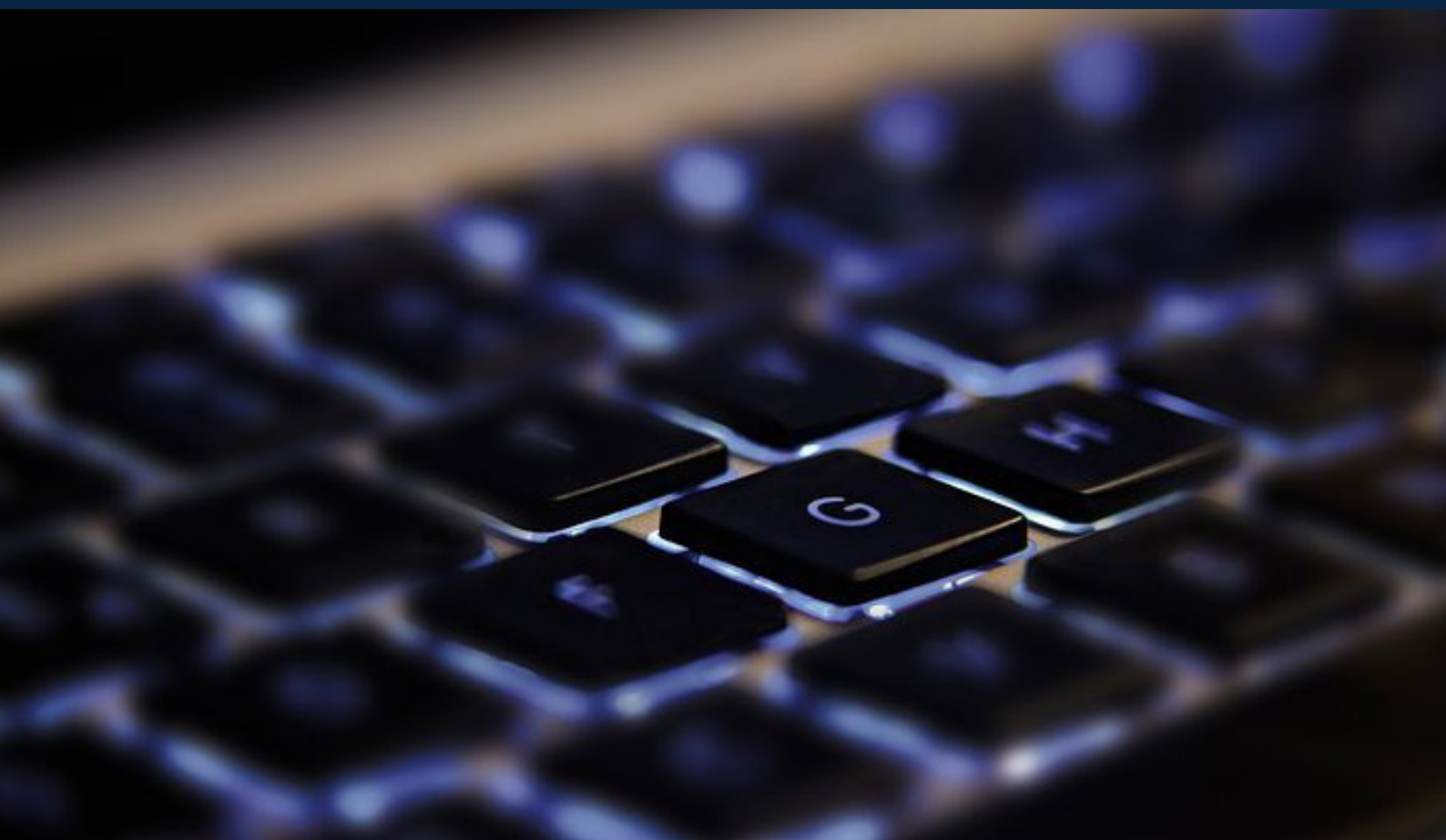


# **How Technology Fuels Trafficking and Exploitation in Asia and the Pacific**



**May 2019**

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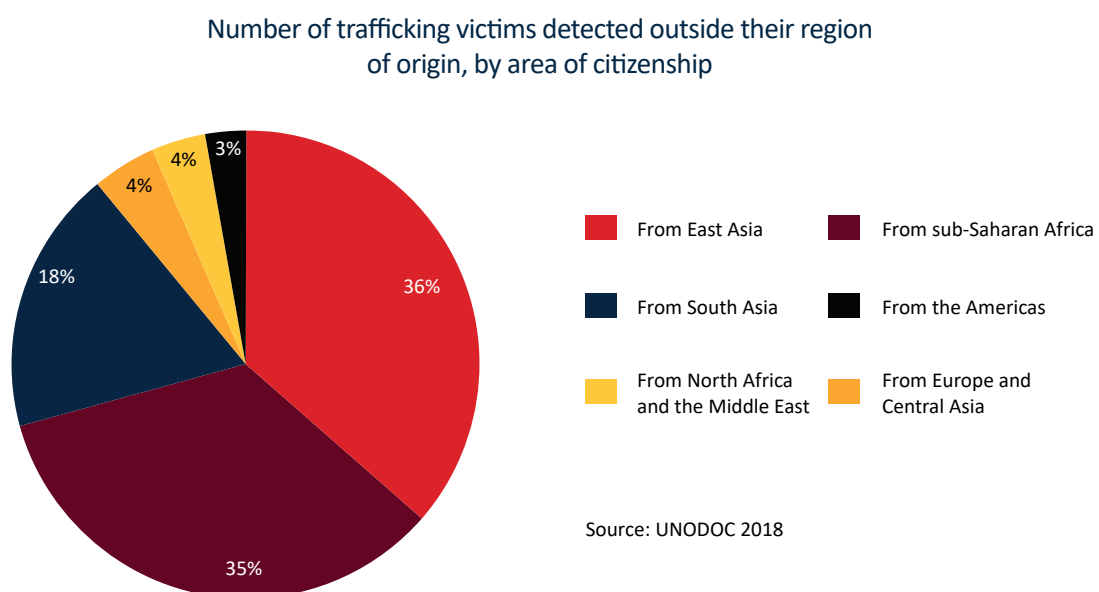
## Context

The total number of modern slavery victims in the world today is estimated to be 40.3 million. Out of this shocking figure, more than half of the victims - at least 24.9 million - are in Asia and the Pacific. This region has the highest number of victims across all forms of modern slavery, accounting for 73 percent of victims of forced sexual exploitation, 68 percent of those forced to work by state authorities, 64 percent of those in exploitation related to the private economy, and 42 percent of all those in forced marriages<sup>1</sup>.



Source: Global Slavery Index 2018

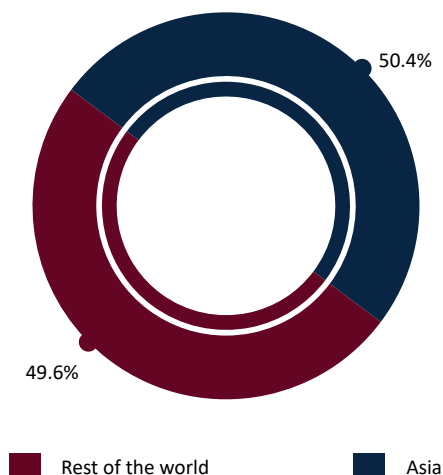
Asia and the Pacific is also an origin of victim trafficking outside of the region. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's 2018 data tell us that 36 percent of trafficking victims detected outside their region of origin come from Asia and the Pacific. Nine percent of victims from East Asia and the Pacific were detected in Western and Southern Europe and six percent were detected in North Africa and the Middle East<sup>2</sup>.



Source: UNODC 2018

In recent years, Asia has experienced a rapid dissemination of information communications technologies. While a huge accessibility divide still exists between rural and urban areas, Asia now accounts for half of the total internet usage globally.

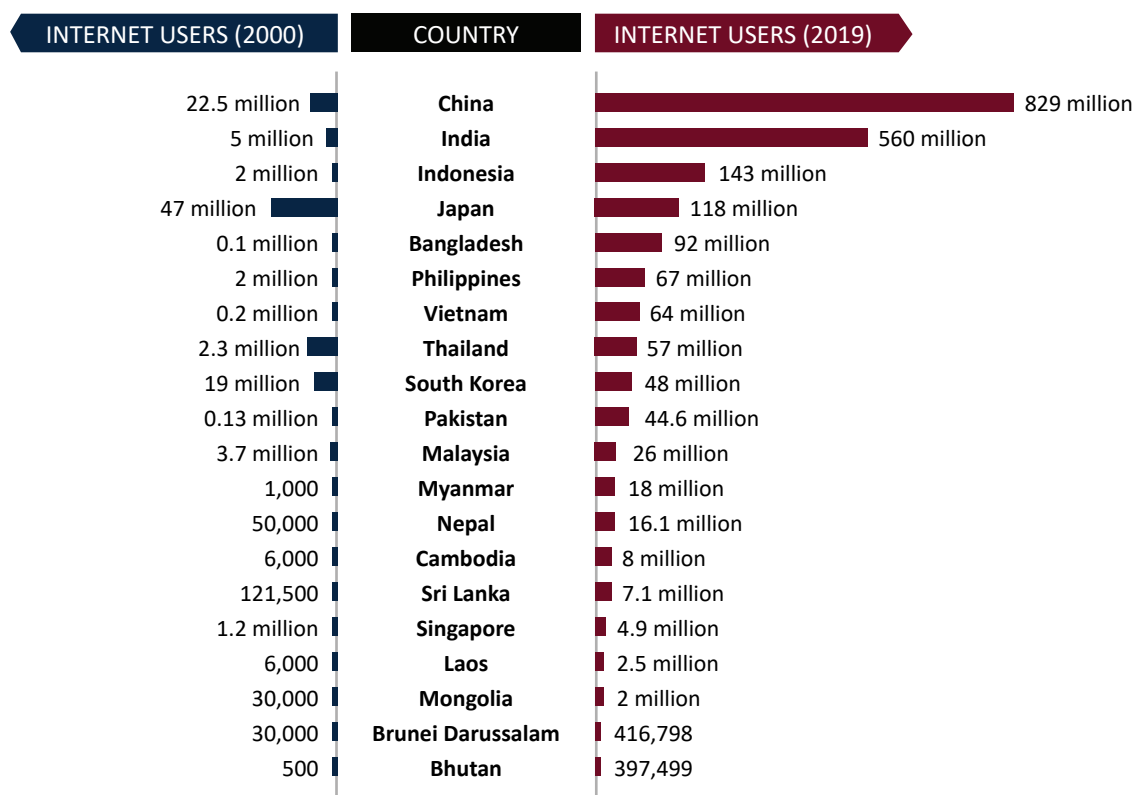
Internet Users in Asia - March 2019



Source: Internet World Stats, 2019

Two decades ago, only a few million people used the internet in India, Indonesia and the Philippines. In 2019, these numbers amount to 560 million, 143 million and 67 million respectively<sup>3</sup>.

Number of Internet Users in Asia, 2000-2019



Source: Internet World Stats, 2019

Social media penetration is also very high: 92 percent of Filipinos and 88 percent of South Koreans who have access to the internet also have a Facebook account. In China, WeChat (the “local version” of Facebook) has 612 million daily users and an 85.5 percent penetration rate<sup>4</sup>.

It is surprising that having these large internet usage statistics applying to Asian countries, very little is known about how technology can aggravate trafficking flows both nationally and internationally. While several resources on the use of artificial intelligence, smartphone apps and other types of technology being used to address this issue can be found, this white paper’s focus will be to provide insight on the use of technology as a liability. We will describe some of the most common ways technology is used for the purpose of trafficking and exploitation in Asia and the Pacific, along with case studies gathered through academic papers on the subject, investigative media stories, official reports, and original research conducted by the Mekong Club.

## Commercial sexual exploitation

Commercial sexual exploitation - in particular cyber sex - is greatly aided by technology. Traffickers recruit victims using websites and apps designed for dating, escort services, job advertising, gaming and social media. For example, in Vietnam, sex trafficking victims have been lured by traffickers who posed as police officers on social media or through online dating relationships to gain their trust<sup>5</sup>. In another case, perpetrators have recruited girls through job service centres and then sold them to sex trafficking gangs based in China and Malaysia.

Cyber sex is a billion-dollar industry that bridges the distance between supply and demand for sexual services from thousands of miles to one click, while making it more difficult for users to be detected and traced.

The cyber crime industry has trapped “Mira” and “Yijun”, two North Korean girls, for eight and five years respectively. The girls fled their country several years ago. While growing up in North Korea, Mira was able to catch a glimpse of the outside world through DVDs and USB sticks loaded with foreign movies that they would buy on the black market - locally known as Jangmadan. She said: *“I was really into Chinese movies and thought all men from China were like that. I wanted to marry a Chinese man, and I looked into leaving North Korea for several years.”*

The reality proved to be much harsher. She was sold to a Chinese-Korean sex cam operation by the same people who smuggled her into China and told that she had to become an online sex worker in order to repay her debt. Yijun said that she had to work for as much as 20 hours a day in front of the sex cam in order to hit her daily target of 200 dollars a day - as the customers paid by the minute<sup>6</sup>.





## Child trafficking

Even more disturbingly, technology is misused to exploit children for sex. According to an NGO's research, 95 percent of commercial sexual exploitation of children in South Korea is arranged over the internet<sup>7</sup>.

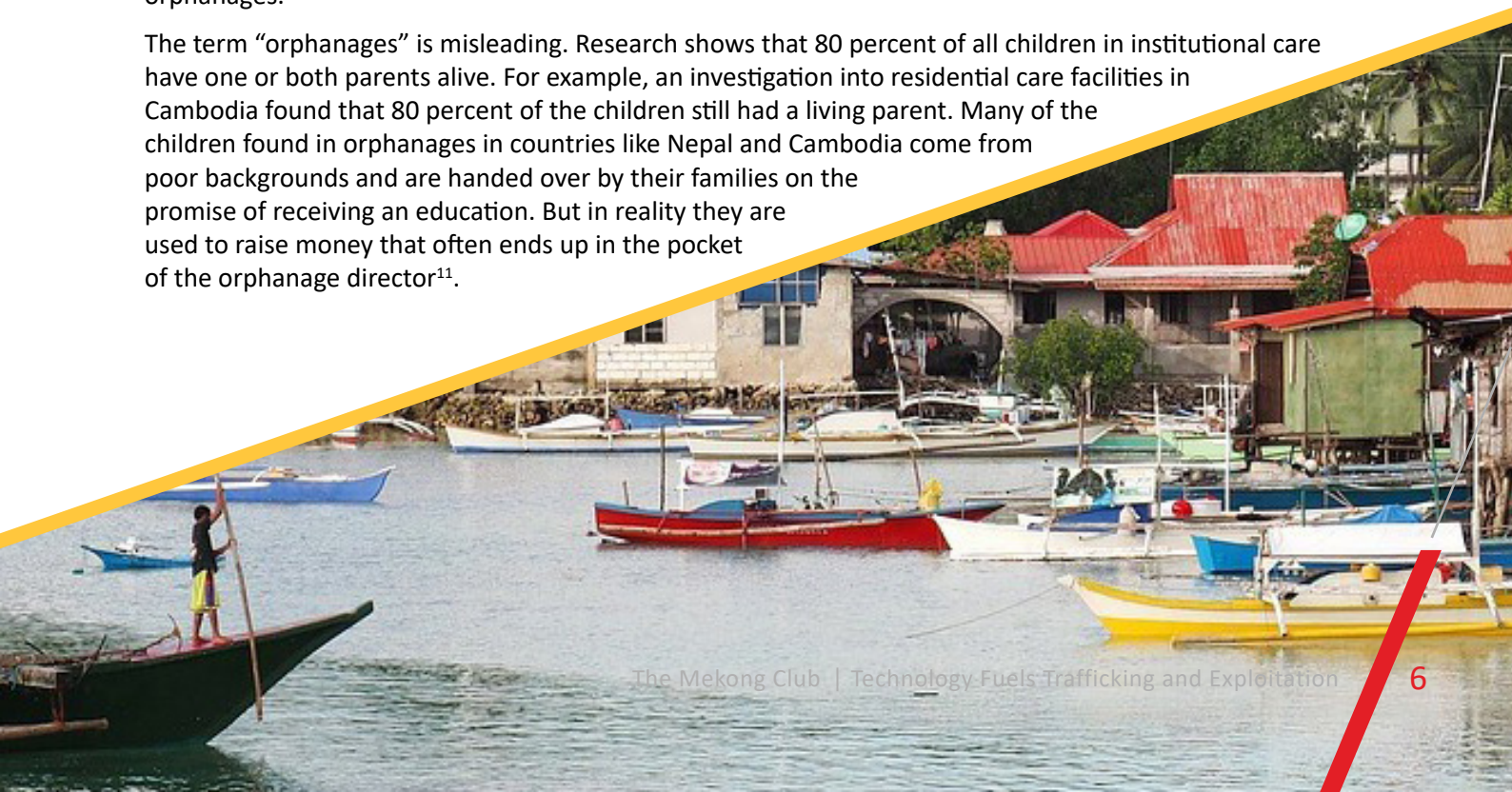
In the Philippines, tens of thousands of children are victims of webcam sex tourism. They are forced to perform sexual acts for foreign customers who watch from the comfort of their homes in their own countries. The videos are broadcast live. There is no need for high-speed internet - a simple phone or an internet café is enough. The business is usually handled by the victims' neighbours, relatives and sometimes even their impoverished parents. They usually get between 10 and 100 dollars per "show" - a big amount in a country where about 60 percent of the population earns only two dollars a day. An investigation in a village 500 km from Manila uncovered that this business is so lucrative that villagers had given up fishing and factory work and started a cybersex business with just an old laptop. The children's families think that cybersex is not pornography and would not negatively affect the children, as technology allows for sexual services to be provided without the need for physical contact<sup>8</sup>.

Globally, the majority of child sexual abuse material is now exchanged via non-commercial channels such as public peer-to-peer platforms like Gnutella, eDonkey and eMule. Private peer-to-peer networks are often used by mid-level offenders who establish closed groups to exchange encrypted files. Anywhere from 7.5 to 24 percent of child sexual abuse material is currently exchanged via commercial channels. As credit card payments are known by most offenders to risk identification, new, and therefore more valuable, abuse material has become a sort of currency in itself, being often used as "payment" for access to other material. While commercial distribution has not been completely eradicated, a trend of decreasing identification of available commercial sexual abuse material may also be due to commercial distributors moving to new platforms or "dark web" environments such as Tor<sup>9</sup>.

The internet is also used to traffic and trade children in the adoption black market. In February 2014, Chinese authorities rescued over 300 babies and arrested more than 1,000 people suspected of buying and selling young children online. This followed a six-month operation in which authorities were made aware of a website promoting private adoptions. Law enforcement authorities subsequently uncovered an online black market that connected buyers and sellers over four websites, online forums and some 30 groups on a popular Chinese messaging platform<sup>10</sup>.

Technology also exacerbates the phenomenon of voluntourism. This is a fast-growing part of the adventure travel market, often advertised and booked online, for people who want to do good in the world, grab their backpacks and head off to other parts of the world to volunteer their time to charitable causes - often in orphanages.

The term "orphanages" is misleading. Research shows that 80 percent of all children in institutional care have one or both parents alive. For example, an investigation into residential care facilities in Cambodia found that 80 percent of the children still had a living parent. Many of the children found in orphanages in countries like Nepal and Cambodia come from poor backgrounds and are handed over by their families on the promise of receiving an education. But in reality they are used to raise money that often ends up in the pocket of the orphanage director<sup>11</sup>.



Institutionalisation is also encouraged as it attracts large funding, part of which comes from tourists eager to try such an experience. Besides aggravating chances of children being trafficked to keep up with the “demand”, voluntourism is often dangerous to the very children it claims to help, as tourists do not undertake any check and are not required to have any qualifications in social work<sup>13</sup>.

## Technology, migrant workers and labour exploitation

Little is known about technology’s negative footprint on labour exploitation - a crime that affects millions of people in Asia, who are exploited to harvest the food that we eat, assemble the phones that we use, and stitch the clothes that we wear.

Asia hosts extended supply chains for a number of sectors, where commodities are sourced, processed, assembled and shipped worldwide.

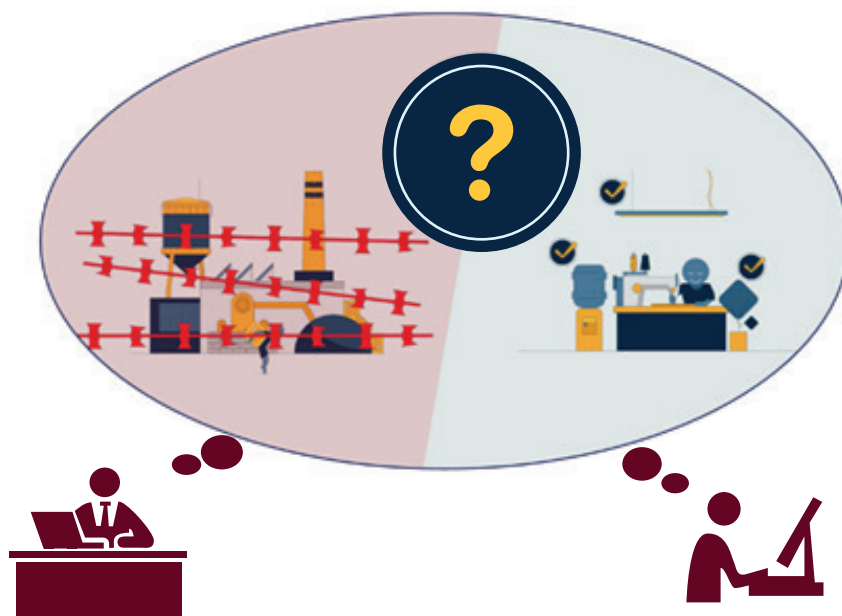
Parallel to the supply chains of things, there is another chain: one of moving human beings. In 2017, there were 62 million international migrants in Asia and the Pacific and more than 100 million migrants around the globe were from countries within the region<sup>14</sup>. The majority of them moved in search of better economic opportunities. These economic migration flows are seldom straight forward and often composed of multiple nodes of middle-men and recruiters. These agents, for a fee, arrange for the jobseekers to prepare and leave the country of origin for the workplace destination. Most cases of debt bondage and trafficking happen at some point during this process, sometimes trapping the victims in a situation of slavery even before they leave their homes.

While traditional recruitment channels are still widely used, with the internet now being vastly accessible, more and more migrant workers are going online to seek information on job opportunities abroad. For example, a popular Filipino website called Workabroad.ph<sup>15</sup> contained 25,000 overseas job posts and attracted more than 700,000 Facebook likes as of May 2019.

However, the flow of information on these platforms is often asymmetrical, meaning that those providing information on the job have the power to manipulate or hide parts of the terms and conditions, and this puts the jobseeker in a vulnerable position. While in some cases technology is used by jobseekers to verify information about employment, there are still gaps that can put them at risk. Governments usually lag behind in terms of equipping their labour departments with up-to-date technology that could highlight illegal activities, and the penetration of certain social media platforms means that some jobseekers trust informal recruitment platforms more than the governments themselves.

Traffickers increasingly use the internet, gaming sites and particularly social media to lure potential victims into vulnerable situations. Men often entice young women and girls with online dating relationships and persuade them to move abroad, then subject them to forced labour or sex trafficking. Some traffickers pose as police officers on social media networks to gain victims' trust. Vietnamese organised crime networks recruit Vietnamese adults and children under the pretense of lucrative job opportunities and transport them to Europe - particularly the United Kingdom - and subject them to forced labour on cannabis farms<sup>16</sup>.

Smartphone apps are increasingly being used to lure and recruit people from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, China and Cambodia into exploitative labour situations in Taiwan, which hosts more than 675,000 foreign workers who perform low-skilled work such as home caregivers and domestic workers, or in farming, manufacturing, construction, and fishing<sup>17</sup>.



These examples show how technology can fuel deception. Photos, tags and fake positive recommendations can make jobs seem too good to be true, a little bit closer and more tangible for the jobseekers. The trust in these channels is high. Research has found that Filipino jobseekers trust comments on Facebook more than the guidelines on the government's employment website<sup>18</sup>. It is also hard to work out which posts are fraudulent and which ones are innocuous because, unlike sex-related posts, typologies and keywords are hard to identify.

During the exploitation phase, rather than the use of technology, it is the lack of it that exacerbates the situation. Isolation and confinement can be reinforced by phones being confiscated and access to the web being prohibited, breaking the victims' contact with their support networks.

One future trend that will see technology negatively affect workers in Asia and the Pacific is the surge in automation of low-skilled jobs. Since human trafficking by its nature is a crime involving human beings, companies may think that replacing human labour with machine labour will be a fix. However, according to the International Labour Organization, automation will deprive 56 percent of South-East Asian workers of a job in the next two decades, with women disproportionately affected in the garment, textile and footwear industry.



In both Vietnam and Cambodia, for example, over 85 percent of jobs in those sectors are at high risk of automation, and over 76 percent of these jobs are held by women<sup>19</sup>. This may fuel even more cases of slavery by creating a race to the bottom among workers trying to find a job at any cost<sup>20</sup>.

## Recommendations for governments

- As more and more rural communities gain access to the internet, it will be crucial for governments to earmark resources to collect data on these activities, unmask and blacklist fraudulent websites, and spread awareness among jobseekers on necessary due diligence.
- Stricter and better regulations should govern crypto currency payments and accountability for technology that facilitates exploitation.
- Governments should also ensure better collaboration to share intelligence and work on joint initiatives to combat the misuse of the internet for the purpose of trafficking. This would be particularly effective between countries at the two ends of economic migration “corridors”, which usually have formal agreements in place but lack adequate monitoring and implementation systems, as well as for countries in other regions where a high number of Asian victims are identified.

## About the Mekong Club

The Mekong Club is an anti-slavery non-profit with a focus on business engagement. The vision of the Mekong Club is to harness the power of the private sector to change business practices in a way that will significantly reduce modern slavery. To ensure this result, we work confidentially and collaboratively with companies from a broad range of industries with a positive, trust worthy approach.

The Mekong Club is one of the few not-for-profit organizations of its kind in Asia to use a business-to-business approach to fight modern slavery. Its founders and current board members are representatives of the private sector who understand the key role companies can play in this fight. The Mekong Club association is now a 36-member strong platform that brings industry-specific working groups together. This model encourages like-minded companies to share their experiences and work together in a confidential environment. We have been working exclusively on modern slavery projects since our inception in 2012.

Our major objectives are to increase understanding and awareness of modern slavery throughout the international business community and to identify practical ways to address it. We work towards this goal through four strategic pillars:

- Business association, comprised of four working groups: Banking and Finance; Apparel and Footwear; Hospitality; and Retail, where member companies meet on a regular basis to exchange best practices and work towards industry-specific deliverables (which we call tools).
- Development of tools: In an effort to bring real value to the participating companies, Mekong Club develops specific projects aimed at addressing a complex issue in the most practical way possible. Our innovative tools include training courses, an online news hub, a multi-language e-learning curriculum, smartphone apps for victim identification, and interactive maps for risk assessment<sup>21</sup>.
- Leadership: Using ambassadors from the business world we aim to increase the influence of the private sector in stepping up and taking a leadership role in the fight against modern slavery.
- Awareness raising and advocacy: We offer presentations and training to organisations, chambers of commerce, corporates, and the wider community in Hong Kong, Asia and beyond.

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