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**Human Trafficking in the Asia Pacific Region:
An Interdisciplinary Literature Review**

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Migration and Mobility in the Asia Pacific (MMAP) is an interdisciplinary research cluster established in 2020 and based at Monash University Malaysia. The aim is to foster a multifaceted dialogue on the complexity of migration and mobilities in the Asia Pacific. This cluster sets out to study the factors, conditions and challenges faced by migrants, groups and communities concerned, especially with regards to the social, economic, legal and political implications of gender, inequality and health in the local, national and international contexts.

Human Trafficking in the Asia Pacific Region: An Interdisciplinary Literature Review

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Introduction

Human trafficking is a global phenomenon that has received a high level of international political and media attention since the 1990s and particularly following the negotiations and passing of a United Nations protocol and major U.S. legislation, both in the year 2000 (Cockbain et al., 2018; Patterson & Zhuo, 2018). The Asia Pacific region is often described as a key hub for human trafficking, particularly trafficking for sexual exploitation. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that forced labour—encompassing forced labour in the private economy, forced sexual exploitation of adults and all forms of commercial and sexual exploitation involving children, and state-imposed forced labour—is most prevalent in the Asia Pacific region. The ILO estimated that in 2016, 3.8 million adults were victims of forced sexual exploitation and one million children were victims of commercial sexual exploitation. More than 70 percent of these victims were estimated to have been exploited in the Asia Pacific region (ILO, 2017).

National and regional initiatives with the stated aim of responding to human trafficking have expanded following the increased levels of international political attention, including in the Asia Pacific region (Cockbain et al., 2018; David, 2009; Goździak & Graveline, 2015). However, there remains limited systematic data on the scale of the problem. Research on human trafficking, including empirical literature on issues relating to human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region, has been widely criticized for its lack of methodological rigour (see, for example, Cockbain et al., 2018; David, 2009; Piper, 2005; Weitzer, 2014).

This article provides a review of academic literature on human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region¹. The article identifies key themes and knowledge gaps presented by the literature. It draws on literature in sociology, political science, public health, criminology, law, anthropology, area studies and critical geography. The article also makes suggestions for future research to address identified gaps and add to the overall body of knowledge.

¹ This paper defines the Asia Pacific region to encompass South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and Oceania and as including the following countries: Afghanistan; American Samoa; Armenia; Australia; Azerbaijan; Bangladesh; Bhutan; Brunei Darussalam; Cambodia; China; Cook Islands; Democratic People's Republic of Korea; Fiji; French Polynesia; Georgia; Guam; Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Japan; Kazakhstan; Kiribati; Kyrgyzstan; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Macao, China; Malaysia; Maldives; Marshall Islands; Micronesia (Federated States of); Mongolia; Myanmar; Nauru; Nepal; New Caledonia; New Zealand; Niue; Northern Mariana Islands; Pakistan; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Russian Federation; Samoa; Singapore; Solomon Islands; Sri Lanka; Tajikistan; Thailand; Timor-Leste; Tonga; Turkey; Turkmenistan; Tuvalu; Uzbekistan; Vanuatu; and Vietnam.

Definitions

The contemporary international definition of human trafficking was established in December 2000 through the signing of a United Nations “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children”, widely referred to as the “Palermo Protocol”. The Palermo Protocol firmly connected human trafficking to transnational organized crime, as denoted by the fact that it is an optional protocol to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The protocol has been signed by 117 countries.

Elżbieta M. Goździak, writing in the Oxford Handbook of Gender, Sex and Crime, provides an overview of the negotiations involved in reaching the Palermo Protocol definition:

“The (Protocol) was a result of two years of negotiations at the UN Center for International Crime Prevention in Vienna and was the target of heavy lobbying efforts by religious and feminist organizations representing two opposing views of prostitution. The Human Rights Caucus (HRC) saw prostitution as legitimate labor, and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) viewed all prostitution as a violation of women’s human rights. The CATW argued that trafficking should include all forms of recruitment and transportation for prostitution, regardless of whether force or deception took place, while the HRC, which supported the view of prostitution as work, argued that force or deception was a necessary ingredient. The HRC also maintained that the term human trafficking should include trafficking of women, men, and children for different types of labor, including sweatshops, agriculture, and prostitution.... In the end the signatories to the Protocol rejected the broadened definition championed by some feminist and religious groups” (Goździak, 2014, p. 616).

The Palermo Protocol defines human trafficking 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 of 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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (UN General Assembly, 2000).

The Palermo Protocol definition includes three components:

- (a) The Act—action, such as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring and/or receipt of persons.
- (b) The Means—including, but not limited to, the threat or use of force, deception, abduction, the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, or other forms of coercion.
- (c) The Purpose—the purpose of human trafficking is exploitation, which can include the prostitution of others, forced labour, slavery or servitude and removal of organs.

Many states have included elements that go beyond the requirements of the Palermo Protocol as they have gone about the process of criminalizing human trafficking domestically. For example, the United States defines human trafficking to include any commercial sex act of a minor. Qatar prohibits human trafficking for the purposes of pornography and Israel has outlawed human trafficking for the purposes of surrogacy. These multiple definitions of human trafficking mean that direct cross-national

comparisons are not possible when states report on instances of human trafficking within their borders (McCarthy, 2014).

Scholars have pointed out that empirical studies demonstrate that it is very challenging to apply the Palermo Protocol definition in practice, including with regards to tracking a direct connection among actors across the act, the means and the purpose as set out in the definition (Bélanger, 2014), and also in situations where the distinction between human trafficking and migrant smuggling is blurred and where, for example, smuggling involves exploitation and vulnerability but not deception or coercion (Weitzer, 2014). Migrant smuggling is considered a separate phenomenon in international law with its own protocol. A smuggler's relationship with a migrant is normally said to end once the migrant has crossed international borders and paid a fee. However, many such migrants remain indebted at the end of the journey and may be compelled to pay off their debts in exploitative situations, thereby blurring the distinction between migrant smuggling and human trafficking (McCarthy, 2014).

Data on the scale and patterns of human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region

The illicit nature of human trafficking, the social isolation of victims, and the application of inconsistent definitions have resulted in challenges to achieving accurate measurement of the scale and patterns of human trafficking, including in the Asia Pacific region (Patterson & Zhuo, 2018). There remains limited agreement on what human trafficking is in practice and even less on how it can be measured, creating significant empirical challenges for researchers and policy makers (McCarthy, 2014). Few empirical studies on human trafficking conduct original systematic data collection and many publications use commonly cited figures from a small number of established reports from UN organizations, which themselves have widely established methodological limitations (Patterson & Zhuo, 2018).

One such well-established report is the biennial “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons” published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). These reports provide a global and regional overview of human trafficking, including broad demographic profiles of victims, trafficking flows, information on forms of exploitation, broad demographic profiles of convicted offenders and details of legislation introduced. Information is collected in two ways: through a dedicated questionnaire distributed to governments, and by the collection of official information that is available in the public domain. UNODC explicitly states that its methodology does not allow for cross-country comparisons.

The 2020 edition of the UNODC’s Global Report on Trafficking in Persons provides a regional overview for South Asia² that indicates that children and adult women were the largest groups of detected victims, accounting for 45 and 44 percent respectively of total victims detected in that subregion (UNODC, 2021). Based on information on forms of exploitation for detected trafficking cases reported by India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, trafficking for forced labour was the most predominant form of exploitation, followed by trafficking for sexual exploitation and trafficking for forced marriage. Victims from South Asia were reported to be commonly detected in the Middle East. Domestic trafficking was also reported to be especially prevalent in the South Asia subregion.

For East Asia and the Pacific subregion,³ the 2020 Global Report indicates that just under half (48 percent) of detected victims were women. Children represented almost a third of all detected victims

² UNODC defines the South Asia subregion to include Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and India.

³ UNODC defines the East Asia and The Pacific subregion to comprise 13 countries in East Asia and 6 countries in the Pacific. East Asia consists of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste. The Pacific includes Australia, Cook Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau and Solomon Islands.

(20 percent were girls and 11 percent were boys). Just over a fifth (21 percent) of detected victims were men. Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation was by far the most common form of exploitation experienced by detected victims (64 percent of all victims suffered this form of exploitation), followed by trafficking for forced labour (29 percent). Notably, countries in this subregion report a high proportion of females being prosecuted and convicted for human trafficking. Fifty-six percent of the 1,233 reported individuals who were prosecuted across nine countries during the reporting period were females. A slightly lower proportion, 48 percent, of the total number of 888 reported individuals who were convicted of human trafficking across nine countries were female. Significantly more females (754 individuals) than males (482 individuals) were investigated and/or arrested for human trafficking across seven reporting countries in this subregion (UNODC, 2021).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is another widely cited source of data. In 2017, together with the Walk Free Foundation and in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the ILO published a report on “Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage” (ILO, 2017). The report’s estimates focused on the principal issues of forced labour and forced marriage. The estimate of forced labour encompasses forced labour in the private economy, forced sexual exploitation of adults and all forms of commercial and sexual exploitation involving children, and state-imposed forced labour. Forced marriage refers to situations where persons, regardless of their age, have been forced to marry without their consent. The estimates of forced labour in the private economy and forced marriage were derived from 54 specifically designed, national probabilistic surveys, which involved interviews with more than 71,000 respondents across 48 countries during the 2014-2016 period. In order to estimate forced sexual exploitation and forced labour, including of children, the 54 datasets were combined with administrative data from IOM’s databases of assisted victims of trafficking.

The ILO report estimated that the Asia Pacific region is host to by far the largest absolute number of victims of forced labour and forced marriage: 62 percent of all victims worldwide were estimated to be located there. The report estimated forced labour to be most prevalent in the Asia Pacific region. Four out of every 1,000 people in this region were estimated to be victims of forced labour. The report estimated that in 2016, 3.8 million adults were victims of forced sexual exploitation and one million children were victims of commercial sexual exploitation. More than 70 percent of these victims were estimated to have been exploited in the Asia Pacific region. Sixty-four percent of victims of forced labour exploitation worldwide were estimated to be located in the Asia Pacific region. Fifty-five percent of all victims of forced labour exploitation in the region were estimated to have been held in debt bondage, with a higher proportion of males (70%) than females (47%) suffering from this form of abuse. Debt bondage is defined by the report as “being forced to work to repay a debt and not being able to leave, or being forced to work and not being able to leave because of a debt” (ILO, 2017, p. 36). The prevalence of forced marriage was found to be highest in Africa, followed by the Asia Pacific region, where 2 in every 1,000 people were estimated to be living in a situation of forced marriage (ILO, 2017).

Academic Literature on Human Trafficking in the Asia Pacific Region

This section provides a review of academic literature on human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region. It draws on literature in sociology, political science, public health, criminology, law, anthropology, area studies and critical geography.

Methodology

The focus of this review's search and selection strategy was peer reviewed, empirical English language articles examining issues that directly relate to forms of human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region and that utilize primary data collection. After the initial search, empirical papers utilizing primary data collection were prioritized for selection and review. Due to the relatively limited range of empirically robust literature on human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region, a small number of secondary, non-empirical articles have also been included in the review for thematic areas where the literature is particularly thin.

Keyword searches were conducted using Monash University's online library⁴ and its comprehensive database access in order to retrieve relevant publications from the academic literature. Additional manual keyword searches were conducted using JSTOR, Taylor & Francis online and Google Scholar. Keywords utilized included but were not limited to "human trafficking", "labour trafficking", "sex trafficking", "child trafficking" and "traffickers". Related keyword combinations were also utilized following a primary search, including combinations with countries and sub-regions of the Asia Pacific region, and with themes, such as "human trafficking and organized crime", "human trafficking and health", "human trafficking and migration" and "human trafficking and domestic servitude", to illustrate some of the possible combinations. Backward searches were also conducted on human trafficking related review articles that were encountered. An additional backward search was conducted on the content of an extensive recent bibliography that catalogues publications on human trafficking (Goździak & Graveline, 2015), though not limited to the Asia Pacific region. In total, twenty-four academic articles focused on issues related to forms of human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region have been included in this literature review, together with an overview of two previously published literature reviews. The review draws on literature in sociology, political science, public health, criminology, law, anthropology, area studies and critical geography.

Literature themes and prior reviews

There are a small number of articles that have previously commented on research on human trafficking relating to the Asia Pacific region. In 2005 Nicola Piper published a review article of research on human trafficking in Southeast Asia and Oceania. Piper (2005) found that human trafficking for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation was by far the major focus of existing empirical and theoretical literature. In seeking to understand the reasoning behind this, she posits that "part of the answer seems to be that trafficking research has been dominated by feminist approaches" (p. 210). She found there to be very limited empirical research on other forms of human trafficking. While there had been a vibrant recent strand of research on international labour migration, at that point in time it was found to have "hardly engaged" with the human trafficking literature (Piper, 2005, p. 211). Piper (2005) suggests that this may explain the limited recognition of male victims of human trafficking in the literature, with evidence of exploitation of males at that point being largely anecdotal.

With regard to geographic focus, Piper (2005) found that the Mekong subregion was a particular area of emphasis. Piper suggests this is a result of the literature's focus on trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation and Thailand's related position in being viewed as "*the hub for the sex trade*" (p. 209). She also indicates that the focus on the Mekong subregion may be a legacy of Cambodia being a key focus of multiple United Nations efforts and programs following the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia period.

⁴ Please see <https://guides.lib.monash.edu/az.php> for a full A-Z list of Monash University's online library database access.

Piper (2005) found limited literature providing evidence for the link between human trafficking and organized crime. Indeed, she states that the available literature indicated that human trafficking in the Mekong subregion “... appears to resemble more of a cottage industry rather than organized crime, with local recruiters being seen as providing a service to the community” (Piper, 2005, p. 212). With regards to gaps in the literature, Piper (2005) believes that “the very root causes of trafficking.... need to be placed at the centre of analysis” (p. 226) and suggests the need for engagement with development literature.

Following on from and in explicit reference to Piper’s (2005) review, in 2009 Fiona David published a commentary on research published on human trafficking in Southeast Asia between 2005 and 2008. David (2009) found that the trafficking of women for the purposes of sexual exploitation continued to be the predominant area of research focus. However, David (2009) did discover that there were by that point a “small number of studies” that had started to study human trafficking for other forms of exploitation, and labour exploitation in particular (p. 96). The Mekong subregion, especially Thailand and Cambodia, continued to be the major geographic focus of human trafficking research in Southeast Asia. David (2009) indicated a need for increased attention to the quality of the research published, with regard to research methodology, data sources, sample size and overall quality of analysis.

This review paper found that there continues to be limited high quality empirical research published on issues relating to human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region and that many of the limitations and knowledge gaps highlighted by Piper (2005) and David (2009) remain broadly present. However, it also found a small number of more recent articles that utilize more robust empirical research designs, focus on the links between human trafficking and labour migration, examine the profiles and roles of traffickers, and study human trafficking issues also relating to men and boys in the Asia Pacific region. This review identified the following core thematic areas in the academic literature on human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region: human trafficking for sexual exploitation; human trafficking for labour exploitation; human trafficking for forced marriage; health consequences of human trafficking; determinants of human trafficking; traffickers; “anti-trafficking” and the negative impacts of anti-trafficking measures; and the impact of international and regional responses to human trafficking. For each theme this article additionally puts forward suggestions for future research to address identified gaps and add to the overall body of knowledge.

Forms of exploitation

Human trafficking for sexual exploitation

Human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation continues to be the dominant overall focus of the trafficking research literature relating to the Asia Pacific region. The Greater Mekong Subregion remains the leading geographical focus of this research cluster, with a particular emphasis on Thailand and Cambodia. There are smaller bodies of work focusing on other countries in the region, including India. The majority of research on human trafficking for sexual exploitation in the Asia Pacific region is qualitative in nature.

Unfortunately, much of the literature on human trafficking for sexual exploitation in the Asia Pacific region suffers from a lack of methodological rigour and weak research design. Common issues include lack of definitional clarity and/or lack of definitional operationalization for the purposes of the research; use of small sample sizes; a preponderance of unsubstantiated claims; ill-founded inferences; and presentation of findings as facts. For example, Blackburn et al. (2010) seek to understand the complexities of human trafficking and child sexual exploitation in Cambodia, yet unfortunately, they do not specify explicit research questions for their study. The study also suffers from a lack of definitional clarity. Interviews and observations were carried out in Cambodia and

Thailand between June 2004 and the end of 2006, though specific locations are not detailed. Convenience sampling was utilized, with over 100 interviews conducted with government officials in Cambodia and Thailand and officials of Western governments, predominantly from police and justice ministries, based in those countries. A further 80 interviews were conducted with “young women and children met inside brothels or arrested at brothels as a result of police operations” (Blackburn et al., 2010, p. 113). Unfortunately, the authors do not address the significant limitations and potential biases of this research design, such as the fact that many of the stakeholders interviewed would have been likely to have had vested interests in the outcome of the research. The resulting findings are based on anecdotal evidence but are often presented as facts. As an illustration of this, the first line of the findings section reads “Based on these observations and interviews, the problem of child prostitution appears to be expansive in Southeast Asia” (Blackburn et al., 2010, p. 114).

Several papers examine the processes of recruitment and deception as related to human trafficking for sexual exploitation and highlight the important role of friends and relatives. Sarkar et al. (2008) utilize a cross-sectional study to seek to understand the prevalence of trafficking, violence and HIV infection experienced by sex workers working in brothels in West Bengal in eastern India. The authors find that 86 percent (n=120) of sex workers categorized as victims of trafficking had been trafficked as minors by individuals previously known to them. Sverre Molland (2010) indicates similar findings from his ethnographic case study, based on fifteen months of field work primarily carried out with local research assistants in the Laos and Thai border towns of Vientiane and Nong Kai in 2005 and 2006. Molland (2010) finds that friends and networks play a key role in the migration processes and that recruitment into sex work in this border region takes place through informal patronage networks. While Molland (2010) believes that in many cases there is no deception, he does find that in some instances, sex workers will lie to new recruits about the nature of work that is involved. At times, this practice is combined with partial confinement enacted by venue owners, resulting in situations that “can arguably be interpreted as trafficking in light of the United Nations Protocol on Trafficking in persons” (Molland, 2010, p. 844). Sarkar et al. (2008) do note some their study’s limitations, including in relation to the use of convenience sampling and self-reported behaviour, to which self-selection bias could be added. Between May and October 2006, sex workers from four district brothels were approached through local NGOs and in total 580 sex workers engaged in the study. Blood samples were also collected. The authors find that 68 percent of the sex workers surveyed entered the profession voluntarily, while 24 percent had been “cheated and were forced by somebody to join the profession against their will”. The remaining eight percent “were forced to join the profession directly or indirectly by their spouses or family members” (Sarkar et al., 2008, p. 226).

Molland (2010) uses his ethnographic case study to put forward evidence against what he views to be the predominant “market metaphor” and rational choice model of the anti-trafficking field, which suggests that vulnerable individuals migrate seeking higher incomes, putting them in positions of vulnerability. This market metaphor model suggests that supply and demand largely explain cross border movements from poorer areas to relatively wealthier ones. The “conundrum” that Molland (2010) witnesses and which he suggests undermines this market metaphor is “why is it that some Lao sex workers’ behaviour appears to conflict with classic market economics by crossing the border to sell sex not only for lower prices, but also for lower income?” (p. 843). Molland’s (2010) answer to the conundrum is the fact that friends and networks play a key role in the migration processes. He suggests that the market metaphor fails to take into account such important nuances.

Sarkar et al.’s (2008) survey results indicate that sex workers who reported they had been trafficked into sex work through forms of coercion and deception were much more likely to have suffered violence. Fifty-seven percent of those forced to enter sex work by their families’ experience violence, compared to 15 percent of those who joined voluntarily. Prevalence of HIV was also higher amongst sex workers categorized as trafficked (experienced by 17 percent of these respondents) compared to

those who entered sex work voluntarily (10 percent of this group suffered from HIV). Joffres et al. (2008) also undertake to identify negative health impacts, as well as to provide a wider ranging overview of trafficking of women and girls for commercial sexual exploitation across India. Unfortunately, the value of the paper is undermined by the fact that the authors present the findings of their literature review as facts, without providing evaluation or critiques of the quality of the original literature. For example, seemingly in reference to a government commissioned report, the authors present the following claim as fact, without backing it up with substantiating evidence: “The majority of trafficked persons are young women or children who have been forced into sex work as a result of poverty, often before they were 18 years old.” (Joffres et al., 2008, para. 5). Similarly, the authors go on to state that human trafficking in India is a “demand-driven phenomenon” but present this claim as fact without reference to any evidence that might support it: “Trafficking for CSE [commercial sexual exploitation] is a demand-driven phenomenon, facilitated by traffickers, who find trafficking highly profitable and low risk, and the availability of vulnerable populations” (Joffres et al., 2008, para. 15).

Human trafficking for labour exploitation

There continues to be far less research examining human trafficking for labour exploitation in the Asia Pacific region as compared to trafficking for sexual exploitation. However, in recent years a small number of papers have been published that connect human trafficking and international migration and which notably focus on the experiences of both male and female migrants. Two articles were in fact both published in a 2014 issue of the ANNALS of The American Academy of Political and Social Science, which specifically sought to publish more “carefully designed empirical studies” (Weitzer, 2014, p. 8) that could withstand some of the criticisms highlighted earlier in this review that have been aimed at the literature on human trafficking.

The two articles, authored by Joarder and Miller (2014) and Danièle Bélanger (2014), benefit from research designs that are more rigorous than those generally employed in much of the human trafficking literature, including explicit use and operationalization of definitions, utilization of relatively large sample sizes and the development of conclusions based firmly on their findings. However, the use of consecutive samples and snowball sampling methods does limit the external validity and generalizability of the findings.

Unlike some of the literature on human trafficking for sexual exploitation, both papers are explicit in both their definitions of human trafficking and the operationalization of the definitions. However, in doing so, they implicitly and explicitly highlight the challenges of utilizing the Palermo Protocol definition for empirical research. Joarder and Miller (2014) investigate the experiences of Bangladeshi migrants who had returned to Bangladesh after migrating illegally. Three field surveys were carried out between April 2009 and November 2010 targeting returning migrants in Dhaka and Sylhet. In total, 638 individuals were contacted, with 518 agreeing to participate and usable information then garnered from 476 respondents. The authors cite the Palermo Protocol definition but interestingly decide to code a returned migrant as trafficked if they reported *one or more* of the following experiences: (1) they believed that they were going abroad with legal documents, but when they reached the host country discovered that the documents were fraudulent; (2) the employer in the host country violated their work contract; or (3) they were subjected to one or more of the following: low or no payment of wages, wages below the contracted amount or unpaid for at least six months, long working hours without overtime pay, no holidays, or sexual harassment or assault (Joarder & Miller, 2014, p. 145). This links to the challenge that Bélanger (2014) highlights regarding the difficulty of using the Palermo Protocol’s definition with “clarity and certainty” in empirical research. Bélanger (2014) surveys 646 returned Vietnamese migrant workers who had worked during the 2000s in four main destination countries of Vietnamese migrants—Malaysia, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. This is supplemented with 99 additional more detailed interviews with returnees, family members and

local political leaders. Bélanger (2014, p. 89) states that “The definition links the acts, the means, and the purpose; therefore, the connections among the actors become a condition of identifying a trafficking case. The complex transnational process of recruitment and placement of legal migrant workers in Asia involves several actors, both formal and informal, so tracking a direct connect among them and their intentions is next to impossible” (Bélanger, 2014, p. 89).

The two articles both emphasize the important role of debt bondage. Joarder and Miller (2014) found that the average cost for a Bangladeshi migrant coded as having been trafficked was almost US\$4,000. The authors contextualize the figure by noting that in 2011 the per capita GDP in Bangladesh was US\$1,700. Bélanger (2014) cites earlier research indicating that Vietnamese migrants incur among the highest levels of debts of all Southeast Asian migrants in order to finance their migration. She found that 62 percent of all survey respondents had mortgaged their homes and residential land to fund their migration. Bélanger (2014) suggests that debt bondage “is the cornerstone whereby abuse, coercion, forced labour, and trafficking and more likely to occur” (p. 95).

Joarder and Miller (2014) focus on the experiences of those Bangladeshi migrants that they code as having been trafficked (386 respondents). When asked why they returned to Bangladesh, over 75 percent of these migrants reported they had returned because they were required to work excessive hours without appropriate overtime pay, not allowed to take holidays, or inadequately paid. Three-quarters of migrants coded as trafficked had been in Middle Eastern countries and violations of working conditions were more prevalent among those who had worked in the Middle East or Malaysia. For example, 86 percent of migrants recorded as having been trafficked who had returned from Saudi Arabia reported experiencing violations of working conditions. In contrast, relatively few migrants recorded as having been trafficked in the United States or the United Kingdom reported such negative experiences. For female respondents recorded as having been trafficked, sexual harassment or assault was a major reason given for returning to Bangladesh. Almost all (96 percent) female respondents recorded as having been trafficked reported having experienced sexual harassment or assault, whereas no men reported such abuses (Joarder and Miller, 2014).

In contrast, Bélanger (2014) reports on the experiences of all migrants in her sample, whether they had experienced abuses or not. She details a wide continuum of migrant experiences. She found that a majority of those surveyed did not report having experienced abuse, deception or severe exploitation (Bélanger, 2014). Indeed, two-thirds reported that the overall impact of their migration experience was neutral or positive. There was significant polarity reported across migration experiences. Notably, female domestic workers were more likely to report positive experiences relative to men and women who had worked in manufacturing, construction and fishing. Between 15 and 30 percent of all respondents did experience threats of being fired, deported or having their salary reduced. Other common reported experiences included not being allowed to leave the workplace and not being allowed to use a phone. With regards to the most extreme negative cases reported, the most common scenario started with deceptive recruitment by means of a fake work contract. Bélanger (2014) concludes that her findings indicate that “human trafficking needs to be recognized as a phenomenon embedded in legal labor migration flows” (p. 102).

Human trafficking for forced marriage

Although human trafficking for forced marriage is regularly highlighted by policy literature and news articles as a major issue in parts of Asia, particularly China (see, for example, Barr, 2019; Caballero-Anthony, 2018; and Carvalho, 2020), and the ILO estimates that 2 in every 1,000 people in the Asia Pacific region are living in forced marriage (ILO, 2017), there is limited academic literature that examines the issue. However, there are two notable recent articles that stand out as exceptions, both

of which focus on women and girls trafficked for forced marriage to China from neighbouring countries.

Stöckl et al. (2017) provide information on the experiences of women and girls trafficked for forced marriage from Vietnam to China. Their article utilizes a sub-study of 51 Vietnamese women and girls who were receiving support in three post-trafficking shelter services in Vietnam. The sub-study uses data from a larger observational cross-sectional study. The authors note the limitations of the small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, which mean that they cannot go beyond descriptive analysis. A consecutive sample is utilized, which further limits the generalizability of the findings. Of the 51 females surveyed, 15 were minors at the time of the interview. The study reveals important insights regarding recruitment tactics. Deception was common: some females had been offered jobs, travel opportunities or just transport to a destination. A notable finding that links to the research on the important role of friends and relatives in trafficking for sexual exploitation is that more respondents reported deception by someone they knew (n=21)—the majority of these people being classed as “friends”—than by strangers (n=12). All but one of the participants reported that they had no idea that they would be marrying a Chinese man before they left their homes. Respondents reported they believed they were leaving home for different reasons. The majority stated they had not planned to travel to China. Most respondents reported having been trafficked for more than a year (n=33, 66%) and that they had experienced extremely restricted freedom (n=37, 73%). The vast majority (n=46, 90%) reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence while in the trafficking situation. Eighty-six percent (n=43) reported that they were forced to have sex. “Husbands” were reported as the main perpetrators of physical violence and sexual abuse, followed by traffickers. Notably, a large majority of respondents (84%) reported that they had attempted to escape their trafficking situation.

Qiu et al. (2019) analyse 73 court cases involving 184 females from Myanmar who were trafficked to China for forced marriage. The cases span a period of 13 years from 2003 to 2016 and represent all officially adjudicated trafficking cases for forced marriages involving females from Myanmar for this time period. The authors conduct primarily descriptive statistical analysis in order to produce basic profiles of the offenders and the victims. They found that 65 percent of the victims were first recruited in Myanmar, which they believe suggests “a clear presence of transnational human trafficking activities within that country” (Qiu et al., 2019, p. 42). After Myanmar, Yunnan province in China, which borders Myanmar, was the next most cited recruitment location, accounting for 30 percent of the sample (55 females were recorded as being first recruited in Yunnan). Analysis of the case records indicated that female victims were either trafficked or intended to be trafficked to 14 provinces spread across China, from border regions to coastal and northern areas. However, just three neighbouring provinces in the central-eastern and eastern region of China—Henan, Anhui and Shandong—accounted for the trafficking destinations of 68 percent of females in the sample. Henan Province, in the central eastern part of the country, was by far the main destination province, where 44 percent of all identified victims were trafficked or intended to be trafficked to. Basic data is also provided to indicate “victim sales prices”, which varied widely. The median price was 31,500 Chinese yuan (around \$4,846 US dollars at the time of publication), with a range from a low of 2000 yuan (about \$307 US dollars) to a high of 170,030 yuan (about \$26,158 US dollars). Further detail of the article’s findings relating to convicted traffickers is provided later in this paper in the section on “Traffickers”.

Possible directions for future research on forms of exploitation

While there is a large body of academic literature focusing on trafficking for sexual exploitation in the Asia Pacific region, there is a clear requirement for future research that demonstrates a higher level of methodological rigour and transparency. Moving beyond the overwhelming focus on the Greater Mekong Subregion would also enable more insights to be developed regarding this form of human

trafficking for other sub-regions and countries of the Asia Pacific region. At present, there also appears to be virtually no existing research examining the trafficking for sexual exploitation of men and boys anywhere in the region—future research probes could look to establish whether this is an issue that should be given greater attention.

Future research should build on the work highlighting the importance of friends and relatives in migration processes and connections with exploitative outcomes, including those that constitute human trafficking.

There continues to be far less existing academic literature examining human trafficking for labour exploitation, compared to trafficking for sexual exploitation, in the Asia Pacific region. It would be a positive development if future research was able to build on the methods, including the use of surveys of returnees, and findings from the Joarder and Miller and Bélanger articles published in 2014. This could include further examination of forms of trafficking exploitation through the lens of a continuum, rather than following binary policy prescriptions that dictate that a migrant is either a trafficking victim or not (and if not, often labelled as an illegal migrant). Cockbain and Kleemans (2019) have suggested that it would be beneficial for future literature to also examine in detail how human trafficking for labour exploitation can be enabled or exacerbated by broader systems, including those related to neoliberal labour markets and the regulation (or lack of) of such markets, as well as wider migration policies. Another potential topic for future research would be trafficking for the purpose of domestic servitude. There appears to be very little existing academic literature focusing on this issue in the Asia Pacific region.

Health Consequences of Human Trafficking

There is a small but growing body of literature examining the negative health consequences of human trafficking experienced by individuals in the Asia Pacific region. While such literature has traditionally focused on women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation, a more recent study has examined a wider range of forms of exploitation, using a relatively large sample of men, women and child survivors of human trafficking. As with the literature on trafficking for sexual exploitation, much of this literature focuses on the Greater Mekong Subregion, particularly Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. This is likely in part explained by the fact that there are a relatively large number of NGO-run shelter services for trafficking survivors operating in these countries.

Several studies detail the widespread negative health impacts of human trafficking. Kiss et al. (2015) report on the first health study of a large sample of men, women and child survivors of trafficking for various forms of exploitation, noting in their research rationale that previously very little research had been completed on the health of trafficked men and boys. The authors completed an observational cross-sectional study in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. Their consecutive sample was made up of 1,015 participants who were receiving support across 15 post-trafficking services. This included 383 men, 288 women and 344 children from Vietnam (34%), Cambodia (30%), Thailand (14%) Laos (11%) and Myanmar (11%). The authors found that almost half of all participants experienced physical violence, sexual violence, or both, including the majority of adults. For women compared to men, sexual abuse was much more common, whereas physical violence was slightly less common. More than a third of children reported physical violence, sexual violence or both. Sixty-eight percent of all participants reported experiencing at least one bad living condition, most commonly living and sleeping in overcrowded rooms, having nowhere to sleep or being forced to sleep on the floor, overexposure to sun or rain or having no clean clothing. A higher proportion of men reported poor living conditions compared with women and children and poor living conditions were particularly high among fishermen.

Kiss et al. (2015) found that the most prevalent health problems that participants reported were headaches, dizzy spells, back pain, feeling completely exhausted and memory problems. Twenty-two percent of participants reported sustaining a serious injury during their period of exploitation. Participants who experienced severe restrictions of movement were around twice as likely to report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression (Kiss et al., 2015). Decker et al. (2009) look more specifically at the link between trafficking for sexual exploitation and negative health outcomes, utilizing data from a 2007 sample of female sex workers in Thailand in order to attempt to also assess the prevalence of sex trafficking as an entry mechanism into sex work. The authors use data collected in 2007 by Mahidol University in Bangkok, in collaboration with local NGOs. The sample was developed to approximate the number of sex workers reported in each Thai province by Thailand's Ministry of Public Health. NGO staff within each province developed maps indicating the presence of sex work establishments and venues were then randomly selected from these maps and their managers were invited to participate in the study. Of the 1,025 sex workers that were approached for the research, a total of 815 participated. The authors found that sex trafficking was the entry mechanism for 10.4 percent of the female sex workers in the sample. Trafficking status was assessed using direct questions consistent with the Palermo Protocol definition. Of those who indicated that they had been trafficked, 89 percent were under the age of 18 at the time of entry into sex work. The results also indicated that trafficked female sex workers had a higher prevalence of several forms of sexual health risks. Those who reported having been trafficked were more likely to experience recent condom non-use as well as condom failure and were over three times more likely to have become pregnant since their entry into sex work than the non-trafficked cohort. Those who reported having been trafficked were also more likely to report experiences of anal sex in the month before the survey. One-third of all respondents surveyed had experienced recent workplace mistreatment and those who had entered sex work via human trafficking were almost twice as likely to report such experiences. Those who reported they had been trafficked were also over twice as likely to have experienced sexual violence at initiation to sex work.

The men surveyed for the Kiss et al. (2015) study had mainly been exploited in fishing (68%) or factories (20%). The main countries of exploitation where these men were exploited were Indonesia (32%), China (26%) and Thailand (24%). More than half were in trafficking situations for seven months or more (Kiss et al. 2015). Pocock et al. (2018)—a related group of authors to the Kiss et al. study—conducted further work looking specifically at the male study participants who had been exploited in the fishing industry. The authors analysed quantitative survey data from structured interviews with 275 male survivors of trafficking for commercial fishing who were in post-trafficking care services. The majority (99%) of long-haul fishermen were from Cambodia, whereas most short haul fishermen were from Myanmar (71%). Half of the trafficked long-haul fishermen suffered at least one serious injury as compared to 40 percent of short haul fishermen.

There is a much smaller body of literature on the post-trafficking experiences of survivors of trafficking. Le (2017) seeks to explore how trafficking survivors' experiences and trauma influence their post-trafficking adjustment. The author utilizes a small consecutive sample consisting of 15 semi structured in-depth interviews with adult female (aged 18-27) trafficked returnees. Interviews were carried out in five Vietnamese border provinces, predominantly at the site of NGOs that provided support services. Of the 15 women, seven had reported being trafficked to China, seven to Cambodia, and one to Malaysia. Their average age at the time of trafficking was 15, with a range of 13-18. The returnees often reported feeling socially and emotionally isolated and many worried about their economic conditions. Le (2017) states that the vast majority of trafficked returnees in Vietnam receive very limited short-term assistance and then return to their communities with little financial or social service support. Aberdeen and Zimmerman (2015) look specifically at the availability of post-trafficking services for survivors in Cambodia. They use purposive sampling to identify research participants from the small number of service providers. The sample was selected based on the lead author's personal

knowledge of such services. The authors note the limitations of a study drawn from such a small number of professionals working for NGOs. In total, ten such organizations were invited to participate and seven agreed. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted via Skype with eight mental health professionals working at the seven organisations (two professionals participated from one of the organizations). The authors found that access to such services depended significantly on the geographical distribution of the services. Notably, they found that “service provision for trafficking survivors in Cambodia is often narrowly focussed on those who need or are willing to enter residential shelter models, with fewer service options for those who choose to reside outside a refuge” (Aberdein & Zimmerman, 2015, p. 10).

The vast majority of research within this literature on the health consequences of human trafficking is based on studies of victims and survivors of trafficking who receive post-trafficking support services. All of the studies reviewed within this body of literature worked with such NGOs in order to access victims and survivors for research purposes. While research based on data from victims of human trafficking who have received assistance from anti-trafficking organizations has strengths and advantages, particularly regarding research access to victims, these aspects of research design link to several limitations of the literature that are unfortunately often largely ignored by the research articles. More generally, much of the broader research relating to trafficking victims comes from studies of victims and survivors of trafficking who receive post-trafficking support services, which are often provided by NGOs. Studies based on samples of victims of trafficking who receive support services should not be assumed to be representative of the population of all victims of trafficking and findings cannot, therefore, be generalized further than for this sub-group (Tyldum, 2010). Unfortunately, the majority of research papers that sample this population—and this includes work related to negative health consequences in particular (though the problem is not exclusive to this research theme)—do not explicitly point out this limitation.

Surtees (2013) details a number of related limitations that should be more explicitly noted. She notes that it is unfortunate that much research on human trafficking is based on an unquestioned premise that information obtained from victims who receive assistance is consistent with information that would be obtained from victims who do not receive such support. As Surtees (2013) points out, this is problematic because there are a number of selection effects at play that influence who receives assistance. NGOs may use certain selection criteria to determine who is able to access support. For example, some shelters may only offer assistance to female victims of trafficking, or victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation only. On top of this, not all victims of trafficking will be identified in or live in areas where support services are available to them (Tyldum, 2010). Indeed, many trafficking victims are identified but do not receive assistance. This can be a result of a number of factors: they may be unsatisfied with the assistance that is available to them; they may have other forms of support available to them and not need NGO provided assistance services; or they may wish to not be labelled as “trafficking victims”. There is of course, another, potentially large, group of victims of trafficking who are never identified and who do not receive support services. This may result from ineffective identification processes, identification biases that favour certain “types” of victims, an explicit choice by some victims to avoid identification, or because some individuals do not view their experiences as “trafficking”. Men in particular, may look to resist being labelled as “victims” or “trafficked” due to cultural expectations relating to ideas of masculinity. Identified but unassisted victims of trafficking and unidentified victims of trafficking form two groups who are of an unknown size and nature, and it is important that researchers question the extent to which they are or are not represented by the characteristics and experiences of victims who receive assistance (Surtees, 2013).

It is also unfortunate that many authors that work closely with NGO support services to gain access to victims—and this includes many of the papers reviewed in this section—do not more explicitly acknowledge the broader limitations of such research design. Such NGOs can of course act as safeguards for individuals in less powerful positions (Surtees, 2013). However, NGOs that provide

assistance services do not have a neutral role and will often have a vested interest in the outcome of any research, which can influence the quality and type of support that they provide to researchers (Tyldum, 2010). Surtees (2013) has found through the course of her research on human trafficking that some support organizations purposefully refer researchers to their “successful cases” because such individuals may, for example, be easier to contact and less likely to suffer repeat-traumatization from a research interview. However, the result is that the experiences and characteristics of victims who are less satisfied with their support may not become part of our body of knowledge.

Possible directions for future research on health consequences of human trafficking

While research based on data from victims of human trafficking who have received assistance from anti-trafficking organizations has strengths and advantages, it will be important for any future research utilizing similar research design to explicitly note the limitations and possible biases. It could also be beneficial for future research that adds to this body of literature to expand beyond negative health consequences and needs and to connect with research on other broader consequences and needs of survivors of trafficking. This might include issues of education and vocational training, economic livelihoods, immigration relief and reconnection with families. This body of literature might also benefit from more in-depth participatory action research undertaken with survivors of human trafficking in order to establish a deeper understanding of their experiences and needs.

Determinants of Human Trafficking

A significant proportion of the wider literature on human trafficking seeks to understand factors that contribute to its prevalence. Unfortunately, to date, there has been very little empirical research that systematically attempts to analyse the factors that drive human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region. A notable exception is a recent pilot study by Dinh et al. (2021), which utilizes a household survey pilot research design and subsequent regression analysis. The authors conducted a pilot survey in the Trà Vinh province in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Direct questions were asked about trafficking, with the authors utilizing the Palermo Protocol definition. An example of such a question was “Do you believe this household member was trafficked?” (Dinh et al., 2021, p. 21). Anchoring vignettes, consistent with the Palermo Protocol definition of trafficking, were also used to help ensure that enumerators and respondents had a similar understanding of key terms. Requests for further explanation of why the respondent believed trafficking to have occurred followed any affirmative responses.

The survey was undertaken in Tieu Can, a primarily rural district of Trà Vinh province that is in accessible proximity to both the Cambodian border and Ho Chi Minh City, which are noted as two important destinations for migrants. The authors indicate that they chose this district in part due to the cooperation of the local government, which allowed them to “complete the “proof of concept” pilot study within the researchers’ available time and budget” (Dinh et al., 2021, p. 20). The survey methods are notable compared to many others included in this article in that villages were randomly selected, from a sampling frame constructed using 2009 Vietnamese census data. Households within the selected villages were then also selected randomly and were given a pre-survey to determine the proportions of migrant and non-migrant households, with migrant households then oversampled due to the view that trafficking victims would be more likely to originate from such households. The full survey was given to 406 randomly selected migrant households. In order to allow for comparisons between trafficked and non-trafficked migrants, and also between (potentially trafficked) migrants and non-migrants, a further 90 randomly selected non-migrant households were also given the survey.

According to the authors, Trà Vinh province was not believed to have been a major source province of trafficking victims in comparison to provinces closer to the borders of Cambodia, Laos and China.

In spite of this, the survey found a total of 38 individuals reported as trafficked, which corresponds to approximately 9.6 trafficking victims per 1,000 persons. The authors note that this is around three times the ILO's estimate for the Asia Pacific of 3.3 victims of forced labour per 1,000 persons, published in 2012 (ILO, 2012; the more recent 2017 edition of the ILO's report estimated that four out of every 1,000 people in the Asia Pacific region were victims of forced labour (ILO, 2017)).

While noting that the "proof-of-concept" survey is somewhat limited by both the sample size and the issue of external validity, given that it was conducted in a relatively small area, the authors utilize a logistic regression model in order to analyse predictors of human trafficking vulnerability. Their results indicate that sex is in no way a significant predictor, finding that "if anything, male migrants are marginally more likely to be trafficked than female migrants" (Dinh et al., 2021, p. 24). Income is also found to not be a significant predictor. It is education, measured as average years of schooling, that is found to have the most statistically significant and robust predictive power. Education at the household level is highly significant and negatively associated with trafficking risk. The authors suggest that "more educated households might be better able to discern legitimate from illegitimate migration opportunities." (Dinh et al., 2021, p. 25). However, perhaps less intuitively, individual education is highly significant but positively associated with trafficking risk, with the result holding where individual education is defined as the raw number of years of education, or as the difference between an individual's education and their household's average. The authors put forward the following rationale for this result: "While at first this may seem like a puzzling pattern, note that a similar pattern in education holds if the outcome variable is changed from trafficking victim to migrant. This fits in neatly with the idea that migration is in many respects a household and, perhaps to some extent, village level decision. More educated households overall may feel less pressure to send a migrant, but when a migrant is sent, the household sends the individual likely to be the best earner, thereby maximizing their combined household earnings" (Dinh et al., 2021, p. 26). The authors state that their results suggest that increasing education levels may be effective in reducing households' vulnerability to trafficking.

Possible Directions for Future Research on Determinants of Human Trafficking

Rigorous academic literature on the determinants of human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region is at a nascent stage. There is a clear need for future empirical research that utilizes robust research designs in order to advance knowledge on the individual, household and societal level factors that contribute to the prevalence of human trafficking in this region. Future research could build on Dinh. et al's (2021) pilot study, including the use of household surveys that ask direct questions related to experiences of human trafficking and the utilization of random sampling, construction of control groups and utilization of regression analysis, which are all very rare in the wider literature on human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region. It would also be important to conduct further testing of the external validity of the results from the Dinh. et al. (2021) study on the importance of education and insignificance of income as predictors of vulnerability to human trafficking.

Traffickers

In general, far less research has been conducted that studies traffickers as compared to victims. This includes the Asia Pacific region. Researchers often cite the clandestine nature of the crime and difficulties gaining access to traffickers as the main reasons for this.

Two relatively recent articles do however, investigate the backgrounds of convicted traffickers in Cambodia and China. Notably, both studies found that convicted traffickers had low levels of education and were from poor backgrounds. Keo et al. (2014) examine the backgrounds of convicted traffickers in Cambodia. The article is unique in utilizing in-depth interviews with convicted offenders. The authors interviewed 91 convicted incarcerated traffickers across five provincial Cambodian prisons and three correctional centres. The sample represented 46 percent of all incarcerated traffickers held across those eight facilities at that time. The majority of the individuals were Cambodians. The authors note that none of the convicted traffickers had received education beyond primary school. Qiu et al.'s (2019) study of 73 court cases in China involving the trafficking of 184 females from Myanmar for forced marriage found that 28 percent of their sample of 143 offenders had never been to school, with 93 percent of the sample having only received middle school education or lower. Eighty-three percent of all offenders were classified as "peasants".

Deception was found by both sets of authors to be important in the trafficking process. For the cases of 111 Myanmar trafficked females where the authors were able to identify deception tactics, Qiu et al. (2019) found that in 72 percent of these cases victims were offered false jobs or assurances of jobs in China (Qiu et al., 2019). Keo et al. (2014) distinguish between their overall sample of ninety-one incarcerated traffickers and those they refer to as *confirmed traffickers*. The authors code twenty-one of these individuals (fifteen women and six men) as confirmed traffickers: they either admitted to their offences during the interview or "their narratives matched the broad definition of their offense because they had engaged in some form of deception or coercion" (Keo et al., 2014, p. 210). Others did not admit to the offence and their accounts indicated that they had not been convicted beyond a reasonable doubt. The authors state that for this larger group "At best they appear to have been doubtfully, and at worst wrongfully, convicted" (Keo et al., 2014, p. 210). Twelve of the individuals coded as confirmed traffickers, and particularly female offenders involved in trafficking for sexual exploitation cases, stated that they had used "seduction or deceptive inducement" to recruit people, which focused on creating "expectations of a better life in a new place." (Keo et al., 2014, p. 212). The results of the interviews suggested that forced recruitment was relatively uncommon.

Both studies report that those convicted of trafficking reported that they either operated as part of very small networks or alone. Qiu et al.'s (2019) analysis of the Chinese court case descriptions indicated that the majority of traffickers operated in small partnerships of 2–4 core members. Such partnerships accounted for about 71% of the cases analysed. Partners involved seemed to have spent most of their time on facilitation of transportation and the actual sale of a "Myanmar bride". More than half of the cases had just one defendant, indicating that only a single trafficker was caught with enough evidence to substantiate the conviction. The authors found that 16 cases appeared to involve just one "core trafficker" (Qiu et al., 2019). Keo et al. (2014) found that of the twenty-one individuals they coded as confirmed traffickers, fifteen stated that they had operated alone. Five said they were linked to three independent and small-scale social networks, and one claimed to be a former member of a large Cambodian organized crime syndicate (Keo et al., 2014).

Qiu et al. (2019) found no clear hierarchical structure in any of the 73 trafficking organizations involved in the court cases they analysed. "These 73 groups of traffickers could at best be considered task forces with loosely affiliated entrepreneurs whose social networks happened to overlap with one another" (Qiu et al., 2019, p. 46). The authors were, however, able to distinguish between two distinct types of "players" within the organizations. "The first type of players acted mostly as recruiters whose primary function was to connect buyers with sellers or simply to make connections between interested parties, often for a small referral fee. The second type of players were more involved, such as receiving and accompanying the victims in transit to their destinations, handing over the victims to their buyers, and taking care of receiving and distributing the payment from the buyers" (Qiu et al., 2019, p. 46). Keo et al. (2014) also state that the characteristics of the networks described by their interviewees were very

different from those of the more organized criminal organizations described as being central to the business of human trafficking by organizations such as the UNODC. With both of these studies, it is of course possible that more organized networks are involved but that the criminals behind such networks are able to evade the authorities. In the Keo et al. (2014) study there is also the risk of a form of self-reporting bias, whereby interviewees may be reluctant to disclose any possible links with organized crime networks for fear of reprisals. That being said, it is true that while wider discourse on human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region often links the crime to organized criminal networks, there is very little academic literature that specifically studies or corroborates this. Chu (2011) aims to study the networks involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling in China. Unfortunately, the article is largely based on secondary evidence of low quality, including news articles, and treats the assertions of rapid reports by United Nations agencies as empirical evidence. Similarly, while policy literature often connects human trafficking to corruption, there is extremely limited empirical literature examining this in the Asia Pacific context. Guth (2010) claims that his paper illustrates that corruption is central to facilitating human trafficking in the Philippines. Unfortunately, the article is heavily anecdotal, limiting the value of its assertions. The Keo et al. (2014) and Qiu et al. (2019) studies notably both found that a significant proportion of convicted traffickers were women. This links to the finding of the UNODC's Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, highlighted earlier in this paper, that countries in the East Asia and The Pacific subregion reported a high proportion of females being prosecuted and convicted for human trafficking (fifty-six percent of the 1,233 reported individuals who were prosecuted across nine countries during the reporting period were females) (UNODC, 2021). Fifty-four percent of Keo et al.'s (2014) sample of 91 convicted traffickers were women. Female convicted traffickers were found to have benefited from significantly fewer years of schooling than their male counterparts. The authors state that "... poor and uneducated women are overrepresented in the statistics of incarcerated traffickers.... Human trafficking appears to offer an illegitimate opportunity to earn money for poor and uneducated women." (Keo et al., 2014, p. 212). Qiu et al. (2019) also found that a relatively high number of convicted traffickers were women. A total of 143 offenders were identified from the sample of 73 court cases—the vast majority (93%) were Chinese nationals, with the remaining offenders being Burmese or Vietnamese. Thirty-four percent of these offenders were women.

Keo et al. (2014) conclude their article by stating "Our research indicates that the majority of incarcerated traffickers in Cambodia are destitute women who, pushed by a lack of legitimate opportunities and pulled by the presence of illegitimate opportunities, engage in unsophisticated criminal activities for very modest gains. Over half of them are probably the victims of miscarriages of justice" (p. 220). This sentiment suggests a link with a small literature that explores the complex "victim-perpetrator" nexus. Palmer and Missbach (2017) utilize a single case study to specifically explore this question of "victim or perpetrator?". The case is that of a juvenile who transported asylum seekers from Indonesia to Australia. The Indonesian juvenile was convicted of migrant smuggling, yet before the conviction the IOM had identified him as a victim of trafficking. The authors state that very limited research focus had previously been devoted to the issue of transporters involved in migrant smuggling whose own recruitment resembles human trafficking, characterized by deception and false promises. They connect the problem of the conviction and the complex victim-perpetrator nexus to the common practice of the Indonesian police to often pursue smuggling and trafficking related offences where the evidentiary requirements are relatively low and easier to prove. This may suggest a link to the Keo et al. (2014) and Qiu et al. (2019) articles and the lack of evidence of more sophisticated criminal involvement in human trafficking (albeit here with an increased focus on related migrant smuggling). Palmer and Missbach (2017) state, "The Indonesian police tend to proceed against intermediaries rather than the main organizer of smuggling operations. Organizers distance themselves by providing transporters with minimal detail about their identity.... They also have the economic and political influence to ensure that they do not end up on the most wanted persons list.... As a consequence, the criminal justice system tends to respond only to the frontline of smuggling

operations” (p. 297). In his previously detailed paper, Molland (2011) states that in the context of recruitment of sex workers to so-called beer shops in Laos, recruitment is most often carried out by current sex workers, using often subtle forms of deception to recruit friends and acquaintances in their home communities. These workers may themselves have been previously recruited through similar methods. Recruitment is rationalized by sex workers as “helping”. Molland (2011) observes what he describes to be a process of “cascading deception”, from (i) an initial invitation to migrate, (ii) upon arrival, the shock of realizing the actual nature of the work, to (iii) a gradual socialisation process in the bar environment preceding the debut into selling sex.” (p. 242).

Possible directions for future research on traffickers

There remains far less academic research examining the roles, characteristics and modus operandi of traffickers as compared to research on victims. Future research should look to make greater use of police, prison and court records, as well as strive to conduct more in-depth interviews with traffickers themselves. However, it will also be important for future research on this topic to acknowledge that as for research on victims who receive post-trafficking support services, the findings generated from research on traffickers who are charged and convicted cannot be generalized beyond this sub-group.

Future studies that build on the work of Keo et al. (2014) and Palmer and Missbach (2017), with the aim of further investigating the potentially interlinked possibilities of states targeting enforcement efforts at so-called “small players” and issues of wrongful convictions and miscarriages of justice, as well as what specifically may be driving these outcomes, would significantly add to our body of knowledge on this topic. Prospective research should attempt to explore more deeply issues of who “traffickers” are, as well as the gendered dynamics highlighted by the existing literature. This could include work to further examine the potentially complex on the ground realities of the “victim-perpetrator” nexus.

Given the overwhelming anti-trafficking discourse that links human trafficking to organized crime in the Asia Pacific region there is a clear need for empirical research to investigate and evaluate this assertion. Elżbieta M. Goździak, writing in the Oxford Handbook of Gender, Sex and Crime (2014), indicates a framework that could be beneficial for future research. Goździak (2014) suggests it would be helpful to theoretically distinguish three different forms of networks that may be responsible for human trafficking: “(a) large-scale networks with political and financial contacts that enable them to establish links between countries of origin and destination; (b) medium-sized networks that concentrate on trafficking in persons from one country to another; and (c) small networks that place one or two persons at a time as required” (p. 627).

“Anti-trafficking” and the negative impacts of anti-trafficking measures

Over the past decade, a critical body of literature has emerged that engages with “anti-trafficking”—policies and practices that have the stated aim of combatting and reducing forms of human trafficking. This scholarship has focused on whether anti-trafficking has led to positive outcomes for victims of trafficking and those vulnerable to being trafficked and related, often negative, consequences, whether unintended or otherwise, which can in some instances in fact increase the vulnerability of migrants to exploitation (Yea & Kitiarsa, 2014).

A core theme within this literature as it relates to the Asia Pacific region that is explored by a number of authors is the negative consequences of the creation of so-called “iconic victims” by anti-traffickers. Sverre Molland’s (2010, 2011, 2013) extensive ethnographic research work along the Laos-Thailand border focuses in part on the dissonance between the black and white “ideal types” created by anti-traffickers of victims—unaware, innocent and weak—and traffickers—evil, powerful and all-knowing,

with the more ambiguous reality on the ground. Sallie Yea (2015) also explores this idea of anti-traffickers creating simplistic binary distinctions. She builds on recent work in the field of critical geography to examine what she sees as the “construction of victimhood in human trafficking” by the state in Singapore (Yea, 2015). She is interested in exploring how a state can create “deserving victims and illegitimate human trafficking claimants” (Yea, 2015, p. 1081). Yea (2015) claims that the Singaporean state is able to manipulate the application of trafficking indicators to label vulnerable migrants in “binary terms as either deserving of protections or not” (p. 1090). She finds that victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation are “rendered highly visible and promoted publicly as the most deserving and legitimate victims of trafficking” by the state (Yea, 2015, p. 1090). Both Yea (2015) and Molland (2011) seek to understand the rationale underpinning “this biopolitics of classification, demarcation and construction” (Yea, 2015, p. 1081). Molland (2011) concludes that “.... guidelines create a sense of coherence and meaning and serve as a safe anchor to manage the ambiguity and flux of the local work ‘anti-traffickers’ seek to alter.” (p. 250).

Yea (2015) finds that the binary classifications that result from the indicator regime in Singapore offer little protection of labour rights and result in very limited possibilities for redress for related forms of exploitation of migrant workers. Yea (2015) references the Palermo Protocol, stating that in Singapore, both the government and NGOs invoke the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) Operational Indicators of Trafficking in Human Beings (ILO, 2009). However, the author finds that when identifying human trafficking for labour exploitation, the Singaporean state has in fact restricted the range of indicators that define this form of trafficking. Yea (2015) suggests this narrowing of indicators is linked to a dilemma the state confronts: a large proportion of migrant workers in Singapore would likely qualify as victims of trafficking if the ILO indicators were officially adopted in full. The author cites statistics indicating that in 2013 there were over 7,000 male migrant complainants to the Singapore labour ministry and yet there were just 49 labour trafficking investigators initiated involving these complaints. Like Yea, Johan Lindquist (2010) believes that by focusing narrowly on a particular type of victim of human trafficking—almost always female victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation—anti-traffickers ignore wider issues concerning migrant labour rights. He states that “.... the enduring effect of trafficking interventions may prove to the suppression and intensifying regulation of migration rather than the protection of migrants themselves” (Lindquist, 2010, p. 226). Lindquist (2010) explores how, given the resulting lack of statistical data, human trafficking, particularly of women and children for sexual exploitation, is “established” not with statistics but with feature films and documentaries. Focusing on this development in the context of the activities of anti-trafficking NGOs in Indonesia, Lindquist (2010) suggests that in the absence of hard statistics, NGOs have increasingly turned to testimonials, which he suggests are now at “the center of a kind of science of countertrafficking” and have “become a form of evidence that the trafficking of women and children is happening and that something must be done” (p. 229). Moving images have then become the core medium that allows for the circulation of these testimonials. The generation of funding and commitments to act requires some form of “evidence”—in Indonesia, this takes the form of countertrafficking films. The author suggests that the widespread use of testimonials of women and children identified as victims by anti-trafficking NGOs in Indonesia should be viewed in the context of the “spread of auditing practices to development and humanitarian projects” (Lindquist, 2010, p. 233). Lindquist (2010) terms those individuals used for such testimonials as “auditable victims”—a concept that shares many similarities with the idea of “ideal types”. Auditable victims are overwhelmingly women and children and the films themselves are found to often bear “no direct relation with the actual forms of violence that many migrants experience” (Lindquist, 2010, p. 226).

Molland focuses more on the negative impacts of the creation of “ideal types” on the programming and research conducted by anti-traffickers. Molland (2013) is interested in exploring how the construction of “ideal types” informs how anti-trafficking organizations view the research they are able to conduct into human trafficking. As both traffickers and victims are associated with “hidden

populations”, and as traffickers in particular are often framed in terms of dangerous “mafia-style untouchable operations”, this results in methodological challenges for access and research (Molland, 2013, p. 302). Yet in contrast to the belief of anti-traffickers that access to traffickers is impenetrable and beyond reach, Molland finds that repeated fieldwork visits enable him to relatively easily build trust with informants who could be considered to be traffickers. Many of the venues where the author carried out his research were not difficult to access, but in fact often embedded in local communities and neighbourhoods. He points out that some venues were actually located in very close proximity to the offices of anti-trafficking organizations, who seemed oblivious to this fact. Molland (2011), who formerly worked as an “anti-trafficker”, finds that traffickers are commonly framed by anti-traffickers as almost omnipresent entities. The author suggests that the development of such framing was influenced by the fact that the Palermo Protocol was developed as a supplement to the United Nations Transnational Organized Crime Convention, thereby suggesting that human trafficking is intrinsically connected to organized criminal activity. However, as highlighted earlier in this review article, the forms of recruitment that Molland witnesses during his research—usually carried out by current sex workers who recruit friends and acquaintances using subtle forms of deception—bear little resemblance to organized crime. When the author presents case studies of such recruitment to members of the anti-trafficking community working in the region, he found that they would often “immerse themselves in the case studies, perceiving them as ‘riddles’ with real ontological answers, rather than stepping back and questioning the very act of projecting trafficking onto the social reality of migration and sex commerce”. (Molland, 2011, p. 249). In related work, Molland (2013) states that in Laos, his research has indicated that many anti-trafficking employees are in reality keenly aware of the fact that trafficking is often small-scale and that it can involve individuals that know each other. However, when it comes to their activities, he finds that many anti-trafficking organizations “regress into models that imply trafficking primarily being a question of organized crime with neat separation between victims and traffickers” (Molland, 2013, p. 315).

Possible directions for future research on anti-trafficking and the negative impacts of anti-trafficking measures

Future research could build on this existing body of literature and further connect to recent work on human trafficking for labour exploitation in particular to examine the role of state policies in creating conditions that result in exploitation in other countries across the Asia Pacific region. This body of literature would also benefit from future work that brings more methodological rigour to examining the so-called “prosecutorial approach” in different countries across the region and that attempts to understand how criminal justice focused anti-trafficking efforts influence outcomes for trafficking victims and other vulnerable migrants.

Building on Sverre Molland’s (2010; 2011; 2013) ethnographic research, future work could also focus more on the roles and views of anti-traffickers themselves. In-depth interviews with anti-traffickers could aim to establish a deeper understanding of the potential dissonance between the forms of trafficking they actually see play out on the ground versus the possibly “idealized” forms of trafficking that the programmes and policies they then implement seemingly seek to respond to.

The impact of international and regional responses to human trafficking

Just weeks before the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Palermo Protocol, the United States passed its own human trafficking legislation—the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA). Notably, the TVPA directly impacts the anti-trafficking policies of foreign governments. It established a sanctions regime authorizing the U.S. President to withdraw U.S. non-trade related, non-humanitarian financial assistance from countries judged to not be sufficiently compliant in meeting the U.S. government’s “minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking”. A related requirement

was included for the U.S. State Department to publish annual reports providing an overview and critique of human trafficking in countries across the world. The sanctions and the so-called Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports have been very influential in affecting international policy conversations, as well as in influencing the responses of particular governments. Janie Chuang (2006) comments that “In practice, the sanctions regime has inspired many governments to develop domestic laws and policies to combat trafficking. But whether these actions contribute positively to the global fight against trafficking should not be assumed. The “minimum standards” by which the United States evaluates country performance are poorly articulated and inconsistently applied” (Chuang, 2006, p. 439).

Anne Gallagher (2006), a legal scholar, looked at the impact of the TIP report in Laos. More broadly, she believes that the TIP report is both very controversial and highly influential in Southeast Asia (Gallagher, 2006). “Many governments, including that of neighbouring Thailand where most Lao victims of trafficking end up, are very sensitive to the grading they are awarded and strive to provide positive information to those responsible for its compilation” (Gallagher, 2006, p. 533). Gallagher (2006) found that Laos seemed to be an exception to this and did not appear to be as influenced by the TIP reporting process. Laos did suffer consequences, however, with the 2006 TIP report highlighting that U.S. requests for law enforcement data had not been met. Lao was relegated to the lowest possible tier status in the report—Tier 3—and therefore “potentially subject to the full range of sanctions set out” (Gallagher, 2006, p. 533). Gallagher (2006) puts forward serious misgivings about the influence of the TIP report, suggesting that the system equates a high prosecution rate with a more effective response, thereby promoting a focus on “easy wins” and “...the small players who can be identified and apprehended much more easily than those who are reaping the real financial rewards” (p. 531). This view is especially interesting in light of the conclusions that Keo et al. (2014) and Palmer and Missbach (2017) highlighted in the earlier section on “Traffickers”, which indicate that miscarriages of justice may be occurring and that states may indeed target low level players because evidentiary requirements make it easier to prosecute them. Gallagher (2006) goes on to cite a 2006 report of the U.S. Government Accountability Office that criticized the TIP report’s data collection and analysis and that noted the subjective nature of its criteria utilized to rank other countries.

Unfortunately, there is very limited academic literature that studies the impact of regional responses to human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region. Emmers et al. (2006) set out to provide analysis of the efficacy of regional institutional arrangements. However, their article is largely descriptive and provides more of a high-level overview of regional mechanisms.

Possible directions for future research on the impact of international and regional responses to human trafficking

Our understanding of the impact of international responses, and the U.S. TIP report in particular, would be deepened through future research that aims to rigorously test the claims put forward by Gallagher (2006) stating that the influence of the TIP report’s focus on prosecution rates results in an over emphasis on targeting the “small players”. It would be especially interesting to connect such testing with existing research on the “victim-perpetrator” nexus and the profiles of traffickers, including Keo et al.’s (2014) work indicating possible miscarriages of justice. Future research within this body of literature should also aim to more rigorously evaluate the effectiveness and impacts of regional mechanisms that have the stated aim of responding to human trafficking.

Conclusion and Discussion on Future Research Directions

There continues to be limited high quality empirical research published on issues relating to human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region and important gaps in knowledge remain. Relatedly, a number of scholars have highlighted how it is challenging to apply the Palermo Protocol definition of human trafficking in practice in empirical studies. Human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation continues to be the dominant overall focus of the academic research literature relating to the Asia Pacific region and the Greater Mekong Subregion remains the leading geographical area of focus. However, over recent years a small but notable number of papers have been published that utilize more robust empirical research designs, focus on the links between human trafficking and labour migration, examine the profiles and roles of traffickers, and study human trafficking issues also relating to men and boys in the Asia Pacific region.

Future research should aim to build on recent advances in methodological rigour applied to the study of human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region and related advances in our knowledge of certain issues. This might include further examination of forms of human trafficking exploitation through the lens of a continuum and recognition of human trafficking as a crime that is embedded in legal migration flows. While research based on data from victims of human trafficking who have received assistance from anti-trafficking organizations will continue to be important and has obvious advantages, it will be important for any future research utilizing similar research designs to explicitly note the inherent limitations and possible biases of such designs. There is also a clear need for future research that utilizes robust research designs in order to advance knowledge on the individual, household and societal level factors that contribute to the prevalence of human trafficking in the countries and sub-regions of the Asia Pacific region. Future work could also explore further how broader systems in countries and regions in the Asia Pacific regions enable human trafficking and more deeply examine the role of state policies in creating conditions that allow such exploitation to take place. Prospective research should also aim to more rigorously evaluate the effectiveness and impacts of international and regional mechanisms that have the stated aim of responding to human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region.

There remains far less empirical research examining the roles, characteristics and modus operandi of traffickers as compared to research on victims of human trafficking. Future research should look to make greater use of police, prison and court records, as well as striving to conduct more in-depth interviews with traffickers themselves. The small existing literature studying the roles and profiles of traffickers points to a preponderance of small-scale networks, sometimes involving friends and relatives of the victims in the early stages of the trafficking process. Scholars should aim to deepen our understanding of the “victim-perpetrator” nexus and to test claims in the existing literature that “small players” are overwhelmingly targeted by state authorities while potentially more sophisticated criminals may enjoy high levels of impunity. Given the overwhelming anti-trafficking discourse that links human trafficking to organized crime in the Asia Pacific region there is a clear need for empirical research to investigate and evaluate this assertion. Finally, it is important to once again stress that adding to our body of knowledge of human trafficking in the Asia Pacific region does not just mean conducting more research—future empirical research should aim to consistently achieve high standards in research design and the level of methodological rigour that is applied.

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