Preventing E-Tourism as Mode of Sex Trafficking in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of e-tourism in Malaysia in facilitating sex trafficking by equipping traffickers with digital tools and opportunities for exploitation. While e-tourism has revolutionized the travel industry by making tourism more accessible and efficient, its digital platforms also present unintended risks that enable traffickers to recruit, advertise, and exploit victims more effectively. By analyzing the mechanisms through which traffickers misuse these platforms, this paper aims to establish a clear connection between e-tourism and the proliferation of sex trafficking in Malaysia. The analysis critically evaluates existing legal frameworks and their effectiveness in addressing this issue, emphasizing the vital role of tourism stakeholders in prevention efforts. By illuminating the darker aspects of e-tourism, this study aims to raise awareness and propose actionable strategies for law enforcement and policymakers to combat sex trafficking in the digital age. Employing a doctrinal research methodology, this research analyzes primary and secondary sources, including case law, relevant statutes, textbooks, and journal articles. This comprehensive approach provides a systematic exposition of the legal landscape governing e-tourism as a mode of sex trafficking in Malaysia.

Keywords: Human Trafficking; E-Tourism; Legal Framework; Sex Trafficking; Technology

INTRODUCTION

E-tourism refers to the digital transformation of the tourism industry, integrating various technologies to enhance the travel experience from planning to execution (Osman & Yatam, 2024). It includes online bookings, digital marketing, and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to facilitate travel-related processes (Buhalis & Law, 2020). E-tourism allows consumers to research destinations, compare prices, and manage travel arrangements independently through digital platforms.

In Malaysia, several online booking systems exemplify e-tourism. Agoda offers a range of accommodations from budget hostels to luxury hotels, while Booking.com provides extensive listings and user reviews. Traveloka enables users to book hotels, flights, and lifestyle products, whereas Klook specializes in travel activities and experiences alongside hotel bookings. Expedia further enhances the travel planning process by allowing users to compare prices and read reviews for hotels across Malaysia. These platforms provide travellers with convenient access to various accommodations while improving their overall travel experience.

E-tourism in Malaysia is experiencing significant growth, with over 50% of travel bookings now made online, reflecting a shift towards digital platforms for planning and purchasing travel services (MATTA, 2024). In the first half of 2024 alone, Malaysia welcomed approximately 5.8 million foreign tourists, marking a 32.5% increase from the previous year (Tourism Malaysia, 2024). Most of these tourists rely on online platforms for accommodation and recreational activities, underscoring the need for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism sector to adopt e-commerce payment solutions to meet this growing demand (Finexus, 2024).

The Role of Technology in E-Tourism

While e-tourism enhances efficiency and independence for travellers, it also presents significant risks, particularly in the context of human trafficking including sex trafficking. Traffickers exploit the anonymity of

digital platforms to recruit and control victims, often disguising their operations under legitimate e-tourism businesses (Hossain & O'Byrne, 2019). The privacy and confidentiality embedded in the tourism industry further facilitate trafficking activities. In July 2018, Polaris, a US-based anti-trafficking NGO, reported that 75% of trafficking survivors had encountered hotels or motels during their exploitation (Anthony, 2018).

The rapid advancement of technology has also outpaced legal frameworks, making it increasingly difficult for law enforcement to prosecute traffickers who leverage digital tools for sex trafficking (Barney, 2018). The intersection of e-tourism and technology enables traffickers to operate across borders while maintaining anonymity, complicating efforts to hold them accountable. As the tourism sector continues to evolve, addressing the risks associated with e-tourism is essential to mitigating its role in facilitating human trafficking.

E-tourism platforms significantly aid traffickers in transporting victims across borders via airlines, trains, and buses, further complicating detection by authorities (UNODC, 2024). Hotels and accommodations booked online often serve as venues for exploitation, allowing traffickers to discreetly conduct their operations (Tuncay & Goktas, 2023). Additionally, technology serves as a powerful tool for traffickers to promote sexual services, blurring the lines between legitimate tourism and exploitative practices (Bernstein & Shih, 2014). The digital space creates convenient access for clients to purchase exploitative services, often without realizing their direct link to human trafficking.

E-tourism also contributes to the rising demand for sex tourism, particularly in regions known for such industries, leading to increased exploitation of women and children (United States Department of State, 2023). Many tourists, whether knowingly or unknowingly, participate in this cycle by engaging with services that exploit vulnerable populations. This issue is further exacerbated by the general lack of awareness regarding the indicators of trafficking (Tuncay & Goktas, 2023).

Who are the traffickers? Traffickers in the context of e-tourism specifically related to sex trafficking comprise a diverse range of individuals and groups who prey on vulnerable populations within the tourism industry. These traffickers include pimps, who exert control over sex workers and often operate in areas frequented by tourists; gang members, who engage in organized crime and utilize violence to maintain dominance over their victims; and business owners, who may exploit legitimate establishments, such as hotels or bars, as fronts for sex trafficking operations (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022). Additionally, traffickers can be strangers or acquaintances of the victims, manipulating trust to facilitate sexual exploitation (ECPAT International, 2023).

E-tourism catalyses sex trafficking, where individuals—often women are the most vulnerable group of people to be trafficked by traffickers digitally due to issues of poverty, gender discrimination, illiteracy, lack of employment opportunities, lack of awareness, lack of good governance and the high demand for women in sex trafficking (P.Shashi, 2018). In Malaysia, newspaper reports suggest that sex workers could earn between MYR 450 (USD 106) for 45 minutes to MYR 7,000 (USD 1,653) per night. The worker would be entitled to 60 percent of the amount while the remaining 40 percent would be paid to the employer (ILO, 1998). Thus, women become attracted to the lucrative remuneration sex work offers to fulfil cultural expectations of them as contributors and breadwinners for their families (HBA Hamid, 2022). Traffickers exploit specific socio-economic vulnerabilities by targeting groups such as migrant workers and rural women (David et al., 2019). These individuals often face dire economic conditions in their home countries, leading them to seek better opportunities abroad. The promise of lucrative employment in Malaysia can be enticing; however, traffickers manipulate these aspirations by offering deceptive job opportunities that ultimately lead to exploitation in the sex trade (Nur Zulaikha Afifah & Ahmad, 2017), Malaysia has been characterized as a destination, origin, and transit country for trafficking, highlighting its central role in these exploitative networks (State Department, 2023). Additionally, refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless individuals, who often cannot legally work in Malaysia, are also highly vulnerable to both sex and labour trafficking (U.S. Embassy in Malaysia, 2024). E-tourism platforms further facilitate this exploitation by making these vulnerable groups more accessible to traffickers. For instance, online job advertisements may lure migrant workers with promises of legitimate

employment in the tourism sector. Once individuals arrive in Malaysia, they often find themselves trapped in exploitative situations where they are coerced into sex work due to debt bondage or threats of violence (Wahab & Yusof, 2022)

The rise of e-tourism has created a more interconnected world where traffickers can easily reach potential victims through digital platforms. Social media and travel websites enable traffickers to advertise fake job opportunities or exploit individuals' desires for travel and work. This accessibility increases the risk for vulnerable populations who may not have adequate knowledge about their rights or the realities of the job market in destination countries (Wahab & Yusof, 2022). Moreover, e-tourism contributes to a growing demand for sexual services as tourism increases in Malaysia. The influx of tourists creates an environment where demand for commercial sex can thrive, further incentivizing traffickers to exploit vulnerable individuals who are desperate for work. Additionally, recent studies have shown that social media platforms play a significant role in shaping tourists' decisions, which can indirectly affect trafficking dynamics (Kim & Lee, 2023).

This paper will critically examine the nature and methods of exploitation within e-tourism, highlighting how digital platforms facilitate the recruitment and manipulation of vulnerable individuals, particularly women. It will assess Malaysia's response to these challenges, evaluating the effectiveness of its legal framework in combating human trafficking in the e-tourism context. The research methodology will be outlined, detailing the approaches employed to gather data on exploitation patterns. Key findings will be presented, illuminating the dynamics of exploitation facilitated by e-tourism technologies. Finally, the paper will conclude with robust policy recommendations aimed at enhancing legal protections and enforcement mechanisms to effectively address this pressing issue and safeguard vulnerable populations from exploitation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traffickers utilize various tactics to establish contact with potential victims within the context of e-tourism. They commonly use social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and messaging apps such as WhatsApp to engage with victims. Posing as job recruiters offering attractive opportunities abroad or as romantic partners, they lure individuals into a false sense of security (Arronte, 2018). These platforms allow traffickers anonymity and access to a wide audience, making it easier to manipulate vulnerable individuals.

Modus Operandi

Traffickers employ digital platforms within e-tourism to recruit and control victims. A common tactic involves creating fake websites or posting fraudulent job advertisements on legitimate job portals and social networking sites. These deceptive listings enable traffickers to establish contact quickly and obtain personal details, such as passport information, increasing their control over victims (UNODC, 2021).

The recruitment process has shifted to digital communication, where traffickers use prolonged interactions to establish trust, emotionally manipulate victims, and isolate them from their support systems. This gradual process makes victims more vulnerable to exploitation while allowing traffickers to maintain control remotely, avoiding physical detection (Ringenberg, Seigfried-Spellar, & Rayz, 2024). Psychological manipulation plays a key role, as traffickers exploit victims' vulnerabilities to ensure compliance. Once control is established, coercion methods such as threats to expose explicit images are used to maintain dominance (Symmonds, 2024).

Technology further expands traffickers' reach by enabling live-streaming, allowing them to exploit victims for a global audience while avoiding direct, in-person contact. Additionally, location-tracking apps and GPS technology enable traffickers to monitor victims in real-time, reinforcing their ability to control movements and behavior (Murphy, 2022). Smartphones with cameras are also used to observe victims remotely, increasing psychological dependency and fear.

Financially, traffickers leverage digital currencies like Bitcoin to conduct anonymous transactions, making it more difficult for law enforcement to trace illicit earnings (Kehl, 2020; Jones & Lindsay, 2022). Secure

communication channels allow trafficking networks to coordinate operations discreetly, further concealing their activities from authorities (Shekhar & Vincent, 2022). Additionally, traffickers exploit online currency transfer services to obscure the origins of illicit income, complicating efforts to track financial flows and dismantle trafficking networks (Lukianchuk et al, 2017).

From the perspective of rational choice theory, traffickers weigh the benefits of sex trafficking against the risks, using technology to reduce detection and maximize profits (Brown, Esbensen, & Geis, 2007). The rise of e-tourism exacerbates these risks by providing traffickers with continuous access to victims and consumers through online platforms. E-tourism facilitates the promotion of illicit services on a large scale, contributing to the increase in trafficking-related crimes (ICAT, 2019).

Failure to address these vulnerabilities results in severe legal, social, and economic repercussions. The integration of technology in e-tourism has created challenges for border security and law enforcement, particularly in countries experiencing a rise in sex trafficking cases. In Malaysia, a thorough examination of the intersection between technological advancements, legal frameworks, and cultural factors is essential to developing effective counter-trafficking measures (Amanda et al., 2016).

Therefore, without an adequate legal framework, the victims are also exposed to the risk of being prevented from participating effectively and meaningfully in legal proceedings against their traffickers.

Legal Response

International Legal Framework on E-Tourism and Sex Trafficking; International responses to e-tourism and its connection to sex trafficking have evolved significantly, with key frameworks such as the Palermo Protocol (2002) and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 shaping the legal landscape. According to the Palermo Protocol, human trafficking includes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons through coercion, abduction, fraud, or deception (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2000). Meanwhile, the TVPA defines human trafficking as "the recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for either labour or services, or a commercial sex act by force, fraud, or coercion" (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Sex trafficking encompasses various forms of exploitation, including forced prostitution, child sex trafficking, and mail-order bride exploitation. Notably, the Palermo Protocol establishes that in cases involving children under 18, there is no requirement to demonstrate coercion or deception for trafficking to be recognized (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2009). This broad definition underscores the need for comprehensive international cooperation and legal frameworks to address trafficking effectively.

Malaysia's Legal Framework on E-Tourism and Sex Trafficking; Malaysia's primary legal instrument against trafficking is the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM), which has undergone amendments in 2010, 2015, and 2022 to strengthen victim's protection and enforcement mechanisms (UN Women, 2024). The ATIPSOM criminalizes various forms of trafficking, including labour and sexual exploitation, while emphasizing a victim-centered approach (Freedom Collaborative, 2018). However, enforcement remains a challenge due to corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and insufficient inter-agency coordination (Skrine, 2022; Othman et al., 2023).

In addition, the Penal Code provides additional tools for law enforcement by criminalizing exploitation related to trafficking activities (Hamid & Mokhtar, 2013). For instance, Section 372 that criminalizes the act of exploiting any person for prostitution. It encompasses a range of activities, including procuring, receiving, or harbouring individuals for sexual exploitation. The penalties for violating this section can be severe, reflecting the seriousness with which the law treats such offenses.

Other complementary legislation such as the Immigration Act 1959/63 regulates the entry and exit of individuals into Malaysia, providing immigration authorities with the authority to detain suspected traffickers.

This act is essential in combating sex trafficking as it allows for the monitoring of foreign nationals entering the country, which is critical given that many trafficking victims are often migrants seeking better economic opportunities. The act enables law enforcement to take proactive measures against individuals who may exploit vulnerable populations through illegal immigration channels (UN Women, 2024).

In the context of e-tourism, where online platforms facilitate travel arrangements, traffickers can exploit these avenues to lure victims under the guise of legitimate employment or travel opportunities. The Immigration Act assists in identifying and detaining those who may be using these platforms to traffic individuals for sexual exploitation. By regulating who can enter Malaysia and under what circumstances, authorities can better prevent trafficking activities that may arise from increased tourism and migration.

In addition to that, the Employment Act 1955 ensures fair treatment of workers and indirectly supports anti-trafficking efforts by establishing labor rights and protections. This act aims to prevent exploitation in the workplace, which is a significant concern for many migrant workers who may be at risk of trafficking. By enforcing standards for employment contracts, wages, and working conditions, the Employment Act helps protect vulnerable individuals from being coerced into exploitative situations (Kamaruddin & Mohd Zin, 2023).

In relation to e-tourism, many individuals seeking work in tourism-related sectors may not fully understand their rights or may be misled about job conditions. The Employment Act serves as a safeguard against such exploitation by ensuring that all workers are treated fairly and have access to legal recourse if they face abuse or exploitation. This protective framework is vital in preventing scenarios where individuals might be trafficked for labour or sexual exploitation under false pretenses.

With the rise of e-tourism and digital exploitation, Malaysia has begun utilizing the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) Act to regulate digital platforms used for trafficking activities. These laws provide mechanisms for monitoring and removing online content that facilitates trafficking, though enforcement remains complex given the transnational nature of cyber-enabled trafficking (Skrine, 2022).

Ethical Considerations in Using Technology to Combat Sex Trafficking; While technology aids law enforcement and policymakers in combating sex trafficking, ethical concerns arise in areas such as privacy, surveillance, and data security. Several key ethical considerations include:

1. Surveillance and Privacy Risks: Governments and private entities increasingly use facial recognition, digital tracking, and AI algorithms to monitor trafficking networks. However, overreliance on surveillance may lead to violations of privacy rights and wrongful accusations (Zheng & Lien, 2021).
2. Potential for Misuse: Law enforcement agencies risk overstepping boundaries by engaging in mass surveillance, disproportionately targeting marginalized communities, or using technology for unintended purposes (Anderson & Skiba, 2020).
3. Need for Ethical Guidelines: Effective governance mechanisms must balance human rights and security concerns to prevent misuse of anti-trafficking technologies while safeguarding personal freedoms (Chan & Poon, 2022).

Malaysia's Progress and Challenges in Addressing E-Tourism and Trafficking; The 2024 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report issued by the U.S. Department of State highlights Malaysia's upgrade to Tier 2, recognizing progress in combating trafficking. Key improvements include increased investigations, higher conviction rates, and greater victim protection measures (Malay Mail, 2024; Bernama, 2024). However, Malaysia still faces significant challenges, such as:

1. Victim identification gaps: Victims often must cooperate with law enforcement to be formally recognized, deterring many from coming forward (BenarNews, 2024).
2. Official complicity and corruption: Some law enforcement officials facilitate trafficking operations, undermining anti-trafficking efforts (The Star, 2024).

3. Lack of inter-agency coordination: Weak collaboration between immigration, police, and digital regulators hampers effective responses to tech-facilitated trafficking (Skrine, 2022).

Malaysia's approach aligns with the United Nations' 3P framework (Prosecution, Protection, and Prevention), but further improvements are needed to strengthen legal enforcement, enhance victim support, and implement digital safeguards (UNODC, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

In focusing on observing the cases of sexual trafficking facilitated via technology and the adequacy of the existing legal framework, this research employed a doctrinal approach. For this paper, the findings were based on data collection via primary and secondary data, and this stage was divided into two phases. The first phase of the data collection involved reviewing all the relevant literature on the subject matter via a library-based search on sex trafficking and the gendered nature of the crime (Bell, J, 2008). The primary sources included the ATIPSOM Act, the Penal Code, the Computer Crimes Act, the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) Act 1998, while the secondary sources include textbooks, academic journal articles, government reports, newspaper, articles and online databases and sources. Doctrinal data was analyzed using interpretative analysis for this paper. Interpretative analysis is a tool for interpreting such sources whereby the researcher, scrutinizes the primary sources of the original documents ranging from a body of case laws to any relevant statutes. A conclusion is derived from the effective enforcement and implementation of such laws in addressing sex tourism via technology. The article also identifies the adequacy of the existing legislation and what shall be improved in the existing legislation to provide a comprehensive legal framework for sex trafficking facilitated via technology in Malaysia.

DISCUSSION

In terms of e-tourism statistics, Malaysia welcomed approximately 20.1 million international tourists in 2023, generating substantial revenue estimated at 71.3 billion ringgit (US$14.9 billion) (TTG Asia, 2024). This figure surpassed the Ministry of Tourism's target of 16.1 million arrivals but fell short compared to pre-pandemic levels when 26.1 million international tourists contributed 86.1 billion ringgit to the economy in 2019. The government has set ambitious targets for future growth, aiming for 27.3 million tourists and 102.7 billion ringgit in tourist expenditure for 2024, with plans to reach 31.4 million visitors and 125.5 billion ringgit by 2025 (Focus Malaysia, 2024). The majority of tourists arriving in Malaysia are from neighbouring countries such as Singapore and Indonesia, reflecting strong intra-ASEAN travel patterns (Statista, 2024). However, despite these promising statistics, there remains a critical need to address the vulnerabilities associated with e-tourism that can lead to increased risks of human trafficking and exploitation.

TABLE I

Year	Number of Sex Trafficking Cases	Number of Arrests Related to Sex Trafficking
2019	55	195
2020	20	159
2021	7	244
2022	16	230
2023	Data not specified	Data not specified
2024	8 (as of March)	Data not specified

Source: National Strategic Office to the Council for Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants / Ministry of Home Affairs; UN Women (2024); MAPO Annual Country Report (2022).

Analysis

The data illustrates fluctuating trends in the detection of sex trafficking victims over the years. In 2019, there were 55 reported cases, which significantly dropped to 20 in 2020 and further decreased to only 7 cases in 2021. However, there was a slight increase in 2022, with 16 cases reported. The statistics for 2023 are not specified, but as of March 2024, there have been 8 confirmed cases of sex trafficking (UN Women, 2024). The number of arrests related to sex trafficking has also varied, with a peak of 244 arrests in 2021, followed by a decline to 230 in 2022. This inconsistency may reflect changes in law enforcement focus, victim reporting practices, or broader trends in trafficking activities. These statistics underscore the ongoing challenges Malaysia faces in combating sex trafficking amid evolving methods used by traffickers, particularly through digital platforms. The need for enhanced legal frameworks and effective enforcement strategies remains critical to addressing these persistent issues.

E-tourism has significantly influenced the landscape of human trafficking in Malaysia, necessitating robust legal frameworks to address the complexities associated with this issue. The Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM) serves as the primary legislation governing human trafficking cases, broadly defining trafficking to include sexual exploitation and aiming to encompass a wide range of trafficking activities. However, ATIPSOM lacks specific provisions addressing crimes conducted via technology, which is increasingly relevant given the rise of online recruitment and exploitation (Skrine, 2022; Tenaganita, 2023). For instance, while Malaysia's Penal Code includes Section 372, which focuses on the trading of persons for prostitution, it does not adequately address the nuances of online exploitation facilitated through digital platforms (Tan et al., 2020). Similarly, Sections 375-376 define and punish rape but fail to encompass coercion that occurs through technological means (Hassan, 2018).

The Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) Act play significant roles in regulating harmful online content related to sex trafficking. These laws target harmful online content but face enforcement difficulties due to resource constraints and the anonymity offered by digital platforms (MCMC, 2020). As technology continues to evolve, these laws struggle to keep pace with new methods of exploitation. Similarly, the Computer Crimes Act 1997 (CCA) addresses offenses involving computer systems and data. According to (Appudurai & Ramalingam, 2007), while the CCA provides a legal framework for addressing computer-related crimes, it does not specifically target the nuances of trafficking facilitated through technology, which is increasingly prevalent in today's digital landscape. They emphasize that the lack of explicit provisions for trafficking-related offenses within the CCA hampers effective law enforcement responses to these crimes (Appudurai & Ramalingam, 2007). These legislations are insufficient to enforce sexual trafficking facilitated via the Internet in Malaysia. (Tan, et al 2020). In addition, the government did not provide clear guidance to prosecutors on what approvals were required to proceed with trafficking charges which led to the delays in prosecuting trafficking crimes and cases not being pursued (Skrine, 2022). This also led to an enforcement issue in combating sex trafficking is the absence of technology in the commission of sex trafficking i.e. the traditional form of sex trafficking. The lack of training for front-line officers and prosecutors has greatly reduced the efficiency of the implementation of human trafficking policies (TIP, 2020).

It is important to note that although Malaysia has enacted the Prevention of Crime Act (POCA), Malaysia does not utilize the Prevention of Crime Act (POCA) for prosecuting sex trafficking primarily due to its focus on specific trafficking laws, particularly the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act (ATIPSOM) 2007. The Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants (ATIPSOM) Act 2007 was established to address trafficking comprehensively, including labour and sexual exploitation. It has been amended multiple times, notably in 2010, 2015, and 2021, to enhance its provisions and enforcement mechanisms (UN Women, 2022.; Attorney General's Chambers of Malaysia, 2021). Moreover, using POCA could complicate the legal landscape surrounding trafficking cases by introducing additional requirements that may not align with the objectives of ATIPSOM. This may deter victims from coming forward due to fears of criminalization or inadequate protection (Skrine, 2022). Therefore, while POCA remains a legislative tool available for serious crimes, its application in sex trafficking cases is limited by the existing framework and priorities established under ATIPSOM.

Besides that, in addition to insufficient border control, weaknesses in law enforcement represent significant challenges to the effective implementation of anti-trafficking measures. Factors such as rapid development, globalization, lucrative illegal businesses, and corruption among authorities further complicate efforts to address this issue. Compounding these challenges is the lack of awareness or concern about human trafficking among much of the Malaysian community, which hampers broader societal efforts to combat the problem (Othman, Hussein, & Mohd Hed, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

E-tourism in Malaysia is increasingly exploited as a mode of sex trafficking (Suhakam, 2004). Traffickers leverage digital technologies inherent to e-tourism to facilitate their operations, highlighting a significant challenge (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This review has underscored the crucial role technology plays in the recruitment, advertisement, and exploitation of victims within the sex trafficking industry through e-tourism platforms (ECPAT, 2019). Given the use of social media, messaging applications, and dedicated websites for recruitment, and the efficiency afforded by mobile technology, a comprehensive and decisive response is needed (Women's Aid Organization, 2018). The rapid proliferation of mobile technology has transformed the trafficking landscape, enabling traffickers to communicate and coordinate their activities with unprecedented efficiency (Core, 2020). This digital facilitation allows for real-time communication and the ability to reach a broader audience, complicating enforcement efforts against these crimes (HRMARS, 2022). Moreover, the portrayal of sex workers on these platforms often commodifies them, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and misogynistic views that perpetuate exploitation (PMC, 2020). Given these challenges, it is imperative for Malaysia to adopt a holistic and comprehensive approach to addressing the potential exploitation of e-tourism platforms for sex trafficking purposes.

Therefore, Malaysia must adopt a holistic approach to address technology-facilitated sex trafficking within the context of e-tourism (Ramasamy, 2020). To effectively combat this issue, several recommendations are put forth. Strengthening the legal framework is crucial; this involves revising existing laws to include provisions that specifically address digital recruitment methods utilized in e-tourism and align with international standards, such as the Palermo Protocol (United Nations, 2000). Moreover, law enforcement agencies should undergo specialized training to better understand how traffickers exploit e-tourism and other digital platforms, equipping them with effective strategies for investigating and prosecuting technology-facilitated trafficking (Jasni & Arif, 2017).

Public awareness campaigns must also be launched to inform communities about the risks of trafficking facilitated through e-tourism and technology, thus empowering potential victims to recognize and avoid exploitation. Collaboration with technology companies should be prioritized to develop tools and reporting mechanisms capable of detecting and disrupting trafficking activities on digital platforms used within the e-tourism sector (Ramasamy, 2020). Finally, it is essential to establish comprehensive support services for victims, providing them with legal assistance, counseling, and rehabilitation programs to aid in their recovery and reintegration into society while ensuring a victim-centered approach (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

By implementing these recommendations, Malaysia can significantly enhance its efforts to protect vulnerable individuals from exploitation in the context of technology-facilitated sex trafficking, specifically addressing the modes within e-tourism (Jasni & Arif, 2017). A proactive and holistic approach will not only reinforce legal frameworks but also strengthen enforcement strategies, thereby contributing to a more effective and coordinated response to this urgent issue (ECPAT, 2019).

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