Human Security and Gender: A Comparative Case Study of Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT: The Southeast Asian region has been facing non-traditional security threats, including water and food security, oil supply, climate change, energy, agriculture, organized crime, and migration. Among them, human trafficking in the region is a critical point. One issue-areas that international relations and security studies scholars often neglect is human trafficking in women and girls. With the globalized economic and political environment, the individual's safety and security have become a major concern. In particular, the feminist perspective is important in human security because women and girls are often victims of violence, organized crime, refugees, interstate conflicts, and other cruel and degrading behaviors. Also, women and girls are often suffered from unequal access to resources, services, and opportunities. Therefore, this paper attempts to use a qualitative comparative research method to examine the human trafficking issue in Southeast Asia from the feminist human security perspective. The focuses are placed on both general conditions and individual conditions. The four countries selected are Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Laos due to their unique trafficking profiles. Data were collected from secondary sources for examining the theoretical arguments. From a feminist human security perspective, this paper concluded that it is undeniable that trafficking against women and girls is the focal point in the general condition. Each country has its unique situation at the state level. Therefore, there is a risk if the researchers and policymakers over-generalize the human trafficking development in the region.

KEYWORDS: Human trafficking, human security, feminist approach, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Human trafficking is a serious transnational threat that impacted many countries in Southeast Asia. However, Human trafficking is nothing new, and there are long-time battles between governments and human traffickers across the Southeast Asia region. Traffickers use various ways to conduct human trafficking activities, such as fraud, force, or coercion for labor or sexual exploitation. Traffickers lure their victims in their illicit schemes, including domestic servitude, forced marriage, child soldiers, and organ harvesting (Lin 2020). An estimated 24.9 million men, women, and children were living in human trafficking situations in the Asia-Pacific region, which had the second-highest prevalence of modern enslavement in the world, with 6.1 per 1,000 people (Global Slavery Index 2018). The Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2018) revealed that more than 85 percent of victims were trafficked from within the Asia-Pacific region (Kangaspunta et al. 2018). There are source and destinations countries in Southeast Asia. For example, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Indonesia are considered major source countries for human trafficking. Destination's countries include Malaysia and Thailand: Victims from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar were trafficked to Thailand; Malaysia has been a destination for Indonesia and Vietnam (Global Slavery Index 2016).

This research aims to identify the pattern difference of human trafficking in Southeast Asia from a feminist human security perspective. The research question is, "what are the general conditions and individual conditions of human trafficking patterns in Cambodia,

Indonesia, Laos, and Vietnam?" In this paper, the author argues that over-generalizing human trafficking in women in Southeast Asia would cause a blind spot and misleading information about the actual situation that each country is faced. Many researchers and policymakers pay much attention to the general condition and patterns of trafficking in women in the region. However, each country in Southeast Asia is different, and sometimes, it can be problematic when generalizing the cases. The four countries were selected because those countries are considered source countries for human trafficking. This study is qualitative comparative case research. The arrangement of this paper is as follows. First, the author briefly surveys human trafficking in human security research. Second, an examination of the four cases will be provided, which provides a starting point for the subsequent analysis. Third, research methods will be introduced as a guild to analyze the cases. Lastly, this author will present the results and relevant discussions.

Human trafficking: a feminist human security perspective

Human trafficking is a focal point in human security research. Many regional and international organizations have recognized the concept and the importance of human security (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007, 10). However, there is no real consensus on what can or should constitute the focus of human security studies (Kaldor 2007, Hampson and Daudelin 2002, Hampson and Penny 2008). In addition, many argue that it has "no single accepted definition, no universal foreign policy mandate, and no consensus-commanding analytic framework for its measurement" (Owen 2008, 35). Human Development Report (1994) defined human security as people's "safety from chronic threats and protection from sudden hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life" (Alkire 2003). After the 21st century, the concept was revived in the debate on the "responsibility to protect" supported by the Canadian government and the "responsibility for development" initiated by the Japanese government. The two governments provided the necessary leadership and funding for including human security on the global agenda (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007, 11). The 1994 definition was broken down into seven components: the economy, food, health, the environment, security of persons, community security, and freedom to engage in political activities. Among the seven elements of human security are considerable links and overlaps. This human development approach to human security was "not only concerned with gross violations of human rights, armed conflicts, and natural disasters, but encompassed wide-ranging aspects of underdevelopment: inequality, public health, international crime, population growth and environmental degradation" (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007, 11). In practice, the Canadian government chose to focus its Human Security Agenda on the personal (physical) security dimension (Dorn 2001).

In human security discussion, the female personal security dimensions have often been neglected. In traditional security, scholars focus on external political, military, and economic threats to the state, which neglect the threats to individuals. By focusing on individuals, human security is a people-centered model aiming to address security at the individual level. Human security is a complex issue to measure and evaluate, and different localities assign different priorities and values. According to the Human Development Report (1994, 30), human life is increasingly threatened by sudden, unpredictable violence, which takes place in several forms:
- Threats from the state (physical torture)
- Threats from other states (e.g., war)
- Threats from other groups of people (ethnic tension)
- Threats from individuals or gangs (crime)
- Threats directed against women and children (rape, child abuse, domestic violence)
- Threats to self (suicide, drug use)

The feminist perspective is important in human security because women and children are often victims of violence, organized crime, refugees, interstate conflicts, and other cruel and degrading behaviors. Also, women and children often suffer from unequal access to resources, services, and opportunities (Haq 1999, 96-100). Kristen Timothy emphasized that the most pervasive threat to women's security is violence in various forms (Timothy 2007). Mckay differentiated violence into two forms: direct and indirect violence (McKay 2004). Direct violence is physical violence toward women. Indirect violence is embedded in ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions and regular experiences. Structural violence occurs whenever people are disadvantaged by political, legal, economic, or cultural traditions (Winter and Leighton 2001). In general, feminists take a bottom-up approach when analyzing the impacts of armed conflict, whereas conventional security studies tend to use a top-down approach (Tickner 2001).

The cases

The human trafficking issue in Southeast Asia, including the four countries in this paper, has three general features. The first is transnational. Many of the victims from those four countries were trafficked to neighboring countries. According to the United Nations Crime Trends Survey (UN-CTS) data, Vietnam has ranked top in the total number of detected victims since 2007. The second is complex. The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report 2019 pointed out that human trafficking is still a massive problem in the region, connecting different types of crime (Grubb 2019). Cybercrime is an example: Child trafficking is linked to the worrying increase in online child pornography. Cambodia has been identified as a major supplier of child pornographic material. The third is the underreported rate of cases. According to Lin (2020), human trafficking had been underreported, under-detected, and under-prosecuted. The crimes remained hidden, and the fear of intimidation and reprisals oppressed the victims. Most of the victims of human trafficking were children and women who were not strong enough to defend their rights. Female victims from those four countries migrated or traveled, searching for paid jobs, but they became victims of human trafficking. Children who were deprived of their families were also forced to perform labor.

Table 1: The estimated prevalence of modern enslavement (Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, and Vietnam)

COUNTRY	ESTIMATED PREVALENCE (VICTIMS PER 1,000 POPULATION)	ESTIMATED ABSOLUTE NUMBER OF VICTIMS	POPULATION
CAMBODIA	16.8	261,000	15,518,000
LAOS	9.4	62,000	6,664,000
INDONESIA	4.7	1,220,000	258,162,000
VIETNAM	4.5	421,000	93,572,000

Source: Global Slavery Index; Table made by this author

The human trafficking situation in these four countries is at a critical level. According to the Global Slavery Index, more than 260,000 of its 16 million people are trapped in modern enslavement in Cambodia. Thousands more are thought to be trafficked internationally, including women forced to marry in China and Thailand - a trend that has doubled during the coronavirus pandemic (Blomberg 2020). The country has a serious child sex tourism problem. 35% of Cambodia's 15,000 prostitutes are children under the age of 16. One-third of the trafficking victims in prostitution are children (Braniger and Jacoby 2019, 26).

In Laos, Due to the economic factor, government policies, and social factors, women and girls become victims of human trafficking and gender-based violence (Buakhiao 2020). Laos is a source country for human trafficking, and between 200,000 and 450,000 people

were trafficked annually within the Greater Mekong Subregion. About 90% of trafficking from Laos occurs in Thailand, where most victims are girls aged between 12 and 18 years. As a criminal activity, trafficking in person is difficult to evaluate, and statistics documenting the scale of this subject in Laos are poor (Human Trafficking in Laos)."

In Indonesia, it is estimated that approximately 100,000 children and women are trafficked each year in Indonesia – 30 percent are below the age of 18. Families and close friends can also play a role in sex trafficking – forcing children into trafficking to pay off familial debt. 43.5 percent of trafficking victims are as young as 14 years old. An additional 40,000 to 70,000 children who are not trafficked are victims of other sexual exploitation (Moore 2021). Most trafficking cases in Indonesia are illegal labor migration category where victims voluntarily traveled abroad for jobs without proper documents and sex trafficking (Subono and Kosandi 2018).

Finally, in Vietnam, women, men, girls, and boys are trafficked and exploited in various industries and settings (Hung 2020). Eighty percent of victims end up in China, which suffers from one of the worst gender imbalances due to its one-child policy previously, and illegal abortion of female fetuses by parents who prefer sons, leading to increased trafficking of Vietnamese women and baby girls to that country (Human Trafficking Cases in Vietnam). Vietnam has recorded over 3,400 victims of human trafficking since 2013, over 90 percent of them women and children from ethnic minority communities (Que 2020).

Methods and data

This paper uses a qualitative comparative case study. The data were collected from secondary sources, mainly from the 2020 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Reports. Other secondary sources, such as Global Reports on Trafficking in Persons, were used in the discussion section to triangulate the findings. Because this paper focuses on the female personal security dimension, this paper adopted the indicators provided by the human security concept, emphasizing women. In total, twelve country-profile documents were examined as pieces of evidence. Those documents were extracted from the TIP Reports from 2017 and 2020. Next, this author coded the documents using the lexical search function in MAXQDA. MAXQDA is a computer-assisted software to analyze codes and documents. In the coding process, this author coded both independent variables and dependent variables. For independent variables, "sex trafficking" and "forced labor" were coded to capture the source of human security threats. For dependent variables, gender indicators (man, male, boys, women, female, and girls) were coded to capture the gender differences affected by human trafficking. As a result, 797 codes were generated from the twelve documents for analysis. To visualize the results, this researcher used the software program Flourish to present the analysis results. In terms of the indicators, this author used two-level indicators: general conditions and individual conditions. General condition is defined as the common patterns that can be observed from the case studies. Individual condition is defined as the individual observable patterns that are different from other cases.

This paper has some limitations. First, this paper may have selection bias. This research is based on secondary sources to discover patterns that fit into the feminist perspective. However, the selection of sources may be subjected to the author's judgment. Second, this research needs to be triangulated from other data sources. Given that this paper is preliminary research, the data triangulation may be insufficient and rely on further research to support the findings. Third, this author may neglect some textual facts about male victims that do not show in numbers because this paper's primary focus is on the female perspective. However, it does not imply that male-victim issues have less importance nor were adequately addressed.

Results and Discussion

This author conducted a general condition analysis using the coded document portrait function to observe the general conditions, which displays a document as an image of its coded segments in sequential order (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019). The result shows that, between 2018 and 2020, sex trafficking and female-related trafficking have more counts than forced labor and male-related trafficking issues. It indicates that female-related sex trafficking is the major issue in Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The result is shown in Figure 1:
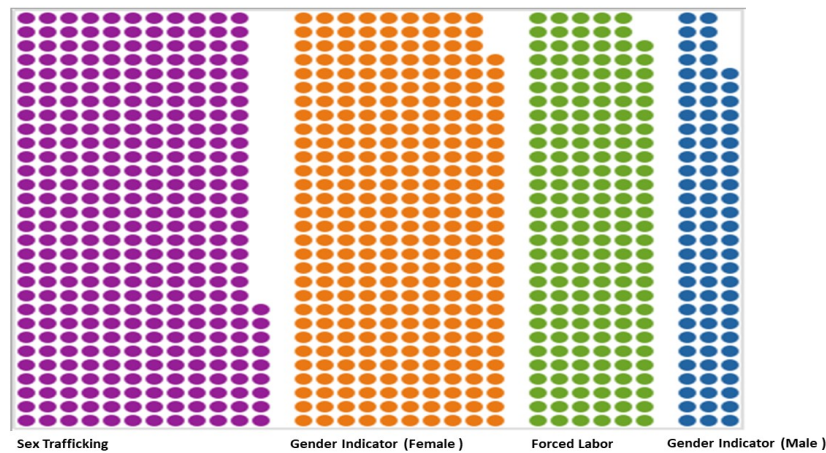

Figure 1: Coded Document Portrait

To further identify the relations of codes in general conditions, this author generated a code map that shows how gender codes are connected with sex trafficking and forced labor. The purpose is to visualize and compare female-related and male-related codes. The code map of the coded documents is shown in Figure 2. The results indicate that female-related terms (women, female, and girls) have a stronger connection with both sex trafficking and forced labor. The term "women" is the most frequently used word (156 counts), followed by "girls" (39 counts) and "female" (21 counts), to describe the issues in the four cases. On the contrary, the terms relating to the male gender are less mentioned across the case studies.
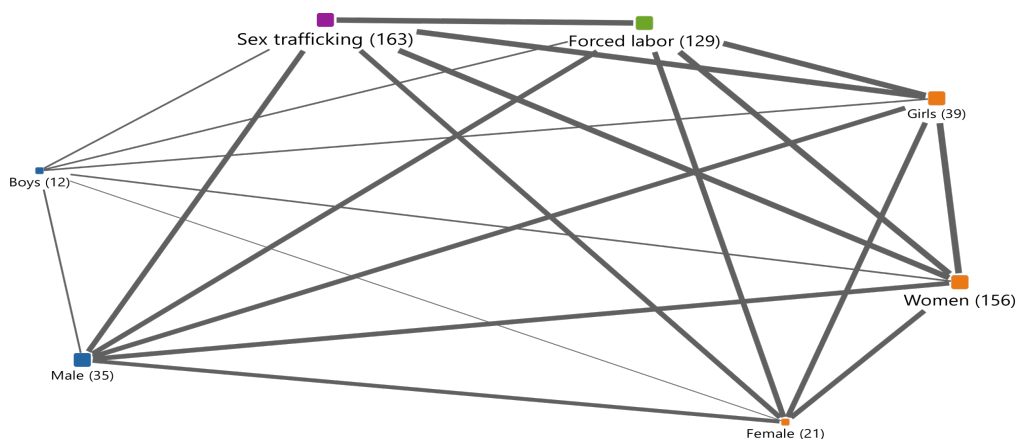

Figure 2: Code Map

Next, to observe the development of each case and find out the similarities and differences among those cases, this author conducted the keyword frequency comparison using two keywords: sex trafficking and forced labor. The result shows an increase in both sex trafficking and forced labor in the case of Cambodia. No major increase was observed in sex trafficking for Indonesia, but there was a sudden increase compared with 2019 and 2020.

There is no major increase in sex trafficking for Laos, but a decrease was observed in forced labor, from 15 counts (2018) to 4 counts (2020). Finally, in Vietnam, no major increases or decreases were observed in sex trafficking and forced labor. The results are shown in Figure 3 below:

Keyword Frequency: Sex Trafficking

■ Cambodia ■ Indonesia ■ Laos ■ Vietnam

Keyword Frequency: Forced Labor

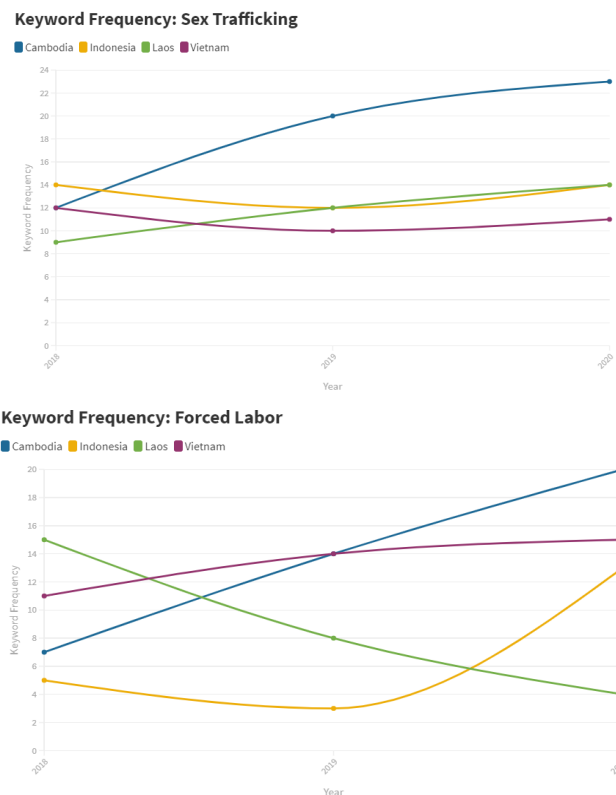■ Cambodia ■ Indonesia ■ Laos ■ Vietnam

Figure 3: Keyword Frequency: Sex Trafficking and Forced Labor

Finally, to observe the patterns of using female-related terms and capture the development of each case, this author conducted a keyword frequency test. The keyword frequency comparison using female-related terms (women, female, and girl) is shown in Figure 4. The results show that an increase was observed from 2018 (10 counts) to 2020 (17 counts) in the case of Cambodia. For Indonesia, an increase was observed from 2018 (15 counts) to 2020 (26 counts). For Laos, there is a dramatic decrease in female-related terms (24 counts in 2018 and only nine counts in 2020). Finally, for Vietnam, a curve development was observed, where there were 15 counts in 2018, 23 counts in 2019, and 14 counts in 2020.

Keyword Frequency: Women, Female, and Girl
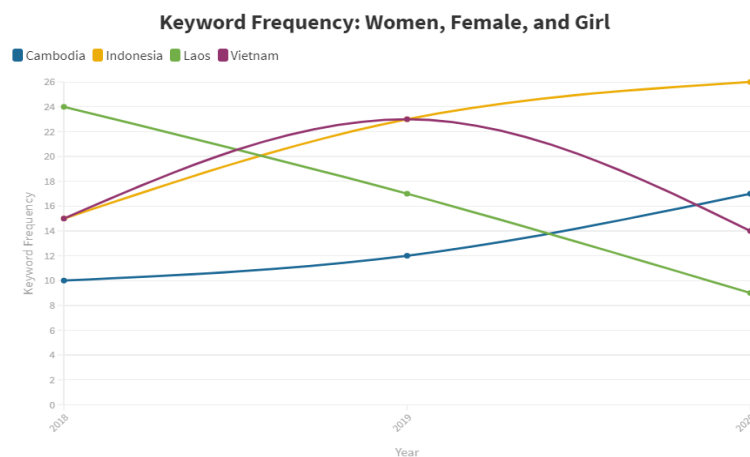
■ Cambodia ■ Indonesia ■ Laos ■ Vietnam

Figure 4: Keyword Frequency of Female-related Terms

Based on the above results, several findings can be drawn. First, in general, female-related trafficking issues are the primary concern in the four cases. This result confirms the hypothesis that the researchers should focus on the female perspective in human trafficking. Second, female-related sex trafficking is a particular concern, especially for Cambodia and Laos, where an increase in the use of the terms was observed. Third, female-related forced labor is an important issue, especially for Cambodia and Indonesia. In both countries, the use of the term has suddenly increased if compared with 2018 and 2020. Another development that can be observed in the case of Laos is that there was a sudden decrease both in the use of the term "forced labor" and the female-related terms. It suggests that in Laos, female-related forced labor has become a less crucial issue than sex trafficking. Finally, compared to the use of the female-related terms in all four cases, there was an increase in using those terms in Cambodia and Indonesia, whereas a general decrease was observed in Laos. This result indicates no common trend or development in female-related trafficking issues among the four cases.

Furthermore, there is a gap between the general conditions and individual conditions. The general condition shows that sex trafficking is the most prominent issue if compared with forced labor. However, it did not necessarily capture the development of the individual case. For example, in Cambodia and Indonesia, female-related forced labor is also a critical issue that has increased its importance over the years. However, this development cannot be observed in the general condition.

There are several policy implications for each case. For Cambodia, the trafficking of women and girls is getting worse. Many of the trafficking in women cases occurred in entertainment establishments. However, the Cambodian government did not put enough effort into addressing the issues. The government provides insufficient tools to collect and share trafficking information. In terms of law enforcement operations and victim services, corruption has been an important issue that impedes government efforts. Some government officials are believed to work with the business owners of the entertainment establishments and have profited from the sex and labor trafficking in women and girls. There is an urgent need to push the Cambodian government to solve the corruption issue and prevent the nexus between human traffickers and government officials.

In the case of Indonesia, the trafficking of women and girls for forced labor has become a more important issue. Traffickers commonly use fraud and coercion during trafficking. However, there was a lack of efficient identification measures of victims. The coordination between governments at the national and local levels is insufficient, and the Indonesian government decreased its funding and budget for human trafficking. The legal effort was inadequate, especially for female victims.

In Laos, many female workers have faced a risk of becoming human trafficking victims because the Laos government imposed a ban for workers who do not possess enough professional skills. Consequently, they would migrate by using informal channels, making themselves vulnerable to the international trafficking rings. Women and girls were faced with high risks, especially in agricultural plantations and specialized economic zones. Although the Laos government has taken some measures, it is not sufficient for victim identification and protection.

Finally, for Vietnam, female trafficking was involved with its labor markets. Most labor firms are affiliated with state-owned enterprises, and female workers seeking overseas jobs were recruited by illegal brokers who charge higher fees, making victims face the risk of debt-based coercion for forced labor and sex trafficking. For the Vietnamese government, the interagency coordination for female victim protection was insufficient, and the anti-trafficking law did not effectively address the anti-trafficking efforts.

Conclusion

This paper has presented several findings and implications. Theoretically speaking, this paper shows a need to investigate human trafficking issues in Southeast Asia from a feminist human security approach. The results show that the use of female-related terms outweighed male-related terms. In the general conditions of the four countries, the results show that "sex trafficking" against female victims is the major issue. The TIP reports tend to focus less on male-related trafficking. However, it does not imply that male-related issues are less critical. Other factors such as the identification ability may affect the result. In terms of individual conditions, each case has shown its unique patterns. For example, in Cambodia, both sex trafficking and forced labor against female victims are getting serious. In Indonesia, forced labor against female victims has become an important issue, especially after 2020. For Laos, identifying victims is becoming challenging, contributing to the decreasing use of female-related terms. However, the female-related sex trafficking issue is still salient. For Vietnam, the human trafficking against women and girls continued, and there is no major increase or decrease in female-related trafficking patterns. Although female-related trafficking is the major concern for those four countries, there was no common trend in female-related trafficking issues among the four cases.

To conclude, the results of this study also support the author's argument that over-generalization of female-related human trafficking in Southeast Asia would cause a blind spot and misleading information about the actual situation that each country is faced. Therefore, the implication of this research shows that researchers and policymakers should be careful when looking at "the big picture" of human trafficking in women and should pay more attention to the "state-level" situation and investigate the individual country's development, rather than making a general analysis and conclusion at the regional level. As Lin (2020) argued, much work needs to be done, and governments should do it differently. This argument is valid in the feminist human security approach to deal with the human trafficking issues in the Southeast Asian region.

Acknowledgment

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