

Policy Issues in Addressing Cross-Border Human Trafficking: A Case Study of Kazakhstan

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This study investigates cross-border human trafficking in Kazakhstan by focusing on three core issues: the structural factors that enable trafficking, the effectiveness of Kazakhstan's legal and institutional responses, and the relevance of international best practices for national reform. Using a mixed-methods approach, including statistical analysis, policy review, and a national survey, the study applies economic, enterprise, and hierarchical models to human trafficking. The findings show that despite recent legislative advances in Kazakhstan, including Law No. 110-VIII "On Combating Human Trafficking" (2024), anti-trafficking efforts are hindered by systemic corruption, limited enforcement capacity, and poor victim identification. This article argues for a coordinated, victim-centered approach grounded in international cooperation, institutional training, and data-driven governance.

Keywords corruption, anti-trafficking legislation, international cooperation, human trafficking, human trafficking data, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Human trafficking is a transnational, multi-dimensional crime that affects individuals across all regions, social categories, and age groups. According to international reports, the most widespread forms of exploitation include sexual slavery, forced labor, coerced begging, and even criminal activities such as organ removal (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2012). These practices are not confined to particular continents or economic strata but are embedded within broader patterns of inequality, migration, and corruption (Lee 2007). Global estimates place the number of trafficked persons between 25 and 40 million. However, the clandestine nature of trafficking operations, along with

limited data collection, obscures the true scale of the phenomenon.

While there is no fixed profile of a trafficking victim (Haynes 2024), certain demographic and social factors—such as poverty, displacement, and lack of family support—are well-documented risk multipliers. Vulnerable populations often include children in state care, unaccompanied minors, migrant workers, homeless individuals, and families without breadwinners, as emphasized in data published by the US Department of Justice (2023). These individuals are targeted not only by local offenders but also by extensive trafficking networks involving intermediaries such as labor recruiters, business owners, and even state officials (Caparini 2015).

Notably, trafficking routes frequently use official infrastructure. Approximately 80% of cross-border trafficking is carried out through formal ports of entry such as airports and regulated land border points, where victims may cross with falsified documentation or under the guise of legitimate travel (Migration Data Portal 2024). Victims trafficked for forced labor are particularly likely to be processed through these legal channels. In contrast, sexual exploitation often occurs via irregular routes or remote terrain. Children, due to their increased dependency and lack of identification, are especially vulnerable to trafficking along unofficial routes (Sheikh 2014; Ospanova, Moroz, and Niyazova 2024).

Despite similarities in the movement of people, human trafficking and human smuggling remain legally and conceptually distinct. Smuggling generally involves a consensual transaction in which individuals pay to be clandestinely transported across borders. In contrast, trafficking encompasses deception, coercion, and sustained exploitation, even when the movement is initially voluntary (Europol n.d.). Moreover, smuggling does not inherently involve economic exploitation, while trafficking is defined precisely by such abuse (Shelley 2010).

In their study of the problem of human trafficking, Buribayev and Khamzina (2023) note that this type of transnational crime is one of the most difficult crimes to prove. And the main thing is that, as of today, it is impossible to establish the real number of victims of human trafficking, as there are only some statistical data on human trafficking, and the real number of victims remains in doubt. Balgimbekov and Syzdykova (2021) examine the tactical impact aimed at improving the detection, investigation, and prevention of the crime of trafficking in persons. For example, various forms of unifying operational and investigative activities, along with integrating criminal procedural and other scientific knowledge for the development and adequate planning of tactical operations within the framework of prevention of human trafficking, were proposed. In their study, Izbasova et al. (2021) cite the number of human trafficking victims as exceeding 40 million worldwide and provide an overview of both Kazakhstani and American research in this field.

Kyzdarbekova and Orazbekova (2022) conducted a comparative study that

examines of the definitions of “trafficking in persons” under the Palermo Protocol (United Nations [UN] Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children [A/RES/55/25]) and the national legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Ospanov (2023) notes the significant contribution by the government of the Republic of Korea in combating numerous transnational threats—including human trafficking—in the “Golden Triangle” region, where Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos converge.

Studying the depopulation of strategically important regions of Kazakhstan, Ibragimova and Turysbekova (2021) highlight the importance of developing a strategy for reducing depopulation that would ensure economic development, protect the rights of migrants, and help solve the problem of human trafficking in the country. Studying the integration of states in the Central Asian region, Mamirova, Nadirov, and Sagatova (2018) identify several transnational threats to border security in the region, including weapons trafficking, drugs, terrorism and extremism, and human trafficking.

Although this issue is actively discussed in legal contexts, it has not yet become a significant subject of research among political scientists. Therefore, this article highlights the legal side of this political issue. Responding to this gap in research, this study sets out to determine the current situation of human trafficking, particularly in Kazakhstan, and develop recommendations based on successful international interventions to combat human trafficking. The primary objective is to assess and establish the effectiveness of public administration efforts in countering risks of cross-border human trafficking.

Materials and Methods

Use of Statistical and Analytical Sources

This study drew on a wide range of national and international sources to assess the scope and governance of human trafficking in Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region. Statistics from the Global Slavery Index by the international human rights organization Walk Free (2023) were used to gauge the extent of human trafficking in both Central Asia and Kazakhstan. To understand trafficking trends in Central Asia, including gender disproportionality, insights from speakers at a two-day international conference on combating human trafficking were used (Haidar 2023). Additional statistics were obtained from the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (2022), particularly concerning gender disparities among trafficking victims, and from DeliverFund (2024), which enabled cross-national comparisons with the US.

To examine the influence of institutional corruption on human trafficking, relevant findings were drawn from the UNODC (2021) and Transparency International (2023). Crime statistics on trafficking-related offences in Kazakhstan

were accessed online through the Committee on Legal Statistics and Special Accounts of the General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2024). Governmental perspectives were contextualized through public addresses by President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (Bassarova 2023), and Minister of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan in 2022, Marat Akhmetzhanov (Shakshina 2022).

Several projects and trainings aimed at preventing human trafficking, conducted by the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (an initiative funded by the European Union [EU]), were also examined (International Centre for Migration Policy Development 2024b). An analysis of a project by the international organization Winrock International (2023) provided insight into how child victims of trafficking can be assisted in Kazakhstan and identified the regions most vulnerable to this threat.

To interpret the complexity of human trafficking mechanisms in Kazakhstan, this research draws on a combined theoretical framework based on three principal models. First, the rational-choice and economic models conceptualize trafficking as a strategic activity in which perpetrators assess the cost-benefit structure of their actions under conditions of weak enforcement and high profitability (Aronowitz, Theuermann, and Tyurykanova 2010). Second, the enterprise model of organized crime offers an analytical lens for understanding trafficking networks as decentralized, profit-oriented entities that operate similarly to legitimate business enterprises, adapting flexibly to state responses and market demand (UNODC 2021). This approach facilitates analysis of trafficking structures that are fluid rather than rigidly hierarchical. Third, the study incorporates hierarchical network perspectives associated with transnational organized crime, particularly where evidence indicates command structures, coercive methods, and territorial division of responsibilities (Bouché 2017). These perspectives are especially relevant for evaluating cross-border operations. Moreover, the business-like operation of trafficking as an illicit market is examined through emerging scholarship critiquing the lack of empirical data on the financial logic and operational infrastructure of trafficking networks (Muraszkiewicz et al. 2015).

Survey-Based Inquiry

In July 2024, an online survey was conducted for this study to gather individual perspectives and experiences related to human trafficking in Kazakhstan. Participants were recruited via open announcements distributed through social media platforms and academic mailing lists. Eligibility was limited to individuals who had resided in Kazakhstan continuously for at least ten years. Although ninety-six people took part in the survey, six did not answer every question, so the final sample comprised eighty-eight respondents.

Respondents ranged from 18 to 48 years of age (mean age: 29.3), with a

gender distribution of 60 women and 28 men. The majority of participants reported middle-income status, while approximately 25% identified as coming from socially vulnerable backgrounds, such as growing up without a breadwinner or with responsibilities of caring for a disabled family member. About one-quarter of participants were students at the time of data collection.

The survey included both closed and open-ended questions. It assessed respondents' understanding of the definition of human trafficking, perceptions of the effectiveness of government responses at various levels, and knowledge of victim support mechanisms. Supplementary questions gathered demographic information and details about participants' socioeconomic conditions during childhood and adolescence.

Results

Prevalence and Gendered Vulnerabilities in Human Trafficking in Kazakhstan

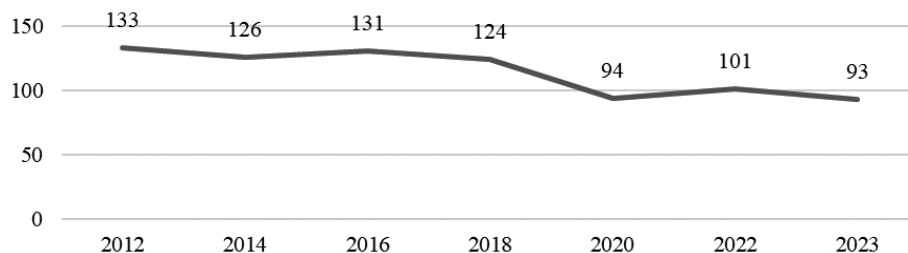
Trafficking in persons, one of the most common transnational crimes, involves the recruitment, transportation, harboring and other forms of controlling people by force, blackmail, or fraud to obtain material gains from their exploitation. Victims include men, women, and children in every region of the world.

According to the Global Slavery Index (Walk Free 2023), 11.1 out of every thousand individuals in Kazakhstan, had experienced slavery at some point in 2021. This amounts to more than 200,000 individuals in Kazakhstan subjected to either forced labor, forced marriage, or other forms of modern slavery. During an international conference in the Kazakhstani capital, Astana, to strengthen national and international partnerships to combat human trafficking, the president and CEO of the non-profit organization Winrock International noted that global trafficking trends around the world show that women and children remain the disproportionate majority of victims, especially in Central Asia (Haidar 2023). In 2020, for example, women and girls accounted for about 64% of trafficking cases (men and boys accounted for 36%).

Moreover, a study by the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (2022) found that in 2022, 60% of modern slavery cases in the Central Asian region involved women and girls, while in Kazakhstan, the share involving women and girls was as high as 74%. The study also notes that women victims often faced difficult social or economic life circumstances that led them to seek alternative means of earning a living. According to one Kazakh national who was trafficked, illegal employers may confiscate documents and force women to provide services of various kinds.

Institutional Corruption and Its Role in Sustaining Trafficking Networks

One indicator of a trafficking problem in a country is the presence of corruption

Figure 1. Kazakhstan's Position in the Corruption Perceptions Index

Source: Author's compilation based on data from Transparency International (2023).

Note: The numbers on the vertical axis indicate Kazakhstan's position (rank) in the CPI index among countries worldwide. A lower number indicates a better position (closer to 1), while a higher number indicates a worse position. The numbers inside the graph are the exact rank values for a specific year

among political officials and law enforcement agencies. Smuggling and human trafficking are virtually impossible without the structural and comprehensive support provided by corrupt schemes (Buribayev and Khamzina 2025; Karibayeva et al. 2021). Many migrant smuggling operations could not exist for long without local or even central authorities turning a blind eye. The UNODC (2021) cites numerous reports by international organizations that identify corruption as a key factor that, for many years, has “fueled” human trafficking on a massive scale across nearly every global route. At the same time, the government of Kazakhstan has undertaken efforts to improve anti-corruption measures (Figure 1).

Public administration actors potentially involved in corruption schemes include police, customs, embassies and consulates, border and immigration services, other law enforcement agencies, local officials, and individuals with influence over public officials. For example, in June 2022, representatives of the Anti-Corruption Service of Kazakhstan reported suspected human trafficking by officials of the Department for Coordination of Employment and Social Programs of the Akimat of the Kostanai region (Radio Azattyk 2022). In particular, state representatives were accused of exploiting an incapacitated Kazakh citizen for free labor. Moreover, among Kazakhstan's political elites, it has been suggested that official data significantly underestimates the extent of police patronage of brothels within the country (Pankratova 2024). Given the strong link between corruption and human trafficking, many more such cases likely remain in the shadows.

At the same time, it should be recognized that the presence of corruption schemes is not always directly proportional to the number or scale of human trafficking cases. For example, the US has ranked among the top thirty countries on the Corruption Perception Index for at least the past decade (i.e., low corruption levels). Yet, according to a study by the US Department of Health

and Human Services, the number of victims of sexual exploitation in the US is significant, ranging from 50,000 to 325,000 annually (DeliverFund 2024). On a positive note, the US government has a long history of combating human trafficking—the Trafficking Victims Protection Act was passed back in 2000, and since 2007 a national hotline has been in place to provide victims with assistance (Congress.gov 2000; National Human Trafficking Hotline n.d.). Still, the number of trafficking victims in the US is 3.3 per thousand population (Walk Free 2023).

An online survey was also conducted to assess human trafficking in Kazakhstan. Of the eighty-eight respondents, twenty-two reported hearing about such situations from their immediate family or relatives in remote rural areas, and one reported personal experience of human trafficking, specifically sexual slavery. Thus, 20% of respondents either knew about or experienced human trafficking. These findings indicate that Kazakhstani society is deeply troubled by human trafficking.

Organizational Structures of Trafficking Networks: Economic and Criminal Models

The study also employed a comprehensive theoretical framework that drew on the economic model, the enterprise model, and the hierarchical (organized crime) model to better interpret and contextualize the empirical findings. These models analyze the operating architecture and motivations of trafficking networks from different perspectives. First, the rational-choice economic model views human trafficking as profit-maximizing behavior in which perpetrators weigh potential revenues against the risks of arrest and punishment. These models are particularly useful in environments with inadequate institutional enforcement, pervasive corruption, and substantial demand for illicit services. They assume impunity and cost-efficiency for traffickers, which helps explain Kazakhstan's low conviction rate despite rising numbers of trafficking victims (Aronowitz, Theuermann, and Tyurykanova 2010). The economic approach also allows for a macroeconomic interpretation of trafficking as an adaptive reaction to structural imbalances in labor markets, especially where irregular migration and poverty converge.

Second, the enterprise model of organized crime emphasizes trafficking's entrepreneurial and commercial dimensions. It claims that trafficking networks are decentralized, agile, and profit-driven businesses that adapt to government enforcement, economic demand, and technological change. Market-responsive networks may exploit unlawful opportunities while minimizing operational costs (UNODC 2021). This model accounts for the role of informal brokers, intermediates, and loosely coordinated agents who recruit and exploit victims without relying on rigid hierarchical organizations in Kazakhstan. Third, the hierarchical model of transnational organized crime emphasizes vertical command structures, defined roles, and territorial control. These structures employ coercion and international logistics. This model applies to verified cross-border trafficking cases in Kazakhstan involving coordinated victim movements

along networked syndicate pathways (Bouché 2017). These groups use encrypted communication and have ties to narcotics and arms trafficking.

Recent research underscores hybrid or network-based models that combine enterprise and hierarchical elements. These adaptive networks respond to legal and economic changes, making them especially difficult to discover and disrupt (Muraszkiewicz et al. 2015). A lack of data on trafficking networks' financial flows and internal logistics makes implementing these models difficult. But law enforcement, reports by non-governmental organizations, and survivor testimonies can help restore these processes. By placing Kazakhstan within broader criminological frameworks through a multi-model theoretical approach, this study enhances its analytical depth. The enterprise and hierarchical models shed light on trafficking networks' organizational dynamics, while the economic model explains traffickers' cost-benefit calculations. Together, these perspectives provide a critical analytical lens that is essential for shaping targeted policy responses and coordinating international efforts to end trafficking and safeguard vulnerable people.

Legislative Changes

In 2022, Kazakhstan's Minister of Internal Affairs, Marat Akhmetzhanov, noted that human trafficking had gone unaddressed for years, resulting in far more victims of labor, sexual, and other forms of exploitation than open criminal cases (Shakshina 2022). He further noted that the absence of a separate law establishing authorized bodies and a legal framework to combat human trafficking was also very damaging. Despite the long history of the problem of human trafficking in Kazakhstani society, it was only in early 2023 that the president proposed adopting a special law to protect and provide proper assistance to victims of human trafficking (Bassarova 2023). In May 2024, following a discussion during the second reading, deputies from the Majilis (lower house of Parliament) of Kazakhstan adopted Law No. 110-VIII "On Combating Human Trafficking," along with all accompanying amendments, and sent it to the Senate for consideration (Institute of Legislation and Legal Information 2024).

In June 2024, Astana hosted a series of consultations within the Human Dimension Dialogue Platform, a consultative and advisory body created by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the implementation of UN recommendations for eliminating all forms of discrimination against women, combating domestic violence, and combating human trafficking was discussed (Sakenova 2024)). One of the speakers, a Majilis deputy, stated that the Law No. 110-VIII "On Combating Trafficking in Persons" contained more than a hundred amendments based on recommendations from international and national human rights organizations, civil society representatives, and experts. Another speaker, the Head of the Department for Combating Organized Crime in the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan, emphasized the draft law's significant contribution. In particular,

the law includes definitions aligned with international standards and enshrines the roles and responsibilities of specific state bodies authorized to combat human trafficking, ensuring the protection of victims' rights—including those of minors and foreigners.

The adoption of this law may have a qualitative impact on the national approach and the overall effectiveness of the state's administration to combat human trafficking. Although such a law could have been adopted much earlier, the very fact that this draft legislation is now under consideration in the Senate is a positive development for Kazakhstani society.

The importance of Law No. 110-VIII is evident from recommendations made to the government of Kazakhstan by the US Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (US Department of State 2023). These recommendations emphasized strengthening measures to identify victims among the most vulnerable segments of the population, particularly foreigners, and ensuring their referral for assistance at the earliest opportunity. Accordingly, the draft law includes provisions requiring the competence of the authorized bodies to refer trafficking victims for assistance and social services (Pankratova 2024). Also, according to Article 2, the law extends to any person identified as a victim of trafficking in Kazakhstan, including Kazakhstan citizens, foreigners who are either permanently or temporarily staying in the country, and stateless individuals.

The US Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons also recommended actively investigating crimes, including potential cases of forced labor, particularly in remote areas (US Department of State 2023). In response, the draft law introduces the concept of a "potential victim of trafficking in human beings," defined as a person in a vulnerable situation due to factors such as dependency, young or old age, disability, or lack of parental care, among others—conditions that individually or cumulatively create a risk of trafficking. Within the law, a potential victim has the right to apply for official identification as a victim of human trafficking, which enables them to access information about their rights and obligations, apply for social services, receive legal assistance, receive guaranteed free medical care, and so on (Mikhnevych et al. 2023; Sopelnyk 2025).

In addition, the provisions of the draft law detail the essence of other key concepts, including "trafficking in human beings," "unified system for combating trafficking in human beings," "authorized bodies in the field of combating trafficking in human beings," "rehabilitation of victims of trafficking in human beings," and "identification of victims of trafficking in human beings," among others. Importantly, and as was recommended by the US Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (US Department of State 2023), the law also stipulates that authorized bodies, within the framework of their competencies, should develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities of students on the prevention of human trafficking as part of their educational process.

International Cooperation

In addition to governmental efforts at the national level, representatives of Kazakhstan have also actively participated and co-operated with international partners. In 2003 the EU launched the Border Management Programme in Central Asia. An early objective of this initiative was to create an effective border management infrastructure, but over time activities expanded to involve other agencies working directly or indirectly in the areas of customs regulation, agriculture, drug control, and so on.

As of 2024, the tenth phase of the Border Management Programme in Central Asia was underway, pursuing the following objectives: apply international security standards, best practices, and an integrated border management model wherever possible; increase the efficiency of offence detection procedures; coordinate investigations between law enforcement agencies in the Central Asian region; harmonize all practices, from institutional to legislative, to facilitate legal trade flows across borders (Shcherbatiuk, Kuras, and Sokur 2024); and improve living conditions in border areas through economic development and respect for gender equality of vulnerable populations. The last objective was especially important given concerns raised by the above-mentioned national and international organizations and experts about the weak protection of vulnerable groups, particularly in rural and border areas.

A training workshop on using the latest digital technologies to combat human trafficking was held in Almaty from May 28 to 30, 2024 (International Centre for Migration Policy Development 2024a), and was made possible by the Border Management Programme in Central Asia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The workshop's main activities aimed to develop the skills of Kazakhstan's law enforcement agencies to apply digital and other modern technologies to the detection of cases and their further investigation. Other topics covered included current legislation in Kazakhstan related to combating human trafficking, the basics of analysis, data collection and analysis in the context of fragmented information, investigative techniques in the era of digitalization, and systematized processing and maintenance of data collected online.

As part of efforts to strengthen cross-border cooperation, training was also conducted in April 2024 to improve the skills of law enforcement officers involved in the investigation of human trafficking cases in border areas (International Centre for Migration Policy Development 2024b). This is crucial because border areas remain strategically important for traffickers, as geographical proximity to other countries make the movement of victims across borders less visible. The intervention focused on working with police officers and academic staff in border areas, particularly those who had only recently begun working or had minimal work experience.

Another international initiative—an EU-funded project launched in June

2023—aims to improve migrant protection and migration management in selected Silk Road and Central Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (International Centre for Migration Policy Development 2023). It is a comprehensive initiative focused on preventing irregular migration, smuggling of migrants, and human trafficking.

Headlines in mass media periodically appear about the theft of not only women and men, but also children (*Liter* 2024). In 2023, the international organization Winrock International launched a three-year project aimed at improving the detection of child victims of trafficking (Winrock International 2023). The reason for implementing this project in Kazakhstan, specifically, is that it is the largest country in the Central Asian region and serves as both a transit and destination point for migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The increase in internal and international migration, and the consequent rise in trafficking risks, is largely a result of economic shocks, first from the COVID-19 pandemic and then from Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Pasyeka and Vyshnevskaya 2024). These and other factors have led to many illegal migrants—including children—entering Kazakhstan on a daily basis without proper documentation. During the implementation of Winrock International's project, its representatives actively cooperated with key state structures that directly or indirectly influence the problem of human trafficking—namely, the Committee of the Ministry of Education on Child Protection, the Commission on Human Rights under the Administration of the President of Kazakhstan, the Ministries of Health, Labour, and Social Protection, and other executive authorities. Geographically, the project took place in the Turkestan, Kyzylorda, Almaty, Zhambyl, and Zhetysay regions.

In recent years, states such as the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine have experienced significant surges in irregular migration, often facilitated by transnational trafficking networks (Galikhanov et al. 2024; Kudayberdieva 2024). According to the Migration Data Portal (2024), migration flows from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in 2023 rose by approximately 32%, 44%, and 53%, respectively, indicating an escalation of the economic and social pressures that drive undocumented cross-border movement (Global Data Institute n.d.). In Kazakhstan alone, an estimated 3.5 million migrants entered during the fourth quarter of 2023, including over 746,000 individuals from Kyrgyzstan and large numbers from Uzbekistan. These movements are not solely the result of conflict-related displacement, as in the case of Ukrainian migrants, but they also stem from structural factors across Central Asia, including widespread poverty, weak institutional frameworks, and a lack of viable employment.

In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the nation's acute dependence on remittances, in conjunction with chronic rural unemployment and a shortage of low-skilled

job opportunities, compels many individuals—particularly women and young people—to engage in informal labor migration (Dyussenova, Darkenov, and Abzhapparova 2024). This dynamic increases their susceptibility to exploitation in Russia, Kazakhstan, and other countries in the region. In Tajikistan, although the number of migrant workers abroad declined from over one million in 2022, continued reliance on informal and unregulated labor channels contributes to significant vulnerability. In Uzbekistan, men and women frequently but irregularly migrate to Kazakhstan and Russia to work in agriculture and construction, while the persistence of child labor in cotton harvesting reflects entrenched risks of forced labor (Efremov 2025; Dzhuzha, Vitalii, and Valerii 2025). These root causes—including economic insecurity, gender inequality, limited access to legal employment and social protection, porous borders, and insufficient consular support—collectively create a highly conducive environment for trafficking. A comprehensive regional study concluded that these interrelated structural conditions underpin organized exploitation, with women, children, and low-skilled migrants facing the greatest risks (Coulter et al. 2020). Case reports further indicate that Uzbekistani and Tajikistani migrants transiting through Kyrgyzstan are often subjected to extortion and forced labor, particularly in construction and agricultural sectors.

In the south of Kazakhstan, particularly in areas closest to the borders with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, which attract illegal migrants, the above projects, programs, and activities have proven extremely useful for improving public administration and raising public awareness of human trafficking. This is important because the situation with human trafficking in Kazakhstan remains tense (Table 1).

The information in Table 1 indicates the intensification of efforts by state authorities to counter human trafficking. At the same time, this may also reflect the exemplary mobilization of state authorities following the President of Kazakhstan’s 2023 speech stressing the importance of addressing human trafficking. However, despite concerns about the large influx of migrants into Kazakhstan’s border regions, the overall crime rate in these regions is, on average,

Table 1. Number of Criminal Offences Related to Trafficking in Persons in Kazakhstan

	2021	2022	2023
Kidnapping	6	3	36
Human trafficking	0	0	8
Trafficking in minors	0	7	23
Involvement of a minor in prostitution	0	0	5

Source: Committee on Legal Statistics and Special Accounts of the General Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2024).

lower than in central or northern Kazakhstan (Ranking.kz 2024). Nevertheless, it remains essential for the government of Kazakhstan to continue hearings on the adoption of Law No. 110-VIII “On Combating Trafficking in Persons.” Only after this process, and then several years of implementation, will it be possible to assess the degree of understanding, involvement, and transformation of public administration efforts to combat human trafficking.

International conferences on human trafficking have been held regularly in Kazakhstan, as in the wider region, with participation from both government representatives from Central Asian states and representatives of international human rights organizations. These conferences have focused on diverse aspects of human trafficking; at the 2023 meeting, for example, the theme was the qualitative and effective rehabilitation and reintegration of victims of trafficking. In addition, to better address trafficking and ensure safe migration, conference participants agreed to renew their commitments to strengthen both national and transnational mechanisms for the identification, repatriation, and social reintegration of trafficked persons.

In terms of international experience in combating human trafficking, in 1977, at the invitation of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation in the US, representatives from eleven state criminal investigation agencies met informally to discuss concerns and opportunities for cooperation. The meeting focused on improving aspects of mutual interest regarding regional management and operations of criminal investigative agencies. Its outcome was a general agreement to establish a unified association—the Association of State Criminal Investigative Agencies—whose members could share information and experiences useful in addressing problems of state-level criminal investigative agencies.

In 2016, the Association published a toolkit for developing a law enforcement strategy to combat human trafficking, intended to assist states in creating effective anti-trafficking strategies (Association of State Criminal Investigative Agencies 2016). According to the toolkit, the basis of quality strategies is ongoing training to ensure understanding and effective investigation of human trafficking cases. Individual agencies indirectly involved in combating human trafficking can also benefit from training in basic counter-trafficking elements, such as understanding the definition of human trafficking, types of trafficking, national legislation, the importance of co-operation with non-governmental organizations, and how to provide victims with correct contact information for specialized authorities.

Training courses are actively developed by the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers, an interagency training body for more than a hundred US federal law enforcement agencies. One program, the “Human Trafficking Awareness Training,” offers participants an overview of the current state of human trafficking (Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers training n.d.). The training includes detailed discussion of state federal laws, as well as case studies, videos, and training activities. A prerequisite for participation is that applicants

must be federal, local, or state officers, agents in law enforcement, or other individuals involved in law enforcement-sponsored organizations.

Florida Statute No. 943.17297 requires all law enforcement officers to complete four hours of training on identifying and investigating human trafficking as part of basic recruit training. The preamble to the “Human Trafficking Detection and Investigation” training course emphasizes that victims can be of any age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, and that it is the responsibility of law enforcement officers to know how to detect human trafficking and investigate such crimes during daily patrols. The training course consists of three modules that cover the definition of human trafficking, acts of force, fraud and coercion, the most common locations of human trafficking, and indicators of sexual and forced labor trafficking. Importantly, this training course is publicly available and can be completed by anyone. To assess learning, the course incorporates multiple choice questions, such as this one: “Citizen A came to the US to work, but his employers confiscated his passport, phone, credit cards and since then he has had to work for free.” Answer options are as follows: (a) example of force and fraud; (b) example of coercion and force (correct); or (c) example of fraud and coercion.

For the government of Kazakhstan, such practices could be effective in raising awareness among law enforcement officials about the extent, causes, and methods of interacting with trafficking victims, as well as improving interagency coordination to identify trafficking actors.

Global Experience

The government of Kazakhstan should also analyze the experience of implementing best practices in combating human trafficking in Germany. Despite the fact that the German government has faced a large influx of refugees in recent years (Keita and Dempster 2020), which could have negatively affected trafficking statistics, only 0.6 people per thousand population in Germany live in conditions of modern slavery (Walk Free 2023).

As early as 1997, Germany established the Federal Working Group on Trafficking in Human Beings to exchange information, analyze problems, develop principles, and take joint action to address trafficking issues (European Commission n.d.). Joint decision-making became one of the foundations of effective state management in combating human trafficking, as the structure of the working group included representatives of the Federal Criminal Police Office and Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, and one representative each from the Ministries of Food and Agriculture, Justice, and Social Affairs, the Federal Association for Non-State Welfare, and the German Institute for Human Rights. Additional measures to create new working groups, improve old ones, and modernize anti-trafficking strategies were taken on a regular basis in subsequent years until the National Action Plan against Labour Exploitation and Forced Labour was announced in September 2023.

Human trafficking remains one of the most pressing and difficult problems to address in the 21st Century. However, developing governments can and should draw on best practices and legislative frameworks from states that have already achieved results in combatting human trafficking. Moreover, trafficking in persons must be addressed in a holistic manner. Improving socioeconomic conditions, especially among vulnerable populations, and tackling corruption—identified by many representatives of international organizations as one of the main causes and enablers of human trafficking—are particularly important in this context.

Discussion

The study's empirical results show that Kazakhstan has a complex, multi-layered trafficking environment with vulnerabilities that are institutional, structural, and personal. The existence of more than 200,000 trafficking victims in a nation of about 20 million people is alarming, particularly when compared with nations like Bangladesh or Nepal that have larger populations but report comparatively fewer cases (Zimmerman et al. 2023). This disparity supports the survey's findings, in which 20% of participants indicated personal or familial familiarity with trafficking instances. It also suggests possible underreporting, inadequate detection methods, and differing definitions across jurisdictions. Given that silence and fear of condemnation were recurring themes among survey respondents, the results highlight the urgent need to strengthen institutional capacity for victim identification and expand public awareness initiatives to combat the stigma and silence surrounding victims.

Consistent with previous global studies, the results of this study indicate that women and girls are disproportionately affected by trafficking in Kazakhstan, accounting for over 70% of victims—well above the Central Asian average of 60% (Al-Tammemi et al. 2023; Fabbri et al. 2023). The prevalence of female victims from economically and socially vulnerable groups supports previous findings that precarious employment and gendered poverty are significant risk factors. The results from this study also underscore the discrepancy between the high number of victims and the relatively low number of criminal cases, an institutional weakness that is also present in Chile (Rojas, Tapia, and Rodríguez 2020). This disparity highlights the systemic inability of law enforcement and prosecuting agencies to effectively identify and investigate trafficking offences, emphasizing the need for procedural reforms.

A key contribution of this study is its recognition of corruption as a major enabling factor. According to data from Transparency International (2023) and the UNODC (2021), structural corruption in administrative and law enforcement systems enables traffickers to operate with impunity. This aligns with Motseki

and Mofokeng's (2022) findings in the African context and is supported in Kazakhstan by credible claims implicating regional officials in trafficking-related crimes. Survey data from both open-ended questions also reveal public suspicion of institutional complicity, suggesting mistrust of official data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

In addition to corruption, the findings also show that socioeconomic inequality and rural marginalization exacerbate trafficking risks, echoing findings by Gezie et al. (2021). Similar to findings from Ethiopia, Nigeria, and other contexts, respondents from rural and marginalized groups reported greater exposure to trafficking hazards. Notably, while Okereke, Nuhu, and Abdul (2023) found that cross-border trafficking in Nigeria exacerbates regional insecurity, no comparable effect was observed in Kazakhstan's southern regions, despite similarly high rates of cross-border labor movement. This distinction suggests the need for further research on how security infrastructure and regional governance moderate trafficking outcomes.

Beyond corruption and inequality, institutional flaws also exist in Kazakhstan's legal and policy frameworks. Although Law No. 110-VIII "On Combating Trafficking in Persons" has been moved to the Senate for review, years without a comprehensive legislative framework left significant gaps in both victim protection and offender accountability. The lesson that legal enactment must be backed by strong enforcement measures, sufficient money, and ongoing institutional training is reinforced by a comparison with Indonesia's ineffective 2007 legislation (Mangku, Yulianti, and Lasmawan 2022), which lacked enforceable protection mechanisms. The results therefore support the recommendation that the Senate of Kazakhstan rigorously evaluate whether the new law aligns with international norms, especially with regard to interagency collaboration and victim support services.

The function of education in preventing human trafficking is one of the most important novel discoveries (Tymoshenko and Makarenko 2022; Kopan and Melnyk 2024). Younger survey respondents, in particular, noted a lack of awareness about legal protections and signs trafficking. Kazakhstan has only recently included such provisions in its national legislation, yet without defined implementation plans, whereas nations such as the US have incorporated trafficking awareness into school curricula in "high-intensity" risk locations (Salas and Didier 2019). Albert (2022) and Spires (2021) warn, however, that although educational interventions show promise, more empirical research is required to pinpoint best practices and avoid stigmatizing or counterproductive content. Thus, it is crucial to create trauma-informed, evidence-based curricula tailored to local vulnerabilities.

The study's emphasis on law enforcement training also highlights a significant implementation gap. Despite Kazakhstan's numerous training initiatives, which are supported by foreign donors, their scope and viability

remain limited. Security-sector survey respondents indicated a need for more comprehensive and ongoing professional development on victim identification and referral processes. In this regard, the US approach provides a scalable example of integrating trafficking response into regular police work, especially Florida's statutory mandate that all officers receive anti-trafficking training (M Tillyer, Smith, and R Tillyer 2021). Hounmenou and Toepp (2023), however, identify structural disparities in US law enforcement trainings, particularly for officers in remote or rural areas, which are just as pertinent to Kazakhstan's decentralized policing system.

Germany's multi-stakeholder approach, with specialized federal agencies and coordinated advisory bodies, provides an institutional model particularly appropriate for Kazakhstan's administrative system. According to Blanton, Blanton, and Peksen (2020), effective anti-trafficking results depend on interagency cooperation and state capacities. Given Kazakhstan's relatively high GDP in Central Asia (Daryo 2024), the government is well-positioned to finance and institutionalize these mechanisms, including interregional coordination units, digital forensic capabilities, and specialized rehabilitation services. Responses to the survey suggest that victims may feel discouraged from seeking assistance when such resources are unavailable, particularly in rural areas.

The survey findings further support the study's theoretical frameworks. Rational-choice theory explains why traffickers persist in their activities in Kazakhstan in spite of legal prohibitions: their high profitability and low likelihood of being caught create an attractive cost-benefit ratio, particularly where law enforcement is ill-equipped or unwilling to step in. At the same time, the enterprise and hierarchy models help distinguish organized syndicate-based trafficking operations, particularly in border regions, from decentralized trafficking activities like rural labor exploitation. Kazakhstan's trafficking environment exhibits the hybrid operational structures identified by Muraszkiewicz et al. (2015), indicating the necessity of adaptable, data-driven enforcement tactics that can change with the times.

Migration pressures continue to be an important contextual factor. Kazakhstan's vulnerability profile is shaped by migration inflows from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Although there is no evidence linking these migratory flows to increases in violent crime, they do support the informal labor market, which is a breeding ground for exploitation. Crucially, the study's empirical data shows that victims of human trafficking frequently enter Kazakhstan through authorized ports, which aligns with global research (Marburger and Pickover 2020) and highlights the necessity of enhanced border screening. Cooperation with organizations like Winrock International to create child-protection initiatives is commendable but necessitates expansion and sustained funding.

Crucially, the study also shows that Kazakhstan has materially benefited from international cooperation. EU-funded programs like the Border

Management Programme in Central Asia and OSCE have greatly improved law enforcement capacities to operate in remote and dangerous areas. However, as Gibbs, Strohacker, and Schally (2023) point out in the US context, small and rural police stations frequently struggle to access up-to-date resources and maintain continuous training. The same is true in Kazakhstan, where respondents from the south and west of the country emphasized regional differences in training quality.

Anti-trafficking strategies remain poorly integrated into broader socioeconomic and regional development frameworks. The passage of Law No. 110-VIII “On Combating Trafficking in Persons” (2024) is an important step, but its full impact will depend on sustained political will, sufficient funding, and well-thought-out implementation procedures. According to survey respondents, enacting laws alone will not have much long-term impact if underlying socioeconomic problems—such as rural poverty, educational disparities, and limited access to legal work—are not addressed.

The results of this study provide unique empirical evidence from Kazakhstan that supplement previous research. According to the survey, trafficking is pervasive but frequently goes unnoticed, with women, impoverished rural populations, and socially marginalized groups most at risk. Although the policy environment is changing, implementation remains disjointed and uneven. Kazakhstan’s future development will depend on its capacity to institutionalize reforms, professionalize frontline services, and prioritize victim-centered solutions. The success of these initiatives will require enhanced data gathering, increasing public confidence in institutions, and developing international collaborations.

Conclusions

While this study notes that there are millions of victims of human trafficking around the world, it is impossible to establish the exact global figure. In Kazakhstan, the Global Slavery Index (Walk Free 2023) estimated more than 200,000 victims in 2021, representing about 1% of the national population. Data from this study’s survey conducted among Kazakh citizens reinforces the seriousness of the problem: one out of eighty-eight respondents reported being a victim of human trafficking, and approximately 20% had heard about human trafficking cases from their immediate environment or relatives.

It has been established that human trafficking cases are often linked to corruption schemes involving senior political officials and local authorities, as documented by the UNODC and other international human rights organizations. Cases of corruption by political officials or law enforcement agencies have also been documented in Kazakhstan, and even representatives from the lower house of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan have raised doubts about the

reliability of official human trafficking statistics published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan. These governance weaknesses help explain why human trafficking remains pervasive in Kazakhstan and why legislation is critical. For comparison, the US—which passed a law providing protection for victims of trafficking in 2000—reported 3.3 victims of trafficking per thousand population in 2023. In that same year in Kazakhstan, however, there were approximately 11.1 victims of trafficking per thousand population (*ibid.*), highlighting both the scale of the problem and the urgency of reform.

Addressing this challenge, as early as 2023, the President of Kazakhstan proposed the development of a special law to protect victims of trafficking. By May 2024, the lower house of Parliament adopted Law No. 110-VIII “On Combating Trafficking in Persons” in the second reading and submitted it to the Senate for consideration. The provisions of this law align with recommendations from the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the US Department of State, including initiatives to integrate trafficking prevention into education and to strengthen the knowledge of executive authorities about preventing trafficking and protecting victims.

This study’s recommendations for Kazakhstan also draw on analysis of international practices, including Florida state’s legislation that requires every law enforcement officer to complete anti-trafficking training. Moreover, analysis of Germany’s interagency working groups on combatting trafficking, which have been operating since the late 1990s, is also useful to inform the creation of specialized anti-trafficking structures in Kazakhstan at the national level.

This research faced some limitations, most notably the difficulty of obtaining reliable data on human trafficking. This is due to the fact that trafficking in human beings involves a multitude of offences that often remain in the shadows, hidden from government and law enforcement structures. Methodological limitations of the survey-based component must also be acknowledged—with a sample size of eighty-eight and voluntary participation, the survey cannot be considered representative of the general population of Kazakhstan.

Future research on the topic could examine assessments by international non-governmental and human rights organizations following the Senate’s final adoption of Law No. 110-VIII “On Combating Trafficking in Persons.” Comparative studies of anti-trafficking efforts in other post-Soviet states could also provide valuable insight into Kazakhstan’s progress and potential pathways for reform.

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