

Triangular Synergy Model to Enhance the Indonesian National Police's (*POLRI*) Strategy in Handling Human Trafficking of Cyber-based Slavery

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Abstract

Human trafficking has evolved beyond traditional forms of exploitation to encompass cyber-based slavery, a disturbing and increasingly prevalent method of trafficking facilitated through the internet. In this form, victims are coerced into working as online scammers and/or facilitate the online gambling. This issue is especially pervasive in Southeast Asia, with Cambodia, the Philippines, and Myanmar serving as major hotspots for cyber-based trafficking. Perpetrators exploit the internet to recruit, deceive, and control individuals for forced labor in online scam operations. Many Indonesian citizens have fallen victim to this form of slavery. However, efforts by the Indonesian National Police (*POLRI*) to combat cyber slavery are often hindered by lack of coordination between directorates under *BARESKRIM*, limited number of regional police offices that have dedicated directorate for Human Trafficking Crimes, inadequate police to police bilateral cooperation and lack of inter-ministerial and nation-wide agency coordination. This paper explores the role of *POLRI* in addressing the rise of cyber-based slavery, focusing on a case study of *POLRI's* involvement in assisting the repatriation of victims from the Philippines. The analysis reveals significant opportunities for improvement at both national and regional levels in *POLRI's* response to this issue. The paper argues that to address the growing threat of cyber-based slavery effectively, *POLRI* must adopt a triangular synergy to enhance the capacity of the National Criminal Investigation Unit (*BARESKRIM*) including through coordination and collaboration between the newly established Directorate for Crimes Against Women, Children, and Human Trafficking (*Direktorat Tindak Pidana Perempuan dan Anak serta Pidana Perdagangan Orang - DIRTIPID PPA-PPO*) and the Directorate of Cybercrime (*Direktorat Tindak Pidana Siber*) under *BARESKRIM* and the establishment of regional Directorates for Crimes Against Women, Children, and Human Trafficking (*DIRTIPID PPA PPO*) in areas with high vulnerability to cyber trafficking; fostering bilateral police-to-police cooperation, ASEAN regional cooperation and deploying police attachés to Southeast Asian countries affected by cyber-based slavery; and strengthening inter-ministerial and nationwide agency cooperation.

Keywords: Human trafficking, cyber-based slavery, online scams, Indonesian National Police, *POLRI*, *BARESKRIM*, triangular synergy, regional coordination

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking remains one of the most severe human rights violations, affecting millions of individuals worldwide who are trafficked for labor, sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2020). While traditional forms of trafficking persist, a newer and more complex issue has emerged: cyber-based slavery. Facilitated by the internet, this form of trafficking involves traffickers using online platforms to recruit their victims, often forcing them into roles such as online scammers or facilitators of online gambling in certain countries across Southeast Asia. The digital nature of this exploitation makes it more difficult to detect and combat complicating efforts to address the growing problem.

Cyber-based slavery has become particularly rampant in Southeast Asia, with countries like Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines emerging as major hubs for online trafficking activities (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2021). Traffickers often use social media, job platforms, and fake online advertisements to lure individuals with promises of lucrative job opportunities or romantic relationships, only to trap them in exploitative situations. Indonesia, with its strategic geographic location, socio-economic challenges, and high internet penetration, is especially vulnerable to this form of trafficking (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2023). The rise of internet connectivity, while offering greater job opportunities, has also inadvertently created an avenue for exploitation, as individuals seeking employment can easily be recruited into forced labor within online scams or gambling operations, often for unfair compensation.

According to the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*KEMLU*), between 2020 and February 2025, around 6,800 Indonesian citizens have fallen victim to cyber-based slavery, primarily through online scams (Antaraneews, 2025). The victims are spread across ten countries, with the majority located in Cambodia, the Philippines, and Myanmar. These alarming statistics highlight the urgent need for effective intervention.

The Indonesian National Police (*POLRI*) plays a crucial role in combating cyber-based slavery, as part of its broader mandate to uphold national law and ensure security. This paper examines *POLRI*'s involvement in addressing the rise of cyber-based slavery, focusing on a case study of its assistance in the deportation of victims from the Philippines.

Through this qualitative analysis of study case method, the paper identifies significant opportunities for improvement in *POLRI*'s approach to combating cyber-based slavery, both at the national and regional levels. The paper emphasizes the need for triangular synergy to combat cyber-based slavery which include enhancing the capacity of *BARESKIM* including strengthening coordination between *POLRI*'s Directorate of Cybercrime and the newly established Directorate for Crimes Against Women, Children, and Human Trafficking (*BARESKRIM POLRI*) and the creation of such directorate under regional police offices. Additionally, it recommends fostering bilateral police-to-police cooperation, deploying police attachés to Southeast Asian countries affected by cyber-based slavery, and strengthening inter-ministerial and national agency cooperation. These measures could significantly bolster Indonesia's efforts to address this growing threat and protect its citizens from cyber-based slavery.

Understanding Cyber-based Slavery: A New Threat in Human Trafficking

Cyber-based slavery is a new term to define the practice of human trafficking carried out through digital platforms and technologies but the traffickers use the physical engagement to transport the victims to the forced labor destination countries. It has similarity but in a way also different with the cyber-slavery term. In the cyber-slavery context, traffickers use the internet to exploit victims for forced labor, sexual exploitation, or engagement in illegal activities such as online fraud (Cheng, 2020). Unlike traditional trafficking, the cyber-slavery which involves physical transportation and confinement, cyber slavery operates in a virtual space, where victims can be coerced and controlled from afar, often without ever leaving their homes (Nguyen, 2021). The ease and anonymity of the internet make it an ideal environment for traffickers to manipulate, deceive, and control vulnerable individuals.

Common methods used by traffickers include grooming victims through online relationships or promises of romantic connections, only to later extort or trap them into exploitative situations (Darmadi, 2021). Victims may be forced to engage in online fraud, cybersex, or other forms of digital exploitation under duress. The coercive control exercised by traffickers can be both psychological and financial, where victims are threatened with harm to themselves or their families, or where traffickers withhold payment or threaten exposure of explicit content (Robinson & Singh, 2023).

Online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and even dating apps are increasingly used by traffickers to recruit victims. These platforms allow traffickers to easily reach a large pool of potential victims, especially those who are looking for employment or social connection (Haque & Susanto, 2022). Once contact is made, traffickers often build rapport by providing promises of support,

financial gain, or even romance. These deceptive interactions ultimately lead to situations where the victim is coerced into performing forced labor, sex work, or participating in cybercrimes (Lee, 2023).

In a similar yet different approach on controlling the victims, cyber-based slavery is the practice of human trafficking in which victims are recruited online through websites or social media platforms and forced to work in destination countries that facilitate online scamming and/or online gambling activities. Victims are hired online to facilitate internet scamming and/or gambling activities physically outside their homeland.

Traffickers involved in cyber-based slavery often use highly sophisticated strategies to target their victims. One of the most common methods involves luring individuals through fake job advertisements or deceptive promises of lucrative employment opportunities abroad (Prasetyo & Lestari, 2022). These ads, often posted on social media platforms, online job boards, or even dating websites, appear legitimate and offer an escape from economic hardship or personal circumstances. Once the victim responds to the offer, traffickers initiate communication, creating a sense of trust before coercing the individual into exploitative situations.

The digital nature of these crimes also complicates detection, as traffickers often operate under multiple aliases or utilize encrypted communications to evade law enforcement (McKenzie, 2020). As a result, victims may not immediately realize they are being trafficked, and law enforcement agencies may struggle to trace the perpetrators who operate across borders and digital platforms.

Indonesia has seen numerous cases of its citizens falling victim to cyber slavery. For instance, there have been reports of Indonesian nationals being trafficked to the Philippines, Cambodia or Myanmar under the pretense of high-paying jobs in the hospitality or entertainment industries. Once they arrive, these individuals have been tricked into participating in online scams and fraud, where they are forced to defraud others on behalf of their traffickers, under threat of harm or blackmail (Mulyono & Lestari, 2023).

In October 2024, *POLRI* successfully repatriated 35 Indonesian citizens (*WNI*) who were victims of human trafficking for forced labor purposes from the Philippines. These individuals had been trafficked under the guise of job opportunities but were instead subjected to exploitation, including working in online scams and fraud schemes. *POLRI's* efforts are part of their ongoing commitment to combat human trafficking, particularly cyber slavery, which has been rising due to the increasing use of the internet for illegal activities. This repatriation highlights the importance of international cooperation in addressing transnational crime like human trafficking. (Antaranews.com, 2024).

METHOD

In this paper, we focus on a case study which has recently been decided by the District Court of Cikarang related to human trafficking in a cyber-based slavery modus operandi. There are three defendants in this case: Aris Wahyudi alias Romeo, Royen Simanjuntak and Nopelia Simanjuntak. With a case number 231/Pid.Sus 2024 Ckr on Aris Wahyudi and case number 227/Pid.Sus/2024 Ckr on Nopelia Simanjuntak and Royen Simanjuntak, each of the defendants only got 1 year 8 months, 1 year 2 months and 1 year the crime of human trafficking that they did (Koranmediasi.com, 2024). They were punished by Law No. 21 Year 2007 on Human Trafficking. However, the state prosecutor's office has submitted an appeal to the decision of the District Court due to its light punishment. (*Ibid.*)

The case started in early October 2023, where six Indonesian citizens (*WNI*) were recruited by Aris Wahyudi, also known as Romeo, to work as online gambling operators in Cambodia, with promises of a fixed salary and a USD 500 bonus. On October 10, 2023, they traveled to Jakarta, where they were picked up by Royen Simanjuntak and accommodated at Nopelia Simanjuntak's residence in Bekasi. Between October 11 and 13, 2023, their passports were processed with Nopelia's assistance. After receiving their passports, they booked tickets to Cambodia with costs covered by the recruiting company. However, on October 15, 2023, as they were preparing to depart from Soekarno-Hatta Airport, Indonesian immigration officials intercepted them upon discovering strong indications of illegal employment abroad. The victims were subsequently transferred to the National Criminal Investigation Agency (*BARESKRIM*) for further investigation. (*POLRI's* process files, 2024).

The 43-year-old Aris Wahyudi alias 'Romeo', was arrested by members of the Fugitive Search unit of the Philippines Bureau of Immigration (*BI*) in Makati City on 20 February 2024. The Philippines immigration issued a mission order for Wahyudi's arrest after receiving information from the Indonesian government which sought his deportation so he could stand trial for crimes he allegedly committed in Indonesia. It was learned that Wahyudi is subject of an arrest warrant issued by the Indonesian national police on 18 January 2024 for allegedly committing the crime of trafficking in persons. Wahyudi was allegedly arrested as an operator for human trafficking syndicate that illegally recruited and financed Indonesian nationals who were trafficked to work in Cambodia without the proper work permits. Wahyudi was deported to Indonesia soon after he got arrested (Philippines Bureau of Immigration, 2024).

Through this case study, we learnt that police-to-police cooperation plays an important role in arresting human trafficking criminals. Human trafficking in nature is a cross-border crime in nature, hence it needs strong cooperation of the POLRI with foreign police in major hotspots of human trafficking country, especially with the cyber-based slavery modus operandi. As a best practice for collaboration between *POLRI* and the Philippines National Police, we also could learn the importance of deploying a police attaché to strengthen cooperation as well as intelligent sharing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Indonesian National Police (*POLRI*) is tasked with upholding public order and enforcing laws in Indonesia. *POLRI* operates through several units, with *BARESKRIM* (the Criminal Investigation Unit) being responsible for investigating serious crimes, including human trafficking. However, *POLRI* faces significant challenges in effectively combating cyber slavery (Jakarta Post, 2021). One of the key challenges is the relatively limited resources allocated to cybercrime investigations, particularly in terms of digital forensics and specialized technology (Suryadi, 2020).

POLRI has recognized the increasing threat of cyber-based slavery and has attempted to address the issue through various initiatives. These efforts include forming task forces to address human trafficking, providing victim assistance, and cooperating with international organizations like INTERPOL and the UNODC (Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). However, the focus has traditionally been on physical trafficking, with less attention given to cyber-related trafficking forms, such as digital manipulation or online fraud (Sari & Hadi, 2022).

In 2024, *POLRI* established a new directorate under the National Criminal Investigation Agency (*BARESKRIM*) to strengthen the handling of human trafficking and women and children's crimes. The directorate is named *Direktorat Tindak Pidana Perempuan dan Anak dan Pidana Perdagangan Orang (Dirtipid PPA PPO)*. The establishment of *Dirtipid PPA PPO* Directorate is part of the implementation of Presidential Regulation No. 20 of 2024 concerning the Third Amendment to Presidential Regulation No. 52 of 2010 concerning the Organizational Structure and Work Procedures of the Indonesian National Police, as well as a form of implementing Gender Mainstreaming (*PUG*) in the Indonesian National Police (*Polri*) as regulated in National Police Chief Regulation Number 1 of 2022 (Komnas Perempuan, 2024). *POLRI* also stated that from 2020 to 2024, *POLRI* had handled 105,475 *PPA* criminal cases and 1,625 *PPO* crimes. With this data, it means that every day there are at least 59 cases handled by the police (*Ibid.*)

The establishment of *Dirtipid PPA PPO* is also *POLRI's* commitment to support the realization of Asta Cita's President Prabowo Subianto vision. The Indonesian Chief of Police, General Listyo Sigit Prabowo said in a statement that the establishment of the new directorates emphasized the *POLRI's* commitment to supporting President Prabowo Subianto's Asta Cita. This support is realized in the form of strengthening the structure by establishing the Directorate for Crimes for the Protection of Women and Children (*PPA*) and Crimes for Trafficking in Persons (*PPO*) as well as the Corruption Crime Eradication Corps (*Kortas Tipikor*) (Detik.com, 2024).

Challenges in Combating Cyber-based Slavery

Along with the *POLRI's* efforts in combating cyber-based slavery, there are still challenges that hinder *POLRI's* action to eradicate the cyber-based slavery. The challenges are:

a) **An Outdated Legal Frameworks and Technology Limitation**

One of the major hurdles in combating cyber-based slavery is an outdated legal framework. The current Law No. 21 Year 2007 alone is not sufficient to recognize the new modus of human trafficking, the cyber-based slavery. The law should be updated to include the current mode of human trafficking trends. In addition, there should also be a synergy and harmonization between Law No. 21 Year 2007 on Human Trafficking and the new Law of Information and Electronic Transaction No. 1 Year 2024.

While Indonesia has made some progress in addressing cybercrime through the establishment of a National Cybersecurity Agency (*BSSN*) and an Anti-Cybercrime Unit (*Kominfo*), there is still a significant gap in the training of police officers on how to investigate digital trafficking networks (Rahman & Fitriani, 2021). This gap is exacerbated by inadequate legal frameworks that fail to specifically address cyber-based slavery and its nuances, such as online fraud, trafficking via social media, and digital coercion (Indonesia Law Review, 2022).

Furthermore, *POLRI*'s capacity to deal with cybercrime remains limited due to outdated technology and a lack of expertise in digital investigation (National Cyber and Encryption Agency, 2023). While *BARESKRIM* has made some strides in addressing digital crimes, its efforts in combating cyber slavery remain nascent. This lack of specialization in cybercrime has hindered *POLRI*'s ability to address the growing threat of online exploitation (Buchori, 2021). Hence, there is a need to foster collaboration between *Dirtipid PPA PPO* with the Cybercrime directorate in combating cyber-based slavery.

b) **Challenges in Police to Police and Regional Coordination**

Indonesia's efforts to combat cyber-based slavery are further hindered by limited cooperation with neighboring countries. ASEAN cooperation on transnational crime, including human trafficking, has been uneven, with differing legal systems, enforcement capacities, and political interests complicating joint operations (ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights [AICHR], 2021). Regional law enforcement agencies often struggle to share intelligence effectively, and cross-border operations are rare due to these disparities (Purnama & Yuwono, 2023). As cyber slavery often spans multiple jurisdictions, the lack of regional coordination significantly undermines *POLRI*'s ability to tackle the issue effectively. Moreover, regional cooperation with neighboring ASEAN countries remains inconsistent, with differing national priorities and resources limiting joint operations and intelligence sharing (ASEAN, 2022).

Currently, *POLRI* only deployed 11 police attaché overseas. The number is not significant enough to encounter the raising of human trafficking in cyber-based slavery mode. In ASEAN countries, *POLRI* has deployed its attaché to Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. While the major hotspots of human trafficking in cyber-based slavery mode are in Myanmar and Cambodia, this paper would like to recommend that *POLRI* also deployed its attaché to both countries to enhance the handling of human trafficking.

c) **Lack of Inter-Agency Cooperation**

Indonesia's efforts to combat cyber-based slavery are further hindered by limited inter-agency and regional cooperation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Immigration and Coercion, the Ministry of Migrant Worker Protection and the Ministry of Social Affairs play key roles in addressing the human trafficking of cyber-based slavery mode. These key agencies involved in addressing trafficking, often operate in silos and lack coordination with *POLRI* (Sutrisno, 2020).

Although at the national level, there is a Central Task Force for the Prevention and Handling of Human Trafficking Crimes (*Gugus Tugas Pusat Pencegahan Tindak Pidana Perdagangan Orang*), the nomenclature change in the recent administration could also be a challenge for combating the human trafficking. The Presidential Decree Number 49 Year 2023 decided the change of the structure of the leadership of this taskforce, with the Coordination Ministry of Politics, Law and Security (*Kemenko Polhukam*), but now as the Ministry is abolished, there need a stronger and wider inter-agency cooperation to further enhance the prevention and handling of human trafficking crimes.

The Need for Triangular Synergy

To address the complexities of cyber slavery, *POLRI* must adopt a model of “triangular synergy” that involves three core elements: 1) enhancing *BARESKRIM*'s capacity through the synergy of *Dirtipid PPA PPO* and the Cybercrime Directorate under *BARESKRIM*, establishing Directorates for Crimes Against Women, Children, and Human Trafficking in the regional police offices which areas are vulnerability to cyber trafficking; 2) enhancing ASEAN cooperation and deploying police attachés to Southeast Asian countries affected by cyber slavery, and 3) strengthening inter-ministerial and nationwide agency cooperation.

a. Strengthening *POLRI*'s National Criminal Investigation Agency (*BARESKRIM*)

BARESKRIM must modernize its digital forensics capabilities, enabling officers to track online trafficking networks and identify perpetrators more efficiently (Lestari & Azmi, 2023). Additionally, specialized training on cyber slavery investigation techniques should be implemented across *BARESKRIM*'s personnel (Tjandra & Wahyuni, 2020). *BARESKRIM* should also prioritize training in emerging cybercrime trends, such as online fraud, digital extortion, and the use of cryptocurrency in trafficking (Tan, 2021). This will ensure that officers are equipped with the necessary skills to address the evolving landscape of cyber slavery.

In this regard, strengthening the cooperation between the newly established *Dirtipid PPA PPO* and the Cybercrime Directorate is essential. In addition, the creation of Directorates for Crimes Against Women, Children, and Human Trafficking in the regional police offices which areas are vulnerable to cyber trafficking is also important to prevent the cyber-based slavery.

b. Enhancing ASEAN Cooperation in Tackling Cyber-based Slavery and Deploying Police Attaché

ASEAN has the potential to play a pivotal role in regional efforts to combat cyber-based slavery. By enhancing joint operations, facilitating intelligence sharing, and harmonizing legal frameworks, ASEAN countries can create a more cohesive and coordinated response to cyber trafficking (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). As cyber slavery is a transnational issue, regional cooperation is essential. Bilateral agreements between law enforcement agencies can foster the sharing of intelligence, allow for joint operations, and help standardize investigative practices across borders. Additionally, Indonesia should advocate for greater support and collaboration within the ASEAN framework to create a more cohesive regional response to cyber slavery. Regional law enforcement bodies could establish a common platform for intelligence sharing that includes both law enforcement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This collaborative approach would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of trafficking patterns and help to disrupt the operations of traffickers more effectively.

In addition, strengthening bilateral police to police cooperation of *POLRI* with neighboring countries is also important to combat cyber-based slavery. *POLRI* should deploy an attaché to Myanmar and Cambodia to prevent and handle cyber-based slavery as well as enhancing the intelligent sharing and cooperation with the countries of major hotspots in cyber-based slavery.

c. Advancing Inter-Ministerial and Agency Collaboration

A whole-of-government approach is essential to addressing cyber slavery. *POLRI* must collaborate more closely with other ministries and agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Migrant Protection, Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Communication, through the Task Force for the Prevention and Handling of Human Trafficking Crimes, to ensure that victims are protected and traffickers are prosecuted. Also, the new government should adjust the Presidential Decree of the Central Task Force to accommodate the structural nomenclature change.

CONCLUSION

Cyber-based slavery represents a significant and evolving challenge to law enforcement, requiring a multifaceted and coordinated response. This article concludes by highlighting the urgency of strengthening Indonesia's National Police efforts to combat the growing threat of cyber-based slavery. While significant progress has been made in addressing traditional forms of trafficking, the rise of cyber-based slavery requires a fresh approach that includes legislative reforms, strengthening

BARESKRIM's capacity and stronger regional cooperation. Indonesia can play a crucial role in addressing this issue, but it must enhance its law enforcement capabilities and collaborate more effectively with neighboring countries. By investing in digital tools, expanding international partnerships, and raising public awareness, Indonesia can significantly reduce the incidence of cyber-based slavery in the region and beyond.

By implementing the triangular synergy model—enhancing *BARESKRIM*'s capacity, fostering ASEAN cooperation and deploying police attaché, and improving inter-agency coordination—*POLRI* can strengthen its efforts to combat this form of human trafficking.

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