

Value Deficits in Conventional Anti-Human Trafficking Mechanisms in Malaysia: Manifestations and Organisational Causes

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking remains a major transnational crime despite the implementation of various conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms in Malaysia. Existing studies have primarily attributed the weaknesses of these mechanisms to legal, administrative, and operational limitations, while relatively little attention has been given to the underlying role of ethical values in shaping implementation effectiveness. This study therefore examines value deficits in the implementation of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms in Malaysia. Specifically, the study aims to examine how value deficits are manifested in the implementation of existing mechanisms and to identify the organisational and structural factors that contribute to these value deficits. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select participants from government agencies, enforcement authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and academic experts who possess extensive experience in anti-human trafficking governance. The data were analysed using thematic analysis with the support of ATLAS.ti software. The findings reveal that value deficits are manifested through five key dimensions: integrity in law enforcement, justice in legal processes, empathy in victim protection, civic responsibility in public awareness, and trust in inter-agency collaboration. These value deficits are primarily influenced by organisational and structural factors, including divergent institutional approaches, weak monitoring and accountability, resource constraints, organisational and logistical barriers, and financial limitations. The study argues that the weaknesses of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms are not solely the result of operational deficiencies but also reflect deeper ethical governance challenges. This study contributes to the anti-human trafficking literature by introducing a value deficit perspective as an alternative framework for understanding institutional weaknesses. The findings provide practical insights for policymakers to strengthen anti-human trafficking governance by integrating ethical values with organisational and institutional reforms.

Keywords: Human trafficking; value deficits; anti-human trafficking mechanisms; ethical governance; Malaysia; qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking poses a significant threat to human security and human rights worldwide and has attracted increasing international attention since the 1990s. The United Nations defines human trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons through force, deception, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation. Recent estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) indicate that the number of victims of modern slavery has risen dramatically to approximately 50 million worldwide, demonstrating that this global threat remains far from being eradicated. Its transnational nature and highly

profitable returns have enabled human trafficking to evolve into a global epidemic that transcends national borders.

Within the Southeast Asian (ASEAN) region, Malaysia has become one of the major destinations for human trafficking activities. The country attracts traffickers who exploit vulnerable groups, particularly migrant workers from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Philippines, for forced labour and sexual exploitation. To monitor countries' efforts in addressing this crime, the United States Department of State annually publishes the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, which categorises countries into different tiers according to their compliance with the minimum standards established under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA).

In response to increasing international scrutiny, the Malaysian government has demonstrated its commitment by introducing various conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms, including the enactment of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM). These initiatives have been further strengthened through the implementation of the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), which focuses on four strategic pillars: prosecution, protection, prevention, and partnership. Despite these initiatives, the implementation of existing mechanisms has proven insufficient to combat human trafficking comprehensively. The number of trafficking cases and victims continues to fluctuate, while Malaysia's position in the TIP Report has remained inconsistent, frequently moving between Tier 2, the Tier 2 Watch List, and Tier 3. The weaknesses of these mechanisms are reflected in the criminal justice system, where conviction rates remain considerably low. For example, only approximately 15% of arrests in 2022 resulted in successful convictions. Furthermore, incidents such as the discovery of 139 mass graves in Wang Kelian involving Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants exposed serious deficiencies in border control and the protection of human rights. These challenges have become even more complex in the post-COVID-19 era, as trafficking syndicates have rapidly adapted by exploiting digital platforms to recruit victims, making their activities increasingly difficult for authorities to detect. Consequently, an important question arises: why does Malaysia continue to struggle at the same level and fail to attain Tier 1 status, unlike neighbouring countries such as the Philippines?

A recent study by Nafisah et al. (2025) argues that Malaysia's inability to progress to Tier 1 stems from critical systemic barriers, particularly weak enforcement, corruption, and inadequate victim protection. Building upon this argument, the present study contends that the greatest lacuna within Malaysia's conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms extends beyond technical or bureaucratic shortcomings and is fundamentally rooted in severe value deficits in their implementation. The erosion of integrity has created opportunities for corruption among enforcement agencies. Deficiencies in justice have constrained prosecution due to difficulties in securing reliable evidence and ineffective legal proceedings. Likewise, the absence of empathy within the victim management system has resulted in inhumane treatment, with undocumented victims frequently being criminalised, while existing care approaches have yet to fully embrace trauma-informed practices. These weaknesses are further compounded by declining civic responsibility, which allows vulnerable groups, particularly forced labourers and migrant domestic workers, to remain vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. Finally, anti-trafficking efforts continue to be undermined by the absence of mutual trust required to implement standardised victim identification protocols through genuine collaboration between government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

In this study, value deficits refer to the erosion, absence, or inadequate institutional practice of ethical values that are essential for the effective implementation of anti-human trafficking mechanisms. Drawing upon ethical governance literature (Huberts, 2014; Rothstein, 2011), value deficits are operationalised through five dimensions: integrity, justice, empathy, civic responsibility, and trust. These values provide the analytical lens through which weaknesses in conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms are examined.

To address these gaps in both the literature and current practice, this study examines the shortcomings of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms through the lens of core humanitarian and justice-based value deficits. Specifically, the study is guided by two objectives: (1) to examine how value deficits are manifested in the implementation of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms in Malaysia, and (2) to identify the organisational and structural factors that contribute to these value deficits within government institutions and

society. A comprehensive understanding of these value deficits is essential for developing a new anti-human trafficking mechanism capable of strengthening both human and national security.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews previous literature on human trafficking by examining three main areas: the concept and global landscape of human trafficking, the implementation of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms, and the emerging paradigm of institutional and public value deficits.

The Concept and Global Landscape of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is widely recognised as a contemporary form of modern slavery. From the perspective of international law, the United Nations, through the Palermo Protocol (2000), defines human trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons through force, deception, or abduction for the purpose of exploitation (Obokata, 2006; UNODC, 2000). Previous studies have shown that this crime has evolved into a highly profitable transnational epidemic. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), human trafficking generates approximately US\$150 billion in illicit profits annually. Furthermore, international estimates indicate that nearly 50 million people are currently living in conditions of modern slavery, particularly women, children, and migrant workers (ILO, 2022).

Within Southeast Asia (ASEAN), the dynamics of human trafficking are largely driven by socio-economic inequalities. As a rapidly developing country, Malaysia has become a destination, source, and transit country for transnational trafficking activities. A recent study by Nafisah et al. (2025) identified the palm oil plantation, manufacturing, and domestic service sectors as the industries most vulnerable to forced labour and labour exploitation in Malaysia. Victims are commonly recruited through fraudulent employment offers before being subjected to debt bondage, passport confiscation, physical abuse, and restrictions on their freedom of movement. Although these trafficking methods have been extensively documented, the cycle of exploitation continues, suggesting the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of national anti-trafficking mechanisms.

Conventional Mechanisms: Implementation and Systemic Gaps

To address this growing threat, both academic literature and international reports frequently use the United States Department of State's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report as the principal benchmark for evaluating countries' compliance with the minimum standards established under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). In response, Malaysia has introduced a range of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms, including the enactment of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM) and the establishment of the Council for Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants (MAPO) as the country's central coordinating body. These initiatives are further supported by the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP 3.0), which adopts the internationally recognised 4P framework comprising Prosecution, Protection, Prevention, and Partnership.

Despite these institutional efforts, existing literature consistently highlights substantial systemic gaps in translating policy into effective practice (Wan Nur Ibtisam, 2014). Although Malaysia has recorded improvements in enforcement operations and arrests, the effectiveness of these mechanisms remains constrained at the prosecution stage. In 2022, only 15% of arrests resulted in successful convictions (US Department of State, 2023). Comparative research by Nafisah et al. (2025) attributes the Philippines' continued Tier 1 status to the establishment of specialised anti-trafficking courts and a more proactive legal framework. In contrast, Malaysia continues to face challenges arising from the limited availability of specialised courts and inadequate judicial facilities, which complicate the prosecution process. Similarly, previous studies have criticised Malaysia's shelter management procedures for frequently criminalising undocumented victims rather than adopting a trauma-informed approach to victim rehabilitation.

Value Deficits as an Ethical Governance Perspective

Previous studies have generally attributed the shortcomings of anti-human trafficking mechanisms to financial limitations, technological constraints, and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Reseman et al., 2015; Sheila, 2016). However, drawing upon the qualitative governance perspectives proposed by Huberts (2014) and Rothstein (2011), recent scholarship has begun to shift towards viewing value deficits as the underlying cause of institutional failure. In the context of this study, value deficits refer to the erosion, absence, or inadequate institutional practice of ethical values that are essential for effective anti-human trafficking governance. Drawing upon ethical governance theory, institutional performance depends not only on legal frameworks, organisational structures, or administrative procedures, but also on the ethical values demonstrated by those responsible for implementing public policies (Huberts, 2014; Rothstein, 2011). Accordingly, this study operationalises value deficits through five interrelated dimensions: integrity, justice, empathy, civic responsibility, and trust. These dimensions serve as the analytical framework for examining the weaknesses of Malaysia's conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms.

First, this crisis is associated with the erosion of integrity and transparency within the enforcement system. Preliminary findings and interviews with academic experts reveal that corruption has infiltrated border enforcement, where certain enforcement officers have collaborated with trafficking syndicates in exchange for financial rewards (Academic UKM 1; Academic UUM 1). Second, a deficit in justice has weakened the prosecution process, as rigid evidentiary requirements and victims' reluctance to testify due to trauma and intimidation have significantly reduced successful prosecutions (AGC 1, 2021). Third, policy deficiencies are closely linked to the absence of empathy and humanitarian values. The discovery of trafficking camps and mass graves in Wang Kelian in 2015 exposed the tragic consequences of inadequate protection for vulnerable refugees and migrants (Hoffstaedter & Missbach, 2024). Likewise, the absence of permanent medical personnel and a centralised victim database in government shelters have resulted in a largely procedural rather than victim-centred approach to care (JIM 1; RPWKL, 2022). Furthermore, anti-human trafficking efforts continue to be undermined by the absence of trust between government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), whose differing priorities often hinder meaningful collaboration. These institutional weaknesses are further compounded by declining civic responsibility among members of the public, many of whom continue to perceive human trafficking as an issue that does not concern them personally (UNHCR 1; JTKSM 1).

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates a clear research gap that calls for a more comprehensive examination from the perspective of value deficits. While Malaysia possesses a relatively comprehensive legal framework through ATIPSOM and the National Action Plan, these mechanisms alone are insufficient if the underlying erosion of integrity, justice, empathy, trust, and civic responsibility remains unaddressed. Therefore, this study argues that strengthening these core values is essential for developing a more holistic and sustainable anti-human trafficking mechanism.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the research objectives of identifying the weaknesses and analysing the factors contributing to value deficits in conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms, this study required an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. Accordingly, this section outlines the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques employed throughout the study.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design. A qualitative approach was selected because it provides the most appropriate means of obtaining an in-depth understanding of the human trafficking landscape in Malaysia while exploring underlying value deficits, such as integrity, empathy, and justice, which cannot be adequately measured through quantitative indicators alone. This research design enabled the researchers to examine the phenomenon comprehensively from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, thereby providing a stronger understanding of the implementation gaps within existing anti-human trafficking mechanisms.

Sampling and Data Collection

The fieldwork was conducted in several strategic administrative and operational locations, namely Putrajaya, Selangor, and Kuala Lumpur. To ensure the credibility of the qualitative findings, two primary data collection methods were employed: semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

Purposive sampling was used to identify key informants with relevant expertise, direct experience, and authority in combating human trafficking. The participants were drawn from three main groups.

Government and Enforcement Agencies

These included officers from the National Strategic Office for the Council for Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants (NSO-MAPO), the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), the Immigration Department of Malaysia (JIM), the Attorney General's Chambers (AGC), the Department of Labour (JTKSM), and managers of government-operated shelters located in different regions, including Kuala Lumpur, Kelantan, and Johor.

Academic Experts

This group comprised researchers and academics from Malaysian public universities, including Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), and the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), whose expertise focuses on national security and legal studies.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

Representatives from international and local organisations, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), were interviewed to provide perspectives on victim protection and human rights advocacy.

Semi-structured interviews were selected to ensure consistency in addressing the core issues related to weaknesses in conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms while allowing sufficient flexibility to explore new issues emerging from participants' responses. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, whereby no new information or themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

To complement the interview findings, document analysis was conducted to triangulate and cross-reference the collected data. The documents examined included the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report published by the United States Department of State, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM), the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), and official statistics on arrests and convictions obtained from relevant government agencies.

Data Analysis

Consistent with the qualitative research design, the interview transcripts and documentary evidence were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis was supported by ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software, which facilitated the systematic coding, organisation, and management of large volumes of textual data.

Through the coding process, interview responses and documentary evidence were integrated and organised into five major themes that directly addressed the research objectives. These themes were interpreted through the lens of value deficits and comprised: (1) Integrity Deficits in Law Enforcement, (2) Justice Deficits in the Legal System, (3) Empathy Deficits in Victim Protection, (4) Civic Responsibility Deficits, and (5) Trust Deficits in Inter-Agency Collaboration. These thematic findings subsequently formed the primary analytical framework for the discussion presented in this study.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: How are value deficits manifested in the implementation of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms in Malaysia?

Theme 1: Integrity Deficits in Law Enforcement Implementation

The findings reveal that integrity deficits constitute one of the most significant manifestations of weaknesses in Malaysia's conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms. Participants consistently described how corruption, weak accountability, and conflicts of interest have undermined border enforcement and facilitated the continued operation of trafficking syndicates. Rather than being constrained by deficiencies in legislation, respondents argued that the primary weakness lies in the ethical conduct of enforcement personnel responsible for implementing existing policies.

An academic participant explained that organised trafficking syndicates were able to influence enforcement agencies through systematic bribery:

"Immigration officers and police personnel were paid monthly allowances by trafficking syndicate leaders. My research has actually demonstrated that corruption among enforcement authorities is one of the main reasons why human trafficking continues to occur." (UKM Academic 1)

Similarly, another academic emphasised that the major challenge was not the existence of illegal border routes, but rather the compromised integrity of officers responsible for guarding the country's borders:

"The real issue is integrity. It is not about the existence of numerous illegal entry routes. When you are responsible for guarding the border, you can simply make arrangements with trafficking syndicates." (UUM Academic 1)

These findings indicate that the implementation of anti-human trafficking mechanisms is not constrained solely by legal or operational limitations, but also by the erosion of ethical values among enforcement personnel. The presence of corruption and conflicts of interest weakens institutional credibility, compromises border security, and creates opportunities for trafficking syndicates to evade law enforcement, thereby illustrating a clear manifestation of integrity deficits within the existing anti-trafficking framework.

Theme 2: Justice Deficits in Legal and Prosecution Processes

The findings indicate that justice deficits are manifested through weaknesses in the legal and prosecution process. Although Malaysia possesses a comprehensive legal framework to prosecute trafficking offences, respondents consistently highlighted that victims often fail to obtain justice due to rigid evidentiary requirements, victims' reluctance to testify, and the limited availability of specialised courts. Consequently, many trafficking cases fail to proceed to successful prosecution despite sufficient suspicion that trafficking has occurred.

An officer from the Attorney General's Chambers explained that obtaining sufficient evidence to secure a conviction remains one of the greatest challenges faced by prosecutors:

"It is extremely difficult to bring a proper charge because we must obtain strong and convincing evidence. In many cases, if we proceed to court, we are likely to lose because there are essential legal elements that we simply cannot fulfil." (AGC 1)

Likewise, an academic participant emphasised that many victims are unwilling to testify because of fear and intimidation from trafficking syndicates:

"It is difficult for the authorities to prosecute traffickers because many victims are afraid to speak. They fear that if they testify, their family members back home will be threatened by the syndicates." (UUM Academic 1)

Another respondent highlighted the shortage of specialised judicial facilities dedicated to human trafficking cases:

"As far as court proceedings are concerned, we only have a specialised court in Selangor. As a result, these cases often take a long time to be heard and are sometimes not given sufficient priority." (AGC 2)

These findings suggest that justice deficits are reflected not only in procedural challenges but also in the limited institutional capacity to ensure timely and effective prosecution. The combination of evidentiary difficulties, victims' fear of retaliation, and inadequate judicial infrastructure significantly reduces conviction rates and weakens the effectiveness of Malaysia's anti-human trafficking mechanisms.

Theme 3: Empathy Deficits in Victim Protection

The findings further reveal that empathy deficits are manifested in the protection and care provided to trafficking victims. Respondents described victim management as largely procedural and administrative, with insufficient emphasis on victims' psychological well-being, medical needs, and individual circumstances. As a result, the protection system often prioritises operational efficiency over humanitarian care.

One immigration officer pointed out that Malaysia still lacks a dedicated database for identifying and monitoring trafficking victims:

"Based on my observations, we still do not have a dedicated database to identify or profile victims of human trafficking." (JIM 1)

Similarly, a shelter manager acknowledged the limited availability of healthcare services within government shelters:

"Our shelter does not have permanent medical officers or healthcare specialists. Whenever victims require medical treatment, they must be referred to external healthcare facilities."
(Government Shelter Manager)

Communication barriers also affect the quality of victim care, particularly for foreign victims from non-English-speaking countries:

"Communication is another challenge. Some victims, particularly those from countries such as Vietnam, do not understand English, let alone Bahasa Malaysia."
(JIM 2)

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that empathy deficits are manifested through institutional arrangements that inadequately address victims' physical, emotional, and psychological needs. The absence of specialised healthcare personnel, integrated victim information systems, and effective communication support limits the provision of victim-centred and trauma-informed care within existing protection mechanisms.

Theme 4: Civic Responsibility Deficits in Public Awareness

The findings indicate that civic responsibility deficits are manifested through low public awareness and limited community engagement in combating human trafficking. Respondents consistently argued that many members of the public have only a superficial understanding of human trafficking and often fail to recognise it as a serious social issue. This situation is further exacerbated by the limited effectiveness of public awareness campaigns, which are constrained by financial resources and restricted media exposure.

An academic participant observed that public understanding of human trafficking remains inadequate:

"Public understanding of what constitutes human trafficking is still very limited. Many people are unaware of the different forms of trafficking and even believe that being smuggled into another country is not necessarily wrong." (UUM Academic 1)

Similarly, a representative from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) noted that many victims themselves do not realise that they have been trafficked:

"Many victims simply do not realise that they have become victims of human trafficking. They believe that being smuggled across borders is acceptable because they are only seeking employment opportunities." (UNHCR 1)

Respondents also highlighted the limitations of government awareness campaigns. One police officer explained that financial constraints have significantly reduced the effectiveness of public advertisements:

"One of the challenges is the limited budget allocated for public awareness campaigns. As a result, advertisements are aired infrequently and often outside prime viewing hours." (PDRM 2)

These findings suggest that civic responsibility deficits are reflected in the limited public understanding of human trafficking and the low level of societal engagement in prevention efforts. Without sustained public education and effective awareness programmes, opportunities to identify victims, report suspicious activities, and prevent exploitation remain limited.

Theme 5: Trust Deficits in Policy and Inter-Agency Collaboration

The final manifestation of value deficits concerns the absence of trust within policy implementation and inter-agency collaboration. Respondents reported that although government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) share the common objective of combating human trafficking, differences in organisational priorities, responsibilities, and operational approaches have limited meaningful collaboration. As a result, information sharing, joint decision-making, and policy coordination remain fragmented.

An officer from the Attorney General's Chambers explained that the role of NGOs in policy development is often constrained because government agencies and NGOs approach trafficking issues from different perspectives:

"We need to clearly define the extent of NGO involvement. Perhaps NGOs do not need to be directly involved in policy formulation because they tend to focus primarily on victims, whereas the government must also consider broader national interests."

(AGC 2)

A representative from UNHCR similarly noted that NGOs have limited influence over policy decisions:

"NGOs do not have decision-making authority in policy or legislation. We can only provide recommendations, but the final decisions remain with the government." (UNHCR 1)

These findings demonstrate that trust deficits are manifested through fragmented institutional relationships, differing organisational priorities, and limited stakeholder participation in policy development. Although collaboration exists operationally, the absence of mutual trust and shared decision-making weakens policy coordination and ultimately reduces the effectiveness of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that value deficits are manifested across five key dimensions of Malaysia's conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms: integrity in law enforcement, justice in legal and prosecution processes, empathy in victim protection, civic responsibility in public awareness, and trust in policy and inter-agency collaboration. These manifestations indicate that the shortcomings of existing anti-human trafficking mechanisms extend beyond technical or administrative weaknesses and are fundamentally associated with the erosion of core ethical values within institutions and society. These findings directly address the first research

question by illustrating how value deficits are embedded in the implementation of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms in Malaysia.

Research Question 2: What organisational and structural factors contribute to value deficits in the implementation of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms in Malaysia?

Theme 1: Divergent Organisational Approaches as Drivers of Trust Deficits

The findings indicate that trust deficits between government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are primarily driven by differences in organisational approaches and institutional priorities. Although both sectors share the common objective of combating human trafficking, respondents explained that their roles and perspectives differ considerably. Government agencies are primarily concerned with legal compliance, national security, and policy implementation, whereas NGOs place greater emphasis on victim welfare and human rights protection. These differing priorities have limited collaborative decision-making and reduced mutual trust.

An officer from the Attorney General's Chambers explained:

"We need to clearly define the extent of NGO involvement. Perhaps NGOs do not need to be directly involved in policy formulation because they tend to focus mainly on victims, whereas the government must also consider broader national interests." (AGC 2)

Similarly, a representative from UNHCR stated:

"NGOs do not have decision-making authority in policy or legislation. We can only provide recommendations, while the final decisions remain with the government."

(UNHCR 1)

These findings suggest that trust deficits are not merely interpersonal issues but are structurally embedded within institutional arrangements that assign different responsibilities and decision-making powers to government agencies and NGOs.

Theme 2: Weak Monitoring and Accountability as Drivers of Integrity Deficits

The findings further reveal that integrity deficits are largely attributed to weaknesses in monitoring and accountability mechanisms within law enforcement agencies. Participants consistently argued that corruption occurs not because of inadequate legislation but because enforcement activities lack effective supervision and accountability. This creates opportunities for individual officers to abuse their authority and establish illicit relationships with trafficking syndicates.

One academic participant remarked:

"Immigration officers and police personnel were paid monthly allowances by trafficking syndicate leaders. My research has shown that corruption among enforcement officers is one of the main reasons why human trafficking continues to occur."

(UKM Academic 1)

Another academic further explained:

"The issue is integrity. It is not about having many illegal entry routes. When officers are responsible for guarding the border, they can simply make arrangements with trafficking syndicates."

(UUM Academic 1)

These findings indicate that insufficient monitoring, limited accountability, and conflicts of interest create favourable conditions for corruption, thereby undermining the integrity of anti-human trafficking enforcement mechanisms.

Theme 3: Resource Constraints as Drivers of Justice Deficits

The findings demonstrate that justice deficits are closely associated with institutional resource constraints. Participants identified shortages of specialised personnel, limited judicial infrastructure, delays in investigations, and difficulties in obtaining reliable evidence as major obstacles to successful prosecution. These limitations weaken the criminal justice process and reduce the likelihood of securing convictions against traffickers.

An officer from the Attorney General's Chambers explained:

"It is extremely difficult to bring a proper charge because we need strong and convincing evidence. In many cases, we know trafficking has occurred, but we cannot fulfil all the legal requirements needed for prosecution." (AGC 1)

An academic participant added:

"Victims are often afraid to testify because they fear that trafficking syndicates will threaten their families back in their home countries."

(UUM Academic 1)

Another respondent highlighted the shortage of specialised courts:

"At present, we only have one specialised court in Selangor. Consequently, these cases often take a long time to be heard and are not always given priority."

(AGC 2)

Together, these findings demonstrate that justice deficits arise not only from legal technicalities but also from broader institutional capacity limitations that constrain effective prosecution.

Theme 4: Organisational and Logistical Barriers as Drivers of Empathy Deficits

The findings reveal that empathy deficits are influenced by organisational and logistical barriers affecting victim protection services. Respondents identified the absence of an integrated victim database, shortages of medical personnel, logistical constraints within shelters, and language differences as key factors limiting the provision of comprehensive victim-centred care.

One immigration officer explained:

"From my observations, we still do not have a dedicated database to identify or profile victims of human trafficking." (JIM 1)

A government shelter manager stated:

"Our shelter does not have permanent medical officers or healthcare specialists. Whenever victims require medical treatment, they must be referred to external healthcare facilities because of our resource limitations."

(Government Shelter Manager)

Another respondent highlighted communication challenges:

"Communication is often difficult. Some victims, particularly those from Vietnam, do not understand English, let alone Bahasa Malaysia." (JIM 2)

These findings suggest that empathy deficits are shaped not only by individual attitudes but also by structural limitations that restrict the delivery of holistic, trauma-informed victim protection services.

Theme 5: Financial Constraints and Limited Public Understanding as Drivers of Civic Responsibility Deficits

The final theme indicates that civic responsibility deficits are driven by financial constraints and limited public understanding of human trafficking. Participants explained that government awareness campaigns are often constrained by insufficient funding, resulting in limited publicity and poor public engagement. Consequently, many members of the public remain unaware of the realities and seriousness of human trafficking.

One respondent explained:

"Our advertisements are not attractive enough to capture public attention. Broadcasting advertisements on private television channels is expensive."

(JTKSM 1)

Similarly, a police officer stated:

"Awareness campaigns already exist, but they are usually broadcast outside peak viewing hours. Budget limitations mean that these advertisements are aired only occasionally."

(PDRM 2)

An academic participant further observed:

"Public understanding of human trafficking remains limited. Many people are still unaware of the various forms of trafficking and do not consider being smuggled across borders to be a serious offence."

(UUM Academic 1)

These findings indicate that inadequate financial investment in public education, combined with limited public knowledge, contributes directly to weak civic responsibility and reduces society's capacity to recognise, prevent, and report human trafficking.

Overall, the findings indicate that value deficits within Malaysia's conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms are shaped by five interrelated organisational and structural factors: divergent organisational approaches, weak monitoring and accountability, institutional resource constraints, organisational and logistical barriers, and financial constraints coupled with limited public understanding. These factors collectively contribute to the erosion of trust, integrity, justice, empathy, and civic responsibility identified in Research Question 1. This demonstrates that the shortcomings of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms originate not only from operational inefficiencies but also from deeper organisational conditions that weaken the ethical foundations of implementation.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the shortcomings of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms in Malaysia extend beyond operational inefficiencies and legal limitations. Rather, they reflect a broader erosion of ethical values embedded within the implementation of anti-human trafficking governance. While previous studies have primarily attributed these weaknesses to bureaucratic constraints, inadequate financial resources, weak enforcement capacity, and technological limitations (Reseman et al., 2015; Sheila, 2016), the present study

argues that these organisational weaknesses are manifestations of deeper value deficits involving integrity, justice, empathy, civic responsibility, and trust. This finding expands the existing literature by suggesting that institutional effectiveness depends not only on formal legal frameworks but also on the ethical values demonstrated by those responsible for implementing them.

The findings further indicate that value deficits are not isolated individual shortcomings but are shaped by organisational and structural conditions. Weak monitoring systems create opportunities for corruption and undermine integrity among enforcement officers. Resource limitations and inadequate institutional capacity weaken the administration of justice by reducing the effectiveness of investigations and prosecutions. Likewise, logistical barriers, shortages of specialised personnel, and communication difficulties constrain the provision of victim-centred protection services, resulting in empathy deficits within the care system. Financial limitations also reduce the effectiveness of public awareness campaigns, contributing to low civic responsibility among the public. At the institutional level, differing organisational priorities between government agencies and non-governmental organisations reduce trust and weaken collaborative governance. Collectively, these findings suggest that value deficits emerge through the interaction between organisational structures and institutional practices rather than through individual behaviour alone.

These findings are broadly consistent with governance theories proposed by Rothstein (2011) and Huberts (2014), who argue that institutional effectiveness depends heavily on ethical governance, integrity, impartiality, and public trust. Although Malaysia has established comprehensive legal and policy instruments, including ATIPSOM and the National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), the findings suggest that formal regulations alone are insufficient to ensure effective implementation. Without strengthening the ethical foundations of institutions, policy reforms may improve administrative procedures but fail to produce sustainable improvements in anti-human trafficking outcomes. This observation also helps explain why Malaysia continues to fluctuate between Tier 2, the Tier 2 Watch List, and Tier 3 despite continuous legislative reforms and institutional restructuring.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the anti-human trafficking literature by introducing a value deficit perspective as an explanatory framework for understanding institutional weaknesses. Existing studies have predominantly interpreted implementation failures from legal, administrative, or operational viewpoints. In contrast, this study proposes that organisational and structural conditions first produce value deficits, which subsequently weaken the implementation of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms. This relationship may be conceptualised as a sequential process in which organisational and structural conditions influence ethical values, which in turn determine the effectiveness of law enforcement, legal processes, victim protection, public awareness, and inter-agency collaboration. Consequently, strengthening anti-human trafficking governance requires more than improving institutional capacity; it also requires reinforcing integrity, justice, empathy, civic responsibility, and trust as fundamental principles guiding policy implementation.

Overall, the study suggests that future anti-human trafficking reforms should adopt a more holistic governance approach that integrates structural reforms with ethical capacity building. Improving monitoring systems, strengthening institutional accountability, enhancing victim-centred services, expanding public education, and promoting genuine collaboration between government agencies and non-governmental organisations are all essential. More importantly, these initiatives should be accompanied by deliberate efforts to cultivate ethical values throughout the implementation process. Only by addressing both organisational conditions and value deficits can conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms become more responsive, sustainable, and effective in protecting victims and combating human trafficking in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study examined value deficits in the implementation of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms in Malaysia by investigating both the manifestations of these deficits and the organisational and structural factors that contribute to them. The findings revealed that the weaknesses of existing anti-human trafficking mechanisms are reflected through five major value deficits, namely integrity in law enforcement, justice in legal processes, empathy in victim protection, civic responsibility in public awareness, and trust in inter-agency collaboration.

These value deficits were found to originate from organisational and structural conditions, including divergent institutional approaches, weak monitoring and accountability, resource constraints, organisational and logistical barriers, and financial limitations coupled with limited public understanding.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by proposing a value deficit perspective for understanding the implementation of conventional anti-human trafficking mechanisms. Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on legal, administrative, or operational shortcomings, this study demonstrates that the effectiveness of anti-human trafficking efforts is equally dependent on the ethical values embedded within institutions and among stakeholders. The findings suggest that organisational reforms alone are insufficient if they are not accompanied by efforts to strengthen integrity, justice, empathy, civic responsibility, and trust throughout the implementation process.

From a practical perspective, the findings provide useful insights for policymakers and enforcement agencies in improving anti-human trafficking governance in Malaysia. Future reforms should move beyond strengthening legislation and institutional capacity by incorporating value-based governance into policy implementation, professional training, victim protection, public awareness programmes, and inter-agency collaboration. Such an approach would contribute to the development of a more holistic, ethical, and sustainable anti-human trafficking mechanism.

Future research may extend the present study by examining value deficits in anti-human trafficking governance from the perspectives of trafficking survivors, migrant workers, and international enforcement agencies. Comparative studies involving other ASEAN countries would also provide valuable insights into how different governance systems influence the implementation of value-based anti-human trafficking mechanisms. The present study focuses primarily on institutional stakeholders involved in policy implementation. Future studies may incorporate trafficking survivors to complement the institutional perspective with lived experiences.

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