

## Transnational Justice for Indonesian Migrant Workers Exploited in Online Gambling Syndicates

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### Abstract

The exploitation of Indonesian migrant workers in online gambling syndicates in Cambodia and Thailand highlights serious gaps in human rights protection and transnational justice mechanisms. Victims are deceived through false recruitment and trapped in forced digital labor, revealing weaknesses in state responsibility across borders. This study aims to examine the application of the Palermo Convention and Indonesia's legal response to ensuring justice for exploited migrant workers. This study uses normative legal research supported by analysis of the Palermo Convention, Indonesian legislation, ASEAN cooperation frameworks, and cross-border human trafficking reports. Findings show that weak regional cooperation, inadequate enforcement, and inconsistent state responses allow cross-border digital exploitation to persist. The Palermo Convention offers a viable legal foundation, but Indonesia's mechanisms remain limited in ensuring protection and accountability. This study contributes to the development of transnational criminal law, migrant worker protection policies, and ASEAN regional cooperation frameworks. Its insights are valuable for strengthening human rights mechanisms and improving cross-border accountability.

**Keywords: Transnational Justice; Migrant Workers; Human Rights; Palermo Convention; Cross Border Exploitation.**

### 1. Introduction

Trafficking in persons involving Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) in Southeast Asia has emerged as a pressing and serious concern. In recent years, the exploitation of PMI within online gambling syndicates operating in Cambodia and Thailand has become increasingly structured and technologically sophisticated, forming a complex pattern of transnational crime. This situation is reinforced by reports from Indonesian immigration authorities, which indicate significant difficulties in detecting prospective PMI who are recruited to work as online gambling operators in Cambodia due to indirect travel routes and the use of third-country transit points.<sup>1</sup> These conditions highlight the heightened vulnerability of PMI to extortion, strict surveillance, and potential forced labor.

Furthermore, empirical data indicate that approximately 5,300 residents of the Riau Islands (Kepri) are employed illegally in Cambodia as scammers and online gambling

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<sup>1</sup> Directorate General of Immigration, "Immigration Admits Difficulty Detecting Prospective Indonesian Migrant Workers for the Online Gambling Industry in Cambodia," Kompas.com, 19 May 2025, accessed 20 November 2025, <https://www.kompas.com>

operators.<sup>2</sup> This situation underscores the extensive scale of illegal recruitment conducted by syndicates through non-procedural channels. Many of these individuals are recruited via social media advertisements and peer networks consisting of friends already residing in Cambodia.<sup>3</sup> According to reports from BP3MI, a significant number of victims were lured with promises of high salaries, yet upon arrival at their workplaces, the actual conditions fell far short of those expectations.<sup>4</sup>

Concrete cases further illustrate the severity of exploitation. One man from Aceh was repatriated after working for two and a half years as an online gambling operator in Cambodia, during which he experienced torture.<sup>5</sup> Forced transfers between gambling companies and physical abuse have become part of the harsh reality faced by PMI victims. From a law enforcement perspective, both Interpol and the Indonesian National Police (Polri) have confirmed that numerous Indonesian nationals are employed in online gambling and scamming operations in Cambodia, indicating the involvement of security authorities in mapping these transnational crimes.<sup>6</sup>

In the academic domain, several studies have addressed this issue. For instance, Nasution (Iqtishaduna) demonstrates that the modus operandi of human trafficking has become increasingly sophisticated: perpetrators recruit prospective victims through digital platforms and social media, promising high-paying jobs, yet in reality, the victims endure severe exploitation.<sup>7</sup> These findings are highly relevant to the phenomenon of digital recruitment and underscore how human trafficking methods have evolved in the internet era. Another study by Hezekiel Munte elaborates on the fraudulent recruitment of illegal PMI to Cambodia and the associated challenges in state protection.<sup>8</sup>

From a regulatory perspective, Indonesia's legal framework is relatively robust, notably with Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of the Crime of Human Trafficking and Law No. 14 of 2009, which ratified the Palermo Protocol. However, the implementation of this framework faces significant challenges when addressing the exploitation of PMI through digitally mediated crimes. Although the Ministry of P2MI and the Witness and Victim Protection Agency (LPSK) have collaborated to strengthen complaint mechanisms and the

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<sup>2</sup> Alamudin Hamapu, "5,300 Residents of Riau Islands Work in Cambodia as Scammers and Online Gambling Operators," Detik.com, 11 February 2025, accessed 20 November 2025, <https://www.detik.com>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Antara, "5,300 Residents of Riau Islands Working Illegally in Cambodia," Antara News, 28 August 2025, accessed 20 November 2025, <https://www.antaranews.com> .

<sup>5</sup> Agus Setyadi, "Acehnese Man Repatriated After 2.5 Years as Gambling Operator and Abused in Cambodia," Detik.com, 23 June 2025, accessed 20 November 2025, <https://www.detik.com>.

<sup>6</sup> Kompas Nasional, "Interpol Polri States Many Indonesians Work in Online Gambling and Scam Companies in Cambodia," Kompas.com, 14 April 2025, accessed 20 November 2025, <https://www.kompas.com> . (Source: Untung, Polri/Interpol)

<sup>7</sup> Ramadhany Nasution, "Law Enforcement Challenges in Handling Human Trafficking Crimes Involving the Overseas Deployment of Labor," *Iqtishaduna: Journal of Sharia Economic Law Student Research* 6, no. 4 (July 2025): 914–924, accessed 20 November 2025, <https://journal.uin-alauddin.ac.id/index.php/iqtishaduna/article/view/57111>

<sup>8</sup> Hezekiel Munte, "Illegal Indonesian Migrant Workers to Cambodia: Legal Sanctions, Fraud Methods, and Challenges in State Protection," *Locus Delicti* 5, no. 1 (April 2024): xx–xx, p-ISSN 2723-7427, e-ISSN 2807-6338, accessed 26 November 2025, <https://ejournal2.undiksha.ac.id/index.php/JLD>

repatriation of victims, various reports indicate that the protection system has yet to fully reach PMI involved in overseas online gambling syndicates.

Gaps in the existing literature have become increasingly apparent, most studies continue to view PMI primarily from the perspectives of migration or general labor, rather than comprehensively through the lens of human trafficking. Research linking digital-transnational exploitation such as that occurring in online gambling syndicates to human trafficking under the elements outlined in the Palermo Protocol (recruitment, transportation, exploitation) remains very limited. Moreover, case analyses in Thailand as a secondary destination country are relatively rare, leaving cross-country comparative potential largely unexplored. To address these gaps, this article adopts an approach that combines international legal analysis (the Palermo Protocol) with national frameworks (the Indonesian Human Trafficking Law, P2MI policies, and immigration regulations) to assess whether the practices of online gambling syndicates toward PMI in Cambodia and Thailand meet the criteria of human trafficking. The analysis focuses on the three main elements of the Palermo Protocol, recruitment, transportation, and exploitation, as a framework to examine the forms of inhumane treatment and the structure of transnational crime experienced by PMI.

The objective of this study is to analyze the forms of exploitation experienced by Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) within online gambling syndicates in Cambodia and Thailand, based on the criteria of human trafficking as defined in the Palermo Protocol, and to evaluate the effectiveness of legal protection mechanisms provided by the state for PMI victims of exploitation. The study also aims to assess the extent to which national policies, including legislation and case-handling practices, align with international standards. To achieve these objectives, the research employs a normative juridical method with a library research approach, involving an in depth analysis of international legal instruments such as the Palermo Protocol, the national legal framework pertaining to human trafficking and immigration, as well as various policy documents, government reports, scholarly publications, and empirical data from media sources and migrant protection agencies.

## 2. Method

This study employs normative legal research, which focuses on examining formal legal norms contained in international legal instruments and national legislation related to human trafficking and the protection of Indonesian migrant workers. This approach is used to analyze the relevant legal provisions, legal principles, and scholarly opinions concerning the exploitation of migrant workers within online gambling syndicates operating in Cambodia and Thailand.

To address the legal issues examined in this research, the author utilizes various primary legal materials, including the 2000 Palermo Protocol, Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of the Crime of Human Trafficking, Law No. 18 of 2017 on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration, and Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights. In addition, ASEAN cooperation documents related to combating human trafficking and transnational crime are also employed. Secondary legal materials consist of legal textbooks, scholarly journals, policy papers, and publications issued by international organizations and government agencies relevant to human trafficking and migrant worker protection. Tertiary legal materials include legal encyclopedias, news reports, online media articles, and other supporting sources that provide contextual information on the issues under study.

Data collection is carried out through library research, legal information tracing using official websites of governmental bodies and international organizations, and the compilation of documents related to legal frameworks on human trafficking and migrant worker protection. The collected data are analyzed through several stages, namely identifying legal facts to formulate the legal issues, gathering the relevant legal materials, conducting a legal analysis of the identified issues based on applicable legal norms, and subsequently drawing conclusions and formulating legal prescriptions in accordance with the arguments developed in the analysis.

### **3. Result and Discussion.**

#### **3.1. Presenting the Results**

Based on the latest empirical data and official reports from relevant institutions, the practice of recruiting and deploying Indonesian citizens (WNI) as illegal migrant workers to Cambodia, where they are employed as online gambling operators or digital scammers exhibits characteristics consistent with the definition of “trafficking in persons” as set forth in the Palermo Protocol<sup>9</sup>. Specifically, these cases involve elements of recruitment and transfer (action/transportation), the use of deception or coercion (means), and the purpose of exploitation, including forced labor, economic exploitation, and violations of human rights.

According to public data from the Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Service (BP3MI), at least 5,300 individuals from the Riau Islands Province (Kepri) have been confirmed to be working illegally in Cambodia as online gambling operators or scammers.<sup>10</sup> Their “illegal” status arises from the fact that Cambodia is not an official destination country for Indonesian migrant workers, meaning their departure occurs through non-procedural channels, such as brokers, social media, or personal networks.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, according to an official statement from the Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Ministry (KP2MI), it is estimated that up to 80,000 Indonesian citizens are residing in Cambodia illegally, the majority of whom are involved in the online gambling and digital fraud industries.<sup>12</sup> This statement indicates that the issue is not merely a series of isolated cases, but rather a structural and systemic phenomenon, involving large numbers of Indonesian citizens and transnational syndicates.

The recruitment methods employed by syndicates heavily exploit informal channels and the fact that there are no regulations governing the placement of Indonesian migrant workers in Cambodia. Many prospective workers are recruited through social media advertisements, friends or acquaintances already abroad, or unlicensed agents, who promise “official” employment, high salaries, and free departure. Upon arrival in Cambodia, victims do not receive official work visas but instead enter on tourist or visitor visas, rendering their status

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<sup>9</sup> IOM, *Trafficking in Persons and Migrant Smuggling Key Definitions and Concepts*, 2023, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> BP3MI, “5,300 Residents of Riau Islands Working Illegally in Cambodia as Online Gambling Operators/Scammers,” ANTARA News, 28 August 2025, accessed 22 November 2025, <https://www.antaraneews.com/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> KP2MI, “Minister of P2MI Reveals 80,000 Indonesians Working in Cambodia, Majority as Online Gambling Operators and Scammers,” Kompas.tv, 15 April 2025, accessed 22 November 2025, <https://www.antaraneews.com/berita/5070249/bp3mi-5300-warga-kepri-bekerja-secara-ilegal-di-kamboja>

illegal and leaving them outside the protection of the law.<sup>13</sup> This system enables syndicates to traffic labor illegally and places victims in situations that are highly vulnerable to exploitation.

A report from KP2MI highlights a concrete case in which a migrant worker referred to as a victim was forced to work as an online scammer with high profit targets. When the targets were not met, the victim was beaten and threatened with physical violence.<sup>14</sup> This case demonstrates that the workers were not only subjected to economic exploitation but also experienced coercion, violence, and abuse, representing forms of modern exploitation or slavery. In addition, the reported working conditions including long hours, demanding targets, strict supervision, and wage deductions far below initial promises indicate systemic economic exploitation and forced labor.

Furthermore, the case of an Indonesian citizen who died in Cambodia, reported to have sustained severe injuries after working for a company allegedly involved in scams reinforces that these practices constitute serious human rights violations.<sup>15</sup> Although up-to-date information is difficult to obtain due to the worker's illegal status, the case illustrates that the consequences of exploitation can be fatal. Based on the findings above, these practices meet all three elements of trafficking as defined in the Palermo Protocol and should therefore be regarded as a form of modern human trafficking, rather than merely illegal migration or ordinary labor violations.

The government, through KP2MI, has acknowledged the presence of Indonesian citizens who are victims of online scams in Cambodia and has undertaken legal assistance, repatriation, and the return of several victims.<sup>16</sup> For instance, in October 2025, KP2MI reported that 110 Indonesian victims of online fraud in Cambodia were under its guidance and coordination with authorities in Phnom Penh for repatriation and legal processing.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the scale of victims and the recruitment methods are extensive and continuously evolving, making it difficult for protection systems to address all cases. The estimated 80,000 illegal Indonesian citizens indicates that the number of victims is very large, while the government's capacity for data collection and repatriation remains limited. Furthermore, because departures do not occur through official channels and often involve visitor visas, many victims go "missing" abroad and cannot be traced.

This situation demonstrates that although, normatively, national law—such as Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of the Crime of Human Trafficking (UU TPPO)—meets international standards, its implementation in the field is far from adequate. As a result, many exploitation victims remain unprotected, and the state's responsibility for protection and law enforcement against transnational syndicates is still suboptimal.

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<sup>13</sup> BP3MI, 5,300 Residents of Riau Islands Working Illegally in Cambodia, 28 August 2025

<sup>14</sup> KP2MI, "KP2MI Assists Migrant Workers Who Are Victims of Illegal Placement in Cambodia," ANTARA News, 21 July 2025, accessed 22 November 2025, <https://www.antaraneews.com/berita/4980605/kp2mi-dampingi-pekerja-migran-korban-penempatan-ilegal-di-kamboja>

<sup>15</sup> Kompas.com, "Migrant Worker Found Dead with Severe Injuries in Cambodia, P2MI Minister Acknowledges Difficulty in Tracking Due to Illegal Status," Kompas.com, 15 April 2025, accessed 22 November 2025, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2025/04/15/215406878/pekerja-migran-tewas-penuh-luka-di-kamboja-menteri-p2mi-akui-sulit-lacak>

<sup>16</sup> KP2MI, "Minister of P2MI Ensures All Indonesian Citizens Victims of Online Scams in Cambodia Are Safe," official KP2MI website, 21 October 2025, accessed 22 November 2025, <https://www.kp2mi.go.id>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

### 3.2. Create a Discussion

The findings of this study convincingly demonstrate that the recruitment and placement of Indonesian citizens as illegal migrant workers in Cambodia or Thailand to work as online gambling operators or digital scammers through informal channels, with false promises, and under forced labor conditions meets the definition of “trafficking in persons” as established in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol). The Protocol stipulates that trafficking encompasses the acts of recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of coercion, deception, abuse of a position of vulnerability, or the provision of payments or benefits, for the purpose of exploitation such as forced labor, slavery, servitude, or other forms of exploitation.<sup>18</sup>

From an empirical perspective, the data from this study indicate that many Indonesian citizens were recruited through social media, personal networks, or unlicensed agents and then sent abroad without official channels. Most entered using visitor or tourist visas rather than legal work permits. This situation demonstrates that the “acts/transportation” element of the trafficking definition has been fulfilled.<sup>19</sup>

The methods used by the syndicates, including deception through promises of high wages and “official” jobs, coercion, pressure, and the use of illegal documents or status, reflect the “means” element. Victims were placed in vulnerable situations and controlled through practices that violated their individual freedom. The fact that many victims were subsequently forced to work under high targets, long hours, strict supervision, wage deductions, and conditions involving potential physical or psychological abuse is consistent with the characteristics of exploitation and coercion.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, conditions resembling labor camps or scam compounds, which have been widely reported in international investigations, are highly relevant. For instance, an Amnesty International report in 2025 indicated that in Cambodia there were at least 53 scamming compounds where victims were confined, forced to conduct online fraud, subjected to forced labor, violence, torture, and modern slavery.<sup>21</sup> In many cases, victims reported being compelled to work under the threat of physical harm, with severely restricted freedoms, including barbed fences, armed guards, and intensive surveillance, in conditions resembling

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<sup>18</sup> United Nations, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, 2000, accessed 23 November 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons-especially>

<sup>19</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Definition of Trafficking in Persons,” in Trafficking in Persons and Migrant Smuggling – Key Definitions and Concepts, Geneva: IOM, 2023, accessed 23 November 2025, <https://www.iom.int/publications/trafficking-persons-and-migrant-smuggling-key-definitions-and-concepts>

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024, Vienna: UNODC, 2024, accessed 23 November 2025, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, “Cambodia: ‘I was someone else’s property’ — Slavery, human trafficking and torture in Cambodia’s scamming compounds,” London, 2025, accessed 23 November 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa23/2025/en/>

forced detention, which meet the category of slavery or practices similar to slavery under the Palermo Protocol.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the “purpose/exploitation” element of the Protocol is also fulfilled: the recruitment and placement were not for ordinary legal employment but for economic exploitation, forced labor, and human rights violations. Since all three elements action, means, and purpose are clearly present based on empirical data and international evidence, the migrant workers involved in these syndicates should be categorized as victims of human trafficking rather than merely illegal migration or ordinary labor violations.<sup>23</sup>

From the perspective of national law, Indonesia has established an appropriate legal framework through Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of the Crime of Human Trafficking (UU TPPO), which criminalizes trafficking and provides for victim protection. The presence of trafficking modalities through non-procedural channels, deception, coercion, and forced labor should allow law enforcement authorities to apply the provisions of the UU TPPO. However, the findings of this study indicate that implementation in practice is very weak: many cases remain unrecorded, victims are unprotected, and syndicates continue to operate with new methods. This demonstrates a gap between legal norms and social reality.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, recent literature on cyber-slavery or forced criminality, such as the study *Cyber Slavery Infrastructures: A Socio-Technical Study of Forced Criminality in Transnational Cybercrime*, emphasizes that in the digital era, forms of trafficking have evolved. Victims are not only forced into traditional physical labor but also into digital crimes, including scams, online gambling, and phishing, through transnational structures that exploit gaps in international laws and regulations.<sup>25</sup> These findings support the interpretation that migrant workers coerced into acting as scam or online gambling operators can be categorized as victims of trafficking, as the methods and purposes of exploitation have shifted in line with technological dynamics

Therefore, the findings of this study not only confirm that Indonesian migrant workers involved in online gambling and scam syndicates are victims of trafficking but also expand academic understanding of modern forms of trafficking in the digital era, where exploitation is no longer limited to manual labor or sexual services but also encompasses cyber and financial crimes.

The implications for policy and law enforcement in Indonesia are substantial. The government and authorities need to strengthen prevention mechanisms, for instance by tightening recruitment agent verification, enhancing monitoring of destination countries, and improving bilateral cooperation. They should also expand protection measures for victims, including consular access, cross-border reporting channels, repatriation, and rehabilitation, as well as update regulations to cover digital exploitation and transnational crimes.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ramadhany Nasution, Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hezkiel Munte, Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> G. Sarkar & S. Shukla, “Cyber Slavery Infrastructures: A Socio-Technical Study of Forced Criminality in Transnational Cybercrime,” arXiv preprint, 2025, accessed 23 November 2025, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2510.12814>

<sup>26</sup> UNODC & ASEAN, *Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia: Challenges and Recommendations*, Bangkok: UNODC, 2024, accessed 23 November 2025, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2024/HTMS\\_report.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2024/HTMS_report.pdf)

Thus, although the national legal framework is appropriate, without effective implementation and adaptation to emerging forms of trafficking, protection for Indonesian migrant workers will remain weak, and transnational syndicates will continue to exploit migrant vulnerabilities.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the recruitment and deployment of Indonesian citizens as illegal migrant workers to Cambodia and Thailand to work as online gambling operators or digital scammers through informal channels, under false promises and forced labor conditions, clearly constitutes human trafficking under the Palermo Protocol, fulfilling the elements of action, means, and purpose. Empirical evidence shows that victims are recruited via social media, personal networks, or unlicensed agents, often entering with tourist visas and subjected to coercion, strict supervision, long hours, wage deductions, and conditions resembling labor camps or scam compounds, reflecting both economic exploitation and modern slavery. Despite Indonesia's legal framework under Law No. 21 of 2007, enforcement gaps leave many victims unprotected, while syndicates exploit emerging digital modalities, including cybercrime, for profit. These findings underscore the urgent need for strengthened prevention, protection, and legal enforcement measures, enhanced bilateral cooperation, and regulatory adaptation to address digital and transnational forms of exploitation, ensuring that Indonesian migrant workers are effectively safeguarded from trafficking and abuse.

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