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Human trafficking in Myanmar and cooperation within ASEAN: Sexual exploitation and forced labour in the construction sector

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Abstract. The aim of the study was to examine the development and extent of human trafficking problems in Myanmar during 2010-2025. The methodology included a theoretical analysis of the concept of human trafficking and the factors that cause this phenomenon, a documentary analysis of legal documents, and a comparative analysis of international reports on Myanmar, which allowed comparing the legal framework, enforcement mechanisms, and regional cooperation. Human trafficking has been studied as a complex phenomenon that encompasses forced labour and sexual exploitation and is carried out through the recruitment, transportation, and use of persons against their will. It has also been established that its prevalence is caused by poverty, economic and social vulnerability, unequal access to education and social services, conflicts, political instability, and inadequate legal protection. The situation in Myanmar in 2019-2023 was analysed, where 1,105 complaints about forced labour were recorded, of which 707 (≈64%) were resolved, 23 children were released, and 18 military personnel were brought to justice. Data on 418 Rohingya refugees who suffered abuse was summarised, of whom 70.1% were men, 29.6% were women, and 0.3% were non-binary persons; In 86% of cases, forced labour prevailed, and in 87% of cases, recruitment was carried out through promises of employment, most often by neighbours, strangers, and acquaintances. It was concluded that effective counteraction to human trafficking requires a combination of national and international measures to criminalise exploitation, complaint mechanisms, training of law enforcement officers and prosecutors, awareness-raising campaigns, and interstate coordination, and international documents form standards for the protection of victims and coordination of investigations, strengthening cooperation between countries to detect, prevent, and prosecute such crimes. The results of the study can be used by government and international organisations to develop policies, programmes to protect victims, and improve mechanisms to combat human trafficking in Myanmar

Keywords: counteraction mechanisms; victims; operational practices; protection of victims; international reports

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Introduction

The relevance of the topic is conditioned by the fact that human trafficking in Myanmar combines human rights violations with transnational migration processes and shadow labour markets, where sexual exploitation and forced labour remain the riskiest, in particular in the construction industry. Socio-economic inequality, armed conflict, internal displacement, and labour migration increase the vulnerability of the population to recruitment, debt dependence, fraudulent employment, and exploitation, and extending these practices beyond state borders makes them difficult to detect and prosecute. The problem of the study is the limited consistency of legal norms and practical counteraction mechanisms between the countries of the region, which weakens the protection of victims and the effectiveness of investigations in cross-border cases. In these circumstances, cooperation within ASEAN (Association of SouthEast Asian Nations) is of key importance as a tool for policy coordination, regulatory harmonisation, and joint response of law enforcement and social services to trafficking-related crimes.

Theoretical approaches to human trafficking analysis are based on understanding the interaction of consent, coercion, and fraud. Researchers have thoroughly investigated this problem, offering various scientific approaches and interpretations that reflect the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon of human trafficking and different views on the mechanisms of its occurrence and reproduction. For example, J.S. Albanese *et al.* (2023) showed that a victim's formal consent to migration or employment masks hidden forms of coercion, debt dependence, and manipulation. Formal consent occurs when the victim officially agrees to migration or employment without realising the actual pressure, debt obligations, or manipulation that effectively restricts their freedom of choice. Further, R. Andrijasevic (2021) expanded the understanding of forced labour through an analysis of global supply chains, highlighting the intersection of labour exploitation, migration, and gender inequality. Forced labour includes forms that include physical or psychological coercion, restriction of the employee's freedom, debt dependence, threat of punishment, and manipulation to force them to perform work against their will. The issue of sexual exploitation is closely linked to child trafficking. D. Nazer & J. Greenbaum (2020) stressed that children from regions of armed conflict and poverty are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, including commercial sexual violence. This is conditioned by a combination of economic vulnerability, lack of protection and social support, which leads children from conflict regions to exploitation and violence.

Labour exploitation of migrants in construction has much in common with other forms of forced labour. The experience of agricultural migrants was analysed by J.S. Norwood (2020), who identified universal risks associated with lack of legal protection, language barriers, and dependence on employers. In practice, this is conditioned by the exploitation of migrants by employers who restrict their rights, manipulate wages and working conditions, and language barriers and lack of legal protection do not allow them to effectively defend their interests. Comparative studies from Central Asia add to the understanding of institutional approaches to combating human trafficking. The study by A. Khamzin *et al.* (2022) emphasised the importance of interstate coordination, criminal law mechanisms, and prevention. In practice, this works through joint investigations, the exchange of information between law enforcement agencies, and the implementation of crime prevention programmes. The effectiveness of combating trafficking in persons increases if national strategies are aligned with regional initiatives and the institutional capacity of responsible bodies is strengthened. N. Gloss *et al.* (2025) demonstrated that effective counteraction is possible only if economic, social, and legal instruments are combined. Such an integrated approach helps to reduce the vulnerability of migrants and increases the coherence of states' actions in preventing labour and sexual exploitation. The role of media in shaping public understanding of human trafficking was revealed by H.K. Tekare (2025), who showed that the choice of narratives affects political priorities and public support for anti-work measures. This includes information campaigns, publications, thematic reports, and educational programmes aimed at raising public awareness, developing a critical attitude towards human trafficking and stimulating support for relevant political and human rights activities. Conceptual approaches to modern slavery proposed by R. Weitzer (2020) and J. Winterdyk & J. Jones (2020) allowed viewing human trafficking in Myanmar as part of a global exploitation system where regional cooperation acts as a response tool. It was established that regional cooperation includes coordination of interstate bodies, exchange of information, joint human rights initiatives, and coordinated measures to combat human trafficking to improve the effectiveness of the response to exploitation within the region.

Despite the aspects highlighted by the above researchers, there are still gaps in scientific discourse regarding the comprehensive analysis of human trafficking in Myanmar in combination with ASEAN regional cooperation mechanisms. The relationship between sexual exploitation and forced labour in the construction sector has been studied to a limited extent considering cross-border migration and informal labour markets. Insufficient attention was paid to evaluating the practical effectiveness of ASEAN joint initiatives in preventing the exploitation of migrants and protecting victims. The purpose of the study was to analyse the problems of human trafficking in Myanmar in the period 2010-2025. The objectives of the study were: to analyse theoretical approaches to the interpretation of the concept of human trafficking and systematise the factors that determine its occurrence; to carry out a documentary analysis of international and regional regulatory and analytical sources on human trafficking and forced labour; to analyse key

international reports to assess the scale of the phenomenon and the effectiveness of counteraction mechanisms.

Materials and Methods

The study covered the period 2010-2025. The methodological basis was: theoretical analysis of scientific approaches to the definition of human trafficking and systematisation of factors of its spread; documentary analysis of international and regional legal acts; comparative analysis of key international reports by IndustriALL Global Union (2025), V. Mishra (2025) on the situation in Myanmar. Using theoretical analysis of H. Stöckl *et al.* (2021), R. Rupita *et al.* (2025), the concepts of human trafficking, forced labour in construction, and sexual exploitation were investigated, their content characteristics were revealed, and the relationship between these phenomena as complementary forms of exploitation was established. Within the framework of this analysis, the key factors of the spread of human trafficking in the world were systematised. The criteria for selecting sources were theoretical validity and relevance to the concepts of human trafficking, forced labour, and sexual exploitation.

Using the method of comparative analysis, the processes of sexual exploitation and forced labour in construction were compared. The criteria for the analysis were the phenomenon, the mechanism for its implementation, the main risks, barriers to detection, and the need for regional cooperation to protect victims. The documentary analysis covered the norm and procedure criteria, the ASEAN document, the tools through which they are implemented, and the gaps in the selected documents. A chronological comparison of approaches in the period 2010-2025 with a distinction between before and after the implementation of ACTIP (Anti-Corruption and Transparency Initiative for the Pacific) allowed recording step-by-step changes in the use of response tools and monitoring approaches, tracking the evolution of practices without evaluating their effectiveness. Materials included: UNODC – United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2022), IOM – International Organisation for Migration (2023), United States Department of State (2010; 2023; 2024), ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (2024; 2025). In addition, a structural and functional analysis was performed.

The categories of analysis were the type of tool or mechanism, application to a particular form of operation, implementation tools (coordination, training, standardised procedures, indicators, monitoring), and existing gaps or areas of reinforcement. The analysis was based on documents from Association of Southeast Asian Nations (2014; 2015; 2021), ILO – International Labour Organisation (2017; 2021; 2022), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2017; 2020). Additionally, materials from Karen Human Rights Group (2017), and United States Department of State (2025a; 2025b) were used. These sources were chosen because of the authority, relevance, and complexity of the coverage of the problem. The analysis covered aspects of international policy, legal framework, regional cooperation, enforcement and protection of victims, statistics and monitoring of cases, and local evidence and specific cases of exploitation. Based on the analysis of the above-mentioned international sources, recommendations were formulated to combat sexual exploitation and forced labour, which cover comprehensive measures of prevention, protection of victims, law enforcement, and international cooperation.

Results

Sexual exploitation and forced labour in construction: Mechanisms, risks, and barriers to detection. Human trafficking includes forced labour and sexual exploitation as interrelated forms of exploitation carried out through the recruitment, transportation, transfer, and use of persons against their will for material gain or other forms of control. It is a serious violation of human rights and combines economic and sexual aspects, making the phenomenon multidimensional and transnational. Forced labour, as a form of human trafficking, is characterised by the use of physical or psychological coercion, restriction of freedom of movement, and the inability to refuse to perform work without the threat of punishment and can manifest itself in various sectors of the economy, such as construction, agriculture, industrial production, or housework. Sexual exploitation, as another component of human trafficking, involves the forced use of persons for commercial sexual services, prostitution, pornography or other forms of sexual violence for the profit of third parties (Rupita *et al.*, 2025). According to the International Labour Organisation (2021), 108 complaints about forced labour were received in 2019, of which 48 met international criteria, and the National Complaints Mechanism (NCM), established in 2020, resolved 20 of the 38 cases received through interim mechanisms. In total, 707 (~64%) of the 1,105 complaints received were resolved between 2018 and 2020. Mass information campaigns and training seminars covered more than 500 thousand citizens and 4,252 institutions, and among minors out of 1,105 cases, 23 children were released, while 18 military personnel were brought to justice. Changes occurred primarily at the institutional and procedural levels through the introduction of a national complaints mechanism and the improvement of the system for dealing with cases of forced labour. In addition, they have manifested themselves in improving the effectiveness of the response, expanding preventive information measures, and strengthening the protection of vulnerable groups, in particular minors. The data show that government and ILO measures have contributed to reducing complaints and improving the response system to forced labour, but there is still a need to strengthen victim protection, effectively punish violators, and further implement legislative changes (International Labour Organisation, 2021). Victims of sexual exploitation are simultaneously subjected to forced labour and psychological control, which makes it difficult for them to independently defend their rights and seek help. The relationship between these phenomena is manifested in the fact that human trafficking is a general process of exploitation and forced labour and

sexual exploitation are specific forms of its implementation. The main causes of trafficking are poverty, social and economic vulnerability, unequal access to education and social services, conflict, political instability, and insufficient legal protection. In addition, there is a high risk of exploitation during mass migration, economic crises, and the lack of effective institutional countermeasures. Theoretical analysis of these phenomena allows identifying their content characteristics, common features and differences, and emphasises the need for an integrated approach to preventing, protecting victims and ensuring effective law enforcement at the national and international levels (Stöckl *et al.*, 2021).

In South-East Asia, sexual exploitation poses the greatest threat to girls and women from poor rural areas, internally displaced persons, children from conflict zones, and undocumented migrants, who face a combination of social vulnerability, economic instability, and limited access to legal protection. The typical scheme of exploitation is multi-stage: recruitment through promises of legal work, educational opportunities or humanitarian assistance, further movement to the city or abroad, and the establishment of control through debt dependence, threats, confiscation of documents, and social isolation. This dynamic is particularly common in the cross-border context of ASEAN due to high population mobility, open borders between states, and shadow migration channels that make it difficult to track victims. The main barriers to counteraction are the lack of documents for migrants, fear of deportation, lack of legal awareness, corrupt practices, and limited mechanisms for identifying victims. In addition, forced labour in construction most often affects poor rural men and women, internally displaced persons, and undocumented migrants, who, due to economic instability, social vulnerability, and limited access to legal protection, find themselves in conditions of exploitation that include recruitment under the guise of legal work, relocation to construction sites, deprivation of documents, debt dependence, threats and social isolation, and high mobility of the population, open borders and shadowy migration channels make it difficult to identify victims, while fear of deportation, corruption, and lack of legal awareness make it difficult to protect them. In Myanmar, the issue of forced labour remains relevant due to a combination of socio-economic, legal, and migration factors, especially for people with low levels of education, temporary migrants, and people with irregular legal status who are looking for work abroad and agree to offers from intermediaries without proper verification of working conditions. Table 1 provides a comparative description of sexual exploitation and forced labour in the construction sector on key features that reflect the forms of attraction, coercive mechanisms, operating conditions, and socio-legal consequences for victims.

Table 1. Comparison of sexual exploitation and forced labour in construction

Phenomenon	Mechanism	Main risks	Detection barriers	What regional cooperation requires
Sexual exploitation	Recruitment through promises of work or help → relocation → debt control, threats, isolation	Debt dependence, threats, confiscation of documents, social isolation	Lack of documents for migrants, fear of deportation, corruption, limited identification of victims	Coordination of cross-border investigations, information exchange, protection of victims, harmonisation of national policies, common standards for the protection of victims, including Myanmar
Forced labour in construction	Withholding passports/ salaries, debt dependence, travel restrictions, inflated fines, threats of release or deportation	Violation of labour rights, financial dependence, psychological control	Private sector out of control, fear of treatment, irregular status of migrants	Joint monitoring, coordination of labour inspectors, data exchange between ASEAN countries, Myanmar's participation in cross-border worker protection programmes and standardised protocols

Source: compiled by the author based on the analysis of IndustriALL Global Union (2025), V. Mishra (2025)

Comparative analysis showed that sexual exploitation and forced labour in construction, particularly among migrants from Myanmar, share a common logic of functioning, which is based on the vulnerability of migrants, control through debt dependence and fear of loss of legal status, while differing in forms of coercion and areas of implementation. Both phenomena are characterised by systemic concealment due to informal practices, limited access of victims to protection mechanisms, and insufficient institutional coordination, which made it difficult to detect them in a timely manner. It was established that effective counteraction requires not only national measures, but also regional interaction, in particular, the harmonisation of monitoring standards, information exchange, and joint actions between ASEAN states, in particular, considering the specifics of the situation in Myanmar, which confirms the complementary nature of these forms of exploitation and the need for an integrated approach to overcoming them.

Characteristics of international and regional sources on human trafficking and forced labour. ACTIP (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2015) serves as a basic regional document that sets mandatory standards for criminalising human trafficking and sexual and labour exploitation, defines states' obligations to protect and support victims, and provides for interstate interaction in the investigation and prosecution of criminal networks. The implementation of these norms at the practical level is ensured by ASEAN regional plans and working mechanisms, in particular, the ASEAN Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2021), which "translates" ACTIP standards into specific

procedures through coordination of member states, training programmes for police and social services, application of risk indicators and forced labour, systematic monitoring of implementation and regular reporting, thus ensuring consistent and practically oriented implementation of the provisions of the convention in the context of Myanmar and other ASEAN countries. Table 2 illustrates how the norms and standards of ASEAN and international organisations are implemented through coordination, training, standardised procedures, and indicators to combat human trafficking and forced labour, while pointing out existing gaps and the need to strengthen mechanisms.

Table 2. Norms and mechanisms of ASEAN and international organisations to combat human trafficking and forced labour

Institute	Obligations or standards	Implementation tools	Gaps / what needs to be reinforced
UNODC	Sets international standards for preventing human trafficking, investigating crimes, and protecting victims	Inter-state coordination, training programmes for law enforcement, SOP for investigations, data exchange	Limited detail of sector risks and specific groups, insufficient standardisation of reporting
IOM	Provides methods for safe migration, risk assessment, and support for vulnerable groups	Trainings, guides, risk indicators, assessment of migrant vulnerability	Insufficient coordination with national legislation, limited implementation of indicators in the construction and industry sector
U.S. Department of State	Monitoring the global state of human trafficking, evaluating the effectiveness of national policies	Regular reports, analytics, recommendations for states	Reports are not always integrated into local mechanisms, weak feedback on implementation of recommendations
ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking	Establishes cross-border procedures for cooperation between law enforcement officers and prosecutors, protection and escort of victims	Cross-border task forces, joint investigative actions, coordination, training, exchange of evidence	Limited consistency in practical application, insufficient standardisation of procedures and monitoring of implementation

Note: SOP – Standard Operating Procedure

Source: compiled by the author based on the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2022), International Organisation for Migration (2023), ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (2024; 2025), United States Department of State (2025a; 2025b)

The analysis of Table 2 shows that international and regional instruments establish a framework for combating trafficking and forced labour by combining standards for the prevention, protection of victims, and investigation of crime with specific implementation tools such as interstate coordination, training, standardised procedures, and data exchange. The use of these mechanisms is aimed at improving the effectiveness of the law enforcement response, protecting vulnerable groups of migrants and providing a systematic approach to identifying risks in different sectors, while the integration of national policies and practical applications remain fragmented, which highlights the need to unify procedures, strengthen monitoring, and harmonisation with local contexts. In 2010-2025, Myanmar's approaches to combating human trafficking evolved from case recording and launching complaint mechanisms to more active documentation and international/regional coordination. However, there were still high risks of forced labour in the construction sector due to the demand for cheap labour and weak control of private contractors. That is why further analysis focuses on how ASEAN regional mechanisms have been applied to Myanmar. Table 3 summarises the key tools and institutional mechanisms of ASEAN aimed at preventing sexual exploitation and forced labour in the construction sector.

Table 3. Instruments and mechanisms of ASEAN to combat sexual exploitation and forced labour in construction

ASEAN tools and mechanisms	Application towards sexual exploitation (Myanmar)	Application towards forced labour in construction (Myanmar)	Gaps / what needs to be reinforced
ASEAN legal standards and conventions	Establish mandatory standards for criminalising sexual exploitation, in particular the recruitment of female migrants from Myanmar, and define obligations for inter-state coordination, victim protection, and access to assistance	Form a general legal basis for criminalising forced labour of migrants in construction, but do not consider specific sector risks, do not detail control and response mechanisms	Requires the development of sectoral-oriented legal guidelines for construction, clarification of standards of proof, and coordinated implementation of norms in national legislation
ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP)	It is a key tool for countering sexual exploitation, providing coordination of criminal prosecution, victim identification, and interstate cooperation on cross-border networks	It is applied to cases of labour exploitation in construction indirectly, without clear adaptation to the specifics of the industry and contract chains	Requires a clearer interpretation of ACTIP in the context of labour exploitation in construction and the development of industry recommendations

Continued Table 3

ASEAN tools and mechanisms	Application towards sexual exploitation (Myanmar)	Application towards forced labour in construction (Myanmar)	Gaps / what needs to be reinforced
ASEAN action plans to combat trafficking in persons	Provide procedures for identifying victims of sexual exploitation, training programmes for law enforcement and social services, and regional coordination	States are focused on identifying migrant labour exploitation, but practical applications to the construction sector are fragmented and unsystematic	Requires defining clear risk indicators for construction, strengthening implementation monitoring, and regular reporting
Mechanisms for cross-border cooperation and information exchange	Provide for the exchange of operational information, coordination of investigations and prosecution of transnational sexual exploitation networks, regarding recruitment routes and methods	Used to identify illegal intermediaries and recruiters in construction, but practical implementation remains limited	There is a lack of joint task forces, agreed standards for collecting evidence, and systematic harassment of recruiters in the construction sector
ASEAN Committee on Migrant Workers (ACMW)	Indirectly promotes the protection of migrants vulnerable to sexual exploitation through recommendations on the rights of migrant workers	Has the potential to influence the working conditions of migrants in construction, but its recommendations are mostly declarative in nature	The ACMW mandate needs to be strengthened, and its recommendations integrated into national inspection mechanisms
ASEAN monitoring and advisory mechanisms (AICHR, sectoral working groups)	Used to advocate for the rights of victims of sexual exploitation and to create a regional human rights discourse	Limited use for systematic monitoring of forced labour in construction, especially in the context of Myanmar's political instability	The mandate for data collection, independent monitoring, and industry-specific analytical reports should be expanded

Source: compiled by Association of Southeast Asian Nations (2014; 2015; 2021), Karen Human Rights Group (2017), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2017; 2020), International Labour Organisation (2017; 2022), United States Department of State (2010; 2023; 2024; 2025a; 2025b)

The table shows that the effectiveness of countering sexual exploitation and forced labour in construction in Southeast Asia depends on the interaction of legal, coordination, and operational mechanisms. Legislative standards provide a framework for criminalising violations, creating a formal framework for prosecuting perpetrators and protecting victims, while action plans and regional coordination define consistent procedures for victim identification and risk assessment, facilitating a systematic response by states. Cross-border information-sharing mechanisms enable rapid detection and blocking of recruitment and exploitation networks. The causal relationship is that legislative frameworks and action plans define standards and processes, and their implementation through coordination and information sharing directly affects the effectiveness of victim protection and prevention of violations, while lack of coherence and insufficient implementation of procedures weakens the effectiveness of these measures.

Recommendations on combating sexual exploitation and forced labour in Myanmar. To combat trafficking and exploitation, it is established that ASEAN member states must criminalise sexual exploitation and forced labour, and inter-state coordination of investigations and protection of victims. According to ACTIP (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2015), such standards are mandatory for implementation at the national level, including the obligation to establish legal mechanisms to protect victims and jointly prosecute criminal networks. Based on this, it is recommended to strengthen the use of ACTIP in Myanmar by clearly identifying victims, providing access to shelters and psychological support, and implementing coordinated coordination procedures between ASEAN states.

Effective operation of regional action plans has been found to improve the identification and protection of victims, and monitoring of risks and recruitment schemes. The ASEAN Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2021) demonstrates that through training programmes for police and social services, the establishment of risk indicators and the regular exchange of information, ACTIP standards can be practically implemented. Based on this, it is recommended to develop specialised risk indicators for sexual exploitation and forced labour in construction, strengthen implementation monitoring and regular reporting, and standardise procedures for collecting data on victims.

An analysis of international reports has shown that cross-border recruitment networks remain the main channel of exploitation of migrants, especially from Myanmar to ASEAN countries. According to the International Labour Organisation (2021) and the International Organisation for Migration (2023), recruitment involves job promises, displacement, and control due to debt, threats, and social isolation, which creates significant barriers to detection and protection. On this basis, it is recommended to strengthen interstate cooperation through contact points, regular exchange of evidence, joint investigative actions, and the development of standard procedures for the identification and protection of victims. Data from the Anti-Trafficking Working Group (2023) and reports by the United States Department of State (2023) confirm that labour exploitation in construction is particularly vulnerable due to the private sector, complex subcontracting chains and recruitment agencies, and the fear of deportation and irregular status of migrants. Based on these findings, it is recommended

to strengthen monitoring of construction sites, ensure transparent recruitment practices, implement coordinated procedures for protecting affected workers, and organise access to legal support and alternative sources of income. For both areas, it is recommended to strengthen ASEAN regional cooperation through joint training programmes for law enforcement agencies and the prosecutor's office, regular exchange of information on risks and recruitment schemes, conducting joint operations against organised criminal groups, and develop risk assessment standards and methods for monitoring the implementation of legislation, which will create an effective and sustainable system for combating human trafficking at the ASEAN level.

Discussion

Human trafficking in Myanmar is emerging as a multi-level phenomenon in which sexual exploitation and forced labour in the construction sector are linked to regional migration processes, the integration of exploitation practices into legal economic sectors, and a combination of structural, institutional, and social factors in the context of limited inter-state interaction within ASEAN. Human trafficking in Myanmar is largely linked to economic instability and high levels of poverty. These factors encourage people to look for work abroad, making them vulnerable to recruitment. The results of the study are consistent with the approaches to the interpretation of the very concept of human trafficking presented by J. Dahlstrom (2020), which demonstrated the elasticity of the legal and social meanings of this phenomenon. The main groups that are exploited are women and children, especially from ethnic minorities. They are most often victims of sexual exploitation and forced labour. This interpretation explains why victims in the construction sector of Myanmar and ASEAN countries are not identified as victims of human trafficking at the institutional level. Sexual exploitation of women and girls in Myanmar is closely linked to gender inequality and social marginalisation. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of J. Gacinya (2020), which proved the role of the construction sector in shaping the risks of human trafficking. A high concentration of forced labour was recorded in the construction sector. This is conditioned by a lack of control over working conditions and a large number of informal contractors. Political instability and armed conflict identified as key background factors for human trafficking correlate with the findings of M. Kakar & F. Yousaf (2021), who analysed the relationship between political turbulence, economic instability, and forced forms of exploitation. The findings confirmed that instability in Myanmar creates an environment in which forced labour in construction becomes economically beneficial to employers but almost invisible to control mechanisms. Exploitation is based on informal labour relations, debt dependence, and limited employee mobility. Similar characteristics were found by A. Khan *et al.* (2022) in a study of human trafficking in Pakistan, where the construction industry is a high-risk area. Informal labour relations and weak government controls create conditions for systematic exploitation of migrants in this sector. Human trafficking cases were documented through reports by the U.S. Department of State, ILO, and UNODC. These documents include statistics, recruitment routes, and types of exploitation. Attention was paid to the role of technology in recruiting victims. It appears that digital platforms are used for fraudulent employment and sexual exploitation, which is consistent with the systematic review by L. Gezinski & K. Gonzalez-Pons (2022). Technological tools expand the capabilities of criminal networks, while making it more difficult to identify human trafficking using conventional methods.

The response to human trafficking within ASEAN remains fragmented and focuses primarily on criminal law measures. Legislation such as the Towns Act (1907) and Myanmar Law Library (2012) provide a legal basis for combating forced labour. They help to officially record violations and bring those responsible to justice, but they do not record all cases and are quite outdated. This approach correlates with the critical analysis of social services presented by A. De Shalit *et al.* (2020), which showed that reducing the problem to criminal justice limits opportunities for long-term support for victims. The lack of cross-sectoral coordination identified in the study confirms the need to consider human trafficking as a problem related to health, social policy, and migration management. The interaction of human trafficking and domestic violence recorded in individual cases of sexual exploitation is consistent with the results of E. Koegler *et al.* (2022). The findings show that exploitation is accompanied by psychological control, threats, and isolation, making it difficult for victims to seek help even within the available regional mechanisms. ACTIP creates regional standards for combating human trafficking. The convention documents define states' obligations to protect victims and criminalise exploitation. The combination of violence and dependence on exploiters increases the length of stay of persons in situations of forced labour and sexual exploitation. The role of medical and community professionals in identifying cases of human trafficking is confirmed by the findings of M. Combs & T. Arnold (2021), who emphasised the potential for interdisciplinary interaction. In ASEAN countries associated with labour migration from Myanmar, this potential is used to a limited extent, which reduces the effectiveness of early identification of sexual and labour exploitation. Features of the normative response to sexual exploitation correlate with the analysis of N. Insani *et al.* (2023), who pointed out contradictions between religious, legal, and international approaches to combating human trafficking. In some ASEAN countries, cultural and regulatory constraints influence policies to protect victims, especially in cases of sexual exploitation. This configuration of operation is consistent with conclusions of J. Wen *et al.* (2020), who focused on the systematic use of economic dependence, social isolation, and limited access to alternative sources of income as key mechanisms for retaining victims in situations of sexual exploitation. The present study also highlighted the internal causes of

human trafficking, in particular, weak law enforcement and corruption. These factors make it difficult for victims to access protection and justice. Exploitative practices are supported not so much by direct physical violence as by a combination of structural constraints and psychological control, which makes it difficult to identify and overcome these forms of criminal activity. The results correlate with the opinion of S. Yesufu (2020), where human trafficking was described as a process supported by socio-economic inequality and limited access to legal protection mechanisms. The study found that forced labour in the construction sector in Myanmar is clearly transnational in nature and is often associated with labour migration to other Southeast Asian countries. Workers are attracted through agents who offer legal employment, but after crossing the border, working conditions are transformed into a form of exploitation.

During periods of economic instability, there is an increase in the vulnerability of migrant workers and women, which expands the scope for traffickers. This conclusion is consistent with the arguments of J. Todres & A. Diaz (2020), who demonstrated that pandemic restrictions increase the risks of human trafficking through loss of income, limited mobility, and reduced institutional controls. In addition, the ILO and UNODC monitoring programmes allow collecting data on cases of forced labour in the field. Such documents are used to develop preventive measures and train civil servants. Similar processes were reflected in the conceptual model by T. Washburn *et al.* (2022), where economic shocks were seen as a catalyst for labour exploitation and modern slavery, which is manifested in the growth of informal employment, increased debt obligations of workers, and a decrease in the ability of state institutions to exercise proper control over working conditions. Cooperation within ASEAN is fragmented and mainly focuses on declarative commitments, while practical mechanisms for information exchange, joint investigations, and victim protection remain limited. This conclusion is consistent with the provisions of B. Orsini (2022), who emphasised that the effectiveness of combating human trafficking depends on coordinated actions of law enforcement agencies, standardised procedures, and interstate trust. The absence of these elements leads to transnational criminal networks exploiting gaps between national jurisdictions. The emphasis on criminal prosecution without parallel development of victim support systems limits the effectiveness of anti-criminal policies. In cases of sexual exploitation and forced labour, victims are often not identified as victims, which reduces the level of seeking help. This situation correlates with the conclusions of K. Marburger & S. Pickover (2020), which emphasised the need for a comprehensive approach to working with victims, including psychological assistance, social reintegration, and legal support, as the lack of coordinated support services leads to re-vulnerability and increases the risk of re-engaging individuals in exploitative practices. Sectoral studies have shown that construction, fishing, agriculture, and domestic work are the riskiest. Documentation of cases in these sectors is aimed at strengthening legislative control and improving employee protection. A similar position was taken by G. Sprang *et al.* (2022), considering human trafficking as a public health issue that requires cross-sectoral interaction. The involvement of minors in exploitative practices demonstrates the intersection of human trafficking with child labour and family poverty. Although the database focuses on Myanmar, the recorded patterns coincide with the results of N. Letsie *et al.* (2021), which in an eight-year analysis of child trafficking cases demonstrate repeated social and economic prerequisites for exploitation. This indicates the universality of certain mechanisms, regardless of geographical location. Transport infrastructure and logistics routes play a role in supporting human trafficking channels, especially in cross-border areas. It turns out that control over transport hubs and migration routes remains uneven. This result is consistent with the analysis by K. Sokat (2022), where transport was considered as an element in the implementation of human trafficking and in its prevention, since control over logistics routes and transport hubs allows for more effective identification of victims and interruption of channels of movement of exploited persons. The findings demonstrate that sexual exploitation and forced labour in the construction sector in Myanmar are influenced by economic vulnerability, limited coordination among states, and the lack of integrated support systems for victims. Alignment with international research suggests that these processes reflect a broader global trend in human traffic king and labour exploitation.

Conclusions

The study found that human trafficking in Myanmar was manifested through forced labour and sexual exploitation, which was realised through the recruitment, transportation, and use of persons against their will for economic gain. Specific cases of exploitation in construction, agriculture, domestic work and among Rohingya refugees have been documented, with poverty, social vulnerability, and lack of effective legal protection identified as the main causes of the phenomenon. During the period 2018-2023, national and international mechanisms such as NCM, ILO, and UNODC documented more than a thousand complaints, resolved most of them, and conducted mass information campaigns and training seminars for citizens and the private sector. The data also showed that the majority of victims were recruited through promises of work in shelters or homes, and the main method of release was self-release and the help of relatives or organisations, which highlighted the importance of an integrated approach to the protection and prevention of human trafficking.

Documents and initiatives implemented during 2010-2025 have strengthened Myanmar's ability to combat human trafficking and forced labour. In Myanmar, the introduction of international and regional instruments provides a systemic framework for combating human trafficking and forced labour. Legislation and agreements criminalise

exploitation, form national complaint mechanisms, protect victims, and improve monitoring, staff training, and statistics. Cooperation with international organisations and cross-border agreements increase the effectiveness of law enforcement, coordination between law enforcement agencies and prosecutors, and information and educational campaigns contribute to raising public awareness. The implementation of clear victim protection standards and regional action plans provides a comprehensive response to exploitation cases, strengthens international cooperation, and enhances the effectiveness of national policies. These documents have provided Myanmar with effective tools for legislative, operational and preventive responses, improved coordination, systematic protection of victims, and control over cases of forced labour and sexual exploitation. The recommendations focus on strengthening legislation, ensuring the effective functioning of the National Complaints Mechanism, and conducting training programmes for civil servants and law enforcement officials to ensure effective protection for victims and proper investigation of cases of forced labour and sexual exploitation. They also provided for the development of economic support for vulnerable communities, monitoring the private sector, and enhancing international cooperation, enabling Myanmar to reduce exploitation, increase security and stability in the system against trafficking in persons. Further research should focus on the effectiveness of the national mechanism for identifying and responding to cases of sexual exploitation among ethnic minorities in remote areas of Myanmar.

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Drawing on an analysis of Rohingya refugee cases and statistics on forced labour in Myanmar, B. Seriev made a case for the need for a sectoral approach to combating human trafficking within the framework of ASEAN cooperation. The author personally reviewed a vast body of international documentation covering the period 2010-2025 and prepared the final text of the article, including the development of specific risk indicators for the construction sector.

Conflict of Interest
None.

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