

The New Frontier of Exploitation: Human Trafficking for Online Scams in Taiwan

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Abstract

Human trafficking in Taiwan has taken on new dimensions with the rise of technology-driven crimes. In 2022 alone, hundreds of Taiwanese victims were rescued from trafficking syndicates that exploited them in online scamming networks operating both within Taiwan and across Asia. Victims of other nationalities have also been found trapped in Taiwan's scam industries, highlighting the country's dual role as a source and destination for trafficking. This shift demonstrates that trafficking no longer revolves solely around forced labour or sexual exploitation but increasingly involves coercion into digital fraud, a criminal economy generating trillions of dollars globally. The significance of this study lies in situating Taiwan at the centre of an evolving global trafficking trend, where online scams represent a new frontier of exploitation with profound security, legal, and human rights implications. Accordingly, this paper has three objectives: to explore the operations of human trafficking in Taiwan for online scams; to examine the challenges faced by the Taiwanese government in combating these crimes; and to analyse the government's responses in combating human trafficking for online scamming.

Keywords: *Human Trafficking, Taiwan, Online Scams, Digital Exploitation, Government Response*

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1. Introduction

Human trafficking remains a significant and evolving challenge in Taiwan, shaped by both historical labour dynamics and contemporary digital transformations. While early patterns of trafficking in Taiwan were closely linked to rapid industrialisation and demand for low-wage labour during the late 20th century (Huynh, 2021), the country today faces more complex and technologically driven forms of exploitation. Foundational studies have documented how migrant workers, particularly women from Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, were deceived with promises of employment and subsequently subjected to sexual exploitation and forced labour during the 1980s and 1990s (Chen, 2014; Huang, 2017). These analyses underscored the socio-economic drivers, recruitment methods, and gendered vulnerabilities that defined Taiwan's early trafficking landscape.

However, recent evidence shows that the situation has shifted dramatically, requiring a more targeted understanding of contemporary trafficking patterns. Taiwan has witnessed a surge in forced criminality linked to online scam operations, a development that has drawn concern from regional security analysts and international organisations (UNODC, 2023; OHCHR, 2023a). Criminal groups increasingly use digital platforms, including messaging apps, social media, and online recruitment portals, to lure individuals into fraudulent overseas job schemes. The masterminds behind these schemes operate transnationally, using Taiwan as part of a broader web of criminal networks that extend throughout East and Southeast Asia (Chang, 2012; Lin & Nomikos, 2018). Many victims, including Taiwanese citizens and foreign nationals from ASEAN countries, mainland China, Hong Kong, South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, are transported to Taiwan or moved through Taiwan to engage in large-scale cyber-fraud operations. These individuals are forced to participate in criminal activities such as investment scams and telecommunications fraud to scam people. It is a form of exploitation known as forced criminality, forcing victims to commit crimes under threats, manipulation, or confinement, blurring the line between perpetrator and victim (Schidlow, 2025). Once recruited, victims reported coercion, isolation, debt bondage, and threats of violence forcing them to follow the instructions to con people (Schidlow, 2025).

According to Chang (2012), Taiwan's advanced digital infrastructure, high internet penetration, and skilled technological workforce create conditions that criminal networks exploit, allowing scam syndicates to

operate at scale and maintain transnational links across East and Southeast Asia. These factors distinguish Taiwan from other trafficking hubs where exploitation is more closely tied to territorial conflict or weak state governance. Simultaneously, Taiwan's proximity and connectivity to regional cybercrime hotspots, such as Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos, have enabled cross-border collaboration between syndicates, further complicating law enforcement efforts (Interpol, 2023; Mekong Club, 2023).

In response, the Taiwanese government has introduced a series of measures aimed at strengthening prevention, protection, and prosecution. Recent initiatives include enhanced cross-border police cooperation, the expansion of digital forensics capabilities, increased monitoring of online recruitment, and specialised anti-trafficking units within immigration and police agencies (Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024; US Department of State, 2024). Nonetheless, persistent gaps remain, particularly in identifying victims forced into criminal activity, regulating online labour intermediaries, and dismantling transnational networks that use Taiwan as a logistical or operational base.

Given these evolving dynamics, this paper examines the intersection between Taiwan's traditional trafficking patterns and the emergence of digitally facilitated forced criminality. Specifically, it aims to (1) analyse how human trafficking operates within online scam industries; (2) identify the structural, technological, and governance-related challenges faced by the Taiwanese government; and (3) evaluate the effectiveness of current policy responses aimed at combating trafficking in the digital age. By addressing these dimensions, the study provides a clearer, evidence-based assessment of Taiwan's contemporary trafficking landscape and its implications for national security and regional cooperation.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology that integrates a diverse range of secondary sources to examine the nexus between human trafficking and online scam operations in Taiwan. The sources include scholarly publications that provide theoretical and empirical foundations on transnational organised crime and cyber fraud; national and international reports from institutions such as the Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, United Nations, Interpol, the International Labour Organisation, and the US Department of State. These international institutions offer official data and policy perspectives,

and media and expert commentaries that capture real-time developments, victim narratives, and regional responses. Through qualitative content analysis, these sources were categorised and interpreted to reveal recurring themes and patterns related to digital exploitation, forced criminality, and state–non-state collaboration. Academic literature contributed conceptual clarity and analytical depth, institutional reports provided authoritative and comparative evidence, while media accounts enriched the analysis with human-centred stories and contextual detail. By triangulating these different types of sources, the study ensures credibility, dependability, and contextual validity, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how human trafficking and cyber scams intersect as a new frontier of exploitation in Taiwan and the broader Southeast Asian region.

3. Understanding Human Trafficking and Online Scams

Human trafficking constitutes a severe form of organised crime that violates individual rights while generating profound spillover effects on countries ensnared in its operations (Jespersen *et al.*, 2019). It is defined in the United Nations (UN) Palermo Protocol (2000) as the

“recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”¹

This comprehensive definition underscores the multifaceted nature of trafficking, encompassing various coercive methods used to exploit individuals (OHCHR, 2020).

Historically, human trafficking was predominantly associated with forced labour, wherein victims were trafficked to work in essential sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and domestic service. However, this dynamic has evolved in response to shifts in global economies and the advent of new technologies. Increasingly, trafficking now encompasses newer forms of exploitation, such as forcing individuals to participate in cybercrime and online scam operations (UNODC, 2023). According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for

Human Rights (OHCHR), traffickers exploit victims across a range of industries, including domestic work, construction, and, more recently, cybercrime.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) explicitly classifies online scams as criminal activities and highlights trafficking for forced criminality as a significant issue. Victims are often compelled to commit illegal acts, such as engaging in fraudulent online activities, for the economic benefit of traffickers or exploiters. Global data further reinforced the gravity of this issue. For instance, analysts from Statista, the FBI, and the International Monetary Fund reported at the January 2024 World Economic Forum that cybercrime represents a growing global threat. The worldwide financial impact of online criminal activities is projected to increase from \$8.44 trillion in 2022 to \$23.84 trillion by 2027 (Charlton, 2024). Taiwan's geographical location further exacerbates its vulnerability to trafficking. Situated east of China, south of Japan, and north of the Philippines, Taiwan is strategically positioned along vital maritime routes connecting the South China Sea and the East China Sea to global trade networks (Patalano, 2013). These routes, crucial for international commerce, are also exploited for the trafficking of individuals for various forms of exploitation. Taiwan is consistently featured in the United States (US) Department of State's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report and has recently been classified as Tier 1 or Tier 2, reflecting its significant efforts to meet the minimum standards for combating human trafficking (Hong, 2022). Nonetheless, one of the major challenges confronting the Taiwanese authorities is the increasing prevalence of trafficking associated with online scams (Davidson & Lin, 2022). This phenomenon, often referred to as "cyber trafficking," involves the coercion and exploitation of individuals, primarily from Southeast Asia, to participate in fraudulent online activities. According to the US Department of State's TIP Reports (2022; 2023), Taiwan serves as both a source and a destination country for human trafficking. Victims, often from economically disadvantaged nations in Southeast Asia, are deceived by false promises of legitimate employment opportunities.

The OHCHR (2023a) estimates that approximately 120,000 individuals from Myanmar and 100,000 Cambodians have been forced into online scam operations. Other neighbouring countries, such as Laos, the Philippines, and Thailand, have similarly been identified as key source or transit

countries, with tens of thousands of individuals ensnared in trafficking networks (OHCHR, 2023a). These victims are particularly vulnerable to traffickers, who exploit their economic hardship with false promises of work opportunities. The emergence of the digital economy has rendered online scams a highly lucrative industry. According to Abraham (2023), an estimated 293 million scam incidents occurred globally in 2021, resulting in a total financial loss of \$55.3 billion. This marked a 10.2 per cent increase in reported scams compared to 2020, when 266 million incidents were recorded. These figures underscore the alarming expansion of this illicit industry, facilitated by advancements in technology and digital platforms.

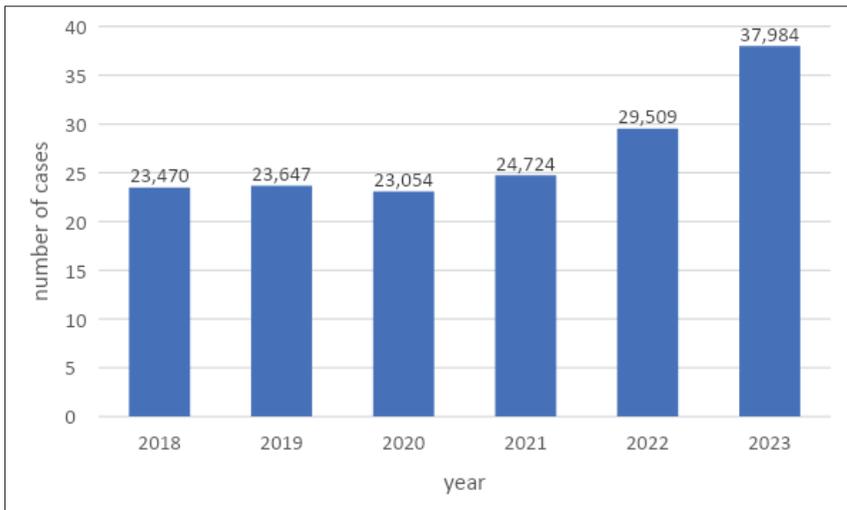
4. Common Types of Online Scams and Their Mechanisms

Scammers employ a variety of sophisticated tactics, including phishing, online dating fraud, and investment schemes, to exploit their victims (Button & Cross, 2017). Phishing, for instance, is a method used to acquire sensitive information such as bank account details through deceptive emails, instant messages, or fake advertisements on websites. When victims unknowingly disclose their personal or banking details to these phishing platforms, their information is at risk of being stolen by scammers. Another tactic involves leveraging crises and calamities to manipulate individuals (Abraham, 2023).

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, scammers exploited vaccination campaigns, promoted fraudulent cheap flight tickets for religious pilgrims, and claimed to assist Australian bushfire victims or Ukrainian refugees, among other deceptive strategies (Abraham, 2023). Another common tactic is online romance scams with significant socio-emotional and financial consequences. According to Wang (2023), perpetrators often create accounts on dating apps such as Tinder to target individuals seeking companionship. Women, in particular, are frequently manipulated emotionally and financially. Romance scams vary across cultures, as evidenced by incidents worldwide. In China, the “*Sha Zhu Pan*” or “Pig Butchering Scam” is a well-organised scheme involving multiple roles: hosts, resource gatherers, IT specialists, and money launderers. These groups collaborate to groom victims for financial exploitation, often using romantic pretences to persuade them to invest in fraudulent apps or gambling websites. Victims are enticed to contribute increasing amounts of money, with no possibility of a refund. The profits generated by such scams are substantial, incentivising scammers to maintain and expand their operations

(Wang, 2023). The success of these schemes heavily relies on manpower, which has led to a connection between online scams and human trafficking. Scammers recruit and exploit individuals, often from vulnerable populations, to carry out their operations (OHCHR, 2023). The digital nature of these crimes, combined with their profitability and the anonymity afforded by social media platforms, has made online scams increasingly resilient and pervasive.

Figure 1: The Number of Fraud Cases Reported to the Taiwanese Police (2018 – 2023)



Source: Taiwanese National Police Agency (Li, 2024)

Figure 1, as Li (2024) highlighted, internet fraud is a common issue in the daily lives of Taiwanese people. While many scam tactics are globally prevalent, some exploit Taiwan’s unique socioeconomic conditions and cultural attitudes. Data from the Taiwanese National Police Agency showed that from 2018 to 2021, the annual fraud case filings ranged between 23,000 and 24,000. However, a significant increase was observed in 2022 and 2023, with the majority of fraud cases occurring on social media platforms. In 2023, the National Police Agency identified investment fraud as the most prevalent form of internet scam. Li (2024) further argued that perpetrators targeted the widespread interest among Taiwanese individuals in short-term stock market investments.

Scammers often impersonate celebrities to lend credibility to their schemes, using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to post fake announcements (Li, 2024). Additionally, personal messages were sent via text or messaging applications, such as LINE, encouraging individuals to invest in the stock market or join investment clubs established by scammers. According to the Taiwan Ministry (101newsmedia, 2025), women were disproportionately affected by investment scams. In the fourth quarter of 2024, out of 1,242 investment fraud victims, 821 were women, nearly twice the number of male victims. Notably, 516 of these female victims were aged over 50. Additionally, about 32 per cent of the victims were either retired, homemakers, or unemployed. When they joined these fraudulent investment clubs, they were persuaded to register on fake websites or applications. Initially, these victims were enticed by small returns on their investments, which appeared to validate the scammers' claims. However, this false sense of security often led victims to invest substantial sums of money. Ultimately, the scammers ceased communication, and the victims' investments vanished. According to the National Police Agency (2025), victims of investment scams usually realise they have been deceived within about two months, while those targeted by romance scams may take up to 270 days to recognise the deception. In 2023, 31.13 per cent of all fraud cases in Taiwan fell under the category of investment fraud, underscoring its prominence as a critical issue (Li, 2024).

5. The Nature and Proliferation of Scam Hubs in Taiwan and Neighbouring Regions

The OHCHR (2023) has raised significant concerns regarding the emergence of scam centres in Taiwan. According to Jespersen et al. (2023), many of these centres are established across Southeast Asia, often recruiting workers through deceptive means. The expansion of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and casinos in the region has further contributed to the growth of illicit economies. These zones serve as hubs for smuggling, regulatory evasion, and the proliferation of illegal demand. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) estimates that scam centres in one Southeast Asian country generate revenues ranging from \$7.5 to \$12.5 billion annually. Another pressing issue involves Taiwanese-led scam centres operating in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia (*The Star*, 2024).

Malaysian authorities recently raided two sites in Kuala Lumpur, apprehending four Taiwanese men and seizing 12 mobile phones, documents, passports, access cards, and two vehicles. These individuals, sought by Taiwanese authorities for their alleged involvement in organised crime and fraud, were later transferred to the custody of the Malaysian Immigration Department (*The Star*, 2024). Jespersen *et al.* (2023) report that recruiters establish these scam centres to groom trafficked victims, coercing them into defrauding innocent individuals through fake investment schemes, including cryptocurrency scams.

The UNODC (2023) underlines that many scam centres originated as call centres or digital operations hubs in Taiwan and other countries, eventually evolving into transnational organised crime networks. To operate effectively, these centres rely heavily on trafficked victims, who are coerced into conducting various online scams, such as phishing, investment fraud, and other cybercrimes. Detecting these operations is particularly challenging, as they are often disguised as legitimate businesses (UNODC, 2023a). Several factors drive the rise of scam centres in Taiwan. The country's advanced digital infrastructure, characterised by high-speed internet and cutting-edge technological capabilities, makes it an attractive location for cybercrime operations (APEC, 2019).

Additionally, Taiwan's environment offers fertile ground for organised crime groups due to the high profitability of online scams and the relatively low risk of detection, enabling these networks to operate with impunity across the Asia-Pacific region (US Department of State, 2023). Traffickers also exploit economic disparities within the region by luring individuals migrating to Taiwan with false job offers. Such exploitation extends beyond Taiwan to other countries with weak governance, including Cambodia and Vietnam (UNODC, 2023). These factors collectively facilitate the establishment of scam centres in Taiwan and other countries, enabling the trafficking and exploitation of individuals. These victims are often forced to engage in illegal online activities, perpetuating a cycle of criminal operations and human rights violations.

6. Digital Trafficking for Online Scams: Push and Pull Factors

This section explores how traffickers exploit digital technologies to facilitate online scam operations, particularly in Taiwan and the surrounding region. Globalisation and prevalent internet access have enabled traffickers to

operate transnationally with greater efficiency. The phenomenon is shaped by push factors such as poverty and lack of opportunity, and pull factors like high profits and low risk of detection. Understanding these dynamics reveals the systemic conditions that make individuals vulnerable and highlights why traffickers are increasingly drawn to this lucrative, digitally driven form of exploitation.

6.1 Push Factors

The rise in trafficking for online scams in Taiwan is significantly influenced by various push factors, which create conditions that traffickers exploit to target vulnerable populations, particularly those from low-income backgrounds in the region.

Economic Disparities and Poverty

Poverty driven by regional economic inequalities remains a primary push factor compelling individuals to seek opportunities abroad. Many individuals from Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, as well as East Asian regions including China, Macau, and Hong Kong, are drawn to Taiwan due to its higher standard of living and better wages (Davidson & Lin 2022). Arguably, Taiwan's relatively strong economy makes it an attractive destination for low-skilled migrants, particularly those seeking employment in construction, manufacturing, or domestic care.

This economic pull factor, however, creates a fertile environment for traffickers, who exploit these advantages through deception and coercion. According to the Global Slavery Index (GSI) (2018), economic disparities in these regions increase susceptibility to trafficking. Particularly, migrants from poorer countries are vulnerable to fraudulent recruitment practices, where promises of high-paying jobs and improved livelihoods disguise exploitative conditions. This vulnerability is further heightened by limited access to education, weak labour protections, and persistent unemployment in their home countries (ILO, 2017). As a result, traffickers prey upon vulnerable individuals only to force them into exploitative labour arrangements, including online scam operations in Taiwan.

Migrant Labour Demand

Taiwan's reliance on migrant labour also contributes to the prevalence of trafficking. The country's demand for workers in specific low-wage sectors, including elderly care, has remained high since 1992 (Lin, 2023). This demand attracts approximately 700,000 migrant labourers, accounting for 80 per cent of Taiwan's 960,000 foreign residents (Lin, 2023). While seeking legitimate employment, many migrants fall victim to traffickers due to precarious legal situations or a lack of awareness about their rights. Frequently, migrants are promised lucrative jobs but find upon arrival that the nature of their work differs significantly from what was initially agreed. Additionally, their situation is compounded by debt bondage, which occurs due to recruitment debts incurred to brokers or lenders to secure employment abroad. The UNODC (2022) highlighted that these financial obligations leave them trapped in cycles of dependency, making resistance to exploitation extremely difficult.

According to Lin and Nomikos (2018), such vulnerabilities are increasingly manipulated by transnational criminal networks, which entice migrants with promises of stable employment but instead coerce them into working in fraudulent call centres and online scam syndicates. Restrictive policies often prevent them from changing employers, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation (Lin, 2023). High unemployment in source countries is one of the push factors driving individuals to seek work abroad. Moreover, the Taiwanese government's promotion of integration through its 2016 New Southbound Policy (NSP) encourages the movement of people seeking employment opportunities.

Global Taiwan Institute (2021) asserted that more than 90 per cent of foreign workers in Taiwan originate from countries included in this policy. With a migrant worker population exceeding 711,000 and a rapidly expanding demographic of nearly one million "new residents" and their children combined, Taiwan's society is experiencing an increasingly pronounced diversification. Under the NSP, visa requirements are relaxed; therefore, people enter the country for job opportunities only to end up in exploitative labour conditions (US Department of State, 2023).

Political Instability

Political instability in source countries intensifies economic hardship and unemployment, while simultaneously triggering large-scale displacement as individuals flee conflict, persecution, or state collapse. Such conditions create acute vulnerabilities, rendering displaced populations prime targets for human traffickers. Taiwan has become a notable destination in this dynamic. Victims fleeing political instability in Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar and Cambodia, have been lured into trafficking schemes that place them in fraudulent call centres and online scam operations across Taiwan and the wider East Asian region (Lin & Nomikos, 2018).

For instance, Myanmar's ongoing armed conflict, economic deterioration, and weakened governance have led to widespread internal displacement and refugee outflows (UN, 2024). These circumstances are not incidental but symptomatic of a broader erosion of institutional capacity. Instability creates governance vacuums that trafficking networks systematically exploit. In contexts where the rule of law is fragile or absent, oversight of migration pathways collapses, and legal protections for displaced individuals are effectively non-existent. Following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, the breakdown of administrative and judicial protections has enabled traffickers to operate with impunity (OHCHR, 2023), particularly in border regions and contested territories. The US Department of State (2022) highlighted Taiwan-based actors as key organisers of scam networks that recruited and coerced displaced persons from Myanmar into forced online fraud operations. Cambodia has been equally implicated. According to the South China Morning Post (2022), Taiwanese authorities prosecuted nine individuals for trafficking at least 88 victims to Cambodia, where they were forced to work in scam grounds under abusive conditions. These victims included Cambodian nationals as well as other regional migrants who were trapped in syndicates with strong operational ties to Taiwanese criminal networks.

In addition, two Taiwanese students were also deceived by a false job advertisement and trafficked to a Cambodian scam centre in 2022, where they were held under coercion until rescued (Angkor Times, 2022). These incidents illustrate the two-way nature of trafficking; Taiwan is simultaneously a source of trafficked persons and a destination where transnational networks exploit victims from unstable or economically fragile countries. These networks exploit migrants' precarious legal and

socio-economic status, coercing them into cyber-enabled scams rather than traditional forms of forced labour or sexual exploitation. The transition of trafficking into the digital realm highlights how political instability in source countries indirectly fuels Taiwan's online scam industry. Together, these factors illuminate how political instability functions as a structural enabler of trafficking. By dismantling legal protections, weakening institutional responses, and exacerbating socio-economic desperation, instability cultivates an environment in which trafficking networks not only emerge but flourish.

Weak Labour Protections in Source Countries

Gaps in labour protections across Southeast Asian countries, including Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, significantly heighten workers' vulnerability to trafficking. Inadequate legal frameworks and poor enforcement create conditions where traffickers can operate with minimal resistance. These deficiencies allow traffickers to exploit individuals through coercive recruitment and forced labour, often within online scam operations (US Department of State, 2023).

In Myanmar, for instance, political instability and conflict have undermined the enforcement of labour laws, while in Malaysia and Thailand, large migrant workforces in informal sectors often lack legal status or access to protections. This legal invisibility discourages victims from reporting abuses, enabling traffickers to exploit them with impunity. High-risk sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work remain largely unregulated. Workers in these industries often lack awareness of their rights or fear deportation and retaliation, making them susceptible to coercion. These systemic vulnerabilities facilitate trafficking into scam centres frequently linked to Taiwan, where victims are compelled to engage in cybercrime, including phishing and financial fraud, under threat of violence.

The transnational nature of these operations is sustained by the disparity between weak protections in source countries and the enabling infrastructure in destination hubs like Taiwan. This dynamic underscores the urgent need for coordinated regional efforts to strengthen labour laws, enhance enforcement, and provide accessible support mechanisms for at-risk workers.

6.2 *Pull Factors*

The growth of trafficking for online scams is not only rooted in vulnerabilities within source countries but also fueled by conducive conditions in destination regions. Taiwan exemplifies a key pull factor environment, economic incentives, supportive criminal networks, advanced technological infrastructure, and relatively low enforcement risks. These factors collectively attract trafficking networks seeking to exploit digital platforms for profit. As traditional organised crime declines, particularly in gambling and prostitution, criminal groups have shifted to cyber scams, which offer global reach and reduced detectability (OHCHR, 2023a). Taiwan's digital economy and regulatory gaps make it a strategic hub for such operations.

Economic and Strategic Advantages

Taiwan's economic environment, characterised by relatively low operational costs compared to other advanced economies, makes it an attractive destination for both legitimate businesses and illicit operations, including scam centres. The country's favourable business climate, efficient infrastructure, and competitive labour costs provide traffickers with an opportunity to establish and run profitable criminal enterprises. These factors are particularly appealing to those involved in online fraud and cybercrime, as they can maintain operations at a fraction of the cost compared to more regulated or expensive jurisdictions. As a result, traffickers often exploit Taiwan's economic advantages to set up scam centres where trafficked individuals are forced into participating in illicit activities, such as running online fraud schemes (Jespersion *et al.*, 2023).

Moreover, Taiwan's strategic location in the Asia-Pacific region enhances its role as a hub for transnational crime, including cyber operations. Its advanced connectivity and robust digital infrastructure facilitate the execution of online scams, allowing them to reach global audiences. This geographical positioning, coupled with its modern technological ecosystem, allows traffickers to conduct operations both locally and internationally, targeting victims across multiple continents. The APEC Report (2019) highlights Taiwan's increasing prominence as a key site for cybercriminal activity, making it an attractive base for scam networks looking to capitalise on Taiwan's advanced digital environment.

Taiwan's central position within Asia also provides traffickers with easy access to neighbouring countries, allowing for the swift movement of trafficked individuals into and out of the region. This geographical advantage, combined with its digital connectivity, amplifies the scale and reach of cybercrimes originating from the island. The lack of stringent oversight in some areas further exacerbates the situation, allowing traffickers to exploit the local economy and infrastructure to perpetuate their operations.

Supportive Criminal Networks

Organised crime networks in Taiwan are central to the expansion of cybercrime and trafficking, offering the structural and logistical support required for large-scale scam operations. Deeply embedded in local and transnational criminal ecosystems, these groups provide safe havens, protection from law enforcement, and critical infrastructure, enabling traffickers to operate sophisticated scam centres with minimal disruption (US Department of State, 2023).

These networks often act with impunity, leveraging influence to bypass regulatory systems and facilitate illicit activities, including securing properties, forging documents, and relocating victims. Their international reach further amplifies the threat, allowing traffickers to expand globally and evade coordinated legal action. Taiwan's advanced digital infrastructure, geographic positioning, and gaps in oversight make it an attractive hub for cyber-enabled trafficking, as underscored by the US Department of State's TIP (2023) report. The intersection of organised crime and weak enforcement capacity poses significant challenges to dismantling these well-resourced, transnational operations.

Advanced Digital Infrastructure

Taiwan's advanced digital infrastructure, characterised by high-speed internet, widespread connectivity, and a tech-literate population, has created a favourable environment for the growth of cybercrime. These technological capabilities not only facilitate the rapid execution of online scams but also support the anonymity and scalability required for transnational fraud operations. The robust digital ecosystem allows scam centres to function with limited oversight, making Taiwan an attractive hub for traffickers and cybercriminals (US Department of State, 2023).

Simultaneously, the expansion of Taiwan's digital economy has driven demand for low-wage labour in tech and online service sectors. While this growth offers economic opportunities, it also exposes systemic vulnerabilities. Traffickers exploit the blurred boundaries between legitimate digital work and illicit cyber activities by luring individuals, often migrants, with promises of lawful employment. Once recruited, these individuals are frequently coerced into working under exploitative conditions in scam operations disguised as digital service roles (ILO, 2022).

The prevalence of digital fraud is further enabled by a highly skilled workforce. Trafficked individuals are compelled to use their technological expertise to operate scam platforms, becoming involuntary participants in organised cybercrime. This intersection of digital proficiency, labour exploitation, and weak enforcement mechanisms highlights how technological advancement, while economically beneficial, can simultaneously create channels for criminal exploitation.

Besides, the integration of digital labour into Taiwan's broader economic development complicates regulatory oversight. The increasing indistinguishability between legal and illegal digital work hampers enforcement, particularly in the absence of robust labour protections. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated international policy responses and stronger monitoring frameworks to mitigate trafficking risks in the digital age (ILO, 2022).

Challenges in Cybercrime Enforcement

Although Taiwan has enacted strong anti-human trafficking legislation, the enforcement of laws against cybercrime remains challenging due to the complex, dynamic, and transnational nature of these crimes. Traffickers are drawn to the perception that cybercrimes are less likely to be detected or prosecuted, particularly when operations span multiple jurisdictions. According to Interpol (2023), despite Taiwan's robust legal frameworks, the intricacy of cybercrime enforcement in the Asia-Pacific region creates enforcement gaps. This perceived impunity further motivates traffickers to base their operations in Taiwan.

In summary, a combination of economic, infrastructural, and legal factors makes Taiwan an attractive location for traffickers to exploit individuals and engage in online scams. These pull factors highlight the need for strengthened regional collaboration and enforcement mechanisms

to combat such illicit activities effectively.

The push and pull factors driving trafficking into Taiwan generally reflect global patterns observed in Eastern Europe and West Africa, though they take on forms specific to Taiwan's digital economy. Persistent economic inequalities, unemployment, and weak labour protections remain central push factors across all regions (ILO, 2017; Global Slavery Index, 2018). As seen among victims from Ukraine, Moldova, Nigeria, and Ghana, deceptive recruitment and false job promises continue to lure vulnerable individuals (UNODC, 2020). Similar dynamics shape migration to Taiwan, where traffickers exploit ambitions for upward mobility through fraud, coercion, and debt bondage (Lin & Nomikos, 2018; US Department of State, 2023). However, unlike Eastern European and West African hubs, where sexual exploitation, forced labour, and irregular migration dominate (Adepoju, 2005; Shelley, 2014) Taiwan is increasingly characterised by cyber-enabled forced criminality linked to online scam operations (Jespersen *et al.*, 2023; OHCHR, 2023a).

On the pull side, global studies show that trafficking hubs thrive where criminal networks benefit from weak oversight and political protection (Mahmoud & Trebesch, 2010; Shelley, 2010). Taiwan shares these characteristics but differs in its reliance on advanced digital infrastructure, which enables transnational scam networks rather than traditional territorial or transit-based trafficking seen in the Balkans or West African coastal routes (Carling, 2006; Gallagher & Holmes, 2008; ILO, 2022; Interpol, 2023). Taiwan's trafficking patterns align with broader international trends but are distinctly shaped by the island's cyber-oriented economy. Understanding these similarities and differences is crucial for developing effective interventions that address both structural vulnerabilities in source countries and the digital nature of trafficking operations in Taiwan.

7. Forced Criminality: Operations of Human Trafficking for Online Scams

In May 2024, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) launched an emergency response network to address the growing issue of scams and human trafficking for forced criminality (UNODC, 2024). Forced criminality refers to situations in which individuals are deceived or coerced into engaging in illegal activities, such as romance scams, cryptocurrency fraud, and illegal gambling. Interpol (2023) stressed that human trafficking

for forced criminality has escalated from a regional crime to a global crisis. The agency identified two distinct groups of individuals impacted by this phenomenon, underscoring the complex and far-reaching nature of the issue.

The convergence of online scams and human trafficking in Taiwan represents a multifaceted and increasingly sophisticated form of exploitation (Thein, 2023). Criminal networks have progressively incorporated human trafficking into their operations to support and sustain large-scale online scam activities. This intersection is primarily driven by Taiwan's advanced digital infrastructure, strategic geographic location, and its favourable economic environment, all of which position it as a key hub for transnational organised crime (Chang, 2012). A comprehensive understanding of this nexus is essential for the development of effective strategies aimed at addressing both human trafficking and cybercrime in the region.

Interpol (2023) further emphasised that online scams and human trafficking represent a dual form of victimisation, affecting two distinct groups. The first group consists of individuals who are trafficked, extorted, and coerced into participating in online fraud activities. These victims are often subjected to severe abuse, including physical beatings, sexual exploitation, torture, and rape, while being trapped in debt bondage (Lin & Nomikos, 2018). The second group comprises victims of online scams, who are defrauded of significant sums of money through fraudulent investment schemes and other deceptive tactics (Interpol, 2023). These scams are perpetrated by the trafficked workers, who are compelled to participate in the criminal activities due to threats of violence and further abuse if they refuse to comply (Thein, 2023).

According to Jespersion *et al.* (2023), traffickers often lure victims with false promises of legitimate employment, only to trap them in exploitative conditions where they are forced to engage in criminal acts. The traffickers' modus operandi typically involves recruiting individuals from overseas via social media and other platforms, offering seemingly legitimate positions in industries such as digital marketing, translation, domestic services, and construction. Upon arrival in Taiwan or other locations, these individuals are shocked to find that they are forced to work in illegal online scam operations. In some instances, as noted by Kennedy and Southern (2022), victims are physically confined, closely monitored, and subjected to psychological abuse, further coercing their compliance.

Furthermore, these trafficked individuals are manipulated into deceiving others, often by cultivating online relationships with unsuspecting victims and subsequently scamming them in various ways. These scams may involve persuading victims to invest in fraudulent businesses or foreign currencies or coercing them into purchasing counterfeit luxury products and services online (Mekong Club, 2023).

Taiwan's model of forced criminality mirrors global patterns but also demonstrates distinct features shaped by its advanced digital environment. As seen in Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and parts of Africa, traffickers in Taiwan recruit vulnerable individuals through deceptive employment offers before subjecting them to coercion, confinement, violence, and debt bondage to compel participation in criminal activities (Jespersion *et al.*, 2019). Similar to operations in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and the Golden Triangle, Taiwan's scam centres operate through organised networks that merge human trafficking with online fraud, generating harm for both trafficked workers and fraud victims (Interpol, 2023; Mekong Club, 2023). The heavy reliance on digital platforms for recruitment, manipulation, and cross-border coordination aligns with emerging patterns in African and Eastern European cases, where cyber-enabled exploitation is increasingly embedded within organised crime (UNODC, 2024).

However, Taiwan differs from jurisdictions where forced criminality is tied to territorial control, militia activities, or special economic zones such as Myanmar's conflict areas, Cambodia's casino hubs, or Libya's migration routes. Instead, Taiwan's operations are shaped by its highly developed digital infrastructure, deep internet penetration, and technologically skilled workforce (Franceschini *et al.*, 2025). These conditions facilitate more sophisticated and scalable scam operations, with closer integration into global financial cybercrime networks (Lin & Nomikos, 2018; Thein, 2023). Taiwan also recruits victims from relatively stable countries with established migration pathways, resulting in a broader demographic profile than contexts that draw primarily from conflict-affected or collapsed states.

Overall, while Taiwan shares the global features of deception, coercion, and exploitation typical of forced criminality, its technologically driven and internationally networked cyber-fraud systems set it apart and require specialised counter-trafficking and cybercrime responses.

8. Online Scams and Human Trafficking from Regional to Global Crisis

The intersection of online scams and human trafficking has transformed from a regional concern into a global crisis, driven by technological advancements and the increasing interconnectedness of global economies. What were once localised issues have expanded beyond national borders, giving rise to complex transnational networks that systematically exploit vulnerable individuals on a large scale.

Interpol (2023) affirmed that the modus operandi of human trafficking and online scams has rapidly expanded, acquiring a global scope and becoming increasingly entrenched. This trend has prompted a global alert regarding a serious and growing threat to public safety. Initially, Cambodia was considered a hotspot for these crimes; however, Myanmar and Laos have since emerged as additional focal points. Furthermore, evidence suggests that these operations are being replicated in other regions, including the Middle East, West Africa and Central America, where cybercrime-facilitated financial crime is already widespread (Interpol, 2025).

Additionally, online scam syndicates frequently exploit migrants from New Southbound Policy (NSP) countries by enticing them with fraudulent job offers. Victims are trafficked to regions such as Cambodia and Myanmar, where they are coerced into executing deceptive operations, including cryptocurrency and financial fraud. These illicit schemes often leverage advanced technology and social media platforms to manipulate and defraud individuals, demonstrating the intersection of human trafficking and cybercrime in exploiting vulnerable populations (Taiwan News, 2023).

There has been a significant increase in the geographical diversity of victims. While the majority of trafficking victims were once primarily Chinese-speaking individuals from China, Malaysia, Thailand, or Singapore, trafficked persons now come from countries as distant as South America, East Africa, and Western Europe (Interpol, 2023). This shift underscores the transformation of what was once considered a regional issue into a global crisis. The growing concern is that individuals from anywhere around the world are now at risk of falling victim to either human trafficking or online scams.

A real-life case reported by Kennedy and Southern (2022) involved a local government official and business owner in Bangkok, who voluntarily assisted struggling residents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Today is January 28th at 1 am, 2022. I’m in a building opposite the Karaoke Bar,” says the Thai teenager into the camera, her eyes swollen from crying. She seems exhausted, close to breaking point, but determined to get as much information across as she can while she has the chance. The woman explains that she travelled from Bangkok to Sa Kaeo on the Thailand-Cambodia border to meet a Thai broker who had promised her a job in Poipet, a seedy casino town just over the border in Cambodia. She was then told that the role would involve scamming strangers online – and that if she wanted to leave, her father would have to pay 40,000 baht (\$1,080) to secure her release. “I know everything and I’m afraid that [the boss] will kill me,” she sobs. “I don’t know what he will do to the others after this and I don’t know if I can contact you again. I’ve heard that at least 20 or 30 people have died.”

Over the following months, more Thai victims of human trafficking held captive in casino towns along the border of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar began sending messages, videos, and pictures. These communications consistently conveyed similar narratives of being deceived with promises of well-paying, respectable jobs, only to find themselves imprisoned by the Chinese mafia under deplorable conditions. Constantly at risk of violence, they were forced to participate in illicit activities, primarily deceiving individuals into fraudulent online investment activities that may have had local government cooperation or knowledge (Kennedy & Southern, 2023). Such cases are common in Southeast Asia, with similar situations involving Taiwanese individuals trafficked to Cambodia and coerced into working in telecom scam networks by human trafficking syndicates (Davidson & Lin, 2022).

Evidently, Davidson and Lin (2022) specified that a large-scale rescue operation saw police forces from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Vietnam collaborating to free their citizens from trafficking syndicates and dismantle the operations of these organisations. Traffickers, many of whom are linked to prominent triads, target primarily young Asians via social media, offering well-paid jobs and accommodation in countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. Upon arrival, these traffickers confiscate passports or sell victims to other criminal groups, forcing them to work in online scam operations. Deprived of their documents and

support, these victims have no choice but to comply. It is estimated that approximately 5,000 Taiwanese nationals have been trafficked to Cambodia under such circumstances, with many never returning home (Davidson & Lin, 2022).

The profitability of online scamming fuels this cycle, with human trafficking syndicates using every available method to lure individuals into their exploitative networks. In response to this pervasive issue, Taiwanese authorities face numerous challenges in combating trafficking for online scams. The following section of this article will explore and analyse these challenges in greater detail.

9. The Challenges Faced by the Taiwanese Government

The Taiwanese government faces a range of significant challenges in its efforts to combat trafficking for online scams. These obstacles are multifaceted, encompassing legal, technological, socioeconomic, and global dimensions. A comprehensive understanding of these challenges is crucial for developing effective strategies to address the growing problem of coerced criminality associated with online scams in Taiwan.

9.1 Inadequate Regulatory and Enforcement

One of the key challenges for the Taiwanese government lies in the limitations of existing legal frameworks, which are often inadequate to address the complex and evolving nature of trafficking for online scams (US Department of State, 2022). While Taiwan has robust laws aimed at combating human trafficking, these laws were primarily designed to address traditional forms of trafficking, such as forced labour and sexual exploitation. Given the rising prevalence of online scams, there is an urgent need to amend human trafficking laws to account for the complexities of trafficking for online scams and coerced criminality.

Additionally, a significant issue lies in distinguishing between victims and perpetrators, particularly in cases where individuals are trafficked and forced to engage in criminal activities such as online scams. In some instances, victims are wrongly prosecuted rather than offered protection, further complicating efforts to combat human trafficking. In light of this, the US Department of State's TIP report (2022) recommended that the Taiwanese government strengthen its legal framework to address the specific

challenges posed by trafficking for online scams, while also enhancing protections for victims coerced into committing criminal acts.

9.2 The Rapid Transition of Technology

Online scam operations leverage highly sophisticated digital technologies, which present significant challenges for Taiwanese authorities and law enforcement agencies in tracking, identifying, and prosecuting traffickers and their accomplices. Given that online scams often involve advanced technologies such as encryption, cross-border digital transactions, and anonymisation tools, these factors complicate efforts to identify and dismantle these networks, particularly when they operate across borders (Interpol, 2023). Furthermore, the rapidly evolving nature of these technologies creates additional obstacles for Taiwanese law enforcement, including difficulties in tracking digital footprints, decrypting communications, and locating the sources of illicit funds.

These technological advancements enable traffickers to operate anonymously, making it difficult to trace their activities or link them to specific geographic locations. As such, the Taiwanese government must bolster its efforts to combat trafficking for online scams by enhancing its technological and technical capabilities. Additionally, regional and global collaboration will be essential in addressing the transnational nature of these crimes.

9.3 Lack of Resources and Capacity

According to the US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (2023), despite progress in addressing human trafficking, Taiwan continues to face significant resource constraints, particularly regarding the needs of victims trafficked for online scams. These victims require specialised care, legal assistance, and rehabilitation services, which are often not sufficiently available. Law enforcement agencies and social services involved in human trafficking cases are limited by insufficient manpower, funding, and training to effectively handle the complexities of these cases.

Furthermore, the government lacks the resources and capacity to thoroughly investigate and prosecute the multifaceted nature of trafficking for online scams while also providing adequate support to victims. The ongoing issues of understaffing and weaknesses in inspection protocols

remain significant obstacles to the authorities' efforts in investigating, identifying, and prosecuting these crimes (US Department of State, 2023).

Additionally, the problem is exacerbated by the international dimension of online scam trafficking, where numerous Taiwanese nationals have been lured abroad, notably to Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia, through fake job offers and subsequently forced into scam operations. Rescue operations are complicated by the Taiwan government's limited diplomatic presence overseas, the remote locations of scams, and inadequate coordination among domestic, regional, and foreign authorities, including NGOs (Davidson & Lin, 2022).

9.4 Transnational and Cross-border Challenges

Trafficking for online scams is often facilitated by networks that operate across borders, making it a transnational crime. Located in the Asia-Pacific region, Taiwan functions as both a source and a transit point for individuals trafficked for such scams. The cross-border nature of these operations complicates law enforcement efforts and necessitates robust international cooperation, as highlighted by the Global Initiative (2021). However, Taiwan's ambiguous status under international law significantly hampers its ability to engage in these cooperative mechanisms. Despite being a highly developed and proactive jurisdiction, Taiwan's exclusion from major international organisations, due to its contested political status, undermines its capacity to coordinate with other countries, share intelligence, prosecute offenders, extradite suspects, or participate in multilateral enforcement actions (US Department of State, 2023; Global Initiative, 2021).

Also, this legal and diplomatic isolation creates a conducive environment for criminal actors. Transnational criminal gangs and traffickers exploit Taiwan's constrained international engagement, knowing that gaps in intelligence-sharing and enforcement cooperation reduce the likelihood of detection and prosecution. The absence of formal diplomatic ties contributes to the delays or failures in extraditing suspects or collaborating on joint investigations, making Taiwan an attractive base or transit hub for illicit operations (US Department of State, 2023; Global Initiative, 2021).

Consequently, both Taiwan-based perpetrators and their victims may fall through the cracks of the international legal system. This legal and diplomatic isolation leaves Taiwanese authorities at a distinct disadvantage in addressing transnational crimes such as trafficking for online scams, creating

persistent gaps in global efforts to combat organised criminal networks (ILO, 2022).

9.5 Lack of Knowledge and Public Awareness

The ILO (2022) reports that one of the significant shortcomings of the Taiwanese government is the limited public education on human trafficking, particularly concerning online scams. Raising awareness about trafficking for online scams presents a considerable challenge. On one hand, it is crucial to educate the public about the prevalence of such scams, as many individuals fail to recognise the signs of trafficking. This lack of awareness contributes to underreporting and the misidentification of victims. Efforts to address this gap include providing training for frontline staff to help identify victims of trafficking involved in online scams, as well as offering appropriate care and support for those rescued.

On the other hand, many victims of trafficking for online scams may not be fully aware of their legal rights or may fear legal repercussions, which leads to reluctance to seek help. Additionally, some government personnel and members of the public may not fully comprehend the complexities of this form of trafficking, resulting in inadequate responses (ILO, 2022). In a nutshell, Taiwan faces several challenges in combating trafficking for online scams, ranging from legal and technological barriers to resource constraints and difficulties in global cooperation. Addressing these issues is essential, and the following section will examine the government's efforts to combat trafficking related to online scams.

10. The Responses of the Taiwanese Government

In its efforts to combat trafficking for online scams, the Taiwanese government has made significant strides by aligning its initiatives with the four pillars of the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA): Prevention, Prosecution, Protection, and Partnership. According to the US Department of State's TIP report (2023), Taiwan remains in Tier 1 of the TVPA, reflecting its compliance with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. This includes the investigation and prosecution of traffickers involved in cyber scam operations, particularly online scams, and enhancing international law enforcement cooperation to address trafficking crimes.

While the government has made notable progress in meeting these standards, it has faced challenges in fully implementing effective victim identification measures, which continue to complicate victims' access to justice and protection. This section will further explore the Taiwanese authorities' responses to the growing issue of trafficking for online scams.

10.1 Prevention

In its efforts to prevent and combat trafficking for online scams, the Taiwanese government has implemented several key measures, focusing on public awareness and education, training, and strengthening regulatory frameworks. According to the US Department of State's TIP report (2023), Taiwan continued its "2021-2022 Anti-Exploitation Action Plan," which outlines strategies to prevent sex trafficking and forced labour among vulnerable populations. Trafficking for online scams is considered a form of forced labour, as victims are coerced and exploited into committing fraudulent acts against innocent individuals. To address this, the government has enhanced its legal framework by tightening regulations on labour recruitment agencies, directly addressing the nexus between human trafficking and online scams. Moreover, efforts to monitor digital platforms have been intensified to prevent the spread of fraudulent job advertisements (US Department of State, 2023).

Additionally, Taiwan has continued to engage in bilateral agreements, establishing memoranda of understanding (MOUs) on trafficking with 26 countries, although some of these agreements have not sufficiently addressed the issue of trafficking for online scams and cybercrime (US Department of State, 2024). Proactive measures include organising workshops and seminars, such as one held by the National Immigration Agency (NIA) in August 2022. This event brought together domestic authorities, foreign officials, scholars, and civil society representatives to discuss strategies for preventing human trafficking through cyber tools and combating cyber scam operations. It also focused on improving collaboration with local and international partners (US Department of State, 2023).

In 2024, Taiwan's Ministry of Digital Development, Ministry of Labour (MOL), and National Police Agency (NPA) collaborated with the technology, social media, and digital communication companies to improve information exchange with the High Prosecutor's Office, Ministry of Justice Investigative (MOJ), and Criminal Police Bureaus. This collaboration resulted in the

establishment of a liaison channel aimed at eliminating fraudulent job and investment advertisements and removing associated fake accounts (US Department of State, 2024).

Furthermore, the government partnered with civil society organisations to organise public awareness campaigns aimed at educating the public about trafficking for online scams. These campaigns provided online assistance to those seeking information and are disseminated through media outlets, workshops, and community outreach programs targeting vulnerable populations, such as migrant workers and young individuals. In August 2024, Taiwan's National Immigration Agency (NIA) organised an international workshop aimed at combating human trafficking. The event drew approximately 300 participants from 11 countries, including government officials, academics, and experts, fostering dialogue on innovative strategies to address trafficking and associated crimes (Scanlan, 2024). According to the Deputy Minister of the Interior, Ma Shih-yuan, in 2023, over 100,000 individuals were coerced into participating in internet and telecommunications fraud operations in Southeast Asia. Among these victims were Taiwanese nationals, highlighting the transnational nature of these criminal activities and the risks posed to Taiwan's citizens (Scanlan, 2024).

10.2 Prosecution

The Taiwanese government has made significant strides in prioritising the prosecution of traffickers involved in online scams by revising its Anti-Trafficking laws (Global Initiative, 2021; US Department of State, 2024). These revisions have led to improvements in legal mechanisms, law enforcement capabilities, and harsher penalties for trafficking-related offences. The amendments to the Anti-Trafficking laws have broadened the scope of trafficking to include new forms of exploitation, such as forced criminality within the digital space. These legal enhancements aim to address the growing issue of online scams and better reflect the complexities of trafficking in the context of cybercrime.

Despite these legislative advances, the US Department of State's TIP report (2024) indicates that the authorities have not reported any specific convictions related to trafficking for online scams, although certain labour trafficking prosecutions have involved cases of online scam operations. Evidently, in 2024, Taiwanese authorities prosecuted 388 individuals in 153

cases related to human trafficking, including 229 cases for alleged forced labour, 115 for alleged sex trafficking, and 44 cases where it was difficult to distinguish between sex and labour trafficking. These efforts reflect Taiwan's ongoing attempts to combat trafficking, including crimes related to online scams, though challenges remain in terms of identifying and prosecuting traffickers, particularly in cases involving complex digital or cross-border elements (US Department of State, 2024).

In addition, the Taiwanese government has established a specialised cybercrime unit within its law enforcement agencies to focus on dismantling networks involved in online scams (US Department of State, 2023). These units are equipped with advanced technology to enhance their ability to trace and prosecute traffickers operating within the digital space. To further strengthen the prosecution process, the government has also invested in capacity-building initiatives, providing training for judges and prosecutors to better understand the intricacies of trafficking cases related to online scams. These efforts aim to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the legal system in addressing this complex form of trafficking.

10.3 Protection

The protection of victims remains a cornerstone of the Taiwanese government's anti-trafficking strategy. Efforts have focused on establishing a comprehensive victim support system that includes shelters, legal assistance, and rehabilitation programs, aimed at facilitating the recovery and reintegration of survivors (US Department of State, 2023). In January 2024, the National Immigration Agency (NIA) further enhanced these mechanisms by amending the Principles for Victim Identification of Human Trafficking. This amendment expanded the categories of potential victims to include individuals at risk of forced criminality, such as those coerced into online scams. It also introduced the "Human Trafficking Victim Identification Notice," which mandates authorities to provide victims with a newly revised identification and remedy mechanism (US Department of State, 2024).

The government has prioritised immediate access to support services, including emergency shelters, medical aid, and psychological counselling, to address the immediate and long-term needs of victims. Legal aid is also a key component, ensuring victims can navigate judicial processes without fear of prosecution for crimes they were coerced into committing. This aligns with Taiwan's adoption of a victim-centred approach, which incorporates

the non-punishment principle to shield victims from legal penalties for acts resulting from their exploitation (ILO, 2022).

Also, victim participation in legal proceedings has been facilitated through measures such as video interviews, written statements, and witness protection services. Social workers accompany victims during court appearances, while their personal information is safeguarded to prevent public exposure. Resettlement services are also offered to help victims rebuild their lives after exploitation (US Department of State, 2024). These measures highlight Taiwan's commitment to protecting the rights and well-being of trafficking victims, particularly those affected by online scams and forced criminality.

10.4 Partnership

Effectively combating trafficking for online scams requires strategic partnerships, given the inherently transnational nature of these crimes. To bolster its anti-trafficking efforts, the Taiwanese government has prioritised fostering both domestic and international collaborations. At the domestic level, the government has strengthened inter-agency coordination by integrating the National Police Agency (NPA), the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau (MJIB), social welfare institutions, immigration authorities, and labour departments into multi-agency task forces. These bodies share intelligence, consolidate investigative resources, and coordinate victim identification and protection services. This “whole-of-government” approach enhances the ability to track illicit online activities, protect victims, and support prosecutors handling transnational trafficking cases (MOI, 2025).

On the international front, Taiwan has successfully established significant partnerships, particularly in Southeast Asia, despite ongoing geopolitical challenges. The MJIB deploys legal attachés in multiple Southeast Asian countries to liaise directly with host-country police, exchange intelligence, coordinate joint investigations, and facilitate rescues of trafficked victims, including Taiwanese nationals detained in scam compounds in Cambodia and Myanmar (NPA, 2025). These attachés act as the primary channels through which Taiwan engages operationally with ASEAN law-enforcement bodies, especially where formal diplomatic relations are limited. Such collaborations have enabled coordinated casework, tracing of financial flows, hunting of ringleaders, and cross-border arrests or deportations. Taiwan's cooperation with Cambodian, Thai,

and Philippine authorities has been particularly critical in dismantling scam compounds and rescuing victims trafficked into forced criminality (Naing, 2025; Taipei Times, 2025; Taiwan Today, 2025).

According to Peck (2025) and Chou (2025), beyond bilateral efforts, Taiwan participates in multijurisdictional operations and regional coordination centres focused on transnational cyber fraud and trafficking. These joint mechanisms, often initiated by regional partners, enable real-time intelligence sharing, digital forensics collaboration, monitoring of cryptocurrency transactions, and synchronised raids on scam compounds across Southeast Asia. Even without formal membership in some international policing organisations, Taiwan contributes operational intelligence and benefits from practitioner-level information exchanges facilitated through partner countries (Taiwan Today, 2025).

Additionally, Taiwan's judicial cooperation efforts rely on both formal mutual legal assistance (MLA) treaties and flexible, case-by-case mechanisms to support cross-border investigations (MOI, 2025). Through these channels, authorities have been able to secure evidence, freeze illicit assets, and strengthen prosecutions in major cyber-trafficking cases (MOI, 2025; Taiwan Today, 2024). In the absence of formal MLA arrangements with many ASEAN states, Taiwan employs alternative tools such as third-party evidence transfers, specialised prosecutor task groups, and support from MJIB attachés stationed overseas (MJIB AMLD, 2024). These mechanisms enhance Taiwan's ability to target organisers, financiers, and recruiters operating abroad.

The Taiwan government also actively participate in international platforms on cybercrime, trafficking, and financial crime, including regional conferences, workshops, and cyber-policing dialogues aimed at improving investigative practices and strengthening collaborative frameworks (MOI, 2025). Despite geopolitical barriers to full multilateral participation, Taiwan continues to advocate for wider inclusion in global policing mechanisms to expand information-sharing, early-warning systems, and accountability for transnational criminal networks (Chou, 2025).

Partnerships with private-sector actors, such as digital communication firms, telecom providers, and financial institutions, play a growing role in detecting scam-related activity, tracing fraudulent schemes, and freezing illicit proceeds. Collaboration with technology companies also supports the disruption of online recruitment channels used by trafficking

syndicates (Interpol, 2023; MJIB AMLD, 2024). Collectively, these judicial, international, and private-sector mechanisms form a comprehensive approach that enhances Taiwan's capacity to combat highly mobile and technologically sophisticated trafficking-for-scam operations across the region.

11. Conclusion

Trafficking for online scams in Taiwan is a multifaceted and evolving challenge, deeply intertwined with global concerns such as human trafficking, cybercrime, and transnational criminal networks. This paper has examined Taiwan's geopolitical and technological landscape, which offers significant advantages but also creates vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit to coerce and manipulate individuals in the digital domain. Also, exploring the causes of trafficking for online scams by discussing the push-and-pull factors that drive vulnerable individuals into exploitative situations underscores the need for systemic approaches to dismantle the traffickers' business model and reduce the supply of victims. The analysis shows that traffickers consistently exploit socio-economic disparities, digital recruitment channels, and weak cross-border law enforcement coordination to lure and control victims, many of whom are deceived with promises of legitimate employment before being coerced into perpetrating cyber-enabled crimes. Furthermore, the digital nature of these operations provides traffickers with anonymity and impunity, creating significant challenges for law enforcement agencies attempting to disrupt these networks.

Taiwan's constrained participation in global policing mechanisms, stemming from geopolitical considerations, amplifies these challenges. Yet the study finds that Taiwan has made meaningful progress by strengthening domestic inter-agency coordination, deploying investigative attachés across Southeast Asia, enhancing legal frameworks for cyber-trafficking cases, and aligning efforts with the four pillars of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act: prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership.

To strengthen Taiwan's response to trafficking for online scams, the research highlights six key recommendations. First, Taiwan should enhance prosecutorial capacity by improving cross-border evidence collection, expanding flexible mutual legal assistance mechanisms, and investing in specialised cyber-trafficking prosecutors skilled in digital forensics and cryptocurrency tracing. Second, victim-centred protections must be strengthened through clearer guidelines distinguishing victims from offenders

in forced criminality cases, as well as expanded rehabilitation, psychological support, and legal immunity for coerced individuals. Third, Taiwan and neighbouring countries should invest in digital-prevention strategies, including targeted public-awareness and digital-literacy campaigns, and closer cooperation with technology platforms to disrupt fraudulent recruitment. Fourth, operational partnerships with Southeast Asian law-enforcement agencies should be deepened through enhanced intelligence-sharing, joint operations, and coordinated raids on scam compounds, supported by information from MJIB attachés. Fifth, the government should continue to engage actively in regional and global cybercrime forums, despite geopolitical constraints, to enhance early-warning systems and harmonise investigative standards. Finally, collaboration with private-sector actors such as fintech companies, telecom operators, and social-media platforms is essential for tracing illicit transactions, identifying fraudulent activities, and shutting down recruitment channels used by traffickers.

Collectively, these measures underscore the need for sustained vigilance, technological innovation, and robust regional cooperation to dismantle trafficking networks and protect vulnerable people from online scam exploitation.

Notes

- ¹ See Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

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