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Human trafficking activities and the confrontation of humanitarian values in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

In general, this research aims to examine structural vulnerabilities, recruitment practices, documented cases, and gaps in victim protection through a qualitative review of legislation, official statistics, institutional reports, and international evidence. More specifically, the research focuses on the prevalence of human trafficking cases that disregard fundamental human values. The data sources for this study consist of primary data—obtained directly from the field through in-depth interviews—and secondary data, sourced from institutions relevant to the primary focus of the research. The study period spans from April to June 2026. The data analysis techniques employed in this research include data reduction, data presentation, and the drawing of conclusions and verification. Human trafficking undermines fundamental human values by reducing people to economic instruments, normalizing coercion, and weakening social responsibility. The results of this study indicate an increase in human trafficking activities in NTT that disregard human values. Consequently, the researcher recommends a framework for collaborative action, community risk mapping, education on safe migration, easily accessible referral mechanisms, survivor-centered recovery, and periodic evaluation. It is concluded that coordinated, rights-based interventions—spanning from the village to the provincial level—represent a concrete measure to break the chain of human trafficking in East Nusa Tenggara and can help reduce the occurrence of similar cases in the province.

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Introduction

Human trafficking referred to in Indonesian law as the criminal offense of trafficking in persons (TPPO) is a social, legal, economic, and ethical issue that exposes the fragility of protections for human dignity and sidelines humanitarian values. Yet, these humanitarian values constitute the moral and ethical principles as well as the universal attributes that underpin how human beings conduct themselves, treat one another, and uphold the worth and dignity of the human person. This crime is not confined to situations in which a person is moved across national borders; it can also arise when recruitment, harbouring, transportation, transfer, or receipt of persons is undertaken for the purpose of exploitation. Law No. 21 of 2007 recognises trafficking in persons as a violation of human rights and dignity and underscores the need for prevention, law enforcement, recovery, and inter-agency cooperation (Republik Indonesia, 2007). The issue must therefore be understood beyond crime

statistics: it concerns the ability of the state and society to treat each individual as a rights-bearing person rather than merely as labour to be traded.

East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) has a long-standing historical and social connection to labor mobility, both within Indonesia and abroad. While migration can create opportunities to improve family well-being, factors such as unequal access to employment, household economic pressure, limited access to information, and the involvement of informal intermediaries can transform the aspiration for decent work into a vulnerability to fraud and exploitation. In March 2025, the provincial statistics agency recorded a poverty rate of 18.60% in NTT, which subsequently decreased to 17.50% in September 2025 (Statistics Indonesia of East Nusa Tenggara Province, 2025, 2026). These figures illustrate a context of structural vulnerability; however, this does not imply that those living in poverty will inevitably become victims of human trafficking. Empirical evidence from the last five years beginning with a poverty rate of 19.02% in March 2024 shows a decline to 18.60% in March 2025, followed by a further drop to 17.50% in September 2025 (representing approximately 1.03 million people living in poverty). By March 2026, the poverty rate was recorded at 17.52% (approximately 1.04 million people), reflecting a slight increase of 0.02% compared to the previous semester. This indicates a link to and a vulnerability toward human trafficking and exploitative recruitment practices.

Preliminary research findings indicate an ongoing risk. The National Criminal Information Center (Pusiknas) of the Indonesian National Police (Polri) recorded three cases of human trafficking handled by the East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Regional Police between January 1 and February 24, 2025. Separately, the NTT Regional Police reported that, from late 2024 to mid-2025, they handled six cases involving human trafficking and two cases involving migrant smuggling two legally distinct offenses that should not be conflated into a single category (Pusiknas Bareskrim Polri, 2025; East Nusa Tenggara Regional Police, 2025). Differences in reporting periods, definitions, and units of measurement make it impossible to directly compare these datasets to determine prevalence trends. To strengthen the data on human trafficking cases for this study, the researchers present several instances that occurred in NTT, including: 1. Alarming Data on Victims and Coffins: Data compiled by the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) indicates that between 2017 and mid-2026, 1,114 Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) from NTT returned home deceased. Most were victims of human trafficking syndicates, having endured extreme exploitation and violence abroad. NTT consistently remains the primary region of origin for human trafficking victims repatriated to Indonesia, with over 85% of victims from this area having been trafficked within the ASEAN region (predominantly Malaysia). A more recent example is the 2026 case of child exploitation in Maumere, where a network was uncovered that held over a dozen young girls captive in a nightclub (pub) in Sikka, forcing them to work under duress.

During a government coordination meeting in August 2024, officials reported that the remains of 68 migrant workers from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) had been repatriated as of August 5, 2024; 67 of these individuals were classified as having "non-procedural" (irregular) migration status (East Nusa Tenggara Provincial Government, 2024). This information highlights urgent concerns regarding the protection of migrant workers. However, neither a non-procedural status nor the death of a worker, in and of itself, constitutes proof that human trafficking has occurred. This distinction is crucial to ensure that protective measures do not criminalize migrant workers, while maintaining vigilance for any signs of coercion, deception, or exploitation. These figures suggest that such circumstances are among the factors contributing to the deaths of workers abroad. Furthermore, they indicate that humanitarian values are not being upheld as a foundation within the world of work.

Global evidence underscores the urgency of this issue. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that the number of detected human trafficking victims in 2022 increased by 25% compared to 2019, with children accounting for 38% of the total (UNODC, 2024). While these global figures cannot be applied directly to the context of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), they indicate that human trafficking is a cross-regional threat characterized by evolving patterns, including labor exploitation, sexual exploitation, and coercion into criminal activity. Meanwhile, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated in 2022 that 27.6 million people worldwide were victims of forced labor (ILO, 2022). It should be noted that the number of people subjected to forced labor is not identical to the number of human trafficking victims. Specifically in NTT, data on human trafficking cases is on the rise, with criminal syndicates employing various tactics such as the "promise of paradise" (luring victims with offers of high wages), the provision of forged documents, and the manipulation of religious sentiments (framing recruitment as a form of divine blessing).

Based on the background of this research, three questions arise: How do structural vulnerabilities and recruitment practices shape the risk of human trafficking in NTT? Why can these practices be understood as a crisis of human values? What forms of collaborative action should be prioritized to strengthen prevention efforts and recovery for survivors? The objective is to present a careful synthesis of secondary evidence and to formulate a framework for action to be further tested at the village, regency/city, and provincial levels aimed at breaking the chain of illegal human trafficking, a crime that fundamentally disregards human values.

Method

This article adopts a qualitative approach based on a descriptive and interpretive literature review and documentary analysis. Its principal sources include Law No. 21 of 2007 and Law No. 18 of 2017; statistical releases from Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur; official publications of the Indonesian National Police, the Pemerintah Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, and the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers/BP3MI; and summaries of UNODC and ILO reports. Documents were purposively selected for their direct relevance to trafficking definitions, economic vulnerability, migrant-worker protection, case handling, and preventive action. Contextual evidence focuses on 2024–2026, while earlier legal and normative sources are retained because they remain relevant.

This analysis is conducted in four stages: (1) identifying claims and figures that can be traced back to their source documents; (2) organizing the information into themes—specifically vulnerabilities, exploitation methods, victims' rights, and governance; (3) interpreting the findings based on the principle of human dignity and applicable legal provisions; and (4) formulating proposed actions along with their corresponding monitoring indicators. Each source is interpreted according to its specific context: poverty data serves as a proxy for the number of human trafficking victims; law enforcement data acts as a factor for estimating prevalence; and reports concerning non-procedural migration are treated as evidence of human trafficking. Additionally, interviews, surveys, or field observations are incorporated as empirical reports on action-research interventions.

Results and Discussions

Conceptual boundaries: Trafficking in persons, non-procedural migration, and migrant smuggling

Conceptually, identifying the crime of human trafficking requires an assessment of the acts, the means employed, and the purpose—namely, exploitation—as stipulated in Law Number 21 of 2007. The acts may include recruiting, transporting, harboring, sending, transferring, or receiving a person. The means employed may encompass deception, threats, the use of force, the abuse of a position of vulnerability, or other forms of coercion. The objective is exploitation, which includes forced labor or services, sexual exploitation, or practices akin to slavery (Republic of Indonesia, 2007). In specific cases, these elements must be evaluated within the applicable legal framework, including provisions for the special protection of children. Regarding human trafficking cases in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) in 2023: data from the NTT Provincial Government recorded 185 official victims, while a network of activists successfully rescued 173 victims from various syndicates. 2024–2025: The NTT Regional Police and subordinate district-level police units intercepted dozens of attempts to transport migrant workers through irregular channels; this included a raid on a syndicate in Langke Rembong in early 2025, which resulted in the rescue of 11 victims.

Distinguishing these categories is critically important. Workers who migrate outside formal placement procedures may lose access to protection, but not every instance of non-procedural migration constitutes trafficking. Conversely, apparently legitimate documentation or recruitment channels do not guarantee freedom from exploitation. Migrant smuggling concerns the facilitation of unlawful entry into another country for material benefit, whereas trafficking focuses on exploitation. Although the two crimes may overlap, their legal elements remain distinct. This framework encourages law-enforcement officials and service providers to screen cases on the basis of facts rather than stigma associated with migration status.

Structural vulnerability and unequal bargaining power

The decision to migrate is generally driven by a reasonable expectation of higher earnings, skill development, and a better standard of living. However, individuals are not on equal footing when recruiters hold complete control over information regarding placement fees, contracts, permits, employer addresses, and grievance mechanisms. Under economic pressure, job offers promising high wages with seemingly simple terms often leave no room for verification. The risks are further compounded when prospective workers must borrow funds from intermediaries and rely entirely on a single party to manage their entire migration process. This demonstrates that the allure or promise of high wages is fueling a rapid increase in cases of human trafficking in East Nusa Tenggara.

BPS data show that economic vulnerability is not evenly distributed across NTT. The provincial poverty rate in March 2025 was 18.60%; some districts recorded higher rates, while others were relatively less affected (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2025). Accordingly, prevention cannot rely on a single generic message for all localities. Interventions must consider the characteristics of migrants' villages of origin, transport access, family needs, local employment opportunities, and public-service capacity. Poverty interacts with informational and institutional inequalities; it is neither the sole cause of trafficking nor an automatic marker of individual vulnerability.

A 2023 Pemerintah Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur report linked non-procedural migration to limited formal employment opportunities, educational constraints, and the need for inter-agency oversight (Pemerintah Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2023). This perspective highlights the need to move beyond simply restricting departures towards creating safer livelihood options. Skills education, access to verified job vacancies, contract literacy, administrative services, and social protection are components of primary prevention because they strengthen prospective workers' capacity to make free and informed decisions.

Recruitment practices, exploitation, and changing methods

Risks can emerge as early as the job offer stage. Warning signs to watch out for include promises of wages without a written contract, non-transparent travel funding, recruiters whose identities cannot be easily verified, unilateral changes to the job destination or description, restrictions on communication with family members, and the withholding of identity documents. In a case handled by the East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Regional Police in early 2025, authorities reported rescuing a woman who had been working without pay and subjected to abusive treatment in another part of Indonesia (Pusiknas Bareskrim Polri, 2025). This case demonstrates that exploitation does not always involve crossing national borders. Specifically regarding recruitment in NTT throughout 2025, the NTT Regional Police received 16 police reports concerning human trafficking, with 6 cases reaching the stage of being declared complete for prosecution (P21), involving a total of 94 victims. Subsequently, between January and June 2026, an additional 13 police reports were filed (7 under preliminary investigation, 3 under formal investigation, and 3 declared complete for prosecution), involving 48 victims (including adult women, children, and adult men).

In August 2025, the Coordinating Ministry for Law, Human Rights, Immigration, and Corrections emphasised that trafficking concerns extend beyond recruitment into conventional migrant-worker jobs. The methods drawing attention from government agencies included exploitation in particular labour sectors, misuse of digital technologies, and emerging forms of exploitation (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Hukum, Hak Asasi Manusia, Imigrasi, dan Pemasyarakatan, 2025). Official concern about these methods should not be taken as proof that each has occurred at a particular scale in NTT. The challenge is to develop adaptive monitoring without generating panic or generalisations about specific communities.

Chains of exploitation often rely on trusted social relationships: relatives, neighbours, friends, or people regarded as knowledgeable about job opportunities. Social trust is a valuable community asset, but it is vulnerable to abuse when recruitment lacks transparency. Prevention efforts should therefore scrutinise practices and systems rather than stigmatise migrant families or communities of origin.

A crisis of human values: Dignity, freedom, solidarity, and justice

In this review, the term 'crisis of human values' refers to the erosion of four moral orientations. First, human dignity is compromised when an individual's body, time, and capabilities are treated as commodities controlled for profit. Second, substantive freedom is undermined when employment choices are shaped by deception, coercion, debt dependency, or restricted mobility. Third, social solidarity is weakened when the suffering of victims is normalized as a personal risk resulting from their decision to migrate. Fourth, justice is obstructed when access to police reporting, legal aid, healthcare, and recovery services becomes increasingly difficult for individuals with limited resources. To strengthen the scholarly argument regarding the dimension of human values, this analysis draws upon ethical and human rights frameworks. A human rights-based analysis focuses on the protection of human dignity, as guaranteed by international law and declarations. This encompasses civil and political rights—such as freedom of expression, the right to due process, freedom from discrimination or torture, and the right to privacy—as well as economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to decent work, education, healthcare, and an adequate standard of living.

This crisis must not be reduced to an alleged moral failing on the part of victims. Survivors often act under pressures beyond their control. Ethical responsibility lies with those who perpetrate exploitation and with systems that fail to prevent foreseeable harm. The Indonesian principle of a just and civilised humanity requires recognition that safety, freedom from violence, and opportunities for a decent life belong to everyone, including migrants with non-procedural status. Law No. 18 of 2017 provides for the protection of Indonesian migrant workers before, during, and after employment (Republik Indonesia, 2017).

From the victim's perspective, the consequences of trafficking can be multilayered: lost income, physical injury, psychological distress, disrupted social relationships, family debt, and uncertainty regarding employment and legal status. Success in addressing trafficking cannot, therefore, be measured solely by arrests. Recovery must take account of personal safety, confidentiality, informed consent to services, access to legal assistance, psychosocial support, and sustainable livelihoods (Kösl et al., 2026; Pulvino et al., 2026; Thompson et al., 2026). The experiences of affected people should inform service design rather than serve merely as illustrations of suffering.

Child protection requires additional safeguards. The Pemerintah Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur reported a coordination meeting with the Indonesian Child Protection Commission in June 2026 to strengthen prevention of trafficking, exploitation, and violence against children (Pemerintah Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2026). This indicates institutional attention to risks faced by children, but statistics on violence against children generally cannot be equated with statistics on child trafficking victims. Service design should prioritise the best interests of the child, continuity of education, and family support.

Institutional responses and protection gaps

Indonesia memiliki landasan hukum untuk memerangi tindak pidana perdagangan orang dan melindungi pekerja migran. Di NTT, koordinasi yang lebih erat tercermin dalam deklarasi bersama antara pemerintah daerah, kepolisian, dan Kementerian Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia pada Agustus 2025 (Kementerian Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia, 2025a). BP3MI NTT melaksanakan edukasi mengenai migrasi yang aman serta memperkenalkan inisiatif PELANGI PMI untuk meningkatkan pemahaman calon pekerja terkait prosedur dan risiko eksploitasi (Kementerian Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia, 2025b). Langkah-langkah ini merupakan landasan yang relevan, hasil penelitian ini membuktikan bahwa upaya menurunkan angka kejahatan tentang kasus perdagangan orang terus dilakukan dengan melakukan kolaborasi dengan beberapa elemen penting di NTT seperti Gugus Tugas Nasional Pencegahan dan Penanganan TPPO (GT PP-TPPO), Lembaga Penegak Hukum & Pemerintah Terkait dan Organisasi Masyarakat dan Internasional. Langkah ini dilakukan untuk mengatasi kasus perdagangan orang yang tidak mengendepankan nilai-nilai kemanusiaan.

Likely implementation challenges include maintaining the flow of information from villages of origin to destinations, ensuring timely referrals, providing sustained support after repatriation, and making records consistent across agencies. Comparing data held by police, social services, women and child protection agencies, immigration authorities, and migrant-worker services requires consistent case definitions and reporting periods. Without traceable data systems, reports received, victims identified, cases prosecuted, recovery services provided, and workers repatriated may be merged into a misleading aggregate.

A rights-based protection framework must avoid two errors. First, an approach focused exclusively on regulating migration may overlook victims of exploitation who need immediate assistance. Second, an approach limited to repatriation, without livelihood support, may expose survivors to the same vulnerabilities again. Public services should provide reporting channels that are easy to use, protected against retaliation, available in languages communities understand, and accessible to families in areas of origin. Perdagangan manusia merupakan ancaman kesehatan masyarakat yang signifikan dan terus menopang berbagai jaringan kriminal global (Bawono et al., 2025; Grubesic et al., 2025; Thương, 2025).

Designing community-based collaborative action

On the basis of this synthesis, the article proposes a four-stage collaborative action cycle: mapping, action, observation, and reflection. The cycle is intended as a design for future policy initiatives and community activities that can be tested in subsequent field-based action research, not as an intervention that has already been implemented. This approach reflects the cross-sectoral nature of trafficking: no single institution can deliver prevention independently. Village governments, BP3MI, labour departments, law-enforcement bodies, social services, schools, faith-based organisations, women's organisations, and survivor groups need to be connected through clear procedures.

The success of this cycle should be defined through indicators that are measurable yet humane. An initial rise in the number of reports does not necessarily indicate increased trafficking; it may reflect greater public trust and improved identification capacity. Evaluation should therefore consider several indicators together: the quality of employment-information verification, access to services, safeguards against repeat victimisation, restoration of economic rights, and progress through legal processes. Victim data must be handled with restricted access, confidentiality safeguards, and adherence to the do-no-harm principle.

At village level, community stakeholders can develop clear employment-information systems, family consultation opportunities, and alert mechanisms when recruiters offer unverified jobs. At district and municipal level, stronger integrated services can simplify document checks and referrals. The importance of respecting human dignity through love, and, secondly, an exploration of whether Erich Fromm’s philosophy of love can help raise public awareness in addressing human trafficking in NTT (France Longginus Goo et al., 2024; Hayon, 2023; Mare et al., 2024). At provincial level, inter-agency data agreements should distinguish identified trafficking victims, prospective workers prevented from departing, non-procedural migrants, and migrant-smuggling cases. At national level and in destination countries, coordination is needed for cross-border legal assistance and investigations into exploitation networks.

Table 1. Proposed collaborative action framework for trafficking prevention and survivor recovery in NTT

Stage	Priority actions	Key stakeholders	Monitoring indicators
Mapping	Map sending villages, recruitment channels, employment needs, and service access; validate risk information without disclosing victims' identities.	Village governments, labour departments, BP3MI, community groups.	Village-level risk maps and updated referral directories are available.
Action	Provide contract and safe-migration education; verify job offers; establish confidential reporting channels; support survivors.	BP3MI, schools, law enforcement, faith-based organisations, social services.	Number of sessions, community reach, reports followed up, and response times.
Observation	Record disaggregated referrals; monitor case outcomes and recovery without duplicating personal identities.	Cross-sector task forces, service providers, independent monitors.	Proportion of cases with completed referrals, services received, and documented follow-up.
Reflection	Evaluate collaboratively with survivors and communities; revise messages, procedures, and service funding.	Local governments, regional legislatures, civil-society organisations, survivor representatives.	Improved standard operating procedures, resource allocations, and service-user satisfaction.

Limitations of the review and directions for future research

This review relies on publicly available official documents. Its figures come from different time periods and recording systems; accordingly, the article does not estimate trafficking prevalence in NTT or test a causal relationship between poverty and trafficking. Institutional sources also tend to document identified cases and official responses more extensively than the experiences of victims who do not report their exploitation. These limitations call for further verification through ethically conducted field studies, survivor consultation, village-based service mapping, and programme evaluation using clearly defined before-and-after indicators.

Future action research could select pilot sites on the basis of reliable risk mapping and community consent. Researchers should design cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection with village partners, protect personal data, and avoid questions or procedures that may retraumatise survivors. Findings could then establish whether safe-migration education, complaint channels, and referral networks genuinely improve access to protection rather than merely increase the number of awareness-raising activities.

Conclusions

Human trafficking in East Nusa Tenggara reflects the convergence of unequal economic opportunities, information asymmetries, abuse of trust during recruitment, and challenges in coordinating protective services. Trafficking must be clearly distinguished from non-procedural migration and migrant smuggling so that legal responses target the appropriate conduct while migrant workers' rights remain respected. A crisis of human values becomes evident when people are treated as instruments of profit, freedom to choose work is constrained through coercion or deception, and survivors' suffering is not met with adequate recovery support. A more sustainable response requires expanded access to safe and decent work, village-level migration literacy, victim identification without stigma, law enforcement against exploitation networks, and recovery tailored to survivors' needs. A four-stage collaborative action model mapping, action, observation, and reflection is proposed as a basis for future policy trials and action research. Its success should be assessed not only through activity counts or case numbers but, above all, through improvements in safety, freedom, access to justice, and the restoration of dignity for the people of NTT.

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