Enduring Abuse for the Sake of Remittance: The sacrifices of trafficking victims

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Abstract

This article discusses the interrelationship between exploitative practices and financial empowerment of trafficked women. It provides a nuanced understanding of women's motivations for migration and considers the impact of migration on victims and their families. Drawing from three months of observations and 18 qualitative interviews with female victims of trafficking in Malaysia, the article discusses women's perception of financial empowerment and the sacrifice, pain, and suffering they endured in exchange for an exploitative income. The findings revolve around three main themes: (i) the role of domestic violence in contributing to exploitation; (ii) the need for victims to support family as a reason to migrate for work, and (iii) enduring abuse and exploitation to support family and avoid the shame of returning empty-handed. The findings highlight how women are willing to endure various forms of abuse, including exploitation, mistreatment, and harsh working conditions, to provide financial support for their families and how domestic violence often serves to facilitate or render women vulnerable to exploitation

Keywords: trafficked women, exploitation, trafficking, abuse, unpaid wages, Malaysia

Suggested citation: H B A Hamid, 'Enduring Abuse for the Sake of Remittance: The sacrifices of trafficking victims', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 24, 2025, pp. 41-56, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201225243

Introduction

Human trafficking is a complex phenomenon that is often influenced by social, economic, cultural, and other factors. Many of these factors are specific to individual trafficking patterns and to the countries in which they occur. For example, poverty, unemployment, armed conflict, corruption, gender inequality, and weak law enforcement can drive individuals to seek better opportunities abroad, often making them susceptible to being trafficked. Cultural norms and

family expectations can also compel individuals to migrate to work, as they feel obligated to support their families through remittances, even if this means having to endure exploitative working conditions.

To understand this phenomenon, this article explores the lived experiences of women who were exploited for their sexual or physical labour in Malaysia. Based on interviews with 18 women accommodated in a shelter for victims of trafficking in Selangor, Malaysia, it analyses the causal impact of trafficking on themselves and their family members. It also demonstrates the reasons for the women's migration and their hopes and aspirations in life.

Trafficking in Malaysia

Malaysia has been categorised as a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking.[1] Most trafficking victims originate from Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, India, Thailand, China, the Philippines, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Vietnam. According to the 2024 Unites States *Trafficking in Persons Report*, in 2023, the Malaysian government registered 165 confirmed trafficking victims; 29 exploited for sexual purposes and 136 exploited in forced labour.[2]

There are a range of exploitative purposes for which individuals are trafficked to Malaysia.[3] Women and children are often trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced labour, and domestic servitude. Many of them endure poor living conditions or debt bondage, or are unpaid or underpaid by their employers, employment agents, or informal labour recruiters. There are also problems of delayed wages, forceful termination, repatriation without receiving end-of-service benefits, delayed access to justice regarding wages, and arbitrary deductions from salaries.[4] Some women are trafficked for sex work by their own family, friends, and acquaintances. There are also instances where women are trafficked for the purpose of delivering babies who are then sold illegally to adoptive parents.

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1 Australian Government, *DFAT Country Information Report: Malaysia*, DFAT, June 2024, https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/malaysia-dfat-country-information-report-24-june-2024.pdf.

2 US Department of State, *2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Malaysia*, US DOS, Washington, 2024.

3 I M Iskandar, '67 Kids Rescued from Traffickers in Past 5 Years', *New Straits Times*, 18 November 2023, https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/11/979576/67-kids-rescued-traffickers-past-5-years.

4 M Javaid, *'How Can We Work Without Wages?' Salary Abuses Facing Migrant Workers Ahead of Qatar's FIFA World Cup 2022*, Human Rights Watch, August 2020, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/08/qatar0820_web_3.pdf.

Migrant domestic workers are particularly susceptible to exploitation. As of October 2023, there were 94,000 migrant domestic workers in Malaysia, the majority of whom are women. An estimated 69% were from Indonesia, 26% from Philippines, and 1% each from Vietnam and Cambodia.[5] A 2022 study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that 29% of migrant domestic workers were trapped in forced labour situations in Malaysia, compared to 7% and 4% in Singapore and Thailand, respectively.[6]

Men, women, and children who have been 'rescued' from their traffickers in Malaysia are detained in shelter homes, forced to undergo judicial processing, and expected to adhere to various rules and regulations before they are repatriated. These shelter homes are administered by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (Ministry of Women), and the officers working there have the authority to protect and guard the victims. At present, there are ten shelters for trafficked persons: seven for women, two for children, and one for men.[7] Trafficked persons are given an initial 21-day interim protection order (for suspected victims; IPO) and a subsequent 90-day protection order (for certified victims; PO) from the courts. The period of detention may be extended by the courts to facilitate the prosecution's case against the traffickers, since the prosecutors mainly rely on the cooperation and testimony of trafficked persons.[8]

Economic and Familial Influences on Trafficking

Trafficking is influenced by multiple determinants which vary across contexts and forms of exploitation. Some of the common factors are local conditions that make people want to migrate in search of better conditions such as poverty, oppression, human rights abuses, lack of social or economic opportunity, or dangers from conflict or instability.[9] According to Kiss and Zimmerman, social and economic inequalities are the main structural drivers of trafficking and exploitation, and

5 J Low, 'Migrant Domestic Workers in Malaysia: Forced Labour and its Catalysts', *New Naratif*, 30 November 2023, https://newnaratif.com/migrant-domestic-workers-in-malaysia-forced-labour-and-its-catalysts.

6 International Labour Organization (ILO), 'Study Highlights Forced Labour amongst Migrant Domestic Workers in Southeast Asia', ILO, 15 June 2023, https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/study-highlights-forced-labour-amongst-migrant-domestic-workers-southeast.

7 H B A Hamid, 'Shelter Homes – Safe Haven or Prison?', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 20, 2023, pp. 111–134, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201223207.

8 *Ibid.*

9 UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons*, United Nations, New York, 2012, p. 430.

harms can occur throughout all stages of the exploitation process.[10] In some cases, families find themselves stuck in a cycle of poverty due to inter-generational debt, which makes it difficult to survive and earn a decent income. Because many families in developing countries live in abject poverty, traffickers often emphasise to victims' families how the money will help them to survive. Therefore, labour migration is conventionally viewed as economically benefiting the family members who are left behind through remittances.[11] Some traffickers also give advance money to families before their family member migrates to work abroad. While this advance may provide certainty and confidence to the families that their loved ones are in good hands and will be able to earn a decent income to support them, it is considered a debt that needs to be paid off by the victim once they start working. Often the debt increases as traffickers force victims to pay inflated food and living costs as well as 'fines' for alleged violations.[12]

According to Démurger,[13] the migration of a family member who is the main breadwinner may bring additional income through remittances, which can support household consumption and expenses. In some cases, traffickers allow victims to send small remittances to their spouses and family members to make the victims compliant and avoid raising suspicion among the family members.[14] Although such remittances can be helpful, the victim's absence also places a heavy burden on the remaining family members who must take over the duties and responsibilities of the main caregiver. This situation can impact children, for example, by increasing their risk of dropping out of school, delaying school progression, disrupting family life which can lead to poor diets, and increasing psychological problems.[15]

In countries like Indonesia and Myanmar, migration is the only viable alternative for women in communities coping with poverty, unemployment, failed marriages, and family obligations.[16] For single mothers with children, the need to migrate

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10 L Kiss and C Zimmerman, 'Human Trafficking and Labor Exploitation: Toward Identifying, Implementing, and Evaluating Effective Responses', *PLOS Medicine*, vol. 16, issue 1, 2019, p. e1002740, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002740.

11 S Démurger, 'Migration and Families Left Behind', *IZA World of Labour*, vol. 144, 2015, pp. 1–10, https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.144.

12 R Surtees and L S Johnson, *Trafficking Victim Identification: A Practitioner Guide*, Regional Support Office of the Bali Process, Bangkok, and Nexus Institute, Washington, 2021.

13 Démurger.

14 UNODC, *Anti-human Trafficking Manual for Criminal Justice Practitioners. Module 4: Control Methods in Trafficking in Persons*, United Nations, New York, 2009.

15 Démurger.

16 International Labour Organization, 'Sex Industry Assuming Massive Proportions in Southeast Asia', ILO, 19 August 1998, https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/sex-industry-assuming-massive-proportions-southeast-asia.

to work and earn a decent income is even more pressing. Household heads in Indonesia have become aware of the income potential in Malaysia and encourage their daughters to migrate.[17] Prospective migrants usually acquire loans from their relatives, friends, or intermediaries involved in the migration process, so they can afford to travel.[18]

In most cases, trafficking victims are fearful of the authorities and do not want to be rescued because they want to continue working and support their family through regular or occasional remittances.[19] Although some women complain about being abused and exploited, some may have normalised these experiences, internalised negative self-worth, or have low expectations of themselves.[20] Consequently, women become exposed to 'everyday violence' and develop a sense of inferiority, which can keep them in a situation of exploitation.[21] 'Everyday violence', according to Stanko, relates to how women manage potentially dangerous situations on a daily basis and experience violence as a common occurrence. As a result, women often do not realise that they have been abused or harmed because they have become tolerant of the abuse they face.[22] By internalising 'everyday violence', women do not always regard themselves as victims, even though they have been objectively harmed.[23] Their reliance on income from trafficking for survival sustains the cycle of exploitation.[24]

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17 R Elmhirst, 'Labour Politics in Migrant Communities: Ethnicity and Women's Activism in Tangerang, Indonesia', in R Elmhirst and R Saptari (eds.), *Labour in Southeast Asia. Local Processes in a Globalised World*, Routledge, Oxon, 2004, pp. 387–406.

18 A Kaur, 'Order (and Disorder) at the Border: Mobility, International Labour Migration and Border Controls in Southeast Asia', in A Kaur and I Metcalfe (eds.), *Mobility, Labour Migration and Border Controls in Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2006, pp. 23–51, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230503465_3.

19 G Forbes, 'Politics of Rescue, Voices of the Trafficked', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 51, pp. 44–45, 2016.

20 J Dodsworth, 'Sexual Exploitation, Selling and Swapping sex: Victimhood', *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 23, issue 3, 2014, pp. 185–199, https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2282.

21 E A Stanko, *Everyday Violence: How Women and Men Experience Sexual and Physical Danger*, Pandora, London, 1990.

22 V Samarasinghe, 'Nepal: Young, Female and Vulnerable', in *Female Sex Trafficking in Asia: The Resilience of Patriarchy in a Changing World*, Routledge, New York, 2008.

23 B Höijer, 'The Discourse of Global Compassion: The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, issue 4, 2004, pp. 513–531, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443704044215.

24 R Klabbers *et al.*, 'Human Trafficking Risk Factors, Health Impacts, and Opportunities for Intervention in Uganda: A Qualitative Analysis', *Global Health Research and Policy*, vol. 8, issue 1, 2023, pp. 52, https://doi.org/10.1186/s41256-023-00332-z.

Trafficked persons are also generally unaware of organisations that can offer assistance, particularly if they are in a foreign country. Some are unable to speak the local language, restricted in terms of movement, and not familiar with the locality of the place where they reside. The lack of awareness of resources, fear of negative consequences, restrictions on movement, and the dependence on the trafficker and their income often prevent victims from seeking help. Victims may also fear retribution by the trafficker and other negative repercussions of leaving a situation of exploitation.[25] Such repercussions include not being believed by the authorities, being accused of criminal activities, shaming, and the prolonged judicial processes, all of which hinders them from being immediately repatriated. All these factors underscore the complexity of the human trafficking problem and demonstrate how trafficking is influenced by multiple determinants, which may vary across contexts and forms of exploitation.

Methodology

This paper is based on interviews with 18 trafficked migrant women held in a shelter in Selangor, Malaysia, conducted between 15 April and 15 July 2024. The questions covered women's reasons for migrating to Malaysia, their relationship with their families, remittances they received while working, and their experiences of living in the shelter. I also interviewed 3 shelter officers to gain a better understanding of the women's problems, their protection processes, and the challenges they face in their day-to-day interactions with the women. All 18 trafficked women and 3 professionals agreed to be interviewed voluntarily and signed a consent form. Although there were 38 women in the shelter during the time of the interviews, I selected only 18 because some of the women were rescued in groups during the same raid and had been working in the same place, which meant that they would have similar accounts except for their backgrounds. Most of them were also of the same nationality. Since I wanted to obtain a diverse sample of participants to identify the nuances of their accounts, I chose only two or three women from groups rescued from the same workplace.

Ethics approval was obtained from Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur prior to the interviews. I also obtained a written and verbal permission from the Director-General of the Ministry of Women to access two shelter homes and conduct interviews with trafficked women and shelter wardens. Given my reputation as an anti-trafficking scholar and my previous experience interviewing trafficked women, the process of attaining access was somewhat easier than the first time. However, permission was only granted after the Director-General was convinced that the outcomes of the research would not be reported to the media and the research would be conducted based on the 'do no harm' principle, as contained

25 *Ibid.*

in the World Health Organization's guiding principles for interviewing trafficked women.[26] These principles were also used as a guide in drafting the interview questions.

The trafficked women are referred to by pseudonyms. They originated from Indonesia (13), Myanmar (3), India (1), and Malaysia (1), and their ages ranged from 19 to 44. Fourteen were trafficked for domestic work or cleaning, three into the sex industry, and one was forced to sell her baby. All except for one were rescued by the police from private dwellings throughout Peninsular Malaysia. One of the women with her newborn baby was rescued from an immigration office in Klang Valley.

I interviewed all eighteen participants in Malay, Indonesian, or English. In addition to the interviews, I spent 14 days in the shelter home to observe the situation and learn about the women's lives in the shelter.[27] Participant observation has been used in a variety of disciplines as a tool for collecting data about people, processes, and cultures in qualitative research.[28] Through participant observation, researchers learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities.[29] In this way, I was able to learn about women's day-to-day routines and understand the rules and regulations of the shelter as well as how women responded to them.

I analysed the data obtained from the interviews using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data which offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data.[30] This method can provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. The analysis was used to explore and understand women's perceptions of financial empowerment, including the intricate details about the non-payment or under-payment of wages to which they were subjected. It also highlights how women choose to remain in situations of trafficking and exploitation due to the pressure to support their families.

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26 C Zimmerman, *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women*, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2003, p. 4.

27 For more info on the living conditions in the shelter, see Hamid, 2023.

28 B B Kawulich, 'Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 6, issue 2, 2005, pp. 43–70, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.2.466.

29 *Ibid*.

30 V Braun and V Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2006, pp. 77–101, http://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Findings

The findings of the study reveal several key factors associated with family that can contribute to a woman's migration and exploitation experience. The data demonstrates three main themes: (i) domestic violence creates conditions that can facilitate or contribute to exploitation; (ii) the need to support family is a key reason for women to migrate for work; iii) women subsequently endure abuse and exploitation to support family and avoid the shame of returning empty-handed. These factors can combine to prolong women's experiences of exploitation or render them vulnerable to further exploitation.

Domestic Violence and Exploitation

Across the world, poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality lead men to assert their masculinity through violent means,[31] including through trafficking and other forms of violence against women. According to the International Organization for Migration, adults are often recruited into situations of trafficking by an intimate partner or family members.[32] A substantial proportion of trafficking cases involve persons with intimacy, bonds of trust, and familial ties. Lovers or spouses, for example, can sell or force young women or girls to migrate because they are in a superior position or a position of trust. This puts women at risk of being trapped in a cycle of human trafficking, violence, and exploitation.[33]

One such example is Rose, a 32-year-old Malaysian woman. Rose was exploited by her boyfriend for the purpose of selling her babies. She was unemployed and heavily dependent on her 63-year-old boyfriend for food, shelter, money, and emotional support. Rose was arrested together with her newborn baby while trying to arrange for a passport to travel abroad to sell her baby. Her boyfriend and two other individuals—a local man and a Vietnamese woman who were believed to be the potential buyers—were also arrested. Rose was upset about what happened and said:

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31 Council of Europe, 'What Causes Gender-based Violence?', CoE, n.d., retrieved 6 April 2025, https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/what-causes-gender-based-violence.

32 L Puigvert *et al.*, 'A Systematic Review of Family and Social Relationships: Implications for Sex Trafficking Recruitment and Victimisation', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, vol. 11, issue 4, 2021, pp. 534–550, https://doi.org/10.1332/204674321X16358719475186.

33 S Pandey, 'Trafficking of Children for Prostitution in West Bengal: A Qualitative Study', *The Anthropologist*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2014, pp. 591–598.

> *I have three children with my boyfriend and that was my third child. My boyfriend had already sold my other two babies for 12,000 ringgit[34] each. I didn't want to sell my babies, but my boyfriend said that I cannot take care of my own babies because I have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). I was only given 500 ringgit for each of my babies. My boyfriend used to beat me each time I ask[ed] for money.*

In most circumstances, victims of domestic trafficking would prefer to return and live in their own houses, but in Rose's case, her mother refused to allow her to return home, saying that she was unable to care and give adequate attention to Rose.

When asked about the whereabouts of her boyfriend and her feelings about him, Rose said:

> *I love him very much even though he beats me. The police have caught him. He loved me very much and I don't know what to do now. I am under medication, so I am always in a daze.*

A protection officer named Ms Rayd (pseudonym) said:

> *Rose's boyfriend is notorious for selling babies. He impregnates women in Thailand and sells the babies for profits.*

Rose's story demonstrates the overlap of domestic violence and exploitation, highlighting how an offender uses a close relationship with a vulnerable woman to facilitate his exploitative behaviour.

Another example comes from Win-Win from Myanmar who also disclosed experiencing domestic violence at the hands of her boyfriend. Her story highlights how the instability of domestic violence can render women vulnerable to exploitation:

> *My boyfriend and I worked at a plastic factory and he used to beat me every day for petty reasons. I complained to my employer about his beatings and he terminated my boyfriend from work. My boyfriend then worked as a welder in Ipoh but was later involved in an accident. He fractured his left leg and could not walk without support. I had to go to Ipoh and help him out. I worked in a bakery to support him and my children. He kept*

[34] Although the women refer to different periods of time, for informational purposes, on 1 June 2024, the exchange rate of 1 US dollar was approximately 4.70 Malaysian ringgits; see 'Currency Table: MYR — Malaysian Ringgit', *Xe.com*, retrieved 27 February 2025, https://www.xe.com/currencytables/?from=MYR&date=2024-06-01.

> *blaming me for his misfortune and continued beating me. I could not stand the abuse and decided to run away from him. That's when I contacted my friend who offered me to work as a waitress in Puchong but ended up being deceived, exploited, and raped by my manager.*

The above cases illustrate gender stereotypes and cultural norms which are often used to justify violence against women. Men are always presumed and accepted to be aggressive, controlling, and dominant, while women are seen as docile, meek, and subservient. These norms can become culturally ingrained attitudes that lead to high rates of abusive relationships, including exploitation.

The Need to Support Family as the Motivation for Migration

The vast majority of women interviewed (n=17) stated that the main purpose of their migration was to earn a decent income and support their families back home. For example, Awi from Paletwa, Myanmar, said:

> *I came to Malaysia because I was not earning enough money in Myanmar. There is also an ongoing war in my country. I needed to support my family, and I contacted an agent to find jobs in Malaysia.*

For Paite, war, floods, unemployment, and death of family members prompted her to migrate to Malaysia to support her family:

> *I am 26 years old from Kyataw, Myanmar, married, and have a daughter back home. I used to work at a hair salon near my village and earned 182 ringgit, which is not enough to support my family. Life is difficult back home. There was a massive flood recently which destroyed a big area of my village, many of us lost our jobs. My husband, father, and brother were killed by the Junta army, and I [was] left to fend for my family. I heard that there are many Burmese working in Malaysia and that's why I decided to migrate to Malaysia. My daughter is growing up, and I need to support her education fees.*

Similarly, Sarina, aged 37, migrated to Malaysia to support her mother and 12-year-old daughter. She said:

> *I earned very little in Indonesia selling lontong [rice cakes in banana leaves] with my cousin, about 223 ringgit a month. I migrated to Malaysia because I wanted to support my mother and my daughter's school expenses. I worked as a cleaner with a company for four months and have not been paid my salary. I work[ed] for 12 to 13 hours a day, and I did not have a day rest. I am very sad because I feel like a failed mother to my daughter.*

Win–Win, aged 30 from Kyauktaw, Myanmar, was trafficked and raped by her manager before she was rescued by the police. Win-Win has two children in Myanmar and one child in Malaysia who is currently living with her boyfriend. She migrated to Malaysia in 2023 because of the civil unrest and to earn a better income, because her earnings in Myanmar were not enough to support her family. Win–Win said:

> *I arrived in Malaysia on 14 July 2023 with the help of an agent. I do not have any passport, and I entered Malaysia illegally on foot from the Thailand border through the jungle. I earned about 900 ringgit per month, and I used to remit money to my family back home... I had to work and support [my boyfriend] and my daughter.*

Another participant, Awi, said:

> *After being discharged from the hospital in April 2023, I accepted an offer to work as a waitress in Puchong with a salary of 1,600 ringgit. When I arrived at the workplace, I found that it was not a restaurant but a newly opened pub. After I entered the pub, I was not allowed to go out and had to obey to the boss's orders. I was asked to be a GRO [guest relations officer/ bar hostess] in a pub and was not paid any wages until I was rescued by the police. I don't have any money now and I owe my family money. Once I am out of this shelter, I will have to work and earn enough money to pay my debts before I can return home.*

As illustrated above, women often migrate to support their families and provide financial stability in the face of poverty, war, or the loss of loved ones. However, this familial responsibility also becomes a double-edged sword. For example, women such as Win-Win and Elizabeth migrated to Malaysia to provide for their children and support their families financially, but their journeys led to exploitation and abuse. Win-Win's story in particular underscores the lengths to which women are willing to go in order to migrate illegally and endure sexual exploitation to fulfil family duties.

The interviews reveal that the family plays a critical and often complex role in motivating women to migrate, contributing to both their vulnerability and the choices they make. It illustrates how deeply ingrained familial obligations can lead women into precarious situations, because they prioritise the welfare of their loved ones over their own safety. This sense of responsibility can make women more susceptible to exploitation, as they may feel trapped in abusive situations or forced to endure harsh working conditions to send remittances home.

Supporting Family as a Reason for Enduring Abuse and Exploitation

Once in Malaysia, traffickers often control victims through threat and economic abuse, which includes withholding or underpayment of wages, or debt bondage. In some cases, traffickers or employers physically abuse their victims to silence or instil fear in them. In this study, 17 of the 18 women reported some form of wage abuse by their employers, such as unpaid overtime, arbitrary deductions, and delayed, unpaid, or withheld wages. Some also reported severe physical abuse, passport confiscation, threats, and limited freedom of movement. However, many women put up with these situations because of the need to earn money to support their families. Many also used various coping mechanisms and hoped that their employers would pay their salaries or outstanding wages.

This is demonstrated by 21-year-old Vijaya from Tamil Nadu, India, who used to work at a cotton factory and earned INR 9,000 (USD 107) per month. The amount was not enough to support her family. She wanted to migrate to Kuwait to work and earn a better income but her family did not allow it. Her parents suggested that she work in Malaysia because there are Malaysian Indians who can speak Tamil. Vijaya worked as a domestic worker in Malaysia and was subjected to prolonged abuse and starvation at times. Her employer did not pay her salary for two months and used to beat her with a baton and rubber hose. He also threatened her that the police would arrest and imprison her. She said that she endured the daily beatings because she needed the money and hoped to be paid her wages. When asked about her family back home, Vijaya said:

> *I have been in the shelter for 8 months since I was rescued. My younger brother took over my responsibility to support my family, but he was killed a few months ago. Now, my ailing father has to work in the factory to support the family because I am stuck here in the shelter. I am unable to work, and I am just idle here. I don't know when I can return home.*

Nelly, a 23-year-old woman from Kupang, Indonesia, worked as a domestic worker for a family for six months. Her agent paid her an advance salary of MYR 1,500 before she left her village. Her parents were grateful to the agent and gave Nelly their blessings before she left for Malaysia. However, Nelly suffered prolonged abuse and injuries at her workplace. Nelly said:

> *I wanted to call my agent earlier, but Madam kept promising me that she will pay my salary in one lump sum. I endured the suffering in the hope that Madam will pay my salary. I kept waiting to get paid, but they never paid me anything till today. I am now in the shelter, and I hope that they will pay me my salary and give me some compensation on the injuries I have suffered [at] their hands. My parents do not know what happened to me, and I hope that I can get paid before I am repatriated.*

In Nelly's case, her employers have been charged under section 13 of Malaysia's *Anti-Trafficking and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act* 2007 (ATIPSOM) and the Labour Office is trying to retrieve her unpaid wages.

Another example of a woman who suffered prolonged exploitation to support her family is Win-Win who said:

> *I have not been working for many months and I am very worried about my family and my children. My mother and children know that I have been rescued by the police and placed in the shelter. I talk to them regularly on WhatsApp video calls here. They are in dire need of money, and I am helpless here. I need to work to support my family, and I will need to do that before I return to my family, I do not want to go back empty-handed... I need to work and support my family; they are all depending on me.*

Rosidah, a mother of five children from Indonesia, migrated to Malaysia to work as a domestic worker. However, she was asked to do various jobs without being paid. Rosidah said:

> *The employers told me that they paid my salary to the agent but I have not received a single cent. It is unfair on me and I feel cheated. I worked so hard and I have not been paid at all. I am very worried about my children back home because I left them with my neighbour and promised her that I will remit monies for my children's expenses. I don't really trust her but I had no choice. I hope she did not sell or give away my children to anyone (cries).*

Nisa migrated to Malaysia to be with her Malaysian boyfriend but was later trapped in a trafficking situation. Nisa said in tears:

> *I have three children in Jakarta and my mother is looking after them. I found an agent who offered me to work as a maid for 1,500 ringgit a month. I needed money to support my family because they are dependent on me. I have not received any salary. I did not know what was happening until the police rescued me and told me that I was a victim of trafficking. I need to get out of this shelter quickly, so that I can work and earn for my family. My sister is now the breadwinner of the family because I am here [in the shelter]. She always asks me to return quickly because she is tired of working and supporting all my children alone.*

In some instances, the withholding of wages is used as a method to control the victims, which is illustrated in two cases discussed below. In both cases, the women's employers were wealthy and prominent individuals without financial constraints who nevertheless continued to exploit the women with impunity.

Elizabeth explained:

> *My employer is a 'Datuk' [an honorary title given by the ruler to a prominent person] and a plastic surgeon. She did not pay my salary and kept deferring to pay it. I could not leave the house because she owed me a lot of money. I was only able to remit 200 ringgit to my son. I have been in the shelter for one year and I am waiting for the lady to pay all my salary. She is being charged in court and she wants to settle the case by paying me some money. I am still waiting for my money. My son is waiting for me back home and he wants to get married. However, he vowed to only get married when I return to Indonesia. I left my son for so long and he grew up on his own because I was unable to remit any money to him. I feel very sad, but he does not blame me.*

Yati, also a domestic worker from Indonesia, was not paid her salary for six years. Her employer was also a prominent person and ran a retirement home. Yati was acutely traumatised by the experience working with her employer. She said:

> *I was forced to work long hours and had to sleep under the dining table for six years. I was sometimes given little food to eat. I still wake up in the middle of the night and cry because I am still traumatised. I was supposed to be paid 1,500 ringgit per month, but I have not been paid anything since I started working. The boss kept saying that he will pay me my salary when I go home but he never allowed me to return home. I have three children back home. I left them when they were little and asked my mother to look after them. I am supposed to send remittances to them from Malaysia, but I have not been able to do so for the past six years. I don't know what has happened to them and how they are surviving, I am still waiting for my salary to be paid and I heard that the Labour Office will help me.*

Sabariah and Dewi from Indonesia migrated to Malaysia to work as cleaners and were promised a salary of MYR 1,400 per month, which is much higher than the salary they were earning in their hometown. Sabariah, 37, has to support her 12-year-old daughter and her ailing mother, while 32-year-old Dewi had a large loan to pay in Indonesia. Her parents work on a tea plantation and make very little income. Both had to work long hours and were only paid one month's salary after working for six months. Their passports were confiscated, and they were not allowed to keep any money and not paid any overtime.

Deti, a 37-year-old woman from Indonesia who worked as a cleaner in Malaysia, has to support her two young children, mother, and six siblings. She managed to remit part of her salary but has yet to receive her full wages. She said:

> *My employer owes me 17 months of salary. I was only paid for 10 months' work, and I have remitted all my monies to my family. My boss would send remittances and let me check the receipt. My mother and children are facing financial difficulties, and my sisters have dropped out from school because they cannot pay for school fees. My children are supposed to be in elementary school, but they are unable to enrol because I am not working and cannot send remittances. I am unable to help them. I feel helpless here.*

The existing perception towards the authorities makes it easier for offenders to threaten victims and make these threats believable and powerful. In addition, trafficked women often feel isolated and alienated in Malaysia, because most of them came from different countries, are unable to speak the local language, and are not familiar with the avenues to seek help.[35] They become alienated, highly dependent on their traffickers, and continue to suffer in silence, which makes it easy for the traffickers to subjugate and control them.[36] As a result, victims continue to work for their traffickers and believe that even the minimal amount they are being paid is better than other options available to them.

A sense of shame at being unable to send money home to family can further cause women to remain in exploitative situations. For example, Sabariah explained:

> *I feel very sad and ashamed of returning home because my family is expecting me to bring home money. In my village, people thinks that I am in prison in Malaysia, although I told my mother that I am in a shelter. Because I am unable to go home and have to stay in the shelter, they consider it a prison.*

These interview excerpts demonstrate how women are willing to endure various forms of abuse, including exploitation, mistreatment, and harsh working conditions to provide financial support for their families. Their sense of responsibility and obligation towards their loved ones often compels them to tolerate suffering, as they view their sacrifices as necessary for the well-being of their children, spouses, siblings, or parents. Additionally, many of the women are reluctant to return home empty-handed, fearing the disappointment or financial hardship their families may face given that they have been working abroad. In such circumstances, they risk being labelled as 'failed migrants,' which can bring shame and embarrassment not only to themselves but also to their families. As a result, they may choose to remain in difficult and exploitative circumstances rather than returning home without money or financial means.

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35 H B A Hamid, 'Sex Traffickers: Friend or Foe', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 18, 2022, pp. 87–102, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222186.

36 *Ibid.*

Conclusion

This article explored the interrelationships between exploitative practices, financial empowerment, and trafficked women's motivations for migration. It demonstrated that women's reasons for migration are often tied to fulfilling family needs and the desire to improve their family's economic status.[37] But in their quest to enhance their economic situation, women can be trafficked, exploited, and sometimes subjected to prolonged abuse. However, the abuse does not only come from the traffickers or employers but can also be inflicted by their spouses or partners. As some of the cases discussed highlight, domestic violence can have a close connection to exploitation, and coercive techniques can be used by intimate partners to facilitate exploitation.

Traffickers blackmail and subjugate victims by withholding or underpaying their wages. While it is clear that the women have suffered immense hardship and pain while waiting for their salaries, there may also be other factors that contribute to this victimisation, such as the need to fulfil their duties as a good mother, wife, or daughter, as well as the fear of being labelled a 'failed migrant' or the shame of returning home without adequate earnings. While the focus of this research was on women's financial empowerment and income, further research is needed to explore the possible responses from the family members of trafficked women.

To conclude, although remittances from exploitative work can augment families' incomes and improve their financial strength, they can also bring a sense of insecurity and pose a high risk of harm that can significantly impact families. While the income gained from working abroad can provide trafficked women and their families with a sense of empowerment, status, autonomy, freedom, and self-esteem, it may come at the expense of enduring severely exploitative practices.

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[37] H Zlotnik, 'Migration and the Family: The Female Perspective', *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, vol. 4, issue 2–3, 1995, pp. 253–271, https://doi.org/10.1177/011719689500400205.