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**Sexual trafficking in the Golden Triangle and the lack of regional
solidarity**

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Abstract

The Golden Triangle, situated in Southeast Asia at the convergence of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, have been internationally recognized for its notorious opium industry. Yet, when the opium fever started to subside, human trafficking rise as a threat in this area. Primarily, sex trafficking stands out as the most prominent form of exploitation characterized by the high number of victims and the severity they endured throughout the trafficking ordeal. The extent of sex trafficking in this region is evident in the intricate networks established by criminal organizations and the involvement of bureaucratic officials.

In confronting this issue, Golden Triangle stakeholders have implemented ineffective or nonexistent anti-trafficking measures, while regional collaborative efforts have not shown their efficacy. Reason for this ranged from internal political instability and corruption to shortcomings in law enforcement that allow sex trafficking to persist and threatening human security of those involved. Moreover, China, as a neighboring country to this region, has shown interest to the Golden Triangle. Particularly, by investing in the special economic zones in Laos and Myanmar and forming connection with non-state armed groups along the China-Myanmar borders, China has been able to exploit the profits generated by human trafficking in the Golden Triangle. This action has not only hindered and slowed the efforts for anti-trafficking cooperation but also deepened the gravity of sex trafficking in the area.

Because of the neglect in addressing sex trafficking in this area, the objective of this thesis is to bridge the gap by presenting a comprehensive overview of the experiences of victims and analyzing the mechanisms in place to confront this thriving and threatening phenomenon in the Golden Triangle. This study also aims to address the lack of academic focus on the collaboration against trafficking among Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos specifically while previous studies have predominantly examined regional cooperation in Southeast as a whole. Hence, this research seeks to tackle the emerging yet underappreciated issues in this area. Through this research, I opt to draw attention to the imperative need for solutions and enhanced cooperation to combat sex trafficking in the Golden Triangle.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background insights

‘Golden Triangle,’ at first glance, might give the impression of a region of notable significance, whether from historical, cultural, economic, or geographical factors. Not to mention, the inclusion of the term 'golden' commonly implies associations with wealth and prominence in popular perception. A Golden Triangle known for its notoriety for illicit activities and transnational crimes lies at the junction of three nations: Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, (Sauterey, 2008, p.3). Functioning as one of the globe's major opium-producing regions since the 1950s and a source of heroin until the early 21st century, the Golden Triangle has persistently posed challenges for the surrounding region. Given the extensive track record of illicit trafficking, concerns are entirely warranted, particularly as human security becomes increasingly concerned with the rise of human trafficking and prostitution (UN, 2020). Therefore, in this thesis, I analyzed why sex trafficking in the Golden Triangle thrive and possible security threats.

Hence, sex trafficking in this thesis is defined as “commercial sex induced by force, fraud, or coercion (or where a person induced to such acts is under 18 years old) and the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through force, fraud, or coercion for involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” (US Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, para 5). No nation can shield itself from sex trafficking, whether it serves as the source, transit, or destination, particularly with the rise of organized criminal networks, notably in the Golden Triangle (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2006a). The cause of the concerning situation of sexual trafficking mentioned in my thesis is the lack of collaboration between the Golden Triangle-sharing border nations. Because of this, no standard policy or anti-trafficking framework was made, making the sex trade in this area unmanageable. Furthermore, the trio's lack of cohesion makes it susceptible to external influences, with some suggesting that China could exploit this vulnerability to serve its interests.

1.2 Research question

The focus of this thesis lies in addressing two significant issues within the Golden Triangle: sex trafficking and Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos’ failure to cooperate in anti-trafficking and the

extension of analyzing external influence on this area. This thesis, therefore, raises the question: Why is the Southeast Asia Golden Triangle a sex trafficking hotspot? Sub questions:

1. What the sex trafficking victims has faced during distinct trafficking process in the Golden Triangle?
2. How effective is the anti-sex trafficking cooperation of the Golden Triangle stakeholders?
3. To what extend do China impact the effectiveness of anti-sex trafficking effort and cooperation politically in the Golden Triangle?

1.3 Hypothesis of the study

The Golden Triangle is a sex trafficking hotspot due to the lack of cooperation among its stakeholders: Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. The lack of cooperation of the stakeholders has led to the emergence of traffickers and criminal organizations, who inheritance complex drug trafficking routes and methods for sex trafficking victims. Because of this lack of cooperation, the Golden Triangle is vulnerable to its neighboring nation, China. To serve its interest, China influence have deepened the sex trafficking and hampered the anti-trafficking collaboration of the Golden Triangle stakeholders.

1.4 Methodology

This thesis used the qualitative method due to the lack of data on human trafficking and sex trafficking in this region. Hence, to provide an insight in lack of academic coverage, of the severity of sex trafficking and the absence of unified cooperation among the involved nations, several methods of qualitative data analysis are used, including:

1. The ODI vulnerabilities to trafficking cycle (ODI, 2023).
2. Trafficking in Persons Reports 2023

1.5 Thesis structure

The structure of this thesis will be: Chapter 2 is the literature review where the historical background associated with opium production of the Golden Triangle is introduced as sex trafficking is inherited certain parts of this past. Supporting theoretical background also included here. The methodology of this thesis is presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 analyzing

the trafficking cycle to give insight of what the sex trafficked victims faced and through the experiences, demonstrated the seriousness of trafficking situation in this area, hence sub question one is answered in this part. Chapter 5 investigates regional cooperation and external influence, which are the main contributors that makes the Golden Triangle a sex trafficking hotspot and answer sub question two and three. Finally, conclusion and recommendations are mentioned in chapter 6.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

2.1. History of the Golden Triangle

To understand the roots of sex trafficking in the Golden Triangle and why this area is serving as a trafficking hotspot, it's important to investigate its history and background. The Golden Triangle, a mountainous and hilly terrain of the Mekong River basin, serves as the meeting point for the borders of three nations: Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos (Figure 1). Its name presents it as a “purely semiotic object, a catchy name used to refer to a geographical area in Southeast Asia important for opium-producing” (Ignasi, 2020, p.4). The prosperity in manufacturing this infamous product has established this area as the primary opium-producing region since the 1950s. It has consistently functioned as the hub of the illicit drug trade managed, overseen, and safeguarded by military leaders with organized crime figures in the region. For the area's distinctive feature, or ‘advantage’ of opium, its name was termed by Marshall Green, the United States Vice Secretary of State, during a press conference on July 12, 1971. ‘Golden’ used to portray the developed opium production industry that bloomed for over half of the twentieth century (Chouvy, 2013). The Golden Triangle had never functioned as a cohesive political entity. Hence, according to Ignasi (2020), the absence of any administrative presence led to forming a loosely defined transboundary area.



Figure 01: Golden Triangle location map. Source: Kidal Delonix (2016).

Despite the well-known history of opium production that has made the Golden Triangle region notable both regionally and internationally, human trafficking persists as a prevalent issue. Unfortunately, it is often overlooked despite being equally serious as drug trafficking. Human trafficking has only recently started to receive attention and become a concerning issue. Hence, the lack of credible data and the limitations of available approaches to the human trafficking situation in the Golden Triangle still exist (Bertil, 2022). Its nature as an illicit activity executed by transnational criminals makes it harder to gather statistics regarding the number of victims and the overall scenario (Sauterey, 2008). While indicating the exact timeframe when human trafficking began in the area is challenging, it has been a parallel concern, exploiting similar conditions and networks. Thus, human trafficking is more than just a recent phenomenon; rather, it has historical roots that can be traced back several decades that went along with opium trafficking. Due to the impact of the Industrial Revolution, European empires sought markets for their increasing volume of machine-produced goods, leading them to turn towards Asia. In the case of the Golden Triangle, exclusive control over opium was crucial to ensuring the success and financial gain of European colonies in Southeast Asia. Specifically, the excessively expensive Indian opium that the British were importing into their Asian colonies felt challenged by the rise of Myanmar opium production, leaving the British with no choice but to legalize the

cultivation and export of opium between these two neighboring nations. It was soon followed by Laos, therefore, the Golden Triangle has been formed by opium production and trade (Chouvy,2013).

After the establishment of the Golden Triangle, humans have been forced to relocate and subjected to trafficking for the cultivation of poppies (Tétényi, 1997). Therefore, the “golden triangle is no longer defined by the narcotics trade alone as trade in people is part of this significant evolution” (Broadhurst and Farelly, 2011, p.11). Human and poppies in truth, share a close connection. Scott (2010, p.86) analyzed that we have “overlooked the active agency of domesticates” by using the term “to domesticate” on humans as subjects and nonhumans as objects. Hence, poppy, considered an object, that should be controlled by humans. Therefore, the intricate networks involving farmers, distributors, and consumers motivated by heroin and profit desires, it is the poppy plant that assumes control. Consequently, as the demand for poppy cultivation increases, individuals find themselves manipulated and incentivized to engage in illicit activities (Ignasi, 2020). The analyzations of Ignasi (2020) have pointed out the close link between humans and poppies as representative of illicit activities. Hence, it helps to indicate when local resources prove insufficient to meet the demand, this dynamic transforms into transnational criminal enterprises. To execute this, criminal organizations trafficked victims to the Golden Triangle using the same routes used for the opium trade, known for its covert characteristics.

Authorities’ bureaucracy is also what makes this region a complex trafficking hub (Chouvy, 2013). Various armed factions, like the right-wing factions in Laos and communist parties in Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, as well as government units like the Thai military, police forces, and the Royal Laotian Army, actively exploited the opium and the human trafficking network to serve their interests. Instead of eliminating this illicit practice; its monetary advantages serve as a resource. Consequently, this has given rise to a dangerous network involving criminal organizations and local authorities.

Hence, drug trafficking and production in the Golden Triangle are paving the way for various perilous transnational crimes, with human trafficking emerging as the prominent. The involvement of criminal organizations and government bureaucracy established an ideal environment for the escalation of human trafficking, initially as a method to cultivate poppy and subsequently evolving into various forms of exploitation for financial gains. In particular, propelled by the desire to maximize profits, trafficked victims are exposed to drugs to facilitate their retention and exploitation. The use of addictive substances compels victims into sexual

exploitation, rendering them dependent and indebted to traffickers (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Criminal organizations orchestrating these unlawful activities are typically well-established entities with a history of prolonged operation. Their knowledge of trafficking routes, coupled with bribery practices, weaves a perilous web that ensnares victims of trafficking, significantly diminishing their chances of escape and seeking assistance. Moreover, in the competitive drug trade markets, the presence of criminal organizations leads to a surplus in supply over demand. To rejuvenate a market that is now saturated and to generate profits, human trafficking unquestionably emerges as a potential avenue for diversifying drug trafficking networks (Aronowitz, 2009). This trend persists and is preferred by criminal organizations because of the absence of effective prosecution against human smuggling and trafficking in many countries (Danziger, Martens, and Guajardo, 2009)

To conclude, while all the mentioned research able to answer why the Golden Triangle from an opium production area has occurred human trafficking, sex trafficking failed to be address. Notably, Ignasi (2022) and Broadhurst and Farelly (2011) able to indicate the rise of criminal organization and how illicit activities resulted in trafficking, an ignorance of sex trafficking analyzation and its reason still visible. Rather, the Golden Triangle opium industry has gained too much academic attention. Hence, my study aims to fill in the gap of not only focus on sex trafficking specifically but providing a detail analyzation of this phenomenon and possible solutions.

2.2. Securitization of human trafficking and its challenges

Securitization theory is applied to explain the prevalence of sex trafficking and human trafficking in the Golden Triangle. Specifically, the application of securitization helps to highlight whether anti-trafficking measures are effective, securitizing human trafficking and the underlying factors. The use of this theory is based on the ability to emphasize the political context of framing human trafficking as a security issue and anti-trafficking cooperation to address it.

Security, by definition, is “the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames of the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics” (Buzan, 1998, p.23). Hence, once a problem is securitized, it is presented as posing threats that demand imperative measures and attention to solve upon normal political procedure (Buzan, 1998). Therefore, securitization matters must be acknowledged and prioritized or else, it only

considered as securitizing move (Buzan, 1998). From that point, Hansen (2007, p.6) pointed out that security can be understood as political discourse, hence “it draws upon representations of identity linking to a conceptualization of identity as discursive, political, relational and social.” From there, security policy must “ascribe meaning to the situation and to construct the object within it and in doing so, they articulate specific identities of other states, regions, people, and institutions and on the identity of national, regional or institutional self” (ibid). For that reason, when a security concern is proposed, exceptional measures of prioritization and constructing a political discourse through institutional actors are needed.

Human security concept was first introduced in the 1994 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) as “a safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression as well as protection from sudden and harmful disruption in the pattern of daily life” (Archanya, 2002, p.326). Policy makers tend to link human security and development. Alkire (2003, p.36) answered by saying that both human security and development are people-centered concepts and human security can be understood “in a manner that is consistent with long-term human development.” Because of this connection, the human security concept can be used for analytical evaluation of anti-trafficking mechanisms.

However, when applying in the context of the Golden Triangle, resistance to frame human trafficking as a security issue or done in a superficial and rhetorical manner are visible. Sukma (2008) saying that human trafficking recorded to be the least securitized of non-traditional security issues both national and regional. His work also indicates, despite the threats to human security and development, human trafficking in Southeast Asia in general still treated as ordinary crime. Because of not securitizing, human trafficking was not prioritized and resolved with emergence measures to confront which leads to the thrive of this phenomenon in this area. Hence, securitization of human trafficking has failed to be applied inside the Golden Triangle.

Moreover, when applying securitization theory to examine the anti-trafficking mechanisms, the failure of recognized human trafficking as security problem heavily impacts on the effectiveness of cooperation. Specifically, Buayairugsa (2019), argues that the existing multilateral mechanism, ASEAN, and the COMMIT prioritized state-centric approach over human security, resulted in the failure in combating sex trafficking in the region. Being a member of these anti-trafficking forums, Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos are no exception in the failure to combat sex trafficking and collaborating. Despite the detailed work of examining sex trafficking in Mekong subregion, Buayairugsa (2019) reluctant to go into the insight of the Golden Triangle and its stakeholders. Hence, this thesis aims to fill in not only his but most of

the academic research in investigating the connection and cooperation of these three nations in anti-sex trafficking.

2.3. Soft power – tool for interests gain

As stated in this thesis, beside the ineffective anti-trafficking of the Golden Triangle stakeholders, external influence also a notable contribution to why this area a sex trafficking hub. In the context of this work, China and its interest is discussed as the reason for the deepening of the phenomenon and one of the factors of the lack of cooperation among the Golden Triangle nations. Soft power theory is applied to analyzed China motive due to its reasonability in answering its recent presences in this area.

Soft power theory means “a state’s ability to attract and persuade another state without the use of threats or payments” (Nye, 2004, p.8). Hence, “a country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries admire its values, want to emulate its example, aspire to its level of prosperity and openness, and so want to follow it” (Nye, 2004, p.50). For that reason, soft power not only can attract but having the ability to influence national political agendas by manipulating political choices. While soft power derives from culture, political values, and foreign policies, other cases of typical resources of hard power still create attractiveness. Thus, “a strong economy not only provides resources for sanctions but can also be a source of attractiveness” (Vaughn and Morrison, 2007, p.315). From a Marxist economic, the successful transition to socialist market economy have helped China positioned as developing country and a notable example for this statement.

While Western soft power values lie on democracy, Southeast Asia where the Golden Triangle belongs are more awe of China’s inviting pace of economic development and political power from this rapidly economic growing (Hwang, 2008). Hence, China has invested and support to Laos and Myanmar through bilateral foreign aids by which Yoshimatsu (2015, p.176) described as “pragmatic approach.” This approach is shown in the enormous investment in special economic zones and infrastructure development in both bilateral and multilateral levels. Surely, this foreign assistance brought positive outcomes resulting in economic growth and trade opportunities in these countries. This support does not serve purposely for regional development but to creates a belief and dependence by focusing on these government’s prioritized needs: infrastructure construction and economic benefits. Therefore, the more immediate and realistic merits the Golden Triangle nations sees, the more deepen the link with

China and leads to long-term political and economic gain to China (Yoshimatsu, 2015). By using soft power, China has taken advantage of the Golden Triangle resources and influence on the connection among this area stakeholders. Hence, instead of focusing on anti-trafficking cooperation to confront this threatening issue, these countries chase after the reality drawn by China. Moreover, China has also control armed groups located in Myanmar and China border for security and political interests which further deepening the seriousness of human trafficking in this area (International Crisis Group, 2023).

China presence and action in the Golden Triangle is a form of soft power. By persuading Myanmar and Laos to pursue given economic benefits, human trafficking continued to be neglect and be used, even. Due to the enormous finance of human trafficking and the effectiveness of criminal networks in executing illegal activities, China influence hampered anti-trafficking effort to serve its own interest. Therefore, this thesis further analyzation argue that China application of soft power have left negative outcome in regional anti-sex trafficking efforts.

3. Sex trafficking in the context of the Golden Triangle

3.1 Geopolitics of the Golden Triangle



Figure 2: Golden Triangle map - Mekong Section. *Source:* International Crisis Group 2023

The Golden Triangle, a mountainous area of 367,000 square miles, was founded in Southeast Asia, with the three corners of the triangle formed from the borders of three nations: Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and Laos. This region is known for its rough landscape, thick forests, and meandering rivers, with the Mekong River standing out as the most significant feature. This is also the home of diverse ethnic groups, inhabited in the valleys that ranged from Lao to the Shan. Blessed with rich natural scenery, varied ecosystems, and abundant biodiversity, this area is renowned not for its natural treasures but for its illicit commerce. In this case, the abundance of nature's gifts has ironically nurtured the flourishing of illicit activities.

While the rugged terrain and dense forests provide natural cover and obstacles to monitoring trafficking routes, the extensive network of rivers also aids in transporting illegal goods. Remarkably, the Mekong River, stretching approximately 5,000km from the Tibetan plateau to the delta in southern Vietnam, stands as the primary lifeline of the region (International Crisis Group, 2023, para 13). Its cruciality lies in its advantage in trade transportation and resource access; therefore, it is considered a vital trade route between China and Southeast Asia. Turning this characteristic into a benefit, a 100 km part of the river that connects China and the Golden Triangle has been explicitly used for human trafficking (Figure 4). Since the Mekong River is significant in regional trading, would turning this river into a major licit trade route under the authorities' control solve the illicit question? The rapids, rocky shoals, and security threats of criminal organizations leave this question unanswered. Yet it can't be denied that geographical uniqueness is crucial to make the Golden Triangle a hub for illicit commerce.

Lies at the intersecting borders of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, the Golden Triangle's unique location is also a factor in answering why illegal activities such as human trafficking thrive in this region. This also contributes to why this region has been beyond the reach of the law for decades. The Golden Triangle is strategically positioned at the intersection of crucial trade routes linking South, Southeast, and East Asia. These geographical advantages facilitate the movement of goods, resources, and people. Consequently, whoever controls these routes holds significant economic influence and power. Additionally, the Golden Triangle is situated at the convergence point of different nations with distinct principalities. While its location facilitates trade and migration, the lack of effective oversight and a consistent policy framework leaves this area largely uncontrolled by authorities. Remote areas involved in the Golden Triangle

were soon exposed to opium cultivation, and the vulnerable group of the community was subjected to being the victims of human trafficking (International Crisis Group, 2023). The Golden Triangle has never been recognized as a political entity, thus “lacking administrative existence and constituting a loosely defined transboundary region whose reality seemed to be an effect of discourse” (Ignasi, 2020, p.384). Hence, this area acts as a grey zone of law, nurturing infamous transnational criminal organizations, and numerous trafficking crimes have been executed. Moreover, the lack of transparency in law enforcement in Thailand and Laos further hindered efforts to combat human trafficking within the Golden Triangle, exacerbating the challenges of controlling and protecting trafficking victims.

It can be seen how the Golden Triangle uses its geographical advantages for illicit activities, where crimes can trap the victims in a dangerous, lawless web. The profits and resources gained from the Golden Triangle could be used for any motive, whether legal or illegal. Not to mention, taking into account the strategic importance of the location and foundation of crimes, the Golden Triangle could become a theater of great power rivalry in the competition for controlling markets and resources. With this reality, human trafficking will be beyond control, and the fate of women and children as vulnerable parts of the community, will be highly threatened.

3.2 Human trafficking routes

With the long history of the opium trade, there is no doubt about the complexity of transnational trafficking routes and patterns in the Golden Triangle. Inheriting this foundation, the flows of human trafficking, both internally and internationally, are considered to be a “highly complex political ecology” (Chouvy, 2013, p.60).

What makes human trafficking a complex phenomenon is the trafficking routes the traffickers use themselves, the legacy left by decades of drug trafficking. To gain a comprehensive insight into the trafficking routes, a trafficking map from Chouvy (2013) is used with some of my additional editing to fit the researched region.



Figure 3: Map of human trafficking routes in Southeast Asia. *Source:* Chouvy (2013), edited by author

Figure 5, by Chouvy (2013), portrays the human trafficking route in Southeast Asia regarding three primary trafficked means of transportation: road, air, and sea. Overview, dense trafficking routes are evident along the borders of Myanmar and Thailand, with three main human trafficking hubs situated within the Golden Triangle region. It can also be seen how connected and diverse the trafficking routes are between nations, lurking away from the grip of law and authorities.

According to the map, three trafficking hubs are Tachilek in Myanmar, Chiang Khong in Thailand, and Mohan in Laos, which are not too far from each other and lie on the boundary of the Golden Triangle. These trafficking hubs both serve as source and destination locations. Specifically, the Mohan human trafficking hub in Laos receives trafficking flow from the source country, in this case, China, to the Golden Triangle. From Mohan, the trafficking routes proceed through the trafficked hub in southern Thailand and potentially extend further, utilizing air trafficking routes to reach Japan, thus establishing one of the significant transnational human trafficking routes. What should be noticed is the Golden Triangle special economic zone situated in this area. The Chiang Khong trafficking hub in northern Thailand, on the other hand, only serves as a transshipment point for the trafficked flow from Myanmar and Laos. The Tachilek human trafficking hub in Myanmar, however, serves as both a source and destination location where it receives victims from Laos, China, and Myanmar itself. Hence, the Golden Triangle, anchored by these three trafficking hubs, forms its corners strategically positioned along the busiest and most intricate trafficking routes.

One of the reasons behind the diversity and intertwining of human trafficking routes in the region is the loosening of national borders. The issue first lies in the vague boundary definition between Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. While national borders refers to the divining line that represents the outer limits within which a nation exercises full territorial and functional sovereignty, be it encompassing land, water, airspace, and underground areas, “the boundaries between the Burmese and the Siamese (Thailand) consisted of a tract of mountains and forest, which is several miles wide and which could not be said to belong to either nation.” (Thongchai Winichakul, 1998, p.64). Hence, the delineation of borders in these areas was determined by the ethnic groups residing nearby rather than by the national authorities. Thongchai Winichakul (1998, p.64) analyses that the reason behind the difficulties of setting borders between Thailand and Myanmar was none other than the intense relationship of “arch-rivals since the sixteenth century,” and it was the British that created these borders. Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos are all young modern states that still carry some of the legacy of Western colonialism. As a result, the

boundaries established by Great Britain and France during their colonial rule have been inherited and utilized between Myanmar and Thailand, as well as between Thailand and Laos, despite differences in the Southeast Asian understanding of sovereignty delimitation (Jeansoulin, 2008). Specifically, the concept of the border remains a new phenomenon, and in some areas, the border is more of a frontier, a concept that lacks legal and political power.

As newly born political entities that just gained independence recently, flaws were visible when the governments of these nations started to involve and control their national border areas. Notably, the lack of control over peripheral areas, which is “characterized by a lack of political maturity, a lack of legitimacy of the central authorities, rampant corruption, and civil unrest” (Sauterey, 2008, p.9), created opportunities for illegal networks to use and develop transnational crimes. When looking into the situation of each nation in the Golden Triangle, Myanmar is not one but many countries based on its ethnic diversity. Therefore, the central government's control over the boundaries cannot match that of the *de facto* tribals in these areas, who have their own respective governments and military forces. Hence, criminal organizations will likely exploit this complex relationship for their interests. In the case of Laos, local governors propose more power than the government due to the influence of the decentralized political system, patronage network, and limited central oversight, making “the rivalry here more about the strength and the hierarchic power than the legitimacy of the authority, and it is through these areas that a major part of illicit trafficking is done” (Sauterey, 2008, p.10). On the other hand, Thailand's vibrant economy has generated an environment for cheap labor and sexual services, making this nation an ideal source and destination country (Sauterey, 2008). With the historical foundation of serving as a buffer zone during the Cold War, the lack of infrastructure was exploited by traffickers to evade detection and hide their activities. Local traffickers and organized crime groups especially take advantage of the poor communication infrastructure in the northern part of Thailand, marking the establishment of a dense trafficking network in this area.

Therefore, taking advantage of the open border and the lack of central governments in this area, numerous transnational human trafficking crimes have occurred. Hence, evolving from the drug trafficking route, the routes used for human trafficking are now far more complex and harder to detect and eliminate, furthering strengthen this trafficking hub dangerousness.

3.3 Sex trafficking process

To answer first sub question to analyze why this area is a sex trafficking hotspot, the ODI's vulnerabilities to the trafficking cycle is applied, details, and factors the victims face is discussed to indicate the vulnerability of the victims.

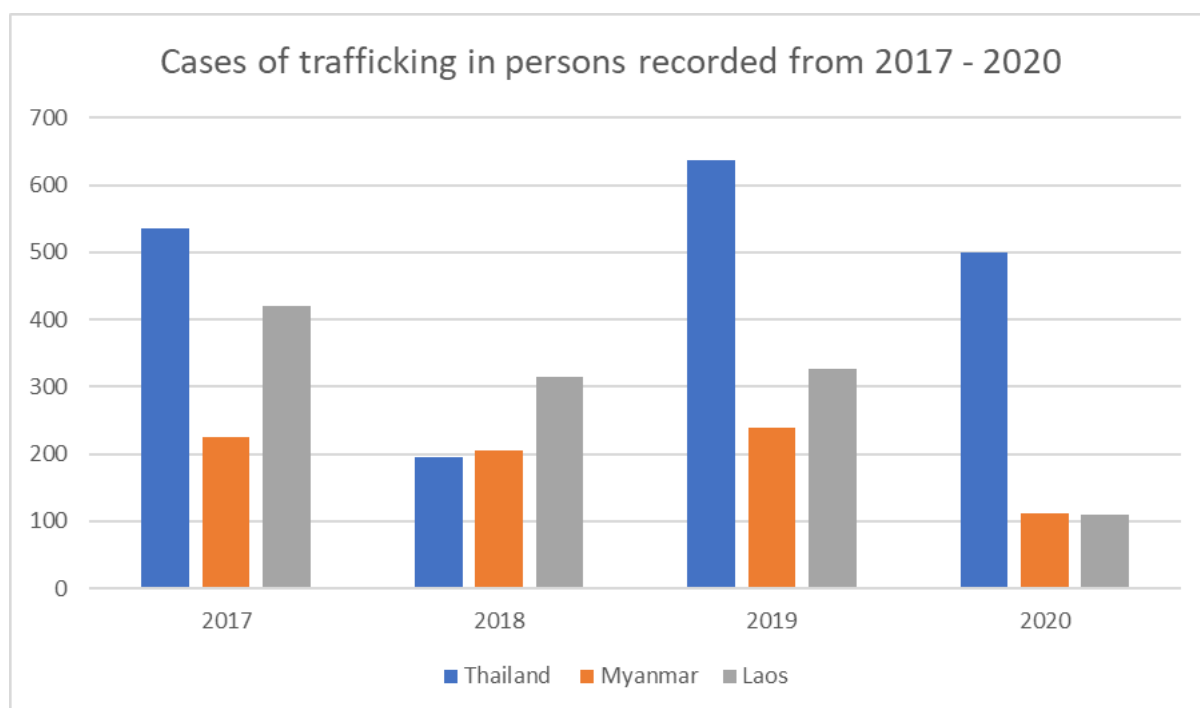


Figure 4: Cases of trafficking in persons recorded from 2017-2020. *Source:* Author's compilation from UNODC 2022 report.

Figure 6 shows data gathered from the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022, portraying the overall trend of human trafficking cases among the three mentioned nations, with a high number of instances above 100 recorded for most of the period. Throughout the reported period, Thailand remains the highest-recorded case of trafficking, as it has long been a destination and source country for sex trafficking. This growth can be analyzed by Thailand's complex socio-economic landscape, geographic location, and high demand for labor. Laos has the second-highest number of human trafficking cases. With approximately 400 trafficked cases recorded, 2017 was its most elevated. According to the 2017 TIP report, Laos was a source, transit, and destination country for sex trafficking victims, making this nation vibrant with illegal trafficking activities. Not to mention, under the emerging Golden Triangle and the Golden Triangle SEZ, numerous cases of women involved in sexual commerce have been

collected in this area. Visibly, Myanmar had the lowest number of cases; however, data could not accurately portray the number of trafficking cases due to the rapid and long-term internal conflicts in this nation.

3.3.1. Pre-departure

In this first stage, victims are prone to an economic vulnerability that varies from a lack of occupations to seeking high-paid jobs and opportunities and residing in developing cities. As proved by experts and governments, poverty is the most prominent factor that turns an individual seeking hope into a sex-trafficked victim.

Societal poverty rate (% of the population) from 2000 to 2021 in Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos

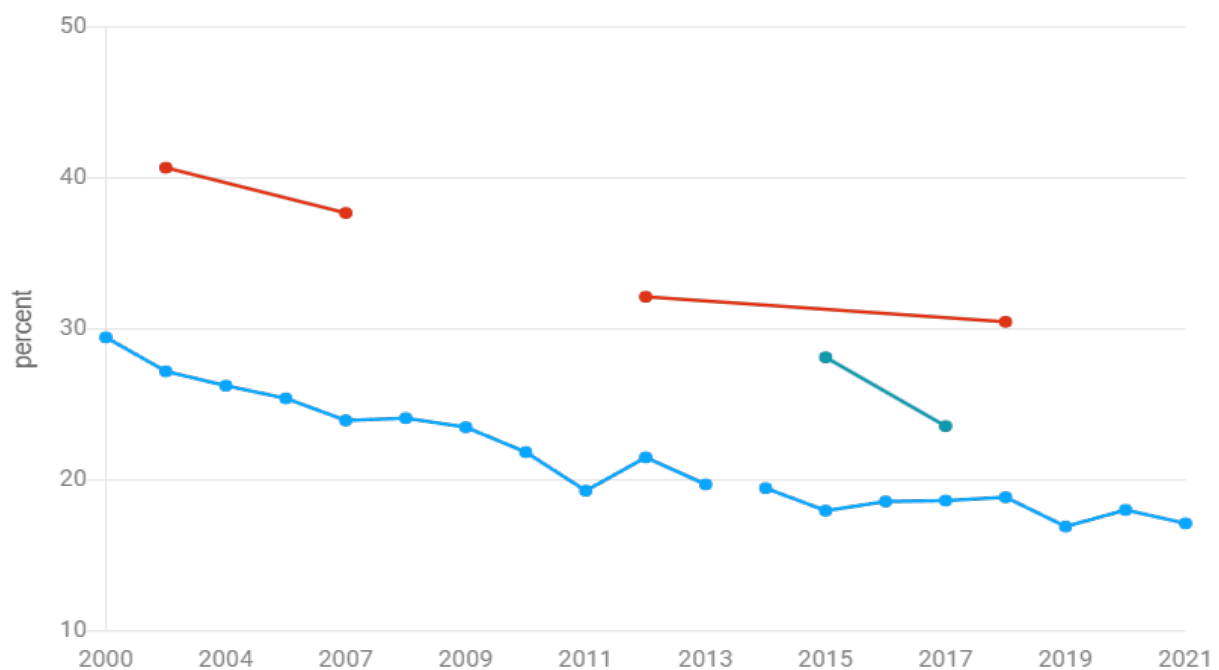


Figure 5: Societal poverty rate from 2000 to 2021 of the Golden Triangle sharing-border nations. *Source:* The World Bank (2024). (Thailand: blue, Myanmar: green, Laos: red)

A significant amount of the population within a specific age group has an income below the poverty line and faces various socioeconomic problems can be seen from Figure 7. Yet, it's crucial to have a deep insight into the distinguishing factors of each nation's economy to find out the reason behind this poverty rate, which has become one of the main tricks used to lure victims. In the case of Laos, its economy has experienced remarkable growth in recent years,

positioning itself as one of the most rapidly expanding economies in the area. Despite this positive growth, Laos's high poverty level is still listed as “the least developed country” by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2021, para 1). Thailand, having the most favorable economic potential and growth among the three countries, also faces the same problem of a rising poverty rate, which always remains at 10%. Laos and Thailand are similar because they are newly industrialized countries with young economies. Fast economic growth contains numerous problems and risks. In both countries, the unevenness of economic development can easily be seen when big cities are overloaded with economic resources while rural areas remain limited and stay backward. This implies that a shift in the labor wave where rural residents have to move to urban and developed regions for employment chances. The rise in living expenses has put enormous financial pressure on people. At the same time, the government provided no supporting policies or mechanisms, which has further made them vulnerable to illicit activities. When the demand cannot be fulfilled nationally, fraudulent promises of high-wage jobs gradually become attractive. Hence, Thailand and Laos’ economic growth is fast but unsustainable, which results in many individuals becoming potential trafficked victims for employment chances.

From the economy, various problems followed, all of which contributed to the pull factors of sex-trafficked victims. One specific aspect within the scope of gender and culture is how women and society see themselves, in the case of traditional views dyed in prejudice rooted for generations. Not only in Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos but in most Asian nations, gender discrimination still exists from household to community, making this situation “a gendered dimension of migration.” (Rushing, 2005, p.141). When the financing status gets challenging, girls and women are forced to stop their education and seek employment opportunities so their brothers, the males in the family, can continue school. Additionally, the sense of responsibility and the acceptance of the family make these women voluntarily the household's primary income (Kaime-Atterhog, 2000). In some instances, migration serves as a way out of the sexual and gender-based violence these women face in their community. Lack of education and occupational experience makes it almost impossible for them to have a high-wage job in a highly competitive employment market. Therefore, unskilled jobs are favorable, such as karaoke bars and massage parlors, which lie underneath these covers, is the rapid growth and rising demand of the sex industry. Young ethnic women in Laos and Myanmar with limitations in information and awareness are also the most vulnerable to being involved, as they “tend to be less aware of recruitment scams” (Blue Dragon, 2020, p.1). Hence, the demand for young

women within the sex trade has created the belief that greater earnings or increased financial support will render these women more exposed to trafficking and exploitation.

Another factor that lured victims into the sex trafficking network of the Golden Triangle and deepened their vulnerability, in the context of Myanmar, the significant event is the 2021 military coup. As mentioned in the TIP Report 2023, the military has forced 1.4 million people to be displaced both internally and externally in Myanmar, deepening the trafficking risk and their vulnerability. Specifically, “many of them are at high risk of sex and labor trafficking, especially when traveling to other countries for economic migration” (TIP Report, 2023, para 5). In this case, the military personnel acting as traffickers. While the TIP Report has shown some evidence of Myanmar’s military force recruiting child soldiers illegally, women are forced to engage in forced labor and commerce sex. What makes this situation serious is the fact that this national military force uses deception and coercion at a national level, leaving the victims with no choice but to compromise.

During the pre-departure stage, a lack of information and awareness regarding online scams and false promises plays a significant factor in luring the victims. Taking advantage of economic needs, traffickers used common social media platforms and put up employment advertisements that promise high salaries, and promote opportunities. The description of the job is usually unskilled, with no strict requirements. What needed to be done was simply take calls and work on call centers or online platforms (US State Department, 2022). In other cases, scammers will find potential victims with a promise of love and a stable relationship. What should be noticed is the sophistication and experience of these traffickers, as they have been trained and nurtured in criminal organizations (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023).

3.3.2. Transit

Regarding the geographical location and the bureaucracy in border areas, it’s not a difficult to move the victims to the destination location. The victims, who are irregular migrants, are forced to leave behind personal documents. This means they will cross through the borders and enter a new country without a visa or passport, making them lie outside the protection of the law. This is not only pushing the victims difficult to identify for future return but also turning into criminal offenses that could easily lead to detention, deportation, or fines. Without knowing what awaits and in the absence of personal documents, victims heavily depend on the traffickers at this stage, who will prepare new documents that will be used through the borders and in the

destination country (Zhang, 2021). Because of this dependency, the trafficker can easily abuse their power over the victims by pushing the migration fee. However, in some cases, the victims have not acknowledged the danger or the fact that they have become sex trafficked victims. Hence, no question or doubt will be raised, not to mention that some have to borrow vast amounts of money for this ‘opportunity.’ It's not until they reach their destination and become involved in the advertised occupation that they realize the truth. According to the 2023 TIP report, Thailand traffickers will use the absence of personal document status to force Laos men to become sex trafficking victims.

In the 2023 TIP Report, Thailand ranks tier 2 in the US TIP scale based on the acknowledgment of significant efforts in practicing anti-human trafficking frameworks. However, this does not change the fact that Thailand is a source, destination, and transit country. Situated in the heart of the Golden Triangle, Thailand serves as a transit nation for Laos and Myanmar trafficked flows.

From Laos, two main trafficked flows can be seen, with one heading to the Golden Triangle SEZ and the other to Thailand. Hence, data recorded from the 2023 TIP Report shows the number of 13,000 Laos residents subject to commercial sex and exposed to sex trafficking in these areas. However, information regarding the transit process to reach the Golden Triangle SEZ is lacking. Though the covert characteristic of this area can explain this, some believe it's the control of the government that blocks the information, and only after receiving approval from high-level members of the central government can it reach the SEZ (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). On the other hand, the transit process to Thailand was fairly easy due to its geographical advantage. Hence, diverse road transportation can be used, and the locals that reside in border areas passionately help the migrants with payment exchange. To hide from the eyes of the border control points, traffickers will likely choose a detour path. Like many border areas in Southeast Asia, certain areas near Thailand and Laos' borders lie covered in thick jungles and mountains with little to no residents, making it ideal to transit the victims. Since they are all in remote areas, trafficked victims are prone to lacking basic living standards that could result in a reduction in health conditions or, in some cases, death before reaching the destination country. Benefiting from 1,501 miles of the border, crossing the border to get to Thailand can be done individually with or without a visa for the Burmese. This is simply because of the long border, where the border control points cannot cover all areas and the instability inside Myanmar. Not to mention the corruption and bribes in the border officials on both sides and the fuel of the Myanmar military coup, leaving this nation's borders with no

guard. Thus, traffickers can easily transit victims by private or public transport and can change the trafficking route anytime when needed. However, after the emergent military coup, the presence of several transnational criminal organizations started to appear and become active along the border lines between Myanmar and Thailand. These organizations can participate in the trafficking process by acting as traffickers or collaborating to traffick and exploit the victims and, in other cases, sell them in casinos and gambling centers.

3.3.3. At destination

In this stage, the victims are exposed to much more intense and complex vulnerability now that they have arrived at the destination. The sex trafficked victims will first be exposed to the lack of information about the occupation that they agreed to work in. Based on the job description and what the traffickers told them before departure, service employment was expected in karaoke, salons, and bars. However, what's welcome for them is not a high-salary service job but being forced to sell sex to repay the migrant debt (Rushing, 2005). In reality, reports from UNODC (2017) have indicated sexual exploitation of Laos and Myanmar women in not only masked sex trading facilities like this but also in private residences where the victims are forced into marriage and childbearing. While the data on Laos women in Thailand is unavailable due to the hindering nature of this phenomenon, sex trafficking victims from Myanmar mostly ranged from 18 years old to above, with some cases still underage. Though illegal and morally unacceptable, this fits the sex industry demand in Thailand in particular and the region in general, with youth and beauty being the most crucial assets. The sex trafficking victims also face the dangerous working conditions that involve long shifts, strict to no freedom, and the risk of physical abuse. Since the sex trafficked victims are mostly young girls with knowledge limitations in protection and under the abuser's coercion, sexual activities are executed without proper protection. Hence, they are easily exposed to communicable diseases, such as HIV/AIDS (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023).

According to the 2011 TIP Report and Mon (2011), Myanmar's victims are trafficked to Thailand, face detention, and are sold to criminal organizations where the risk of being abused and exploited is exceptionally high. Eventually, these women will be transferred to work in strip clubs and bars that operate under their control and gain profits from the victim's body. Whether the criminal groups are exploiting them or not, the money they gain will belong to the traffickers or the one controlling them to pay the enormous debt hanging on their heads to be

in the destination location. A report from UNODC (2013) has indicated that migrants must give 406 USD to reach Thailand. Particularly in the case of the Burmese, the estimated fee ranges from 300-500 USD. Additional fees will eventually occur with “150,000 MMK in Myanmar and 10,000 THB when they arrive in Thailand. The fee will be taken from their income, while the migrant only receives 1,000 TBH each month” (UNODC, 2013, para 4).

Besides Thailand as an infamous trafficking destination, the Golden Triangle SEZ, situated inside the Golden Triangle, is also worth mentioning regarding the destination location of sex trafficking victims. Since its establishment in 2007, this SEZ has established itself as one of the most concerning illicit activity and human trafficking hubs in the region. Operated under the control of Zhao Wei, a Chinese gangsta who leads the Kings Roman Group, the Golden Triangle SEZ is a paradise of gambling, casinos, and the emergence of scam centers. According to the TIP Report 2023, the majority of the victims who are trafficked to this area are Laotians, Burmese, and Thai people, covering a significant number. For instance, the report mentions the presence of Burmese manual laborers near Lao’s area of the Golden Triangle who are suspected to be human trafficking victims

In the Laos TIP report, the destination of Laos girls will either be one of the many casinos in the area or the scam center. Specifically, after recruiting victims through online platforms, victims will be trafficked to the casino, where they will work as “chat girls”, selling their depraved images or chatting to attract male players involved in gambling and buying casino stocks (Laos TIP Report, 2023, para 4). Like any other trick to lure the victims, the high salary and free meals are completely fraudulent, as these girls are subject to enormous debt and the pressure to meet the requirement of selling stocks per month. However, most of them ended up being forced into sex trafficking for profit maximization, as the casino's requirements are exceptionally high. Regarding scam centers, trafficked individuals are often required to work extended shifts in online scamming companies or call centers, many of which are affiliated with casinos. Consequently, these roles often entail online gambling, cryptocurrency dealings, and money laundering—activities that yield profits for the Golden Triangle SEZ and the King Romans Group. Hence, cases recorded show victims being tormented physically, chained, and unable to meet basic living standards in these casinos and scamming centers, which presses their vulnerability (US State Department, 2022).

3.3.4. Return

For sex trafficking victims who are fortunate enough to escape, many factors contributing to their vulnerability. This includes social stigma, precisely the prejudged view the community will have of returning women. Instead of sympathy for the victims, they will suffer discrimination for being sex trafficked victims who have been involved in the sex industry, be it voluntary or not. Laos or many parts of Asia still view sexual occupation as society's vice, therefore lacking protection mechanisms and adequate rehabilitation services. This social stigma comes from the community and family, rooted for generations. Thus, the victims face not only physical vulnerability upon their return but also emotional vulnerability from being left out by society. The shame and disappointment make them unable to speak out about their experience and raise the risk of being re-trafficked (Domingo and Siripatthanakosol, 2023).

Though numerous trafficked victims have been saved and assisted in returning to their country, many more are still captured and held against will, especially on the border between Myanmar and Thailand, as well as in the Golden Triangle SEZ. Since there has not been any sharing of anti-human trafficking policies between the two neighboring countries, sex trafficking victims are still hopeless to free themselves. For victims who were trafficked and captured in the Golden Triangle SEZ, the connection with the criminal organization is one of the primary obstacles to finding a way out. Since the controller of the SEZ is a gangsta himself, the King Roman Casino has long served as an illicit hub, making this place significantly dangerous.

From the trafficking process, sex trafficked victims are prone to a dire reality. Serve as trafficking hub, these sufferings are nurtured and enhanced in the Golden Triangle. Through the analyzations of the victim's experience in the trafficking process, this chapter has answered sub question one.

4. Regional cooperation in anti-trafficking and external influence

4.1. Current situation of anti-trafficking regional cooperation

The region where the Golden Triangle is located, in particular, and Southeast Asia, in general, have long been facing human trafficking problems. However, no anti-trafficking mechanisms or sharing information platforms were made among this trio, the core of the Golden Triangle and famous trafficking hubs of the region. Hence, this part is indicated to answer sub question two that evaluates the effectiveness of anti-trafficking cooperation of this area stakeholders.

The reasons for this lack of anti-trafficking attention and cooperation are varied. To answer why human trafficking attention is being neglected, some common reasons shared by the three

nations include the incapacibilities of the institutional and legal implementation of governments in responding to human trafficking. Generally, the governments of these nations are frequently hampered by the legacies of poverty, violence, and corruption. Specifically, all three nations of the Golden Triangle are young states and are newly gaining independence from long-period conflicts. Besides the possible inheritance of colonial resource-explosive systems, the weakness of legal institutions' capacity and coordination contributes to corruption. This widespread phenomenon heavily interferes with the effectiveness of combating trafficking through the intended ignorance of transnational trafficking cases, weak regulations, and the lack of government attention to monitoring victims' protection agencies. In the case of Thailand, bribery from trafficking organizations and individuals still happened among government members and bodies, with cases of protecting brothels and commercial sex centers or engaging in the trafficking process themselves (TIP Report, 2023). The corruption among Thai officials also slowed the detection and prosecution procedures by prolonging the time foreign victims had to reside in shelters. Severe corruption also happened in Laos due to the lack of victim identification and referral procedures upon their return. Not to mention that the GTSEZ in Laos still actively serves as a regional trafficking hotspot without facing any legal or government pressure.

Besides corruption, political instability is one aspect that cannot be overlooked in Myanmar's most specific case. Rank in tier 3 in the 2023 US Department Tip Report, the control regime in Myanmar made little to no effort to tackle human trafficking. The military junta is not only able to take over the elected democratic government but also worsen the combat trafficking effort through the neglect of legal institutions and the absence of victim identification. Consequently, no trafficking cases were recorded to protect the victims and “inappropriately penalized victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.” (TIP Report, 2023, para 3), meaning they are facing legal punishment for being trafficked victims. Severe cases of military officials violating human rights and participating in the trafficking process are also recorded.

Additionally, difficulties in legal implementation from central to provincial levels are still visible, especially in Laos. One aspect that contributes to the lack of attention of combating trafficking is the profit created from it. Thailand and its sex tourism are the most notable cases. Karen (1999, p.114) pointed out that “an alliance is formed between the local government in search of foreign currency and both local and foreign businessmen willing to invest in the sex industry” in the scenario where Thailand's economy depends significantly on the profit created

from this industry. This causes Thailand to be willing to bear international pressure rather than eliminate sex tourism on its territory.

While these are common and specific factors leading to the neglect of anti-trafficking efforts, what creates the lack of combat trafficking cooperation is more explicit. Despite a reasonably positive diplomatic relationship with Laos, Thailand has a fairly complex connection with Myanmar. After being rivals for three centuries during the Burmese and Siamese wars, diplomatic relations were established in 1948. Though various elements led to this prudent decision, the involvement of opium or the Golden Triangle couldn't be denied, as demonstrated by the heroin invasion in the Shan States by the Thai Northern Army in 1942. Since then, the connection between the two nations has faced challenges. The criticism of the constructive engagement approach is that, "it has led to enhanced border security and increased trade, but has also exacerbated tensions and strained relations between the two." (Buszynski, 1998, p.100). This diplomatic approach encouraged positive outcomes in humanitarian aid, economics, and cooperation promotion between the two nations, despite criticism that Thailand invaded too deeply into Myanmar's affairs. The relatively close connection between the Thai government and the Myanmar military junta is the other factor that not only collides diplomatic relations but also deepens the complexity of anti-trafficking collaboration. The bond between the two militaries is portrayed through what Sanglee (2021, para 4) described as Thailand's "quiet diplomacy." Contrary to ASEAN's assertive approach to the Myanmar military coup, Thailand remains cautious and has not criticized the ruling junta. Though some believe this is Thailand's solution for peace, others fear this contrary attitude fueled by profits from the rising supply to its tourism industry, allowing a disruptive approach to Myanmar's energy supply and increasing regional influence. Hence, not only is anti-trafficking cooperation between the two harder to happen, but human trafficking victims could potentially be used.

Moreover, judging from Myanmar's long history of instability and the current internal conflict, including the 2021 military coup that took over the democratically elected government, it's harder for Myanmar than any other nation to engage in anti-trafficking collaboration. Already unstable with a high level of poverty and enormous socio-economic issues, it was after the military coup that Myanmar pushed further to the edge of a "collapsed state." (International Crisis Group, 2021, para 1). Since the success took over, the military junta has severely executed and violated human rights towards those who were against its political position, engaged in, and profited from this act. Unable to function as a nation, this has become a significant obstacle to regional cooperation and anti-trafficking solution implementation

Though no anti-trafficking effort was made among the trio to tackle the human and sex trafficking situation in the Golden Triangle, they still participate in multilateral regional agreements and high political dialogues to reduce trafficking cases and protect the victims (figure 6).

On the one hand, In terms of multilateral agreements in anti-trafficking that involve the three Golden Triangle nations. Recognizing the serious nature of human trafficking in the region and the inefficiencies of combating it independently, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has become a pioneer in establishing regional cooperation dialogues when human rights institutions are absent. Even though human trafficking is not prioritized on many national agendas in the region, ASEAN efforts have met specific achievements. One of its soft law instruments, the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP), established in 2015, has made significant efforts to address human trafficking by creating an open forum for information-sharing and preventing human trafficking cases. The Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative Against Trafficking (COMMIT) is also one of the regional attempts to combat human trafficking in the region. From the experience of the ACTIP, the COMMIT was able to assist and protect 5000 victims (UNACT, 2015). This was made possible by formulating a national anti-trafficking system that can monitor the victim's protection and prosecution processes in the member states. One thing that should be noticed in the COMMIT achievement was the success in recognizing and including male victims in human trafficking identification.

A regional cooperation in anti-trafficking that is worth noticing is the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region. This agreement is a commitment among signed nations to combat human trafficking through open dialogue, frameworks, and raising capacity through infrastructure investments. To secure efficiencies in anti-trafficking, the MoU recognized the imperative need for proportionate penalties and the crucial role of confiscating traffickers' assets, an evolving step compared to prior agreements. Additional regional sharing efforts that have the participation of the three Golden Triangle nations are listed in Figure 9, along with their efficiency and inefficiency in combating the human trafficking process.

Despite the high number of agreements and political dialogues that have been made, the rising cases of human trafficking victims are still recorded in the Golden Triangle. In a narrow view, most anti-trafficking collaborations cover broad areas of Southeast Asia, meaning they're not specifically made to tackle human trafficking in the Golden Triangle alone but in the whole

region itself. Due to differences in the human trafficking situation in each area, despite being in the same region, the large cover makes it inefficient to reduce the number of human trafficking cases. Hence, judging from the complex trafficking routes and the presence of criminal organizations, the lack of collaboration designed for this area is one of the main contributors to the inefficiency in preventing human trafficking. This is none other than the result of the lack of cooperation among the nations inside the Golden Triangle themselves, who bear the responsibility. In a broader view, common reasons that lead to the inefficiency of combating trafficking are resource limitations, weaknesses in legal implementation, and a lack of cohesive guidelines in victim identification and protection for the member states. Since most of them are non-binding agreements, the difficulties in monitoring the performance and responsibilities of the member states are still obstacles to anti-trafficking effectiveness.

On the other hand, in terms of certain bilateral anti-trafficking that is still recorded among the three nations through the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Employment of Workers (MoU), Thailand is the mediate between Myanmar and Laos. This memorandum operates separately from the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region, with only Thailand signing with other countries. Specifically, it was designed to promote a framework to employ workers, ensuring a safe labor migration environment through cooperation. This means that those who seek employment outside borders and participate in this agreement will be protected by law and able to work and find legal occupations without seeking out illegal channels.

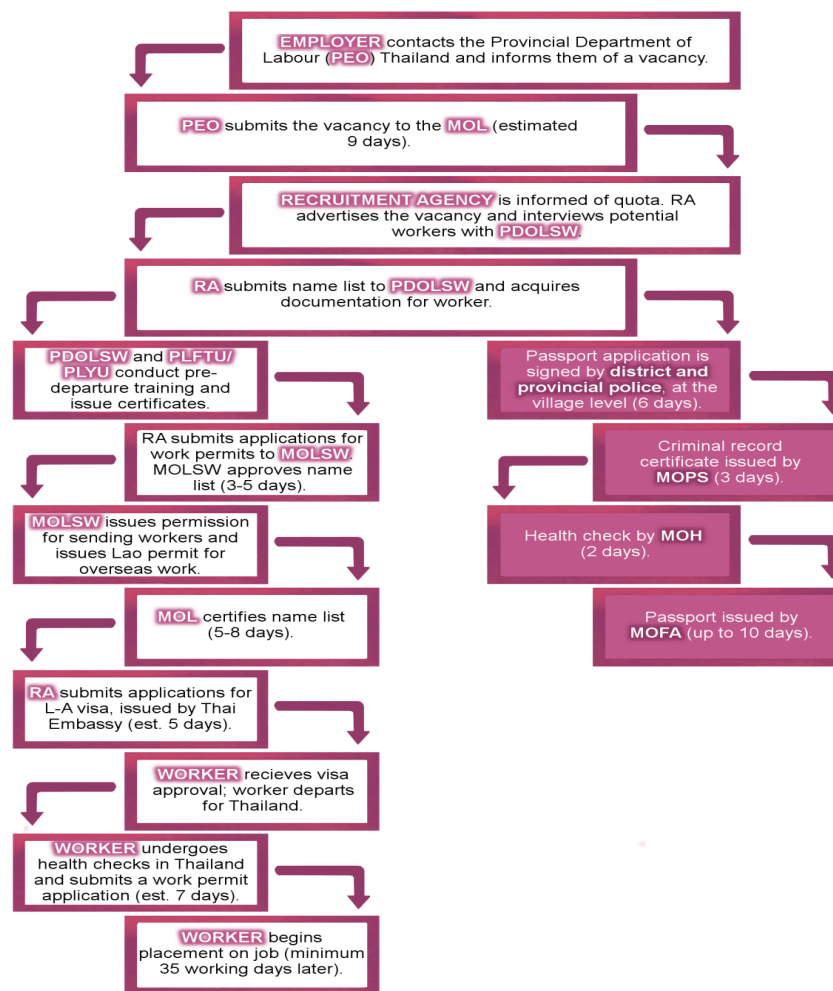


Figure 7: MoU recruitment process for workers. *Source:* ILO, 2015.

However, this framework still faces specific criticisms. One of them is the prolonged and expensive procedures that make most migrations hesitate to be involved. Not to mention the strict requirements of personal documents and the large number of registers, this memorandum is unapproachable. The efforts of only the Thai government are not enough to secure the framework's effectiveness. Laos, which signed the agreement, faced human resources, technology, and budget limitations when only 10% of Laotian migrants passed the MoU procedures (World Bank, 2012). On the other hand, the Myanmar government shows no effort to sustain and develop the recruitment procedures under the MoU framework. For these reasons, the majority of migrants still choose irregular cross-border methods, despite the high risk of being a trafficked victim.

It can be seen that the anti-trafficking mechanism remains ineffective and the primary reason is the lack of cooperation in the core nations of this area. While reasons varied from economic to

diplomatic and political, the truth cannot be denied that despite anticipating a high number of regional collaborations, it will only be when Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos have their agreements designed for the Golden Triangle itself that the situation can be addressed. Thus, to tackle human trafficking in general and sex trafficking in particular, these nations need to step over their internal and external issues to work together in anti-trafficking prevention.

4.2. External influence on the area

4.2.1. Strategic presence of China in Laos

China's influence on Laos is most visible in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ) located in Lao's Bokeo province. This economic zone was established in 2007 through a collaboration between the Laos government and a Chinese-owned Hong Kong-registered company, Kings Romans Group. Although it's operated under the control of private commercial subjects, given the fact that a Chinese gangsta, Zhao Wei, is in charge of this loosely controlled area, it's not challenging for China to exercise its influence.

Since its construction and establishment, the GTSEZ has been active, contrary to the definition of an economic zone. While it serves as an illicit hub, combining any illicit activities to maximize the profit that ranges from money laundering, gambling, and human trafficking, it also torments the surrounding area's and Lao's neighboring security. China's investment and intended neglect of the illicit activities in this area also contribute to its "intelligence gathering and power projection." (Crisis Group Report, 2023, para 80).

With the backing of China, the GTSEZ continues to be "beyond the normal legal and regulatory framework that applies to the rest of Laos; it operates with a "state of exception." (Laungaramsri, 2017, p.523). Hence, the Kings Roman Group "has its own private, foreign security service that provides 'policing,' making it difficult to monitor or take action against any illegal activity that takes place." (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021, p.7). As stated, no one gets to approach the Golden Triangle SEZ without approval from the government members. In other words, this SEZ is located on Laotian territory, meaning the Laotian central government has full authority over it. Still, reality says otherwise about the de facto state of this area. Moreover, judging from the high corruption rate of Laos political entities, there is a high chance that Zhou Wei has made some allies through bribery, making this SEZ untouchable.

To answer the presence and growth of the GTSEZ, it's crucial to look into the relationship between this nation and China. Using economic engagement to achieve strategic goals, China has successfully executed 'debt-trap diplomacy' that makes Laos prone to economic dependence. As China is one of Lao's primary foreign investors, Laos has executed several Chinese loan infrastructure projects. Particularly notable is the China-Laos high-speed railway, a key component of the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to link southern China with the mainland of Southeast Asia. Instead, what Lao faced was \$6 million added to this nation's debt burden, valued at \$14.5 billion. The 2021 World Bank report reported that Lao's public and publicly guaranteed debts amounted to 88% of its gross domestic product (GDP). Despite this enormous loan, China's investments are still welcomed, which is evident in the willingness of the GTSEZ establishment. After the emergence of the GTSEZ, the tourism industry, and foreign investment have brought significant changes to not only Bokeo province but also implemented hope. Specifically, Bokeo province, where the GTSEZ is located, transformed from the most severely impoverished area to one of the most prosperous in the nation (Lao Statistics and World Bank, 2020). This has created hope for Lao's authorities by expecting this rapid and positive change to spread and eventually transform the nation out of debt. Hence, the Laos government sees the GTSEZ as an economic opportunity, despite this area being an example of "sovereignty for sale" (Drezner, 2009, p.65), and the profits created are made from illegal activities. Hence combat sex trafficking was ignored over economic interests.

4.2.3. Connection and motive of China in the Golden Triangle.

As aforementioned, this area is located in the Mekong River, a vital channel of trading and water resources. Hence, China has built eleven dams along the Mekong mainstream to control the water flows and directly affect Thailand, and use this resource as a leverage tool to meet its interests over countries that depend on this river. Hence, eleven dams in the Mekong River serve as China's 'soft power' for the goal of regional hegemony (Howe and Knight, 2012, para 4). These acts not only hampered regional security, fueling transnational crime activities, but also affected the cooperation process of the Golden Triangle. China exercises its influence in the Golden Triangle region through economic and cooperation zones like the GTSEZ in Laos, which foster regional economic collaboration on the outside and financial dependence and illicit hubs on the inside (Figure 11).

List of China's involvement in economic and cooperation zones in the Golden Triangle	
Name	Location
Sino-Thai Rayong Industrial Park	Thailand
Thailand Eastern Economic Corridor	Thailand
Vientiane Saiseta Comprehensive Development Zone	Laos
Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone	Laos
Ruili-Muse Economic Cooperation Zone	Myanmar
Kyauphyu Special Economic Zone	Myanmar

Figure 8: List of China's involvement in economic and cooperation zones in the Golden Triangle. *Source:* Author's compilation

The majority of these economic and cooperation zones do not meet the definition of an economic zone by providing short-term profits and unsustainable growth in the areas in which they are located. Most of them become illicit hubs and trafficking hotspots that propose severe consequences, yet some still hallucinate solutions for the nation's prosperity, as in the case of Laos and Thailand. Myanmar, with the military junta taking control, unable to function as a state, was left with no choice but to compromise. Hence, China has taken full advantage of the vulnerability of the Golden Triangle in the absence of regional cooperation and has further prolonged and interfered in this process by creating more threatening problems. Therefore, China influence on the Golden Triangle did impact the effectiveness of anti-trafficking effort in certain level.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Sex trafficking in particular, and human trafficking in general, remains an emerging problem in the Golden Triangle, making this place a regional hotspot for sex trading. This is evident in the dire situation they have to face in each trafficking process. Despite the seriousness of this scenario, a lack of cooperation in anti-trafficking is still visible among the core nations of the Golden Triangle, which is one of the main reasons for the unmanageable thriving of this phenomenon. Specifically, criminal organizations and the inheritance of the drug's hidden and complex trafficking routes and methods still actively lure and exploit victims' vulnerabilities without a practical approach to eliminating them from the governments.

While sex trafficking remains unsolved, the lack of cooperation between Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos has deepened the vulnerability of the Golden Triangle to external influences. Neighboring the Golden Triangle, China has actively engaged in the affairs of this area to serve its interests in stable economic growth by taking advantage of the illicit profits through the web of casinos in the economic zones. These approaches will benefit China's long-term regional aims of obtaining power. Because of this, sex trafficking will not only be left unsolved but will also strengthen profit maximization.

Therefore, this study shed light on the situation of sex trafficking and examine the anti-trafficking cooperation of the Golden Triangle stakeholders. With the resulted of inefficient cooperation that further leads to the exposure to external influence, there is an impressive need for regional cooperation among Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos to enhance the internal and external security of the Golden Triangle. To do this, adopting an open information-sharing platform and effective regional guidelines is crucial. Additionally, regional assistance should be provided to enhance the economic and living standards in the area while working to dismantle criminal networks through collaborative multilateral efforts. By having strong unification and efficient protocols to address illicit activities in this area, an internal positive transformation could happen and lower the risks of being influenced by external influences in the Golden Triangle. Further research to investigate human trafficking aspect and prevention methods are still needed for a stable and safe future of the Golden Triangle.

Recommendation

5.1. Prevention

The main driving force behind trafficking victims is poverty, leading many to be enticed into crossing borders or migrant to cities in pursuit of employment opportunities. Therefore, to prevent the risk of victims being trafficked, it's essential for the trio's government to economically focus on rural areas through economic transformation and move towards a more balanced economy nationwide. The government's investment in rural infrastructure, small-scale industries, and microfinance programs can promote the rural economy, which is already filled with diverse resource potentials. This will undoubtedly create positive outcomes by creating livelihood opportunities in rural areas and contributing to more sustainable economic growth nationally. Not to mention, being able to provide stable occupations will reduce the overload of central cities, the socio-economic issues that come with the phenomenon, and the chances of seeking irregular channels. The governments should also diversify income resources to reduce dependency on single income streams. Encouragement in non-traditional employment, especially cultural and traditional occupations, should be taken into consideration.

One of the contributors to successfully luring the victim is the lack of foundational knowledge regarding the trafficking situation of rural residents. Because of the lack of awareness that many victims are subjected to being trafficked by false promises or the pressure of seeing others have success by taking these fraudulent offers. To tackle this problem, governments should conduct efficient educational guidelines for anti-trafficking and safe migration to raise awareness among the province's authorities, tourism representatives, communities, and schools. These anti-trafficking educational protocols should be applied flexibly according to each province and area's unique characteristics through a range of training. The training process could include recognizing potential victims, and targeting and assisting them early before the trafficking process begins. Specifically, judging from the adaptability of the traffickers, online scammers and fraud recognition should also be trained. The involvement of local communities is also essential to help prevent the exposed risks by providing close information, emotional and financial assistance.

5.2. Prosecution

Legal implementation is one of the main factors in tackling sex trafficking in the area. While prosecution and criminalized trafficking still face particular difficulties in the trio, the

governments should develop legal mechanisms for clearly classifying types of human trafficking and accompanying penalties, as well as identify each kind of victim trafficked for effective law enforcement. Moreover, trafficking should be considered equally serious as other hideous crimes, as human trafficking results in the tragic loss of victims' lives and stands as one of the most severe violations of human rights. Hence, it's vital for the government's juridical body to apply suitable penalties that fit the severity of this crime; besides finance, prison sentences should be included. Additionally, little to no leniency should be considered due to the concerning nature of this crime and the enormous profits and resources of the organizations controlling it. This means that suspended sentences, fines, and administrative penalties during the prison period should be refined to a more suitable measure.

Legal mechanisms and criminalization should also be used strategically for comprehensive anti-trafficking measures. Notably, law enforcement agencies and prosecutors must bring attention to areas recorded as extremely concerning cases with a high number of victims being trafficked and expropriated, which in most cases are border areas or hubs of criminal groups, instead of low-dangerous level areas. This does not mean domestic areas with unskilled traffickers are not as important; rather, they could be handled by local judicial bodies, while high resources can be focused entirely on high-level trafficked areas without being overloaded and causing delays during the prosecuting process.

5.3. Protection.

To protect sex trafficking victims, governments need to ensure the absence of social stigma and the reassurance of the social reintegration process. On the side of social stigma, awareness campaigns to raise social understanding of the situation and empathy for the victims are needed, along with reducing harmful gender norms that perpetuate vulnerability. On the side of the victim's social reintegration, the support of the government and NGO agencies should be strengthened. Specifically, shelters and social homes aim to provide urgent and timely assistance to victims' physical and mental health by professional counselors and trained social workers. Though these places are designed to provide holistic care, empowerment, and legal protection to the returned victims and gradually prove their efficiency, many facilities face limited resources to sustain and provide quality services. Therefore, a call for government attention in this area is needed to ensure the effectiveness of the victim's integration.

By applying the 3P framework introduced by the US Department of State, a lower number of sex trafficked victims is expected. However, to ensure the efficiency of this recommendation, it's important for nations to treat it equally with economic growth and other priority goals. Because of the hideous nature of this crime and the limitation of this study, further research and investigation are needed to fully address the sex trafficking situation in the Golden Triangle.

6. Appendix and bibliography

Appendix

List of regional cooperation in anti-trafficking

Name	Signed country	Efficiencies in anti-trafficking	Inefficiencies in anti-trafficking
ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP)	Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam.	- o Ensure the fairness and effectiveness of punishment for traffickers. - o Protect and assist trafficking victims. - o Promote regional cooperation through a broad scope of purposes	- o No obligatory or mechanism to help victims reintegrate and re-traffick. - o Unable to meet the TIP protocol standard given by the UNCTOC. - o No criminalized general guidelines and penalties were given to member states.

**Coordinated
Mekong
Ministerial
Initiative
Against
Trafficking
(COMMIT)**

Cambodia,
China,

Laos PDR,
Myanmar,
Thailand,
Vietnam.

o Member states can
formulate a national
anti-trafficking
system that can
monitor victim
protection, policy,
and prevention
progress.

o Consider men
trafficking as a
crime

o Create open
dialogues to enhance
cross-border anti-
trafficking
effectiveness and
collaborations.

o Implementation of
policy into action
is still facing some
challenges.

o Limited resources
and varying
capacities remain
the obstacles of
the COMMIT.

Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP)	Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Denmark, Germany, India, Japan, South Korea, Laos, Myanmar, Netherlands, Norway, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, US, UK, Vietnam.	- o The first regional multilateral government-to-government agreement with 16 Asia countries and 5 outside region nations. - o Foster collaboration among member states and efficient law implementation on marine. - o Able to prevent and track criminal networks and trafficking cases on sea routes through a real-time information-sharing platform.	o The active zone does not cover the region's major sea routes due to the absence of Malaysia and Indonesia, which controlled these routes.
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Mekong Integrated Enforcement Operations (MILO)	China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand	- o Tackle transnational crime on the Mekong River and safeguard regional security through border management. - o Provide an information-sharing platform for member states to prevent trafficking cases and detect traces of criminal organizations. - o Promote collaboration among the member states in detecting human trafficking cases.	- o Lack of stable funding and suitable technology for effective policy implementation. - o Cross-border cooperation is still fragile, making it an obstacle to eliminating criminal networks.
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Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons in the Greater Mekong Sub- Region (MoU)	China, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam	o Create an open forum and promote collaboration among the member states to combat human trafficking	o Implementation differences between member states, evidently through economic gaps
		o Raise capacity building through investments in creating experts and infrastructure for efficient measures to combat trafficking.	o Differences in legal framework, implementation, and procedures among member states.

Figure 6: Regional collaboration in anti-human trafficking. Source: Author's compilation.

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