

TRAFFICKING-IN-PERSONS PROTECTION RISK ANALYSIS

IOM TIMOR-LESTE

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TIP in Timor-Leste: A Largely Hidden Crime

2

cases investigated

Apr 2023 – Mar 2024

involving 12 suspected traffickers

16

victims identified

Apr 2024 – Mar 2025

*9 adult male, 7 adult female
— all labour trafficking*

Reported
Cases

Hidden Prevalence

Fear & stigma
Limited detection
Under-reporting
Lack of awareness

How Does TIP Manifest? Forms, Sectors & Patterns

Labour Trafficking

Most prevalent form. Victims trapped in construction, agriculture, fishing & domestic work through debt and deception.

Sexual Exploitation

Affects women, girls & LGBTIQ+ individuals in urban centres and abroad. Closely linked to GBV and unsafe migration.

Forced Marriage

Economically-driven, disproportionately affecting girls. Directly intersects with long-term trafficking vulnerability.

Forced Criminality

Emerging trend — victims coerced into illegal activities. Online scam compounds are a growing regional concern.

KEY TREND TIP rarely occurs as a sudden or isolated act — it develops progressively through economic pressure, deceptive recruitment, debt accumulation, and coercive control. Trafficking chains are increasingly hidden and cross-regional.

Why Does TIP Remain Largely Hidden?



Fear & Stigma

Survivors fear retaliation and social blame. Sexual exploitation cases rarely reported as victims are treated as though at fault.



Weak Identification

Low community awareness of trafficking indicators. Frontline actors — especially in rural sucos — lack training to recognise and refer.



No Surveillance System

No regular national data collection mechanism. Issues remain invisible to the state without quality statistics.



Debt Bondage & Control

Victims cannot leave because of recruitment debt. High interest makes repayment impossible.



Digital Exploitation

Social media used for grooming and coercion. No cyber legislation leaves victims without recourse.



Climate Shocks

Floods and landslides weaken family care capacity, pushing children and youth into vulnerable situations.

"We rarely see human trafficking cases where victims come forward or report to service providers in the same way as in other cases like GBV." — FGD Participant

Push & Pull Drivers of Trafficking

PUSH FACTORS

Socio-economic vulnerability

Poverty, lack of employment, low wages, youth underemployment

Family & community gaps

Household violence/neglect; family separation reduces supervision

Gender inequality & GBV

Intimate partner violence as structural driver; patriarchal norms

Individual vulnerability

Low digital literacy, no trusted migration info, stigma & discrimination

PULL FACTORS

Deceptive employment

False promises of work/migration; urban or overseas income appeal

Unregulated recruitment & debt

Agencies without oversight; recruitment fees create debt bondage

Weak governance gaps

Limited identification capacity; gaps in detection and referral

Unsafe mobility corridors

Cross-border and rural-to-urban movement; informal migration channels

Who Is Most Affected?



HIGHEST RISK

Migrant Workers

- Timorese workers abroad in construction, fishing, domestic work
- Trapped by debt from recruitment fees and travel costs
- 16 recently identified victims — all labour trafficking



HIGH RISK

Children

- Children left with elderly grandparents while parents work abroad
- Girls pushed into early/forced marriage due to economic pressure
- Online grooming via social media without cyber safeguards



HIGH RISK

Women & Girls

- GBV survivors fleeing abuse through unsafe migration
- Dependency exploited via false promises of marriage or employment
- Stigma and shame prevent disclosure of sexual exploitation



ELEVATED

LGBTIQ+ Persons

- Stigma compounds barriers to service access and reporting
- Lack of inclusive services increases isolation and re-trafficking
- Underrepresented in data due to fear of disclosure



ELEVATED

Persons with Disabilities

- Restricted access to services and information
- Heightened exposure due to limited mobility and support
- Often excluded from protection mechanisms



ELEVATED

Internally Displaced

- Climate disasters erode family care capacity
- Displacement weakens community protection structures
- Increased reliance on risky coping strategies

Vulnerability varies across groups, shaped by gender norms, legal status, stigma, and access to services.

Cross-Cutting Drivers: Child Protection & GBV as TIP Risk Factors

CHILD TRAFFICKING & CHILD LABOUR

Family separation & weak care

Parents working abroad leave children with elderly grandparents, reducing supervision

Economic pressure

Girls pushed into early/forced marriage to reduce family financial burden

Online & offline exploitation

Social media grooming; no cyber legislation or child online protection

Climate & emergency shocks

Disasters weaken parental capacity, exposing children to exploitation

Normalisation of violence

Abuse framed as discipline; reduces reporting, allows exploitation to persist

GBV & SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Normalisation of violence

"In many communities, violence is still viewed as normal behavior" — creating conditions traffickers exploit

Intimate partner violence

DV/IPV pushes survivors to seek escape through unsafe migration pathways

Patriarchal dependency

Traffickers exploit women's economic dependency through false promises

Technology-facilitated abuse

Non-consensual intimate images used as tools of coercion, escalating to trafficking

Criminalisation of victims

"The woman is already a victim, yet the law ends up criminalising her again" — discourages disclosure

Timor-Leste's ASEAN Accession: TIP Implications

Timor-Leste, as an ASEAN member, is opening new economic, labour migration, and regional cooperation pathways, each with significant TIP implications.

CHALLENGES

Increased labour migration flows

Accession will accelerate outbound and inbound migration, multiplying exposure to deceptive recruitment, debt bondage, and exploitation in labour corridors.

Expanded trafficking networks

Greater regional connectivity may facilitate cross-border trafficking operations, including scam compound recruitment targeting Timorese nationals.

Regulatory readiness gap

Timor-Leste's labour migration governance, recruitment oversight, and victim identification capacity are not yet commensurate with regional mobility demands.

ASEAN TIP frameworks not fully adopted

Timor-Leste has not yet ratified all regional instruments. Gaps in alignment with the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking (ACTIP) limit legal protection.

OPPORTUNITIES

Regional cooperation on anti-TIP

ASEAN membership enables Timor-Leste to engage fully with the ASEAN Convention Against TIP (ACTIP), regional task forces, and shared intelligence on trafficking networks.

ASEAN ACT programme engagement

Full participation in ASEAN ACT enables access to technical assistance, training, and cross-border referral mechanisms to strengthen national response.

Labour migration governance reform

Accession creates political momentum for regulatory reform — including recruitment oversight, bilateral labour agreements, and pre-departure orientation.

Stronger bilateral diplomatic leverage

ASEAN membership strengthens Timor-Leste's position to negotiate victim repatriation, legal assistance, and survivor-centred consular support with destination countries.

Obrigada wa'in!
