Adopt ad ref on 9 November 2026

AICHR Briefing Paper on Disability and Trafficking in Persons in ASEAN
Executive summary

This AICHR Briefing Paper was developed by the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), with the support of the Australian Government through the ASEAN–Australia Counter Trafficking (ASEAN-ACT) program. It aims to support ASEAN sectoral bodies, ASEAN Member States, policymakers, justice sector institutions, organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), civil society organisations (CSOs), and other relevant stakeholders to strengthen disability-inclusive approaches to preventing and responding to trafficking in persons.

A draft of this AICHR Briefing Paper was presented at a regional workshop involving stakeholders from across ASEAN Member States in January 2025. Input and feedback provided during this workshop were incorporated into subsequent versions of the Briefing Paper. The paper also draws on the findings and inputs of the Regional Validation Workshop on the Zero Draft ASEAN Policy Brief on Disability and Trafficking in Persons, held in Laguna, Philippines, on 7-8 May 2026. The results of these research and consultation activities are reflected in the present version.

What is the policy challenge and why does it matter?

Trafficking in persons remains a significant human rights challenge globally and across ASEAN. While persons with disabilities are recognised as being at heightened risk of trafficking and exploitation, there are no reliable estimates of the number of persons with disabilities who are trafficked. This is largely because trafficking data is not routinely disaggregated by disability and many victims with disabilities remain unidentified or do not report their experiences to authorities.

The relationship between disability and trafficking is complex and operates in two directions. Persons with pre-existing disabilities may face increased risks of trafficking due to structural inequalities and barriers to education, employment, information, social protection, and justice. At the same time, trafficking itself can result in physical, psychosocial, intellectual, or other disabilities arising from violence, exploitation, hazardous working conditions, deprivation, trauma, and the lack of timely medical and psychosocial care.

Research and consultations indicate that persons with disabilities experience multiple forms of trafficking, including labour trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, forced begging, and online exploitation. The Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna (May 2026) further highlighted the importance of recognising the diverse experiences of persons with different types of disabilities, including non-visible disabilities, and ensuring that persons who acquire disabilities as a consequence of trafficking are not overlooked in prevention, protection, recovery, and access to justice efforts.

What are the key drivers of the problem?

Poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, and unequal access to education, employment, social protection, and essential services continue to be among the principal drivers of vulnerability to trafficking for persons with disabilities. Limited access to accessible information and awareness of trafficking risks and available support services further increases vulnerability.

The Regional Validation Workshop held in Laguna in May also emphasised that vulnerability is shaped by multiple intersecting factors. Gender, age, migration status, displacement, statelessness, ethnicity, indigenous identity, conflict, disasters, climate change, and unsafe online environments may combine with disability to create heightened and compounded risks of trafficking and exploitation. These intersecting vulnerabilities require responses that move beyond a single-risk approach and recognise the diversity of experiences among persons with disabilities.

What legal and policy frameworks are in place?

Through their ratification of international human rights instruments, including the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (2000) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), ASEAN Member States have committed to ensuring that persons with disabilities are protected from trafficking and exploitation and are able to access recovery services and justice.

This commitment is echoed in regional agreements, including the 2015 ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) and through regional plans such as the ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Work Plan Against Trafficking in Persons 2023–2028 and the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In line with Article 5 of ACTIP, national laws on trafficking in most ASEAN Member States recognise persons with disabilities as a group that is vulnerable to trafficking in persons by imposing harsher penalties for cases of trafficking involving a person with a disability. Other policies and strategies in some countries also make explicit reference to protection of persons with disabilities and the need for recovery and rehabilitation services for victims of trafficking to be disability inclusive.

National disability laws and policies in ASEAN Member States outline the broad rights and entitlements of persons with disabilities in a range of areas and in some countries explicitly prohibit abuse and exploitation of persons with disabilities. However, full implementation of these rights is an ongoing challenge and persons with disabilities still face a range of barriers to accessing their rights and entitlements.

Broadly speaking, laws and policies on counter trafficking and disability are disconnected from each other. This means that stakeholders in these two sectors often

work in silos and there are missed opportunities to prevent trafficking and more effectively protect victims with disabilities.

Participants at the Laguna Regional Validation Workshop emphasised the need for greater policy coherence across ASEAN and national frameworks, stronger cross-sectoral coordination, and the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in policy development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

What are the key gaps in practice?

At a practical level, there is limited collaboration between counter-trafficking stakeholders and agencies supporting individuals with disabilities. This makes it challenging to address the specific vulnerabilities and needs of victims of trafficking with disabilities.

Many victims of trafficking with disabilities do not report their experiences to authorities because of shame, fear of traffickers, social stigma, harmful gender norms or because a family member or romantic partner has been involved in their trafficking. Existing processes for identification also fail to identify many victims of trafficking with disabilities. Even if they are identified as a victim of trafficking, frontline staff often do not have the knowledge and skills to identify that they may have a disability. Without formal identification, victims of trafficking with disabilities may not able to access the full range of services they are entitled to.

Government and non-government organisations across the ASEAN region provide a range of services to support recovery and reintegration for people who have been identified as victims of trafficking or presumed victims of trafficking. But these organisations face funding and staffing challenges and often have limited capacity to meet the specific needs of persons with disabilities. Limited numbers of specialists mean that providing mental health care for victims of trafficking is a particular challenge. There are also challenges with long-term care for physical and mental health, particularly outside major cities. Victims of trafficking with disabilities also face significant barriers in accessing justice, including limited access to legal assistance, lack of reasonable accommodations, and negative stereotypes which affect their ability to participate in legal processes.

Reintegration of victims of trafficking with disabilities is particularly challenging when family members have been involved in trafficking. There are also significant risks of being re-trafficked when the underlying drivers – poverty, lack of education, and limited employment and livelihood opportunities – are not addressed. Victims of trafficking with disabilities also face significant stigma, discrimination and exclusion.

What can be done to strengthen counter-trafficking policy and practice?

This ASEAN policy brief makes a number of recommendations for both regional and national stakeholders. This includes raising awareness among persons with

disabilities about the risks of trafficking and exploitation, providing clear guidance and training for frontline responders on accessible and inclusive identification, service delivery and access to justice, strengthening regional and national strategy and policy frameworks to ensure these recognise and address the intersection of disability and trafficking in persons, and strengthening collection and reporting of disability-disaggregated data on victims of trafficking.

Introduction

The intersection of disability and trafficking is a significant human rights issue which requires both a policy and regulatory response as well as changes to counter-trafficking practice. To date, counter-trafficking efforts have paid very little – if any – attention to the intersection of disability and trafficking. But there is now growing awareness of the need to ensure that prevention efforts take into account the risks that persons with disabilities face, that protection and support services meet their specific needs, and that victims of trafficking with disabilities are able to access justice.

Disability and trafficking intersect in two main ways. Disability can compound poverty and marginalisation, or lead to social exclusion, disempowerment, and dependence on caregivers. These factors may drive persons with disabilities to seek opportunities in potentially exploitative situations or mean they are more susceptible to exploitation by those around them (Carey & Peterson, 2020; Jagoe et al., 2022; Nichols & Heil, 2022; Office for Victims of Crime and Bureau of Justice Assistance, n.d.). The physical, sexual and psychological abuse, injuries or illness that victims of trafficking experience can result in disabilities, particularly when victims do not receive adequate medical, psychological or psychiatric care, or social support (García-Vázquez & Meneses-Falcón, 2024; Ottisova et al., 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

This AICHR Briefing Paper has been developed on the initiative of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), shepherded by Thailand, in collaboration with the Office of the Representatives of Thailand to ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) with the support of the Australian Government. It outlines what is known about the links between disability and trafficking in persons in ASEAN and provides recommendations for strengthening counter-trafficking efforts to better address this issue. The brief aims to equip policymakers and frontline responders – including those involved in identifying victims, investigating and prosecuting trafficking cases, and social workers and other practitioners who support the shelter, recovery and rehabilitation of victims – with an understanding of the challenge of disability and trafficking, the key drivers, and how well existing policy and practice is addressing this issue.

This Briefing Paper is based on research and consultations undertaken in six ASEAN countries –Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam – with a wide range of government and non-government stakeholders, including police, prosecutors, officials from social affairs and justice ministries and counter-trafficking taskforces, social workers and shelter staff, and staff from NGOs working in counter-trafficking and organisations of persons with disabilities. A draft of this AICHR Briefing Paper was presented at a regional workshop involving stakeholders from across ASEAN Member States in January 2025. Input and feedback provided during this workshop have been incorporated into the final version.

This AICHR Briefing Paper provides a broad overview of the issues and challenges in the six countries. For more detailed findings on individual countries, we refer readers to the research report and the country briefs for Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam, which are available on the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking program's website.

Box 1: Key definitions

Persons with disabilities

The understanding of disability adopted in this study aligns with the social model of disability, in which disability is understood as the interaction between individual impairments and social barriers. This model is reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which defines persons with disabilities as those who have long-term **physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments** that, in interaction with social, cultural, environmental and other **barriers,** may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Trafficking in persons

Under both the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000) (UN Protocol) and the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) (2015), the crime of **'trafficking in persons'** refers to '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 includes at a minimum prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or service, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or removal of organs.

Trafficking, therefore, involves three elements: the **act** (recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons), the **means** (threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, or abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability) and the **purpose** (exploitation). For children, only the 'act' and 'purpose' are required. The element of 'means' is not required. This recognises the inherent vulnerability of children (Protocol to Prevent, Supress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, 2000, Article 3[a]). Importantly, Article 3 of the UN Protocol and Article 2 of the ACTIP indicate that the **consent** of a victim is not relevant where threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, or abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability have been used. In contrast to popular opinion, trafficking in persons does not require travel or crossing borders. If someone is forced to work or engage in intended exploitation (for any purposes) against their will, it is considered trafficking. In 2016, more than half of the

world's identified trafficking victims were exploited in their own country (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018, p. 41).

In this Briefing Paper, we use the term 'trafficking' to refer to crimes which involve all three elements for adult victims, and two elements for children. We use the term 'exploitation' in a more general sense, to refer to experiences of abuse, mistreatment, and manipulation, which may or may not be classified as trafficking.

Disability and trafficking in persons in ASEAN

What is the policy challenge and why does it matter?

Trafficking in persons is a significant challenge – both globally and in ASEAN. It is very difficult to accurately estimate the numbers of trafficking victims. The most widely cited estimate is that there are 40 million people who are victims of modern slavery, with 15.1 million people in situations of forced labour - including commercial sex work - across Asia and the Pacific (International Labour Organization, Walk Free and International Organization for Migration, 2022, p. 24). Around three-quarters of identified victims of trafficking are from Southeast Asia, which includes the ASEAN region (Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative, 2023).

Although persons with disabilities are recognised as a group that is vulnerable to trafficking in persons, there are no reliable estimates of the number of persons with disabilities who are trafficked (Jagoe et al., 2022), either globally or in individual countries. Across ASEAN Member States, obtaining accurate disaggregated data on the number of trafficked victims with disabilities is a significant challenge, even in countries where data on disability is collected as part of population censuses or other large-scale national surveys. A number of ASEAN countries maintain national databases on trafficking cases and services provided, but data is not routinely disaggregated by disability. Some NGOs and government agencies capture data on whether those who seek their services have a disability. However, this information is generally only used for the purposes of providing services and primarily captures visible disabilities such as physical impairments. Collecting accurate data is also difficult because so many people who experience trafficking – including those with disabilities – do not report this to authorities (Andrevski et al., 2013; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Kasper & Chiang, 2022; Surtees & Zulbahary, 2018).

It is also difficult to estimate the number of people who acquire disabilities as a result of trafficking. However, extensive research and data on migrant workers who experience exploitative work conditions (which may or may not be classified as trafficking) suggests that there are potentially a significant number who sustain illnesses, injuries or trauma that may lead to disabilities (see for example Lyneham & Larsen, 2013; Saptaningrum et al., 2021; Surtees, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2014).

Importantly, these studies indicate that exploitation, violence and abuse happens to people of all genders and to workers who migrate through both formal and informal channels. Not all illnesses, injuries or trauma experienced during trafficking will result in a disability. However, given the tens of millions of people who migrate for work across the region, the high levels of violence, abuse and exploitation, and the unmet need for recovery and rehabilitation services in many countries, there are likely a significant number of people who have acquired a disability as a result of their trafficking experience.

Trafficking of persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities are vulnerable to all forms of trafficking. Our research and consultations across the six countries found that the types of trafficking persons with disabilities experience mirror broader trafficking patterns in the region, with sex trafficking, forced marriage, and labour trafficking (including forced begging) the most common.

While persons with disabilities can be exploited by those they don't know well, in many cases family members are the perpetrators. And while the exploitation may involve a change in location – either within a country or across international borders – exploitation can also take place within a person's home or community.

The stories presented below are based on interviews and consultations undertaken for this study. All names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

Sex trafficking

Our research and consultations found that women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation (see **Box 2**: Women and girls with disabilities are vulnerable to sexual exploitation). In countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, this is mostly domestic, with women or girls being sexually exploited in their own homes or being lured to cities by promises of work. Elsewhere in the region sex trafficking of women and girls with disabilities has both domestic and international dimensions, with women from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar being deceived into sex work in Thailand. Thai women and girls with disabilities have also become victims of online sex trafficking or been trafficked into the sex industry in Europe and elsewhere (Chalayonnavin, 2023; Royal Thai Government, 2021; Wildau, 2010).

Box 2: Women and girls with disabilities are vulnerable to sexual exploitation

Phonthong, Lao PDR: Phonthong lost her hearing when she was a teenager. When she finished primary school, one of her uncles suggested that she go to Thailand to find a job. She was smuggled over the border at night by boat, then taken to the south of Thailand where she worked as a domestic helper. But after the husband sexually abused her, she ran away.

Phonthong returned to Lao PDR, but it was hard to find a job. Her aunt suggested she could get her work as a waitress at a karaoke bar back in Thailand. Phonthong's

aunt left her at the bar and disappeared. The bar owner told Phonthong her aunt had taken her salary, and she needed to work to pay it back. Working as a waitress didn't pay very much, so Phonthong ended up being a sex worker. She didn't want to, but it was the only way she could earn enough money to pay back the money and have some left for herself.

Children with disabilities can become victims of online sexual exploitation including in pornography. This was noted in particular by stakeholders in the Philippines. Online sexual exploitation of children has risen significantly in the ASEAN region over the last 10 years, facilitated by the increase in internet use and ease of international financial transactions (ECPAT, 2022; ECPAT et al., 2022a, 2022b; International Justice Mission, 2020; Roche et al., 2023).

Forced marriage

Women with disabilities can be vulnerable to forced marriage. Forced marriage between women and girls from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam and Myanmar and Chinese men has been growing over the last two decades. Child marriage – a form of forced marriage – has also been documented in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos PDR and Vietnam (Bertrand, 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 2022; Jordana, 2017; Plan International, 2022; Watkins-Smith, 2022).

In other parts of the world, research indicates that women and men with intellectual disabilities are at greater risk of forced marriage (Clawson & Fyson, 2017; Groce, Gazizova, et al., 2014; McCarthy et al., 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). Those interviewed for this study, and participants in the national workshops in Vietnam and Lao PDR, indicated that they had observed cases of forced marriage. While our research did not identify any examples of women and girls with disabilities in forced marriages in other countries, the prevalence of this issue and the greater risks associated with disability suggest that there are likely to be at least some cases.

Labour trafficking

In all six countries, stakeholders shared examples of persons with disabilities who experienced labour exploitation, including being underpaid – or not paid – for work, being abused at work or having their wages taken by family members.

Box 3: Persons with disabilities experience various kinds of labour exploitation

Grace, the Philippines: Grace used to live with her brother and his wife. She is deaf but has never learned formal sign language. Grace worked in her brother's house, doing cleaning and cooking, but her brother and his wife often hit her or screamed at her, even for small things.

Grace taught herself some skills in massage, manicure, and laundry. She used this to earn a little bit of money, but her brother always took it from her. Grace didn't want to go to the police. She thought they would say it was just family trouble, or they would not believe her. Grace is now being supported by a local NGO that supports victims of exploitation and violence.

Ria, Indonesia: Ria works for an Indonesian NGO that provides legal assistance, including for victims of trafficking. She told the research team about a case involving labour trafficking of three persons with disabilities, one of whom was exploited for 20 years. The case involved a small non-profit organisation which ran a guest house. The victims helped run the guest house but were never given a contract or paid wages. The employees were also treated badly. If they did something wrong, the Director would pinch them and hit them. He would also accuse them of stealing things. Often, they would only get rice that had spoiled to eat.

Forced begging

In almost all countries, our research and consultations uncovered cases in which children and adults with disabilities were victims of forced begging, a form of labour exploitation (see also Agape International Missions, 2019; Disabilities Thailand, 2016; Harkins, 2019; Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S Department of State, 2021, 2024; Wahida, 2017). This included begging on the street or in marketplaces or train stations.

Box 4: Persons with disabilities across ASEAN can be exploited in forced begging

Kanya, Thailand: Kanya has a visual impairment. She completed primary school but has not been to school since then. Now in her early 30s, she is the main breadwinner for her family. Every morning her parents take her to a train station or bus stop where she begs for money. All the money she collects goes to her family.

Alang, Lao PDR: Alang and his family are Hmong. They live in Vientiane and are very poor. Alang spends his days begging at a tourist site. Tourists feel sorry for him when they see his badly burned hand. His hand didn't always look like this. Alang's parents deliberately burnt it with hot water so that he could earn money begging.

Other types of trafficking

Our research and consultations also identified several other types of trafficking involving persons with disabilities in the region, including forced criminality such as drug trafficking, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU Fishing), online scams or robbery and theft of government disability benefits.

Organ trafficking involving persons with disabilities was mentioned by stakeholders in Cambodia (see also Women Enabled International and Disability Rights International, 2019; European Disability Fund, 2022).

Box 5: There are cases of organ trafficking involving persons with disabilities

Chantevy, Cambodia: Chantevy is deaf and never learned to speak. As a teenager, she was trafficked to Thailand for sexual exploitation. Chantevy's traffickers also removed one of her kidneys. She was eventually rescued, but her rescuers didn't notice that she was missing a kidney, and Chantevy's speech and hearing impairments meant it was difficult for her to tell them what had happened to her.

In other parts of the world, cases of trafficking involving adults and children with disabilities in residential care settings and exploitation of older persons with disabilities have been documented (Mathews et al., 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2018; Milovanovic, 2023; Commission on Human Rights, 2017; Kulachai, 2018; Whangmahaporn, 2019). Our research and consultations did not examine this issue specifically. However, several interviewees and participants in validation workshops did mention issues such as commercial surrogacy, which is illegal in some ASEAN countries but not others, and illegal adoption. Recent research has also drawn attention to orphanage trafficking, which involves 'recruiting' children into orphanages in order to exploit them and/or to make money through donations, child sponsorship, and orphanage tourism and volunteering (Lyneham & Facchini, 2019; Nhep et al., 2024). This likely includes children with disabilities.

Trafficking leading to disabilities

The significant impact of trafficking on physical health of victims in the region is well-documented. Migrants who experience sexual or labour exploitation and identified victims of trafficking often report experiencing physical and sexual violence as well as psychological violence (including insults, threats, intimidation, verbal abuse, imprisonment, withholding of food or other basic necessities, or enforced sleep deprivation). Many are also subject to poor living and working conditions, dangerous work, and inadequate medical care, which can also lead to illness or injuries (Yea, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Lyneham & Larsen, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2014; Pocock et al., 2016; Issara Institute & International Justice Mission, 2017; Surtees, 2017; Mission for Migrant Workers, 2017; Tsai & Dichter, 2019; Asis, 2019; Saptaningrum et al., 2021; Lennox, 2022; Jesperson et al., 2023; Turner & McCarthy-Jones, 2023; Llewellyn, 2023).

In research and consultations across all six countries, stakeholders gave multiple examples of victims of trafficking who acquired disabilities as a result of their trafficking experience. In some cases, stakeholders said that they sometimes found it difficult to determine whether the person had an impairment or condition before trafficking which was exacerbated by their experience. This was particularly the case for cognitive or neurological conditions and mental health conditions.

Box 6: Victim-survivors of forced marriage can experience significant psychological trauma

Sana, Lao PDR: Sana's friends and neighbours often referred to her as 'slow', so she may have had a mild intellectual or learning disability. As a young woman, she was forced into marriage with a Chinese man. This experience had a significant impact on her mental health. When Chinese authorities returned her to Lao PDR, she was severely distressed. The only thing she had with her was a mobile phone. The phone had photos of children on it, which police assumed were her children. Even though Sana was treated at a hospital, her condition did not improve. This meant she was unable to give police any information about what had happened to her.

Linh, Vietnam: Linh spent 16 years in China after she was trafficked into forced prostitution. Each time she tried to escape, her traffickers cut the tendons in her legs, making it difficult for her to walk. She also suffered severe gynecological injuries, leaving her unable to control her bodily functions. Linh was eventually taken in by an international humanitarian organisation in Hanoi. In addition to her physical condition, she was also suffering from severe psychological trauma. She was officially identified as a victim of trafficking, and the organisation provided her with shelter, along with medical treatment, psychological support and legal assistance. Over time, her psychological health improved, but some of her physical injuries could never fully heal. The organisation provided livelihoods support for Linh's mother, who has become her primary carer, enabling her to support herself and her daughter.

Box 7: Men who are trafficked can acquire disabilities due to harsh conditions and poor treatment

Supardi, Indonesia: Supardi wanted to work overseas to help support his young family. A recruiter told Supardi he could get him a job in a factory in South Korea. Supardi travelled to Singapore, but instead of catching a connecting flight to South Korea, he was taken to a fishing boat waiting in the harbour. The foreman took his mobile phone, so he couldn't contact anyone. He and the rest of the crew were only given rice or bread to eat, and they slept in the hold where the fish are kept. When the foreman thought the crew weren't working hard enough, he would beat them. After one particularly severe beating, Supardi lost vision in one eye. He also has trouble concentrating and gets headaches a lot. Supardi was eventually rescued, along with the rest of the crew. He is relieved the nightmare is over, but he has struggled to get his life back together.

Maung, Thailand: At 17, Maung left Myanmar to work on a farm in Thailand. After six months, he fell ill. Maung's employer didn't take him to a hospital or clinic. After his illness, he was very weak and couldn't do as much work as he used to. His

employer punished him by beating him. He tried to run away but his employer found him. After that, he was punished even more harshly. Eventually, he was no longer able to walk. Maung's friends helped him escape and he now lives with them in Thailand. He doesn't want to register himself with the authorities. He is afraid he will be arrested because he came to Thailand as an undocumented worker. But he considers himself lucky. He was given a wheelchair, and he is able to earn some money by interpreting and translating between Burmese (Myanmar) and Thai.

Box 8: Children who work in dangerous environments are at risk of acquiring disabilities

Children who work in dangerous environments are at risk of acquiring disabilities. In Cambodia's brick factories, for example, recent research has found that debt bondage is common and child labour continues to occur, despite efforts by the Government of Cambodia to address this.

Whole families often work to pay off loans from factory owners. Children as young as 9 work alongside their parents, carrying heavy piles of bricks and using dangerous machinery to mould the clay. The dangerous work means that children are at risk of accidents. Often these accidents are caused when children's arms and hands are caught in the machines used to mould the bricks. Sometimes, this requires amputation (Blomberg, 2020; Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), 2016, 2023; Field, 2017; Goldstein, 2023; Robertson, 2018).

Trafficking also has a significant impact on mental health, including depression and thoughts of suicide (Kiss, Pocock, et al., 2015; Kiss, Yun, et al., 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2014). This was raised consistently by stakeholders in all six countries. Because they are still developing physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally, children may be particularly vulnerable to the physical and psychological harms of trafficking, with both short- and long-term impacts on their health and wellbeing (Davis, 2015; Nodzenski et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2023). The mental health impacts of trafficking are likely exacerbated by the limited number of psychologists and psychiatrists as well as barriers to accessing this kind of support, including the stigma associated with psychosocial disabilities in many countries in the region (Rousseau, 2019; UNICEF et al., 2022).

Beyond its impacts on the victim, trafficking also affects the lives of family members, including children, potentially leading to inter-generational trauma and stigmatisation (Goswami et al., 2023; Juabsamai & Taylor, 2018; Marti Castaner et al., 2021).

What are the key drivers of the problem?

Poverty and financial stress

There is a strong link between individual and household poverty and vulnerability to trafficking. Across the region, financial need is one of the primary reasons people choose to migrate for work, either overseas or within their own country. People who are under acute financial stress may be less able to negotiate wages or conditions, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Poverty may also help explain why many people do not report exploitative situations that they, their family members or their children experience, particularly when there are few other choices for earning an income.

Across the region, households in which there is a person with a disability experience higher levels of poverty, including due to additional medical or other costs, such as transportation to clinics or hospitals, carers or assistive devices (Carraro et al., 2022; Hastuti et al., 2020; Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2020; Merttens, 2022; Mitra et al., 2017; Mitra & Yap, 2021; Mont & Cuong, 2011; Palmer & Williams, 2023; Rahayu Kusumastuti et al., 2018). In some cases, a disability may mean that a person is not able to work, or a family member needs to stay home to care for or support them. There is also some evidence that women with disabilities in the region experience higher levels of poverty (Merttens, 2022, pp. 28–29; Mitra & Yap, 2021).

These issues are exacerbated by gaps in social protection for poor households and persons with disabilities. Despite improvements in provision and targeting of social protection schemes in the region, a significant percentage of the poorest households are not covered and the amount provided by the benefit covers only a small proportion of the additional costs (Acosta et al., 2018; Banks et al., 2019; Carraro et al., 2022; Development Pathways, 2022; HelpAge International, 2018; Lao Disabled People's Association, 2022; Merttens, 2022, pp. 71–72; Merttens et al., 2024; Palmer et al., 2016; Rahayu Kusumastuti et al., 2018; Thammasat University & United Nations Children's Fund, 2019; TNP2K, 2023; United Nations Viet Nam, 2022). This means that persons with disabilities often depend on family members to support them financially.

Education and access to information

Education can impact vulnerability to trafficking in several ways. For example, a lack of education can limit employment and livelihood opportunities, pushing people into low-wage work or jobs in the informal sector, where there are fewer protections for workers' rights. It can also mean that people do not develop essential knowledge and life skills, including skills in analysing information critically, managing money, making decisions, managing interpersonal relationships, and staying safe online. These skills can help people make better judgements about situations that are potentially exploitative.

Box 9: Lack of education and information makes persons with disabilities vulnerable

Putri, Indonesia: Putri works for an Indonesian Organisation of Persons with Disabilities. She told the research team that people with disabilities are vulnerable for different reasons, including not being fully aware of their rights or not understanding situations, particularly if they have an intellectual disability.

Dependence on family members makes persons with disabilities vulnerable. They put a lot of trust in their family, and sometimes its misplaced. She told the story of a man with an intellectual disability whose family took his wages. The wages would be deposited in his account, but his brother would take it out. He had given him the PIN number for his ATM card.

Putri also said that sometimes persons with disabilities feel they are a burden to their families. They are afraid that if they say something, they won't be given any food, or they will be beaten, or kicked out of the home.

Persons with disabilities in the region face particular challenges in accessing quality education. These include physical accessibility (distance to a school, lack of transport options, and accessibility of school buildings), the cost of schooling, lack of inclusive teaching practices, and discrimination and bullying from both teachers and children (Afkar et al., 2020; Agbon & Mina, 2017; Bogenschutz et al., 2021; Carraro et al., 2022; Chantou, 2023; Hastuti et al., 2020; Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009; National Human Rights Commission Thailand, 2015; Phanthalangsy, 2023; Thammasat University & United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). The impact of these challenges is reflected in the large numbers of children with disabilities across the region who do not complete basic education (ACDC Vietnam et al., 2019; Hamilton et al., 2018; Hastuti et al., 2020; Merttens, 2022; Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation et al., 2023; National Statistical Office and United Nations Childrens Fund, 2022).

There are also significant gaps in the provision of education and information about sexuality, sexual health, and sexual and reproductive rights among persons with disabilities in the region, particularly women (Carew et al., 2022; European Disability Forum, 2022; Tsuda et al., 2017; Vaughan et al., 2015; Women Enabled International & Disability Rights International, 2019). This lack of information means that persons with disabilities may not recognise unhealthy relationships, false promises, inappropriate sexual contact or exploitative situations. Limited awareness of digital safety among persons with disabilities can also mean they are vulnerable to online exploitation.

Finally, a lack of information about trafficking that is targeted at persons with disabilities and limited information in accessible and understandable formats means that persons with disabilities may not recognise risky or exploitative situations or know where to go for help.

Employment and livelihood opportunities

Lack of employment and livelihood opportunities is a significant driver of trafficking and is linked to both poverty and education. Persons with disabilities face a range of additional challenges in employment. Low levels of education may limit the options available to them. Workplaces may not be physically accessible or there may be limited access to assistive devices which could enable participation in employment (Cameron & Contreras Suarez, 2017; Cheausuwantavee & Keeratiphanthawong, 2021; Gartrell & Hak, 2017; Mina, 2017; Phanthalangsy, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Persons with disabilities also experience significant discrimination in employment, including because of negative perceptions about their capabilities as well as employers' reluctance to accommodate their needs (Artharini, 2017; Bualar, 2014; Cheausuwantavee & Keeratiphanthawong, 2021; Lao Disabled People's Association, 2022; Palmer & Williams, 2023).

Box 10: Persons with disabilities have limited options for decent work

Novi, Indonesia: Novi works for an Indonesian Organisation of Persons with Disabilities. She told the research team that people with disabilities often end up in exploitative work out of necessity because there are so few options for decent work.

She shared the story of a Deaf woman who was a sex worker. The woman felt that her disability meant that this was one of the few kinds of work she could do to earn enough money for her family. The woman's two children were living with her parents in her home village, while she worked in a city. She would go home to see them when she could and bring some money to pay for their food and clothing. Initially, her parents didn't know she was a sex worker, but when they found out, they told her she could keep visiting the children as long as she brought money for the extended family as well.

As a result, persons with disabilities have much lower rates of participation in the workforce (Development Pathways, 2022; General Statistics Office, 2024; Hastuti et al., 2020; Mina, 2013; Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao Statistics Bureau, 2020). They also tend to be concentrated in lower quality or more vulnerable employment (Cameron & Contreras Suarez, 2017; De Luna-Narido & Tacadao, 2016; Gartrell, 2010; Hastuti et al., 2020; National Statistical Office and United Nations Childrens Fund, 2022). There is also some evidence that women with disabilities in the region are more likely to be in vulnerable employment (Bualar, 2014; Mina, 2017; Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao Statistics Bureau, 2020; Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation et al., 2023; World Bank, 2024).

Gender and type of disability

Although people of all genders are vulnerable to trafficking, there are different patterns of trafficking for children and adults with disabilities of different genders. Women with

disabilities across the region face greater vulnerabilities around education and employment than men (General Statistics Office, 2024; Hastuti et al., 2020; Mina, 2017; Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao Statistics Bureau, 2020; Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation et al., 2023). This may increase their risk of trafficking.

Consistent with global evidence (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012; Women Enabled International & Disability Rights International, 2019), our research and consultations found that women and girls with disabilities are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Other research indicates that men are more likely to be trafficked into fishing, manufacturing and forced begging (Pocock et al., 2016). However, there is growing awareness that stereotypes about gender and trafficking make it difficult to fully understand the extent and nature of trafficking experienced by men. For example, research in Cambodia found that ideas about masculinity often mean that not enough attention is paid to men's experiences of trafficking and that this can make it more difficult for male victims to receive support (Eastmond, 2016).

Vulnerability to trafficking may also be influenced by the type of disability or the level of support a person needs. Persons with intellectual, developmental or learning disabilities may be vulnerable to trafficking because they have limited capacity to understand what is happening to them (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012; Reid, 2018). Adults and children with sensory disabilities (people with visual impairments or those who are D/deaf or hard of hearing) and speech or communication impairments may also be specifically targeted by traffickers because they are less likely to be able to communicate what is happening to them to others.

Box 11: Taking advantage of a person's disability satisfies the 'means' element of trafficking because it involves 'abuse of a position of vulnerability'

Having a disability can make a person vulnerable to trafficking. But when traffickers knowingly take advantage of a person's disability to exploit them, it is known as 'abuse of a position of vulnerability'. This is one of the 'means' elements in the definition of trafficking (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013). Abuse of a person's disability could include taking advantage of a person's intellectual disability to mislead them about a job or manipulate them into forced sex work or using a person's inability to communicate (because of a physical disability or Deafness, for example) to give them no choice about being exploited.

Adults – and particularly children – whose disabilities are more visible, including persons with physical disabilities or visual impairments, are vulnerable to forced begging because they are more likely to evoke sympathy from passers-by (European Disability Forum, 2022, p. 5; Groce, Loeb, et al., 2014, pp. 7–8). In some cases, traffickers deliberately inflict injuries on victims in order to create greater sympathy

(Anti-Slavery International, 2014; United Nations Children's Fund South Asia, 2022). Both of these issues emerged in our research and consultations.

Other factors

Several other factors emerged through our research and consultations which contribute to persons with disabilities' vulnerability to trafficking. These include harmful gender and social norms around obligations to family and respect and obedience towards parents and those who are older. These may make persons with disabilities feel obligated to tolerate exploitative practices as part of their contribution to household income, as payment for the 'burden' they place on the family, or to avoid being seen as disobedient or disrespectful. In some countries in the region, there are also social and cultural norms around when it is appropriate for children to start contributing to family income by working within or outside the home and around when people should marry. These norms may mean that children and young people are vulnerable to potentially exploitative work or forced marriage.

The stigma of disability and discrimination towards persons with disabilities, including in education and employment, can result in persons with disabilities being more socially isolated and lead to low self-esteem, which traffickers can use to manipulate people (Women Enabled International & Disability Rights International, 2019). Stigma and shame associated with disability – as well as poverty – can also mean that children or adults with disabilities are abandoned or placed in institutions, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; Gartrell & Hoban, 2013).

Finally, conflict, natural disasters, and climate change and the forced displacement, loss of livelihoods and social and cultural disruption that occurs as a result can increase people's vulnerability to trafficking (Hoogesteyn et al., 2024). Families burdened by financial and environmental challenges may find it challenging to adequately protect or care for family members with disabilities. In regions prone to natural disasters, persons with disabilities may face additional barriers to escaping dangerous situations, further increasing their vulnerability to traffickers who take advantage of such crises.

What legal and policy frameworks exist?

ASEAN Member States have ratified multiple international human rights instruments relevant to trafficking in persons and the rights of persons with disabilities. These include the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (2000); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) and the Migrant Workers Convention (1990). For the most part, these instruments do not explicitly recognise the intersection between disability, trafficking and exploitation. However, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women

and Children does refer to the need to ensure that measures to ensure protection of victims "take into account … the age, gender and *special needs* [emphasis added] of victims of trafficking in persons." The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is more explicit in recognising the vulnerability of persons with disabilities to exploitation. Article 16 commits State Parties to prevent exploitation, violence and abuse against persons with disabilities, protect victims and promote their recovery and rehabilitation and ensure that "instances of exploitation, violence and abuse against persons with disabilities are identified, investigated and, where appropriate, prosecuted."

ASEAN Member States also have made a number of regional agreements in relation to human rights (see Table 1). This includes the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), which is a legally binding instrument. Article 5 of the ACTIP requires Member States to apply higher penalties for cases of trafficking which involve serious injury or death, including suicide, or victims who are particularly vulnerable, 'such as a child or a person who is unable to fully take care of or protect himself or herself because of a physical or mental disability or condition'. Regional-level actions to give effect to the ACTIP are outlined in the ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Work Plan Against Trafficking in Persons 2023–2028 (Bohol Trafficking in Persons Work Plan 2.0). This document references the importance of promoting inclusive and accessible protection, care, and support services for all victims of trafficking, including through developing guidelines and minimum standards for shelter and support services to ensure they are accessible to persons with disabilities. It also specifically mentions the need to collect disaggregated data on disability to measure progress on achieving prevention, protection, law enforcement and regional cooperation outputs.

ASEAN Member States' commitment to disability inclusion is implemented at a regional level through the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Enabling Masterplan recognises that persons with disabilities may be victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking. It highlights the need to protect persons with disabilities "both within and outside the home, from all forms of disability based-discrimination, the deprivation of liberty, exploitation, abuse and violence, including sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence". It also references the need for cooperation between ASEAN sectoral bodies and organisations of persons with disabilities on a range of transnational crimes, including trafficking in persons that involves persons with disabilities.

National disability laws and policies in ASEAN Member States outline the rights and entitlements of persons with disabilities in a range of areas, including education, employment, health care and rehabilitation, political participation and freedom from discrimination. Disability laws in some countries – including Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam – explicitly prohibit abuse and exploitation of persons with disabilities, although none mention trafficking specifically. Indonesia's Law No. 8 of 2016 on Disability outlines specific rights to protection from discrimination, neglect, abuse and exploitation. Vietnam's 2010 Law on Persons with Disabilities prohibits "abuse of

persons with disabilities …for personal profit" and "enticing or forcing persons with disabilities to violate laws or social ethics" and Article 53 of Cambodia's 2009 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities outlines penalties for "acts to intentionally gain benefits by abusing the naivety or vulnerability of persons due to their disabilities, by forcing those persons to commit or not to commit any acts that cause serious damage to them". However, even though national disability laws provide legal protection for persons with disabilities, persistent social stigma towards persons with disabilities, as well as lack of funding and other resources, among other factors, means that progress in fully implementing the provisions outlined in the UNCRPD and national laws is somewhat mixed. This means that persons with disabilities still face a range of barriers to accessing their rights and entitlements, including physical, social, institutional and communication barriers (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, 2018, 2022c, 2022b).

In line with Article 5 of the ACTIP, laws on anti-trafficking in a number of ASEAN countries recognise persons with disabilities as a group that is vulnerable to trafficking, including by imposing harsher penalties for offences involving trafficking of persons with disabilities. Other policies and strategies in some countries also make explicit reference to protection of persons with disabilities and the need for recovery and rehabilitation services for victims of trafficking to be disability inclusive (see Table 1).

Table 1: Anti-trafficking laws, policies and strategies in six ASEAN Member States

Cambodia	Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation (Royal Kram No. NS/RKM/0208/005) (2008) imposes higher penalties for trafficking involving minors and trafficking involving the death of a victim but does not make explicit mention of any other vulnerable groups. Implementing guidelines on victim identification, minimum standards for residential care and minimum standards for victim protection contain some references to specific rights of persons with disabilities (such as the right to a sign language interpreter). The National Strategic Plan on Combating Trafficking in Persons 2024-2028 recognises persons with disabilities as one of the groups that is vulnerable to trafficking and includes strategies to strengthen protection. The Guidebook on Standard Operating Procedures for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation, adopted in 2024 by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, calls for respect, dignity, and special attention to victims with disability in service provision.
Indonesia	Law No. 21/2007 on the Eradication of the Criminal Act of Trafficking in Persons recognises the significant physical, psychological and social harm of trafficking and outlines victims' right to rehabilitation for both physical and psychological conditions. There is no specific mention of persons with disabilities in the Law itself. However, Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Regulation No. 8 2021 on Standard Operating

	Procedures for Integrated Services for Witnesses and/or Victims of Trafficking in Persons notes that services for persons with disabilities must be in line with relevant laws and regulations on the rights of persons with disabilities.
Lao PDR	Law on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (2015) recognises the significant impact of trafficking on physical and mental health, including the potential for trafficking to lead to disabilities and imposes higher penalties for trafficking which results in serious physical injury, and physical or psychosocial (mental health) disability. Penalties are higher still for cases in which the victim acquires a lifetime disability or is infected with HIV/AIDS. The forthcoming revision of the law has included input from representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare on disability inclusion. Implementing guidelines on victim identification, victim protection, assistance, and referral do not refer specifically to disability.
Philippines	Republic Act No. 9208 (Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003) recognises persons with disabilities as being vulnerable. Section 3(b) states that '[c]hild – refers to a person below eighteen (18) years of age or one who is over eighteen (18) but is *unable to fully take care of or protect himself/herself from abuse, neglect, cruelty, exploitation, or discrimination because of a physical or mental disability or condition*' (emphasis added). Republic Act No. 11862 (Expanded Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2022) includes several new elements related to disability. Section 2 states that measures and programs to eliminate trafficking and support trafficked persons should be 'disability inclusive'. Under Section 6(l), trafficking of a person with disabilities is considered 'qualified trafficking' and attracts harsher penalties. Section 16(t) includes the National Council on Disability Affairs as a partner in efforts to address trafficking, stating that it will coordinate with the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT) to develop programs for the prevention of trafficking involving persons with disabilities and provide assistance to persons with disabilities who are trafficked. **[PH: In addition to requiring recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration measures to be disability-inclusive, Section 137 of the 2022 Revised Implementing Rules and Regulations of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2023 provide for the recording of whether an alleged trafficked person has a disability and for the collection and disaggregation of trafficking data according to the type of disability, if any. This information is also to be included in databases maintained and shared among relevant agencies to complement the central database established by IACAT.]**
Thailand	Anti–Trafficking in Persons Act, B.E. 2551 (2008, last amended in 2019) and Human Trafficking Criminal Procedure Act, B.E. 2559 (2016) outline the rights of victims of trafficking to physical and mental recovery and rehabilitation, including expenses associated with this. In 2017, harsher penalties were introduced for perpetrators where the victim is 'a child not over

	fifteen years of age or a person with physical disability or mental infirmity'. Ministry of Social Development and Human Security 5 Year Strategic Plan (2023-2027) refers to 'vulnerable groups' and to the need to "promote integrated prevention and resolution to trafficking in persons, develop mechanisms to systematically protect victims of trafficking and vulnerable groups, as well as develop an integrated and holistic database."
Vietnam	Anti-trafficking law was recently revised to align with international treaties to which Vietnam is a party, with implementing guidelines on victim identification, victim support to be revised accordingly. The revised Law on the Prevention and Combating of Human Trafficking No. 53/2024/QH15(2024) does not specifically mention persons with disabilities. However, persons with disabilities are recognised as a vulnerable group in the Penal Code, with higher penalties for trafficking which results in "mental and behavioural disability", damage to the victim's health, death or suicide or which involves the removal of body parts. Higher penalties are also outlined for cases of forced labour in which the victim has a disability.

In addition to specific laws protecting persons with disabilities, ASEAN Member States have a range of other domestic laws and regulations which provide protection for all persons. This includes labour laws protecting all people from exploitation and unsafe working conditions and providing for recovery, rehabilitation and compensation in the event of accidents, illness or disability, although some groups – such as workers in the informal sector – may not be fully protected (Cabegin, 2022; Domingo & Siripatthanakosol, 2023; Gartrell, 2010; Hamid et al., 2022; Harkins, 2019; World Bank, 2024). Many countries also have laws and regulations protecting women and children from violence, abuse and exploitation although for the most part, these laws do not integrate a disability perspective (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). Despite this, stakeholders in consultation workshops reported that these laws were sometimes used to prosecute cases of trafficking, including those involving victims with disabilities. This approach may be particularly useful given the difficulties of proving the crime of trafficking in persons (David, 2008; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017).

What are the challenges to implementing these policy and legal frameworks?

Identification and reporting

Table 2: Challenges with identification and reporting

▪ Reporting mechanisms (e.g. hotlines) are not fully accessible for people with disabilities	▪ Trafficking of persons with disabilities is less visible because it happens on a smaller	▪ Victims are often reluctant to report their experiences because:

- Staff turn-over in government agencies means people with the right skills move on
- Current screening forms do not include questions about disability such as the Washington Group Questions
- Existing guidelines for screening and identification do not recognise taking advantage of a person's disability to exploit them as 'abuse of a position of vulnerability' (one of the 'means' elements of trafficking).

scale, and is often carried out by family members, which makes it harder for frontline staff to detect

- Frontline staff have limited awareness of disability and find it difficult to recognise non-apparent disabilities or understand what persons with different disabilities need
- Frontline staff do not routinely work with OPDs that understand what accommodations and approaches are needed for persons with disabilities
- Victims' mental state may mean that they need psychological or psychiatric treatment before they are ready to be interviewed.
- Communication difficulties with persons with disabilities (including a lack of trained sign language interpreters or victims' not being familiar with formal sign language) can make it difficult to collect evidence, and therefore difficult to identify the crime

- They feel ashamed about what happened to them or are worried about what other people will think
- They don't want to be seen as a 'victim' or remember painful experiences
- They may may not be able to remember or talk about what happened to them because of the trauma they experienced
- They are afraid of their traffickers or their trafficker is a powerful member of their community
- They don't think that authorities will believe them or help them
- The person who exploited them is a family member or romantic partner
- They don't understand that they are the victim of a crime
- They don't know how to report what has happened to them
- They don't know that they have a disability or are worried that saying they have a disability will mean other people will discriminate against them

Identification of victims of trafficking relies on proactive approaches (such as screening at airports or border crossings, labour and welfare inspections, tracing of financial

transactions, or raids on suspected commercial sex operations) and reactive approaches (reports by victims, their family members or members of the public). However, the nature of trafficking involving persons with disabilities – and challenges with identifying people who acquire impairments as a result of trafficking – means that proactive approaches miss a large number of cases.

There are also significant challenges with underreporting. Underreporting of trafficking and exploitation is a global phenomenon and has been well documented in the ASEAN region (Andrevski et al., 2013; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Kasper & Chiang, 2022; Surtees & Zulbahary, 2018). Research and consultations in all six countries confirmed that underreporting can stem from feelings of shame and embarrassment driven by harmful social and gender norms about trafficking and disability, reluctance to relive painful experiences, as well as fear or mistrust of authorities or a perception that authorities will not help them. Victims may also be afraid of reprisals from traffickers, especially if they are influential people, or being returned to abusive situations or deported or prosecuted for illegal activities they may have been involved in because of their trafficking, including immigration offences. This is particularly the case when either presumed victims or frontline responders are not aware of the non-punishment principle for trafficking victims. In some cases, victims' mental health at the time of rescue and return may mean they do not report their experiences (see Box 12). Poor mental health can also mean that victims cannot be interviewed immediately or cannot provide reliable information. Some mental health conditions – as well as some intellectual, learning and developmental disabilities – can make it difficult for people to recall events or details accurately. This may mean that they cannot provide information about what happened to them or may be seen as 'unreliable'.

Box 12: Trauma can make it very difficult for victims to report their experiences

Agus, Indonesia: Agus works for an Indonesian NGO that helps migrant workers who have experienced exploitation and abuse. He told the research team about the case of a victim of trafficking who experienced physical violence which led to a disability while working as a domestic worker in the Middle East:

'She suffered serious burns on her hands, her face, and part of her chest. When it happened, her employer didn't take her to the hospital, just gave her some ointment. When the case was brought to Indonesia, it was very difficult. We filed complaints several times with the Ministry of Manpower … They kept asking questions in a way that suggested they were blaming the victim. [For example:] 'Why didn't you make a complaint when you were abroad, why only now?' They didn't think about her mental state at the time. She only had the courage to make a complaint [once she returned to Indonesia] because we assisted her. When she was abroad, she was too afraid, and there was no-one to assist her. The government doesn't really understand that, so even though they're a victim, the government doesn't take their side.'

Our research and consultations found that persons with disabilities face additional barriers to reporting. In particular, limited access to education and information – or having an intellectual disability – means that persons with disabilities do not always recognise their experiences as trafficking. People may also be reluctant to report their experience if a family member or romantic partner is involved in their trafficking. This may be because they fear being rejected, depend on the person for support, or because the income from the exploitation may make a significant contribution to the household.

Box 13: Families often depend on the income that victims provide

Chet, Thailand: Chet is in his early 20s and has a visual impairment. He lives in Nonthaburi province in Thailand with his mother, stepfather and grandmother. He is the only child in the family. Neither his mother nor his stepfather has a job. Every day, his mother and stepfather take him to a market near their home where he sings. Sometimes passersby give him money. Chet knows the way that his family treats him is exploitation, but he doesn't think he can do anything about it. Besides, he needs to work to feed his family.

The inaccessibility of reporting mechanisms and communication challenges also make reporting more difficult for persons with disabilities. All six countries have established mechanisms for reporting incidents of trafficking or exploitation, such as hotlines or mobile applications. However, these mechanisms are not fully accessible for persons with disabilities, particularly persons who are Deaf or hard of hearing, or those with speech impairments. And even when they do report, our research and consultations suggested that persons with disabilities are not always taken seriously. Stigma associated with disabilities may also mean that persons with disabilities do not disclose their disability at the time of identification.

Frontline staff involved in screening and identification in all six countries consistently reported that they face challenges in identifying and interviewing persons with disabilities. Staff may not recognise exploitation of persons with disabilities as trafficking since the experiences of persons with disabilities may look different to the 'typical' pattern a person being deceived into exploitative employment or forced to do sex work. Current screening forms do not include questions about disability such as the Washington Group Questions and staff may not have the skills or knowledge to identify persons with disabilities, particularly non-apparent disabilities or those which require a specialist diagnosis. Frontline staff also said that they do not have a good understanding of the different needs of persons with disabilities or how to meet them and do not routinely engage with government disability agencies or OPDs that understand what accommodations and approaches are needed. Existing guidelines for screening and identification also do not recognise taking advantage of a person's disability to exploit them as 'abuse of a position of vulnerability' (one of the 'means' elements of trafficking). Additionally, staff may be unable to conduct interviews if

victims have mental health conditions that require treatment. Frequent staff turnovers within government agencies exacerbate these challenges, with skills and knowledge lost when staff move to new areas. There are also communication challenges, including with persons with intellectual disabilities or those who are Deaf, given that the availability of sign language interpreters is limited in some areas. Communication with Deaf people who don't use formal sign language is a particular challenge.

These challenges mean that NGOs and OPDs across the region can – and in some cases already do – play an important role in bridging gaps in the identification process, with victims' experiences coming to light when they approach these organisations for help or support. However, many persons with disabilities who are victims of trafficking – or those who acquire impairments as a result of trafficking – fall through the cracks. Without formal identification, they may not be eligible for the full range of services available.

Box 14: NGOs play a vital role in providing services to victims of trafficking in persons

NGOs are a critical part of the support system for vulnerable people, including for victims of trafficking. They are often vital in reaching people that government services miss, especially those who have not been formally identified as victims of trafficking.

Some NGOs providing services to identified and presumed victims of trafficking work in collaboration with government and may receive some government funding for the services they provide. Others operate independently. For those who are reluctant to engage with authorities, NGOs offer an alternative source of help and support. NGOs' independence from government may make it easier for them to establish trust with victims. Despite the critical role they play, NGOs often operate with very little funding. This makes it difficult for them to carry out their work effectively and provide long-term support for cases.

Support services

Table 3: Challenges with support services

▪ Shelters are often not designed to be accessible for persons with disabilities ▪ Administrative requirements can make it difficult to access	▪ In some ASEAN countries, NGOs receive limited government funding and resources to provide support victims of trafficking with disabilities. In many	▪ Victims of trafficking with disabilities are often not aware of their rights and the services they can access to support them ▪ Victims of trafficking with disabilities may be

services, for example if victims don't have identity documents ▪ There is not enough funding to provide services to victims over the longer-term, and there are very few services outside of major cities ▪ Social welfare schemes (including for persons with disabilities) don't cover everyone who needs them and only provide a small amount of money. This means people are at risk of being re-trafficked.	countries, there is no budget allocated for this purpose ▪ There are a limited number of social workers for ongoing case management ▪ There are not enough qualified psychologists and psychiatrists, and mental health care services at the local level are limited ▪ Staff in shelters and social workers often don't have experience with persons with disabilities and have limited awareness that the needs of persons with disabilities vary according to age, gender, and type of impairment and level of support needs. This means support for recovery and rehabilitation is often not tailored to meet victims' specific needs ▪ There is limited engagement between service providers and OPDs which could help ensure that victims were referred to appropriate services to support them	reluctant to seek support due to a lack of trust and fear of stigma ▪ Victims of trafficking with disabilities can be judged or excluded by their families or communities, particularly if they are a victim of sex trafficking, have HIV-AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases or have mental health issues ▪ Reintegrating into families and communities is challenging when family members are involved in trafficking ▪

In recognition of their complex needs, government and non-government organisations across the ASEAN region provide a range of services for people who have been identified as victims of trafficking or presumed victims of trafficking. This includes services designed to meet short- and medium-term needs for shelter, medical treatment, psychological support, financial support, legal assistance, and protection as well as longer-term support for economic recovery such as training in vocational or

life skills, or initial funds to start a small enterprise (Rapid Asia, 2022). In general, support services are more readily available for women and children, which means that adult men who experience trafficking can face challenges in accessing support.

At the time of the research, all 10 ASEAN countries have established interagency coordinating bodies and developed plans to prevent and combat trafficking in persons. However, with the exception of the Philippines, in most countries, these bodies don't include representatives from government agencies responsible for disability issues or from civil society organisations, including organisations of persons with disabilities. Services are also available for migrant workers – both documented and undocumented – who are experiencing health, financial or legal challenges or to support them to reintegrate into their communities on their return. Access to these services does not require a person to be identified as a victim of trafficking or presumed victim of trafficking.

Box 15: A coordinated approach helps trafficked victims with disabilities get the services they need

Gabriel, Philippines: Gabriel works for a city government in the Philippines. He told the research team that the city-level interagency council on trafficking in persons helps make service provision more coordinated. The Social Welfare and Development Office coordinates aftercare services, such as shelter, psychosocial support, education, and preparing the victim to testify in court. If there are victims with disabilities, they work with the Persons with Disabilities Affairs Office. Funding is available to support victims of trafficking with specific services, such as a sign language interpreter.

He also explained that the Persons with Disabilities Affairs Office has provided disability awareness training to the police and the police are now partnering with the Social Welfare and Development Office to disseminate information about how people with disabilities can report exploitation.

Gabriel said the biggest challenge they face is staff to provide aftercare services and monitor victims once they have reintegrated. The city needs to double the number of social workers but there is a cap on the budget for personnel.

Hor, Cambodia: Hor works for an anti-trafficking NGO in Cambodia. Recently, the organisation has been working as part of a coalition of anti-trafficking organisations and organisations for persons with disabilities. They have developed a learning and training hub that enables members to share information and learn from each other. Hor explained that this approach has strengthened relationships between these organisations, expanded the services available to victims of trafficking with disabilities and helped make services more accessible and inclusive. Members of the coalition have also begun to work together in advocacy efforts to strengthen anti-trafficking initiatives.

Although recent changes to guidelines for service provision have included greater recognition of the needs and rights of persons with disabilities who are victims of trafficking, challenges remain. In some cases, lack of awareness of the services that are available – as well as administrative requirements – can make it difficult for people to access services. There are also a limited number of social workers available to support victims to access services and provide ongoing case monitoring, particularly at the local level. Accessing specialist care, especially for mental health, is a particular challenge, with lengthy wait times to see psychologists and psychiatrists, particularly outside major cities, and shortages of medication (National Human Rights Commission Thailand, 2015; Rousseau, 2019; United Nations Children's Fund South Asia, 2022).

Box 16: Administrative requirements can make accessing services difficult

Lila, Indonesia: Lila is a victim-survivor of trafficking who volunteers with an Indonesian NGO to support other victims. She told the research team about how difficult it can be to access health care when victims don't have any identification documents.

Lila was assisting a woman who was HIV-positive and needed to be hospitalised but did not have any identity documents with her.

Lila contacted the relevant local government agency. She explained how unwell the woman was and asked for a referral to the regional hospital so the woman could be admitted as a public patient. However, staff at the agency said they could not provide a referral without first taking a detailed history of the case and seeing the woman's identity documents.

Lila then decided to try a private clinic in Jakarta, but they also said they needed the history and all her documents before they would treat her. Eventually, after Lila said her NGO would pay for the woman to be treated as a private patient, the clinic agreed to provide a referral. They sent her to the regional hospital for some tests.

Even though the woman was considered a private patient, there was still a long wait for the tests. Increasingly concerned about the woman's physical health, Lila decided to take her to a public health clinic in Jakarta. Finally, she was able to get the tests and was admitted to the hospital.

Our research and consultations found that shelters are often not designed to be accessible for persons with disabilities. Several countries in the region have increased their efforts to make shelters accessible, including through conducting accessibility audits in collaboration with OPDs and conducting training for staff. However, in general stakeholders in all six countries said that frontline staff involved in providing services

to victims of trafficking often do not have much experience working with persons with disabilities and may not have a good understanding that persons with disabilities are a diverse group, whose needs vary according to age, gender, type of impairment and level of support needs. There is also limited engagement between service providers and OPDs which could help ensure that victims were referred to appropriate services to support them. This means that support for recovery and rehabilitation is often not tailored to meet victims' specific needs.

Trafficked victims with disabilities also face a number of challenges with return and reintegration. Access to services is difficult once people return to their home communities, especially when these are outside of major cities, where services may be limited, or where people are required to travel to district or provincial capitals. As noted previously, limited understanding of the needs of persons with disabilities among frontline staff means that accessibility and reasonable accommodations are not provided. Limited budget for return and reintegration support also makes it difficult to ensure that the specific needs of persons with disabilities are met. Physical and psychological conditions – and a lack of accessible transport options – can also make travel tiring, uncomfortable or stressful, making it particularly difficult for persons with disabilities to access these services. Return and reintegration is very challenging where family members are complicit in the trafficking.

Box 17: Survivor networks provide much-needed support over the longer term

One NGO that provides shelter and other services for victims for trafficking in Vietnam has recognised the importance of support over the longer-term, once people leave the shelter. They have established a self-help network that enables victim-survivors of trafficking to stay connected to each other and provide each other with ongoing support. The network also offers training in soft skills, entrepreneurship, and other topics. It currently has around 150 members and includes victim-survivors of trafficking with disabilities.

Victims of trafficking with disabilities also often face multiple kinds of social stigma. Migrant workers who are victims of trafficking, for example, often feel as though they have 'failed', especially when they do not return with expected savings. People who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation can also face judgement from neighbours and communities or rejection from families. Having a disability can add to this. For example, there is still significant stigma attached to psychosocial disabilities. People living with HIV-AIDS can also face discrimination in their communities as well as in accessing services.

Finally, there are significant risks of being re-trafficked when the underlying drivers of trafficking – including poverty, lack of education, and limited employment and livelihood opportunities – are not addressed, either through provision of livelihood skills

and financial support to establish a small business, or through facilitating access to social protection schemes for persons with disabilities.

Legal assistance and engaging with the justice system

Table 4: Challenges with accessing justice and engaging with the legal system

▪ Legal aid services are limited, especially outside major cities ▪ Non-government legal aid providers get very little government funding ▪ The criminal justice process is often bureaucratic and lengthy, and there are no mechanisms to expedite cases involving vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities ▪ Mechanisms for restitution and/or compensation for disabilities acquired as a result of trafficking are not sufficiently detailed in regulations and there is no clear guidance on calculating damages and losses ▪ There is often limited budget for compensation and/or restitution and even when this awarded by the court, victims often do not receive it ▪ There is limited guidance on reasonable accommodations in legal proceedings and limited funding for this	▪ Justice actors don't have a good understanding about disability, or how to meet the different needs of persons with disabilities ▪ Investigations and court proceedings are not always victim-sensitive in practice ▪ There are challenges in communicating with persons with some types of disabilities. This can make it difficult to obtain information to proceed with investigation and prosecution ▪ Justice actors don't always understand that taking advantage of a person's disability to exploit them satisfies the 'means' element of trafficking because it involves 'abuse of a position of vulnerability'. ▪ Justice actors sometimes do not see persons with disabilities as credible witnesses or as able to participate in the justice process. ▪ There is limited engagement between justice actors and OPDs	▪ Victims are often reluctant to talk to legal aid providers, particularly if they are government organisations. ▪ Many victims don't want to participate in legal proceedings, because they are afraid of their traffickers, don't trust the legal system. ▪ Victims may not want to be involved in legal action if a family member was involved in their trafficking ▪ Taking legal action often involves costs for victims, including costs associated with filing a case or transportation costs to attend court hearings, and funds are not always available fund to cover these costs ▪ Legal proceedings are emotionally draining and lengthy and often don't result in any restitution and/or compensation

▪ There are very few trained and experienced sign-language interpreters who can work in legal settings	to support presumed victims with disabilities during the investigation, prosecution and adjudication process	

Trafficked victims with disabilities have a range of legal needs. This can include needs relating to visas and immigration, family law issues such as divorce, custody of children, guardianship or adoption, assistance with recovering unpaid wages, and assistance with criminal charges or a criminal record for crimes committed while the person was trafficked (Office for Victims of Crime and Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2015; Sumner, 2023). Laws on anti-trafficking outline the rights of victims to legal assistance (see Rapid Asia, 2022). Many countries also have laws designed to provide access to free legal services for vulnerable groups. Legal assistance for victims of trafficking is normally provided by government agencies. However, NGOs, legal aid organisations and law faculties in some universities also deliver legal assistance, often providing a vital service especially when presumed victims of trafficking are reluctant to use government services.

Despite this, victims of trafficking face challenges in accessing legal assistance. Legal aid providers have limited capacity to provide legal assistance. This is exacerbated by the fact that non-government legal aid providers receive very little government funding for their work and often rely on volunteers. Victims can also be reluctant to engage with legal service providers, particularly when this involves engaging with a government agency (Domingo & Siripatthanakosol, 2023; Human Rights Development Foundation, 2023).

National laws guarantee the rights of persons with disabilities to justice and to reasonable accommodations in the justice process. In practice, however, many trafficked victims with disabilities – and persons with disabilities who engage with the justice system more broadly – still face a range of challenges (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2022c; Himpunan Wanita Disabilitas Indonesia, 2019, 2022; Indonesia Coalition of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities for the CRPD Committee's LOI Response, 2022). Stakeholders in all six countries reported that justice actors often do not have a strong knowledge of different disabilities and the needs of persons with disabilities, although in some countries police, court personnel and judges have received some disability awareness training. Court proceedings are not always victim-sensitive in practice, including for child victims, and justice actors sometimes see victims as partially responsible for what had happened to them. However, in some countries victim-centred and trauma-informed approaches have been introduced, including provisions such as closed hearings and video testimony, and providing victims with support and enough time to ensure they were ready to testify (see also Rapid Asia, 2022). Limited understanding of the intersection between disability and trafficking also means that justice actors do not always understand that

taking advantage of a person's disability to exploit them satisfies the 'means' element of trafficking because it involves 'abuse of a position of vulnerability'.

Furthermore, across ASEAN states there is generally little guidance from government or policy makers on how to accommodate persons with disabilities in legal proceedings (UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2023). Stakeholders in some countries also said that law enforcement and justice actors often held stereotypes about persons with disabilities, particularly those with psychosocial (mental health) disabilities and that persons with disabilities, including those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, speech impairments, or sensory disabilities were often not seen as credible witnesses. Although the UNCRPD clearly outlines persons with disabilities' rights to justice, OPDs and other stakeholders have raised concerns about processes and practices for determining the legal capacity of persons with disabilities and practices around substituted decision-making, particularly for persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, 2018, 2022a; Disabilities Thailand, 2016; Disability Convention Team, 2017; Mulai & Hidayat, 2023).

Our research and consultations also indicated that a significant obstacle to victims of trafficking accessing justice is their reluctance to participate in legal proceedings. This can be for a range of reasons, including trauma, fear of reprisals from traffickers, or lack of trust in the criminal justice system (Andrevski et al., 2013; Domingo & Siripatthanakosol, 2023). Many countries have laws which provide protection for witnesses involved in criminal proceedings. However, victims of trafficking are often reluctant to pursue legal action when a family member was involved in their exploitation, particularly if the family member was a caregiver or the primary income earner. Victims of trafficking can also be dissuaded by the fact that legal proceedings are lengthy and emotionally draining with no way to expedite cases involving vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities. Legal proceedings also often do not have satisfactory outcomes, including in the form of restitution or compensation, despite laws in many countries that include provision for restitution or compensation for victims of trafficking (see also Rapid Asia, 2022). In practice, there is often limited budget for compensation or restitution and mechanisms for awarding it for victims who acquire disabilities as a result of trafficking are not sufficiently detailed. The cost of legal action – including costs associated with filing a case or transportation costs to attend court hearings – can also be a barrier.

Across the region, stakeholders raised concerns around communication challenges in investigations and legal proceedings, including with children and adults with intellectual, developmental or psychosocial disabilities, speech impairments and those who are Deaf or hard of hearing and those who did not use formal sign language. This can make it difficult to obtain information to proceed with investigation and prosecution. These challenges persist despite efforts in many countries to improve access to sign language interpreters. The main challenges mentioned were limited availability of professional sign language interpreters (including those who have been registered,

certified or authorised to provide services during court proceedings), particularly outside major cities, and interpreters not having adequate skills and knowledge in interpreting in court proceedings, particularly for cases of trafficking in persons (see also Disabilities Thailand, 2016; Disability Convention Team, 2017; Himpunan Wanita Disabilitas Indonesia, 2019; Lao Disabled People's Association, 2022; National Human Rights Commission Thailand, 2015; OHANA, 2020). More broadly, there is limited engagement between justice actors and OPDs which could support presumed victims with disabilities during the investigation, prosecution and adjudication process.

Box 18: Deaf relay interpreters help overcome communication challenges

Julio, Philippines: Julio works as a Deaf relay interpreter. He helps other Deaf people to file cases and works with hearing interpreters during police interviews or interviews with barangay (local government) officials. Not everyone knows Filipino Sign Language. Some people use non-standard signs or gestures, especially if they haven't been to school. They need someone who can understand them and translate their message into standard sign language.

Julio told the research team that a few years ago, he worked with a Deaf boy with multiple disabilities who had been groomed online and sexually exploited. The police had a sign language interpreter, but the interpreter and the child couldn't understand each other. So, Julio was brought in to help.

The shortage of interpreters is a still a challenge, especially outside major cities. Interpreting in court is also specialised work. Court interpreters have to be certified and appointed by the Supreme Court. But court officials don't always know where to find professional sign language interpreters and budget isn't always available. Sometimes judges have to pay the interpreters out of their own pockets.

Recommendations

Persons with disabilities experience many of the same conditions that make other groups vulnerable to trafficking, including poverty, limited access to quality education, decent employment, social protection, and social exclusion. These risks are often compounded by intersecting factors such as gender, age, migration status, statelessness, indigenous identity, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity, conflict, climate change, disasters, displacement, and unsafe online environments. Trafficking itself may also result in disability, creating additional protection, recovery, and justice needs for survivors who acquire disabilities as a consequence of exploitation.

Persons with disabilities continue to face significant barriers to being identified as victims of trafficking, accessing protection and support services, participating in justice processes, and achieving long-term recovery and reintegration. These barriers include inaccessible information and services, limited disability-inclusive capacity among

frontline responders, inadequate reasonable and procedural accommodations, fragmented referral mechanisms, and persistent stigma and discrimination.

Government and non-government actors involved in preventing and responding to trafficking in persons have taken important steps to strengthen disability-inclusive responses. However, participants at **the Regional Validation Workshop on the Zero Draft ASEAN Policy Brief on Disability and Trafficking in Persons, held in Laguna, Philippines, on 7–8 May 2026**, identified the need for greater policy coherence, stronger cross-sectoral coordination, more effective disability-inclusive implementation, enhanced data collection and evidence generation, and more systematic collaboration between anti-trafficking and disability stakeholders at both the regional and national levels.

A core recommendation of this Briefing Paper is that persons with disabilities, including survivors of trafficking with disabilities, and organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) are meaningfully engaged in both regional and national efforts to prevent trafficking in persons, protect and support victims, promote recovery and reintegration, and strengthen access to justice. Meaningful engagement means actively involving persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, in the planning, development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programmes, ensuring that their perspectives, expertise, and lived experiences inform decision-making in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Recognising that the implementation of these recommendations requires coordinated action across multiple stakeholders, the recommendations identify the ASEAN sectoral bodies, ASEAN Member States, and other relevant actors best placed to support their implementation.

The following recommendations were developed through research and further refined through consultations with ASEAN Member States, ASEAN sectoral bodies, organisations of persons with disabilities, civil society organisations, survivor representatives, technical experts, and development partners during the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna. They respond to the key findings and recommendations identified throughout this Briefing Paper and are intended to strengthen disability-inclusive responses to trafficking in persons across ASEAN.

Regional-level recommendations

Prevention of trafficking in persons

Research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna found that awareness of the intersection between disability and trafficking in persons remains limited among regional policymakers and practitioners. Participants during the Laguna workshop further highlighted the need to strengthen understanding of the intersecting factors that compound trafficking risks for persons with disabilities,

including poverty, limited access to education and livelihoods, migration, conflict, disasters, climate change, and unsafe online environments. They also emphasised the importance of ensuring that persons with disabilities have access to accessible information on trafficking risks, rights, and available support services. To strengthen disability-inclusive prevention across ASEAN, AICHR, ACWC, ACMW, SOMTC, ACW, SOMSWD, ASEAN Member States, and relevant stakeholders—including organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), civil society organisations (CSOs), academia, and development partners—could work together to:

- promoting a shared understanding of the intersection between disability and trafficking in persons, including the application of an intersectionality lens, through joint capacity-building and knowledge-sharing among ASEAN policymakers, practitioners, and relevant stakeholders;
- developing regional guidance on disability-inclusive prevention of trafficking in persons, aligned with relevant ASEAN frameworks, including ACTIP, the ASEAN Multisectoral Work Plan Against Trafficking in Persons (Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0), the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan on Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD);
- developing accessible, disability-inclusive information, education, and awareness materials on trafficking in persons in multiple accessible formats that ASEAN Member States can adapt for national and local awareness campaigns;
- promoting closer coordination between local disability mechanisms and relevant local authorities and service providers, including local anti-trafficking mechanisms and social welfare offices, to facilitate disability-sensitive identification and referral, accessible information dissemination, and the provision of reasonable accommodation and appropriate support at the community level;
- facilitating the exchange of promising practices, peer learning, and knowledge-sharing among ASEAN Member States, OPDs, CSOs, and other relevant stakeholders on disability-inclusive prevention initiatives;
- promoting the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities, including organisations of persons with disabilities and survivors with disabilities, in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of regional prevention initiatives.

Identification

Research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna highlighted continuing challenges in identifying victims of trafficking with disabilities, particularly persons with psychosocial, intellectual, developmental, communication, and other non-visible disabilities. Participants during the Laguna workshop emphasised the need to strengthen disability-inclusive identification processes, improve the capacity of frontline responders, ensure timely referral to appropriate support services, and promote multidisciplinary and cross-border cooperation. To strengthen disability-inclusive victim identification across ASEAN, SOMTC, with

support from AICHR and in collaboration with ASEAN Member States, OPDs, CSOs, and relevant technical partners, could work together to:

- promoting human rights-based, disability-inclusive, trauma-informed, and survivor-centred approaches to victim identification that recognise and address the barriers preventing the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities throughout identification and referral processes;
- encouraging ASEAN Member States to develop or strengthen disability-inclusive victim identification guidelines and procedures. This could include incorporating the Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Functioning – Enhanced or the Washington Group/UNICEF Child Functioning Module into identification processes to assist frontline responders in identifying support needs, facilitating timely referrals, and providing appropriate reasonable accommodations;
- through the Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC) and other relevant ASEAN mechanisms, supporting ASEAN Member States to strengthen disability-inclusive cross-border identification, referral, and protection of victims of trafficking in accordance with Article 14 of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP);
- supporting ASEAN Member States to establish or strengthen multidisciplinary victim identification and referral mechanisms involving law enforcement, social welfare authorities, health professionals, labour and migration authorities, OPDs, CSOs, with particular attention to identifying and responding to the needs of persons with psychosocial, intellectual, developmental, communication, and other non-visible disabilities.

Support services and recovery

Research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna identified emerging good practices across ASEAN in delivering more inclusive and accessible services for victims of trafficking with disabilities. At the same time, participants at the Laguna workshop highlighted persistent challenges relating to inaccessible services and infrastructure, limited disability-inclusive capacity among frontline responders, weak referral mechanisms, insufficient long-term psychosocial and reintegration support, and inadequate coordination between government agencies, OPDs, CSOs. To strengthen regional cooperation in these areas, AICHR, ACWC, SOMSWD, ACMW, ACW, SOMTC, ASEAN Member States, and relevant stakeholders—including OPDs, civil society organisations, and development partners—could work together to:

- developing regional good practice guidance on disability-inclusive shelter, referral, protection, recovery, return, and reintegration services that promote a human rights-based, trauma-informed, survivor-centred, and disability-inclusive approach, while recognising the barriers that hinder the full and effective participation of victims of trafficking with disabilities throughout all stages of support and recovery;

- facilitating regional exchange of knowledge, promising practices, and practical tools on disability-inclusive service delivery, including approaches to supporting persons with psychosocial, intellectual, developmental, communication, and other non-visible disabilities, as well as persons who acquire disabilities as a consequence of trafficking;
- promoting stronger multidisciplinary referral and coordination mechanisms among social welfare, health, justice, labour, migration, and protection authorities, together with OPDs, CSOs, community-based organisations, and other relevant service providers;
- promoting the application of "Do No Harm" principles and survivor-centred approaches throughout victim protection, recovery, and reintegration, including through the implementation of relevant ASEAN guidance and standards;
- supporting regional capacity-building for frontline responders and service providers on disability inclusion, accessibility, reasonable accommodation, trauma-informed care, and effective communication with persons with different types of disabilities.

Access to justice

Justice sector actors, as well as participants at the Laguna Regional Validation Workshop, identified the need for clearer regional guidance on responding to cases of trafficking involving persons with disabilities and ensuring that victims can participate fully, safely, and effectively throughout justice processes. Participants of the Lagunaw workshop highlighted barriers relating to inaccessible reporting mechanisms, limited disability awareness among justice actors, insufficient reasonable and procedural accommodations, communication barriers, repeated interviewing and re-traumatisation, and the continued reliance on victim testimony in trafficking cases. To strengthen disability-inclusive access to justice across ASEAN, SOMTC, AICHR, ASEAN Member States, judicial and prosecutorial training institutions, legal aid providers, and relevant OPDs, CSOs could work together to:

- facilitate regional exchange of knowledge, peer learning, and promising practices to strengthen disability-inclusive access to justice for victims of trafficking;
- support regional capacity-building and networking among investigators, prosecutors, judges, legal aid providers, and other justice sector practitioners to strengthen disability-inclusive, trauma-informed, and survivor-centred approaches throughout criminal justice processes;
- develop practical regional guidance on investigating, prosecuting, adjudicating, and providing remedies in trafficking cases involving persons with disabilities. Such guidance should address accessibility, reasonable and procedural accommodations, effective communication, the use of interpreters and other support persons, individualised assessments of support needs, and measures to minimise re-traumatisation while ensuring that persons with disabilities—including those with intellectual, developmental, learning, psychosocial, and communication

disabilities—can effectively participate in justice processes and are recognised as credible witnesses;
- promote the exchange of good practices on disability-inclusive victim compensation and restitution, including approaches that recognise both material and non-material harm, including disabilities acquired as a consequence of trafficking;
- strengthen regional understanding and implementation of the Non-Punishment Principle for victims of trafficking with disabilities who are compelled to commit unlawful acts as a direct consequence of their trafficking experience.

Regional strategy, policy and legislative framework

ASEAN has taken important steps to integrate disability inclusion and trafficking in persons into regional strategies, policies, and cooperation mechanisms. However, participants at the Laguna Regional Validation Workshop emphasised the importance of strengthening policy coherence across ASEAN sectoral bodies, ensuring alignment with existing ASEAN and international commitments, and promoting a more coordinated and intersectional approach to disability-inclusive responses to trafficking in persons. To strengthen the regional strategy, policy, and legislative framework, AICHR, SOMTC, ACWC, SOMSWD, the ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN Member States, OPDs, CSOs, and other relevant stakeholders could work together to:

- explicitly recognise the intersection between disability and trafficking in persons, including the application of an intersectionality lens, across relevant ASEAN strategies, policies, action plans, and monitoring frameworks, including the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP), the ASEAN Multisectoral Work Plan Against Trafficking in Persons 2023–2028 (Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0), the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan on Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and other relevant ASEAN instruments;
- strengthen policy coherence and coordination across relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies, including AICHR, SOMTC, ACWC, ACW, ACMW and SOMSWD, to promote complementary and mutually reinforcing approaches to disability inclusion, human rights, victim protection, and criminal justice responses to trafficking in persons;
- support and encourage ASEAN Member States to align national laws, policies, and action plans on trafficking in persons and disability inclusion with ACTIP, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and other relevant regional and international commitments;
- promote the meaningful participation of OPDs, survivors of trafficking with disabilities, and CSOs in the development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of regional policies, guidance, and initiatives relating to trafficking in persons and disability inclusion;

- through AICHR and SOMTC, and in consultation with other relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies, explore the development of regional guidance on victim compensation and restitution that recognises both material and non-material harm, including disabilities acquired as a consequence of trafficking.

Disability-disaggregated data and reporting

Research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna highlighted that effective disability-inclusive responses to trafficking in persons depend on the availability of reliable, comparable, and disability-disaggregated data. Participants of the Laguna workshop noted persistent gaps in the collection, analysis, and reporting of disability-related trafficking data, limited interoperability between existing information systems, and the need to strengthen evidence generation while ensuring confidentiality and the protection of victims' personal information. To strengthen disability-disaggregated data and evidence across ASEAN, ASEAN Member States, national statistical agencies, with the support from OPDs and CSOs, research institutions, and relevant development partners, could work together to:

- encourage ASEAN Member States to systematically collect, analyse, and report trafficking data disaggregated by disability, sex, age, and other relevant indicators, including through existing regional reporting mechanisms under the Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC);
- develop regional guidance and promote common approaches for disability-inclusive data collection, management, analysis, and reporting, including appropriate safeguards for confidentiality, privacy, and the protection of victims' personal information;
- strengthen collaboration between national anti-trafficking agencies, national statistical offices, OPDs, research institutions, and other relevant stakeholders to improve the quality, comparability, and use of disability-disaggregated data to inform policy development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation;
- facilitate regional exchange of good practices and technical expertise on disability-inclusive information management systems and data governance, including approaches to improving interoperability and information-sharing while respecting national legal frameworks and data protection standards.

National-level recommendations

Prevention of trafficking in persons

Research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna found that, across ASEAN Member States, there remains limited collaboration between stakeholders working on trafficking in persons and disability inclusion. Participants also highlighted the need to address the structural and intersecting factors that increase vulnerability to trafficking, including poverty, social exclusion, barriers to

inclusive education, limited livelihood opportunities, migration, conflict, disasters, climate change, and unsafe online environments. Participants of the Laguna workshop further emphasised the importance of ensuring that persons with disabilities have access to accessible information on trafficking risks, rights, and available support services. National governments, in collaboration with organisations of persons with ~~OPDs~~ **disabilities [PH]**, CSOs, communities, and other relevant stakeholders, could therefore focus on:

- strengthening collaboration and coordination between agencies responsible for counter-trafficking, disability inclusion, education, labour, migration, social protection, and other relevant sectors to address the intersecting factors that increase vulnerability to trafficking;
- engaging OPDs, survivors of trafficking with disabilities, and CSOs in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of prevention policies, programmes, and awareness initiatives, including efforts to address stigma, discrimination, and harmful gender and social norms;
- developing accessible, culturally appropriate, and disability-inclusive information, education, and awareness materials on trafficking in persons, exploitation, rights, and available support services, using multiple accessible formats;
- strengthening policies and programmes that promote inclusive and quality education for persons with disabilities and remove barriers to access throughout the education system;
- promoting decent work, sustainable livelihood opportunities, and equitable access to social protection for persons with disabilities to reduce their vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation;
- strengthening community-based prevention initiatives, including partnerships with local governments, community organisations, faith-based organisations, and OPDs, to improve outreach, early identification of risks, and awareness among persons with disabilities and their families.

Identification

Research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna highlighted continuing challenges in identifying victims of trafficking with disabilities, particularly persons with psychosocial, intellectual, developmental, communication, and other non-visible disabilities. Participants of the Laguna workshop also emphasised the need to strengthen the capacity of frontline responders, improve multidisciplinary identification and referral processes, ensure timely access to appropriate support services, and provide reasonable accommodations throughout the identification process. National governments and relevant authorities responsible for victim identification, in collaboration with OPDs, CSOs, ~~civil society organisations~~ **[PH]**, health professionals, and other relevant stakeholders, could therefore focus on:

- developing, reviewing, and regularly updating disability-inclusive victim identification guidelines and procedures. This could include integrating the Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Functioning – Enhanced, or the Washington Group/UNICEF Child Functioning Module into identification processes to assist frontline responders in identifying support needs, facilitating timely referrals, and providing appropriate reasonable accommodations;
- allocating sufficient financial, human, and technical resources to ensure accessibility and the provision of reasonable accommodations throughout the victim identification process, including access to sign language interpreters, alternative and augmentative communication, assistive technologies, and other forms of support appropriate to the individual's needs;
- establishing or strengthening multidisciplinary victim identification and referral mechanisms involving law enforcement, social welfare, health, labour, migration authorities, OPDs, CSOs, with particular attention to identifying and responding to persons with psychosocial, intellectual, developmental, communication, and other non-visible disabilities;
- strengthening the capacity of frontline responders through regular training on disability inclusion, trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches, effective communication, and identification of the diverse support needs of persons with different types of disabilities;
- ensuring that victims of trafficking with disabilities are informed, in accessible formats and through appropriate communication methods, of their rights and the protection, recovery, rehabilitation, and legal services available to them, and are supported to access those services through effective referral mechanisms.

Support services and recovery

Research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna identified significant knowledge, capacity, and resource gaps among frontline personnel responsible for providing protection, support, recovery, and reintegration services to victims of trafficking with disabilities. Participants of the Laguna workshop further highlighted the need to strengthen accessibility throughout referral and recovery pathways, improve coordination among service providers, expand long-term psychosocial support, and ensure that services respond to the diverse needs of persons with different types of disabilities, including those who acquire disabilities as a consequence of trafficking. National governments, especially social affairs and women's affairs, in collaboration with OPDs, CSOs, service providers, and other relevant stakeholders, could therefore focus on:

- developing, reviewing, and updating policies, guidelines, standard operating procedures, and service delivery standards to ensure that protection, referral, shelter, recovery, return, and reintegration services are disability-inclusive, accessible, trauma-informed, survivor-centred, and provide appropriate reasonable accommodations;

- incorporating the Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Functioning – Enhanced or the Washington Group/UNICEF Child Functioning Module, where appropriate, to inform individualised assessments of support needs and the planning of protection, recovery, and reintegration services;
- developing practical tools and assessment procedures to identify accessibility requirements, reasonable accommodations, and other individual support needs at the earliest possible stage of service delivery;
- strengthening the capacity of frontline personnel responsible for victim protection, shelter, health care, psychosocial support, return, and reintegration through regular training on disability inclusion, trauma-informed care, effective communication, and responding to the needs of persons with different types of disabilities, including psychosocial, intellectual, developmental, communication, and other non-visible disabilities;
- ensuring that reporting mechanisms, hotlines, referral pathways, shelters, health services, psychosocial support, and other victim support services are accessible to persons with different types of disabilities and available in multiple accessible formats;
- strengthening multidisciplinary coordination and referral mechanisms among government agencies, health and social service providers, OPDs, CSOs, community-based organisations, and other relevant stakeholders to ensure timely, coordinated, and continuous support throughout recovery and reintegration;
- strengthening long-term recovery and reintegration support, including access to psychosocial services, social protection, education, livelihood opportunities, and community-based support, recognising that recovery needs may continue well beyond the immediate post-trafficking period.

Access to justice

Research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna highlighted that victims of trafficking with disabilities continue to face significant barriers in accessing justice. Participants of the Laguna workshop identified inaccessible reporting and complaint mechanisms, limited disability awareness among justice sector actors, communication barriers, inadequate reasonable and procedural accommodations, and insufficient guidance on responding to trafficking cases involving persons with disabilities. They also emphasised the importance of ensuring that persons with disabilities can participate effectively throughout criminal justice processes and access appropriate remedies. National governments, especially justice sector institutions, in collaboration with legal aid providers, OPDs, CSOs, and other relevant stakeholders, could therefore focus on:

- strengthening the capacity of police, investigators, prosecutors, judges, legal aid providers, and other justice sector personnel through regular training on disability inclusion, trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches, effective

communication, and responding to the needs of persons with different types of disabilities;

- ensuring that reporting mechanisms, police stations, prosecution services, courts, legal aid services, and other justice sector facilities are accessible to persons with disabilities and provide appropriate reasonable and procedural accommodations throughout investigations, prosecutions, and judicial proceedings;
- developing practical guidance and standard operating procedures for investigators, prosecutors, judges, and other criminal justice personnel on disability-inclusive access to justice, including accessibility, reasonable and procedural accommodations, effective communication, individualised assessments of support needs, and measures to minimise re-traumatisation while ensuring that persons with disabilities can effectively participate in justice processes and are recognised as credible witnesses;
- strengthening access to legal aid and ensuring that victims of trafficking with disabilities receive accessible information about their rights, available legal remedies, and justice processes in formats appropriate to their individual communication needs;
- developing or strengthening mechanisms for restitution and compensation for victims of trafficking, including guidance on the assessment of both material and non-material harm, recognising disabilities that may arise as a consequence of trafficking and ensuring that victims can effectively access these remedies;
- allocating sufficient financial and technical resources to provide accessibility measures, reasonable and procedural accommodations, interpretation, assistive technologies, and other forms of support necessary to enable victims with disabilities to participate effectively throughout justice processes;
- strengthening the implementation of legal safeguards, including the Non-Punishment Principle where applicable, to reduce the risk of victims with disabilities being criminalised for unlawful acts committed as a direct consequence of their trafficking experience.

National strategy, policy and legislative framework

ASEAN Member States have made important international and regional commitments to protecting persons with disabilities from violence, abuse, exploitation, and trafficking in persons. However, research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop in Laguna highlighted that these commitments are not always consistently reflected or implemented across national anti-trafficking and disability policies, strategies, and legal frameworks. Participants also emphasised the importance of strengthening policy coherence, applying an intersectionality lens, and ensuring that disability-inclusive approaches are integrated across relevant sectors. National governments, in consultation with OPDs, CSOs, survivor leaders, and other relevant stakeholders, could therefore focus on:

- reviewing and, where appropriate, strengthening national trafficking in persons legislation, policies, and strategies to explicitly recognise the heightened and intersecting vulnerabilities of persons with disabilities to trafficking, ensure accessibility, reasonable and procedural accommodations, and provide appropriate protection, support, and access to justice for victims with disabilities;
- explicitly integrating the intersection between disability and trafficking in persons into relevant national anti-trafficking legislation, policies, action plans, disability inclusion strategies, and implementation frameworks, ensuring alignment with the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and other relevant regional and international commitments;
- strengthening coordination and policy coherence among agencies responsible for counter-trafficking, disability inclusion, justice, social welfare, labour, migration, education, health, and other relevant sectors to support a whole-of-government response to disability-inclusive counter-trafficking efforts;
- promoting the meaningful participation of OPDs, survivors of trafficking with disabilities, and CSOs in the development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of laws, policies, strategies, and programmes relating to trafficking in persons and disability inclusion;
- strengthening monitoring, evaluation, and accountability mechanisms to assess the implementation and impact of disability-inclusive trafficking policies and strategies, including through the collection and use of evidence to inform continuous policy improvement.

Disability-disaggregated data and reporting

Research, national consultations, and the Regional Validation Workshop highlighted that effective disability-inclusive responses to trafficking in persons require reliable, disability-disaggregated data and stronger evidence to inform policy and practice. Participants noted persistent gaps in data collection, analysis, reporting, and information-sharing, as well as the need to strengthen coordination across relevant agencies while ensuring confidentiality and the protection of victims' personal information. National governments, in collaboration with national statistical offices, OPDs, CSOs, research institutions, and other relevant stakeholders, could therefore focus on:

- strengthening existing national trafficking data systems, or where appropriate establishing integrated information management systems, to collect, analyse, and report data disaggregated by disability, sex, age, and other relevant characteristics. Data collection should, where appropriate, identify support needs and include information on persons who acquire disabilities as a consequence of trafficking, while ensuring strict safeguards for confidentiality, privacy, and data protection in accordance with national laws;
- strengthening collaboration between national anti-trafficking authorities, national statistical offices, OPDs, research institutions, and CSOs to improve the quality,

consistency, comparability, and use of disability-disaggregated data for policy development, programme design, monitoring, and evaluation;

- developing or strengthening national guidance, indicators, and data collection methodologies to support the consistent collection and reporting of disability-disaggregated trafficking data, including through meaningful consultation with OPDs, survivor leaders, and technical experts;
- encouraging relevant government agencies to incorporate disability-disaggregated data and analysis into periodic reporting on the implementation of national counter-trafficking policies, strategies, and action plans, in order to strengthen evidence-based decision-making and accountability.

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