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ASEAN's Role in Addressing Online Scam-Based Human Trafficking in Cambodia

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***Abstract**:* Advances in digital technology have fueled the emergence of a new form of human trafficking: scam-based online human trafficking. In Southeast Asia, Cambodia has become a hub for online scam operations that recruit victims through fake job advertisements and subsequently exploit them in online fraud schemes. This phenomenon is not only a form of transnational crime but also threatens human security, particularly the dimension of personal security, as victims experience confinement, forced labor, violence, and psychological pressure. This study aims to analyze the form of online scam-based human trafficking developing in Cambodia through the concept of personal security, examine ASEAN's role in addressing it, and identify challenges affecting its effectiveness. This study employs a qualitative method using secondary data such as scientific journals, reports from international organizations, ASEAN documents, and other relevant sources. The findings indicate that ASEAN has undertaken various efforts through the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP), ASEANAPOL, SOMTC, and the ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Work Plan. However, its effectiveness faces challenges such as disparities in implementation among member states, limited coordination among law enforcement agencies, and the principle of non-interference. This study concludes that strengthening regional coordination and implementing more effective policies are necessary to address this threat in Cambodia

Keywords: human trafficking; online scam; asean; personal security

INTRODUCTION

Human Trafficking is a crucial problem that occurs today, especially in the Southeast Asian region (Semy & Manafe, 2026). Human trafficking occurs in many forms, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, organ trafficking, debt slavery, and more recently, forced involvement in crime through online fraud operations (Adelia & Atman, 2025). In Southeast Asia, the rapid development of technology and digital communication has changed the pattern of this transnational crime, making it much more complex and difficult to eradicate completely. Historically, ASEAN's collective commitment to address this issue culminated on 21 November 2015 through ratification *ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* (ACTIP) as a legally binding instrument regionally (Semy et a. However, in the period 2015 to 2024, the effectiveness of ACTIP was tested by the emergence of a cyber fraud complex (*cyber-scam compounds*) that exploits thousands of individuals through the phenomenon *forced criminality* or coercive criminality (ACTIP, n.d.-b; Semy et al., 2026).

Cambodia has emerged as a major hub of this activity in the region, where the online fraud industry is estimated to generate a very massive illegal revenue, reaching more than USD 12.5 billion per year—a figure equivalent to half of the country's total official Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Guardian, 2026). A 2023 report estimates that at least 100,000 people from various Asian countries are trapped inside an online fraud complex in Cambodia in conditions resembling modern slavery. The victims, who are generally educated and digitally literate young generation, are lured by fake job advertisements on social media and end up in arrest and physical intimidation. The crisis was so severe that Cambodia earned the internationally cynical nickname "Scambodia", reflecting the difficulty of eradicating the industry due to the alleged involvement of economic elites and senior officials who owned properties used by fraudulent operators (Sullivan, 2026).

The region's human trafficking crisis is now seen not only as a legal issue, but as a fundamental threat to personal security(What Is Human Security?, n.d.). Personal security is a core dimension of human security that requires the protection of the core of an individual's life to be free from physical and psychological violence. Technically, the effectiveness of this protection is measured by how quickly an individual can remember and execute a self-defense plan when a threat occurs (Goslin, n.d.). The latest data shows an extraordinary escalation of threats, where the number of Indonesian victims jumped from just 15 cases in 2020 to 7,027 cases in April 2025, with Cambodia as the highest concentration (Kharissa, 2025). This phenomenon creates the so-called "Dark Zomia" in the border regions, where state authority is weakened and replaced by transnational exploitation infrastructure (Lazarus, 2026). Countries' failure to properly identify victims is often due to differing legal standards among ASEAN members, which hinders the implementation of international protocols such as the Palermo Protocol (Aulia & Kuswandi, 2026).

Several previous studies have addressed the phenomenon of online fraud-based human trafficking in Southeast Asia. In this case, Luong's (2023) research explains that victims are generally recruited through fake job ads that offer high salaries and work opportunities abroad before being forced to engage in online fraudulent activities(Luong, 2025). Other research such as ASEAN-ACT (2024) shows that the development of scam compounds in the region has created a new form of exploitation in the form of forced criminality that combines human trafficking, cybercrime, and transnational criminal networks (*ACTIP*, n.d.-a). In addition, Lazarus Research (2026) also highlights the increasingly complex digital exploitation network in Southeast Asia that takes advantage of weak state supervision and differences in regulations between countries(Lazarus, 2026). Although various studies have addressed the characteristics of scam compounds, patterns of victim exploitation, and the development of online scam-based human trafficking in Southeast Asia, most studies still focus on victim experiences and syndicate modus operandi. Studies that specifically analyze ASEAN's role as a regional organization in dealing with online scam-based human trafficking in Cambodia are still relatively limited. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze this phenomenon through the perspective of Human Security in the aspect of Individual Security. The formulation of the problem in this study is as follows:

1. How is *online scam-based human trafficking* developing in Cambodia?
2. What is the role of ASEAN in dealing with *online scam-based human trafficking* in Cambodia?
3. What are the challenges facing ASEAN in dealing with *online scam-based human trafficking* in Cambodia?

Based on the formulation of the problem, this study aims to:

1. Analyzing *the growing forms of online scam-based human trafficking* in Cambodia
2. Analyzing ASEAN's role in tackling *online scam-based human trafficking* in Cambodia
3. Identifying the challenges facing ASEAN in addressing *online scam-based human trafficking* in Cambodia

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with case studies to comprehensively uncover the phenomenon of human trafficking practices related to online fraud. The case study approach was chosen to explore the phenomenon behind the high number of cases and interconnected syndicate networks in the Southeast Asian region. This research data is secondary data collected through the analysis of official ASEAN documents such as ACTIP, reports from UN agencies such as UNODC and IOM, as well as investigative reports from non-governmental organizations such as Legal Aid of Cambodia (LSCW). Sources were purposively selected using three criteria: (1) direct thematic relevance to online scam-based human trafficking in Cambodia or to ASEAN's institutional response; (2) credibility of the publishing body, limited to peer-reviewed journals, official ASEAN and United Nations documents, and investigative reports from established anti-trafficking and human-rights organizations; and (3) currency, prioritizing materials published or substantively updated between 2015 and 2026 so that the analysis captures both the ratification of ACTIP in 2015 and the most recent developments under the Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0 (2023–2028). Within this pool of sources, the case events discussed in this study are bounded to the 2015–2024 period, during which the majority of documented scam-compound cases in Cambodia occurred.

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis procedure adapted for qualitative case studies. First, all selected documents were compiled and read repeatedly to gain familiarity with recurring issues. Second, open coding was applied to identify concepts related to victim recruitment, confinement and exploitation mechanisms, ASEAN's institutional instruments, and barriers to implementation. Third, these codes were grouped into three thematic categories corresponding to the study's research questions: (1) the evolving form of online scam-based human trafficking in Cambodia, (2) ASEAN's institutional response, and (3) the challenges limiting that response. Fourth, each theme was interpreted through the personal security framework, specifically its three interrelated dimensions—freedom from physical violence, freedom from psychological coercion, and the capacity for autonomous decision-making—so that this concept is applied as an analytical lens throughout the discussion rather than only as an introductory concept. Finally, findings drawn from different source types (legal instruments, institutional reports, and investigative journalism) were triangulated to strengthen the reliability of the interpretation. Through this method, it is hoped that critical conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of ASEAN's role in protecting the personal security of individuals amid the complexity of transnational cybercrime.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Online Scam-Based Human Trafficking in Cambodia

The following findings are organized around the three dimensions of personal security introduced in the Methods section, tracing how each stage of the scam-based trafficking process from recruitment to confinement to psychological control progressively erodes victims' freedom from physical violence, freedom from psychological coercion, and capacity for autonomous decision-making.

The results of the study found that in the last decade (2015–2024), Cambodia has transformed into an operational hub for online fraud (*online scam*) managed by transnational syndicates . In contrast to traditional human trafficking, the modus operandi in Cambodia relies heavily on the exploitation of digital technologies for recruitment and operations. Syndicates use social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, and TikTok to spread fake job ads with the promise of high salaries between USD 1,000 to USD 1,200 (*ACTIP*, n.d.-a; Semy & Manafe, 2026). The victims, who are mostly highly educated and digitally literate young people, are lured by job offers as administrative or customer service personnel without heavy competency requirements (Studies, 2026). At this recruitment stage, the harm to personal security is already underway: because consent is obtained through systematic deception rather than accurate information, victims' capacity for autonomous decision-making is compromised before they ever set foot in a scam center.

Upon arrival in Cambodia, these individuals were held inside a fraud center complex (*scam centers*) which are often located in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) such as Sihanoukville ((ASEAN-ACT), 2024). In this location, the personal security of the victims was violated to the extreme. They are forced to work up to 16 hours a day to commit cyber fraud—including *pig butchering* and investment fraud—under threat of physical violence, electric shock, and total isolation (ASEAN-ACT), 2024; Guardian, 2026). This creates a loss of "freedom from fear", in which victims are treated as cyber commodities in conditions resembling modern slavery (Dimensions & Urbanek, 2017).

Violations of the individual's personal security occur through highly organized physical and psychological control mechanisms within "fraud factories" to paralyze the victim's self-sovereignty (Scam & Southeast, 2025). From a *personal security* lens, the form of menace is no longer just ordinary crime, but the formation of conditions that deprive individuals of a sense of safety. The most destructive modus operandi is the "Pig Butchering" (Sha Zhu Pan) scheme, a long-term emotional manipulation technique that ensnares victims through platforms such as X, Instagram, and Telegram before draining their assets (Acharya, 2024). For women, this vulnerability is intersectional, where they are not only exploited powerfully but also genderly, often forced to perform "affective labor" or simulated digital intimacy to ensnare new targets (Anugrah, 2025). Their physical security is absolutely crippled through an arbitrary system of fines—such as fines for "breathing" or "leaning on a chair"—that creates permanent debt bondage (UNODC, 2023). Organizationally, the operation involved six levels of hierarchy, ranging from the "Big Boss" at the top to the "Soldiers" (victims) at the bottom who were forced to work 14 to 20 hours a day under the shadow of the threat of violence (Luong, 2025).

Within the deception complex, principles of personal security—such as the individual's ability to think rationally and act without pressure—are crippled through the threat of violence, confinement, and long-term psychological manipulation such as schemes *Pig Butchering* (Goslin, n.d.). This condition is exacerbated by the fact that many victims actually have higher education, yet domestic economic vulnerability forces them to ignore their personal security instincts for survival. This exposes them to risk *forced criminality*, which ultimately traps them in "digital quarantine" in jurisdictions with minimal state supervision (Aulia & Kuswandi, 2026; Lazarus, 2026)(Aulia & Kuswandi, 2026; Lazarus, 2026).

The complexity of online scam-based human trafficking in Cambodia shows that this phenomenon can no longer be seen as a purely domestic problem. Its characteristics involving cross-border recruitment, inter-regional movement of victims, and transnational criminal network operations make its handling require more coordinated regional cooperation. Therefore, ASEAN as a regional organization in Southeast Asia has an important role in facilitating policy coordination, information exchange, and strengthening cooperation among member countries to address these threats.

ASEAN's Response

ASEAN responds to the threat of this transnational crime through the establishment of a strong regional legal framework, namely the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) which was ratified in 2015 and came into effect in 2017 (Semy & Manafe, 2026). ACTIP serves as a binding legal foundation that harmonizes standards of prevention, protection, and prosecution across member states (*ACTIP*, n.d.-a). Institutionally, technical coordination is carried out through the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC) mechanism, which formulates *Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0 (2023–2028)* to improve border cooperation and case management of TIP (Implementation of the ASEAN) (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2025). Read against the personal security framework, this legal-institutional layer primarily targets the normative side of protection—setting the expectation that victims' freedom from physical and psychological harm should be guaranteed—rather than directly intervening in ongoing cases.

Through ACTIP, ASEAN member countries are committed to strengthening prevention, victim protection, prosecution, and cross-border cooperation in dealing with human trafficking. The framework is then strengthened through various regional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), the Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC), and ASEANAPOL which serves as a forum for coordination in dealing with various forms of transnational crime in the region.

Another functional role is carried out by ASEANAPOL, which facilitates communication between regional police forces for rescue operations. In 2024, ASEANAPOL specifically adopted a resolution to dismantle cyber fraud centers and address the link between online fraud and forced labor. This commitment is strengthened through high-level declarations such as the Vientiane Declaration 2024 and the Labuan Bajo Declaration 2023 which target the misuse of technology in human trafficking (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2025).

ASEAN seeks to restore the personal security of survivors through the Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0 (2023–2028), which emphasizes the pillar of protection through a non-punishment system so that victims are not punished for the cybercrimes they are forced to commit (AMMTC, 2023). At the domestic level, the Government of Indonesia has launched the SAMAN system for moderation of fake job advertisement content as well as the SaveTravel application to provide emergency assistance directly through the danger button on the victim's mobile phone (Kharissa, 2025). In addition to macro policies, individual empowerment efforts are carried out through self-security guidelines that teach the HOT (Hidden, Obviously Suspicious, Typical) protocol to detect suspicious packages or shipments that may threaten physical safety (NaCTSO, n.d.).

Mapped against the personal security framework, these mechanisms occupy distinct and complementary roles rather than a single unified function. ACTIP operates at the normative level, obliging member states to criminalize trafficking and establish victim-protection standards, which addresses personal security mainly by setting the legal expectation that victims should be free from physical and psychological harm. SOMTC and the Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0 operate at the technical-coordination level, translating that norm into border cooperation, case management, and non-punishment provisions that are meant to restore victims' freedom from prosecution and enable recovery. ASEANAPOL operates at the operational level, providing the cross-border policing links needed for rescue and dismantling operations that most directly affect victims' freedom from physical confinement. In practice, however, this mapping also exposes ASEAN's structural limitation: because each mechanism is confined to norm-setting, coordination, or policing support without a supranational enforcement authority, none of them can independently compel a member state to act. ASEAN's role is therefore best characterized as that of a facilitator that supplies the legal and coordinative architecture for protecting personal security, while the actual delivery of protection remains dependent on the political will and enforcement capacity of individual member states such as Cambodia.

Although this normative framework looks comprehensive, the effectiveness of its implementation in ensuring the personal safety of victims in Cambodia is still considered very limited. During the period 2015–2024, Cambodia remained in the Tier 3 category in the world trafficking report because it was considered to have not met the minimum standards for eradication (Semy & Manafe, 2026). There is a wide operational gap, where domestic prosecutions in Cambodia (197 cases in 2024) have not been able to significantly touch the intellectual actors of transnational syndicates (Adelia & Atman, 2025). ASEAN's inability to drastically reduce the number of cases is an indication that the current regional instrument is still symbolic rather than operational on the ground.

These efforts show that ASEAN is not completely passive in dealing with the threat of online scam-based human trafficking. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the regional response is still a matter of debate as the number of victims found in online fraud complexes in Cambodia remains high despite the various regional instruments that have been put in place. This condition shows that the success of ASEAN policies still depends heavily on implementation at the national level and the ability of each member state to translate regional commitments into concrete actions.

Challenges and Limitations

The main challenge that hinders ASEAN's role is rigid adherence to the Principles *Non-Interference* which is part of the *"ASEAN Way" (Hermawan & Muthia, 2025)*. This principle creates a reluctance among member states to criticize the failure of other countries' domestic law enforcement, even if it has an impact on human security at the regional level (Semy & Manafe, 2026). As a result, the implementation of ACTIP is highly dependent on domestic political will, which in the case of Cambodia, is often hampered by the alleged involvement of local economic elites in providing property for the operation of fraud centers (Guardian, 2026; Sullivan, 2026).

The next challenge is the weak cybersecurity infrastructure and regional law enforcement. Cybercrime syndicates are able to move more adaptively and quickly by moving their operational locations (e.g. from Cambodia to Myanmar or Laos) to avoid international pressure—a phenomenon referred to as *"Whac-A-Mole"* global. ASEAN currently lacks a centralized database and intelligence exchange mechanism *real-time*, so regional responses tend to be reactive . Without a transformation towards an institution with operational authority such as the ASEAN Centre on Transnational Crime (ACOT), the protection of individuals' personal security from the threat of digital exploitation will remain fragile(Semy & Manafe, 2026; Sullivan, 2026).

In addition, the biggest challenge in guaranteeing personal security is the ultra-fast adaptivity of syndicates, creating a "Whac-A-Mole" phenomenon where they easily change locations during raids. The syndicate is now starting to use artificial intelligence for voice and facial replication to penetrate banking security systems, expanding the scale of the threat(Scam & Southeast, 2025). The inability of national authorities to penetrate the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) due to "jurisdictional exceptionalism" and the alleged involvement of local elites has left human security protections in a very fragile condition (Lazarus, 2026).

The characteristics of ASEAN itself that prioritize the principle of non-interference are also a challenge in handling online scam-based human trafficking. This principle limits ASEAN's ability to intervene directly in member countries' domestic policies, including when there are allegations of weak law enforcement against the operations of scam compounds. As a result, ASEAN plays more of a role as a coordination facilitator than as an actor who has the authority to force policy implementation directly. This situation causes regional responses to often be slower than the development of transnational and adaptive crime networks. Taken together, these three challenges show that the gap in protecting personal security in Cambodia is not merely a resource problem but a structural one: weak domestic political will limits enforcement, fragmented cybersecurity and intelligence-sharing limit detection, and the non-interference principle limits ASEAN's authority to compel either—leaving victims' freedom from physical and psychological harm dependent on national rather than regional guarantees.

CONCLUSION

Online scam-based human trafficking in Cambodia is a new form of human trafficking that is evolving as digital technology advances and cybercrime activities increase in Southeast Asia. This phenomenon suggests that threats to human security are no longer limited to traditional physical violence, but also include digital exploitation that impacts the safety, freedom, and dignity of individuals. From a human security perspective, the practice directly threatens the dimension of personal security because victims experience forced labor, detention, violence, and psychological pressure. ASEAN has shown its commitment to addressing this phenomenon through ACTIP, SOMTC, ASEANAPOL, and the Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0. However, the effectiveness of regional responses still faces various obstacles, especially the limitations of cross-border coordination, weak implementation at the national level, and the principle of non-interference that limits ASEAN's capacity to take more decisive action. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen more integrated regional cooperation so that ASEAN is able to respond to the development of online scam-based human trafficking more effectively in the future.

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