 2020 and December 2024, the Directorate for the Protection of Indonesian Citizens recorded 6,782 Indonesian citizens in online scam-related cases, including approximately 4,300 cases associated with Cambodia (DPWNI, 2025). These figures represent the broader consular caseload and are analytically distinct from statistics on formally identified trafficking victims and complaints involving Indonesian migrant workers. This distinction is important because the online scam caseload includes individuals with different administrative and victim-identification statuses. The present study, therefore, does not infer trafficking victimhood solely from inclusion in the online scam statistics; instead, it evaluates trafficking, coercion, confinement, and other forms of exploitation where these conditions are specifically documented in the underlying sources.

Indonesia’s protection system remains predominantly reactive because its institutional architecture assumes formal registration and procedural migration, whereas online scam syndicates deliberately operate through mobility patterns that fall outside those administrative channels. Registration-based monitoring mechanisms, including *Peduli WNI* and *Sisko P2MI*, function most effectively for migrant workers who enter the formal placement system, but many victims travel on tourist visas, use indirect transit routes, and rely on informal recruitment networks that leave them outside routine state monitoring. Syndicates exploit this gap by recruiting through digital platforms, routing prospective workers through countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and obscuring the final destination and employment purpose until victims have already entered the trafficking process (Munte, 2024; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023). They also finance

travel and accommodation costs at the recruitment stage and later convert these expenses into debts that bind victims to scam operations after arrival (IOM, 2024). This pattern explains why protection often begins only after exploitation has occurred, when victims escape, are identified, or contact Indonesian authorities. The central problem, therefore, does not lie in the absence of formal regulations, but in an institutional mismatch between a protection system designed around procedural migration and trafficking networks that derive their operational advantage from bypassing precisely those procedures. This mismatch produces a persistent coverage gap in which the migrants most exposed to exploitation are also the least visible to the mechanisms intended to protect them.

These findings confirm and extend earlier research on human security and migrant-worker vulnerability. Fitria (2023), Khadifa (2024), and Denney and Xayamoungkhoun (2023) show that migrant workers often experience overlapping economic, legal, and physical insecurities that cannot be understood through a single dimension of risk. The present study supports that premise but advances it in two important ways. First, rather than using human security as a broad interpretive framework, it operationalizes personal security through four empirically traceable dimensions: state responsibility for protection, protection from non-state actors, protection from violent crime, and protection of vulnerable groups. This operationalization makes it possible to assess not only the existence of insecurity but also the institutional mechanisms through which protection is delivered, limited, or interrupted. Second, the findings show that insecurity does not necessarily end with rescue or repatriation. It can persist into the post-return phase when rehabilitation, economic recovery, and follow-up monitoring remain weakly documented or unevenly implemented. In this context, the phenomenon institutionally labeled “Repeated Offender” should be interpreted with caution, because repeated returns to exploitative environments may reflect ongoing structural vulnerability rather than simply individual risk-taking (DPWNI, 2025). The study, therefore, extends human security scholarship from an emphasis on exposure to threat toward a broader concern with the continuity of protection across the entire victim trajectory, from recruitment and exploitation to rescue, repatriation, and reintegration.

The findings also extend the analytical scope of personal security as formulated by Hanlon and Christie (2016). Their framework emphasizes protection from threats originating from the state, non-state actors, violent crime, and conditions affecting vulnerable groups. In the Indonesia–Cambodia case, however, the position of the migrant-origin state requires a broader interpretation because Indonesia is not primarily the perpetrator of violence but a protection-responsible actor whose interventions can be effective at one stage of the trafficking process and insufficient at another. This study, therefore, argues that personal security should be assessed not only by the existence of formal protection mechanisms but also by their continuity, reach, and institutional capacity throughout the entire trafficking trajectory. Within this extended framework, the temporal gap captures whether protection is activated before or only after harm occurs; the coverage gap identifies which groups remain inside or outside the reach of protection systems; and the capacity gap evaluates whether institutions possess sufficient resources and operational capability to implement their formal mandates. These three gaps do not replace Hanlon and Christie’s framework but refine its application to transnational migrant protection. Accordingly, freedom from fear requires more than rescue from immediate violence; it depends on a continuous protection process that extends from recruitment and departure to exploitation, rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

The practical implication of these findings is that Indonesia should shift from a rescue-centered model toward a continuum-based protection system that follows victims across the full trafficking trajectory. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh should standardize

case documentation and post-rescue tracking to enable systematic monitoring of case record completeness, referral completion, and follow-up rates. The Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers and immigration authorities should expand early-warning mechanisms beyond formally registered migrant workers by incorporating risk indicators associated with tourist-visa departures, indirect transit routes, and suspicious recruitment patterns; relevant indicators would include the number of high-risk departures intercepted and the proportion of identified cases referred for protection. The Ministry of Social Affairs and local governments should establish documented post-repatriation pathways that integrate psychosocial recovery, economic reintegration, and continued monitoring, with measurable outcomes such as rehabilitation uptake, employment recovery, and re-victimization rates. The interagency trafficking task force should also institutionalize gender- and age-disaggregated reporting and develop specific protocols for victims of forced complicity, minors, and survivors of sexual violence, using indicators such as demographic data completeness and access to specialized services. The central policy implication, therefore, is not simply the creation of additional regulations, but the redesign of protection mechanisms around the actual trajectory of trafficking rather than the assumed trajectory of procedural migration.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Indonesia's response to online scam-related trafficking in Cambodia was most clearly documented at the stages of rescue, consular assistance, victim identification and referral, and repatriation, while evidence concerning longer-term rehabilitation, economic recovery, and post-return monitoring remains less systematic. The study also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing among Indonesian citizens recorded in online scam cases, Indonesian migrant workers represented in migrant-protection statistics, and individuals formally or substantively identified as victims of trafficking in persons. The 6,782 online scam cases recorded globally and the approximately 4,300 Cambodia-related cases constitute a broader consular-protection caseload and should not be interpreted as equivalent to the number of confirmed trafficking victims or formally registered migrant workers. Within cases where trafficking and exploitation are specifically documented, transnational criminal networks used digital recruitment, tourist-visa travel, indirect transit routes, debt arrangements, document confiscation, confinement, and physical, psychological, and financial coercion. These patterns reveal a protection challenge that extends beyond the formal migrant-worker placement system. Across the evidence, three recurring implementation problems are visible: a temporal gap between the escalation of online scam-related exploitation and institutional responses, a coverage gap affecting citizens who travel outside formal migration channels, and a capacity-related gap between broad protection responsibilities and the institutional resources documented in publicly available sources.

The study contributes to personal security scholarship by extending the framework beyond the identification of threats toward the evaluation of protection continuity across the trafficking trajectory. It adapts the state-related dimension of personal security to the position of a migrant-origin country by conceptualizing the state as a protection-responsible actor whose effectiveness can vary across recruitment, departure, exploitation, rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The study also introduces temporal, coverage, and capacity gaps as analytical categories for assessing how formal protection systems interact with transnational trafficking networks. This approach connects legal protection studies, migrant vulnerability research, and transnational crime analysis by identifying the institutional points at which regulatory mandates lose effectiveness when criminal networks operate

outside the assumptions of procedural migration. The findings, therefore, suggest that stronger protection requires a continuum-based system that follows victims across the full trafficking process rather than concentrating primarily on rescue and return.

This study has several limitations. It relies on secondary documentary sources and therefore cannot directly verify victims' experiences, institutional practices, or long-term post-repatriation outcomes at the individual level. Publicly available data also remain uneven across institutions, particularly for gender, age, rehabilitation participation, economic reintegration, psychosocial recovery, and re-victimization. In addition, the study focuses on the 2020–2024 period and uses later publications only to confirm patterns that had already emerged within that timeframe. Future research should combine documentary analysis with interviews involving survivors, embassy personnel, migrant-protection officials, social-service providers, and civil society organizations, while also developing longitudinal evidence on post-return recovery and re-victimization. Such research would allow scholars to test more directly whether continuum-based protection can reduce the structural vulnerabilities identified in this study.

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