

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12426685

IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND SECURITY ANALYSIS

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Received: 03/10/2025
Accepted: 04/02/2026

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ABSTRACT

Background: Irregular migration and human trafficking constitute two of the most pressing transnational security and humanitarian challenges confronting the international community in the twenty-first century. Despite extensive international legal frameworks and enforcement efforts, both phenomena continue to escalate globally, generating profound violations of human dignity and fundamental rights. Objectives: This study examines the social, economic, and security dimensions of irregular migration and human trafficking through a multidimensional analytical lens. It critically evaluates the effectiveness of international legal instruments and identifies persistent structural gaps in global responses. Methods: The study employs an integrative analytical framework combining descriptive analysis, comparative legal examination, and critical evaluation of empirical data derived from United Nations reports, national legislative instruments, and field observations at six major international criminology and intelligence forums (2019–2023). Results: Findings reveal that the global irregular migrant population grew from 16 million in 2000 to 41.2 million in 2024, while annual human trafficking profits are estimated at USD 150 billion. Sexual exploitation accounts for 59–75% of all trafficking forms. Current international strategies disproportionately emphasise enforcement over root-cause prevention. The United Arab Emirates' integrated legal model is identified as a regional best-practice paradigm. Conclusions: Combating irregular migration and human trafficking demands a comprehensive four-pillar strategy – Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership – anchored in addressing structural socio-economic inequalities in origin countries. Arab states, particularly the UAE, are well positioned to champion a regional humanitarian framework addressing root causes.

KEYWORDS: irregular migration; human trafficking; transnational organised crime; Palermo Protocol; victim protection; United Arab Emirates; Four-P framework

1. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is among the most ancient and persistent violations of human dignity known to civilisation, predating the emergence of modern nation-states and international borders. Historically referenced as slavery, forced servitude, or the slave trade, the international community recognised its brutality at an early stage, culminating in seminal instruments such as the Slavery Convention (1926), the Forced Labour Convention (1930), and the Supplementary Slavery Convention (1956). Yet, despite nearly a century of concerted legislative action, trafficking in persons remains one of the most rapidly growing forms of transnational organised crime.

Irregular migration represents a comparatively modern phenomenon, yet it has added an influential and deeply troubling dimension to the human trafficking landscape. While migration broadly – whether regular or irregular – constitutes a major feeder of trafficking networks, clandestine border crossing and migrant smuggling expose women, children, and vulnerable adults to extraordinary risks of exploitation. These realities compelled the international community to act decisively through the adoption of the **United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC, 2000)** and its two supplementary instruments: the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Palermo Protocol) and the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air.

According to the International Organisation for Migration, the global migrant population reached **304.2 million in 2024** compared with 173 million in 2000 – an increase of 75.8% over two decades. More alarmingly, the estimated number of irregular migrants grew from 16 million (2000) to 41.2 million (2024). Annual financial proceeds generated by human trafficking are estimated at **USD 150 billion**, ranking it alongside drug and arms trafficking as one of the three most profitable criminal industries globally (ILO, 2014; UNODC, 2018).

Despite over 164 states ratifying UNTOC and its protocols, empirical evidence demonstrates that these legal frameworks have not achieved their intended preventive goals. This suggests structural gaps not merely in enforcement architecture but in the conceptualisation of the problem itself – particularly the underweighting of socio-economic root causes in favour of criminal justice responses. Some scholars have argued that irregular migration and trafficking have become embedded components of the global shadow economy, at times managed

with the tacit participation of state actors (Chomsky, 2014; Carens, 2015).

This study addresses these gaps through an integrative multidimensional analysis. It examines the conceptual, empirical, legal, and policy dimensions of irregular migration and human trafficking, evaluates the effectiveness of existing international responses, identifies structural vulnerabilities exploited by criminal networks, and presents the United Arab Emirates as a model of best practice in a regional context. The paper further proposes evidence-based policy recommendations grounded in a **Four-P Framework**: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature on irregular migration and human trafficking spans criminology, international law, migration studies, security studies, and development economics. This section synthesises the most relevant streams of scholarship, identifying convergence points and persistent debates.

2.1. *Human Trafficking as Transnational Organised Crime*

Early scholarship, including Rijken's (2010) European-focused study, traced the transformation of trafficking from a largely localised moral and social issue into a highly structured global criminal economy. Rather than operating through isolated offenders or small, loosely connected groups, trafficking evolved into a coordinated system embedded within transnational organised crime. Rijken argued that organised crime syndicates effectively "franchised" trafficking by adopting corporate-like structures, with clearly differentiated roles such as recruiters, transporters, document forgers, financiers, and exploitative employers. This division of labour increased efficiency, reduced operational risk for individual actors, and enabled networks to scale across borders. As a result, financial flows became highly fragmented and layered, complicating detection by law enforcement and regulatory authorities.

Blanton (2019) extended this analysis by situating trafficking within the broader landscape of global illicit markets. The study demonstrated that trafficking had surpassed both drug and arms trafficking in terms of growth rate, generating an estimated USD 150 billion annually. This rapid expansion is often attributed to the comparatively low risk and high profitability of human trafficking: unlike drugs or weapons, human beings can be exploited repeatedly, creating sustained revenue streams. Furthermore, weak regulatory

environments, corruption, and gaps in international legal coordination have allowed trafficking networks to thrive with relatively limited disruption.

Hepburn and Simon (2013) provided an empirical foundation for understanding how these networks function in practice. Examining trafficking cases across 24 countries, they uncovered the extent to which criminal operations are embedded within legitimate economic structures. Traffickers frequently operate under corporate cover, utilising shell companies, hotel chains, construction firms, agricultural enterprises, and entertainment venues to disguise exploitative practices. This blending of legal and illegal activities not only obscures accountability but also facilitates the laundering of profits and the normalisation of exploitation within everyday economic transactions. Their findings also identified key structural drivers of trafficking, including adverse economic conditions, geographic positioning along migration routes, political instability, armed conflict, and entrenched social and economic inequalities.

These conclusions are reinforced by the UNODC Global Reports on Trafficking in Persons (2018; 2022), which document the detection of trafficking in virtually every nation worldwide. The reports highlight the transnational nature of trafficking flows, with victims often transported across multiple jurisdictions before exploitation occurs. They also emphasise the adaptability of trafficking networks, which continuously adjust routes, methods, and recruitment strategies in response to law enforcement efforts and shifting global conditions. Collectively, this body of research underscores that human trafficking is not merely a criminal issue but a deeply embedded feature of the global economy, sustained by systemic vulnerabilities and facilitated by increasingly sophisticated organised crime structures.

2.2. Irregular Migration and Its Intersection with Trafficking

The conceptual boundary between irregular migration and human trafficking is both porous and highly contested within academic and policy debates. Rather than representing two entirely distinct phenomena, the relationship between them exists along a continuum in which coercion, consent, and exploitation may overlap in complex ways. Zaghoul (2018) offered a comparative legal analysis that challenges the dominant victim-centred framework by suggesting that smuggled migrants may, in certain circumstances, bear partial criminal liability. This argument remains controversial, as it risks undermining protections for vulnerable individuals;

however, it importantly draws attention to the element of agency exercised by some migrants who actively choose to engage smuggling networks as a strategy for mobility. By foregrounding this agency, Zaghoul complicates binary distinctions between “victim” and “offender,” highlighting the need for more nuanced legal and policy frameworks that can account for varying degrees of choice, constraint, and exploitation.

At the same time, broader ethical debates on migration further illuminate the structural conditions that blur this boundary. Scholars such as Carens (2015) and Wellman (2011) interrogate the moral legitimacy of restrictive border regimes, questioning whether such policies inadvertently exacerbate migrant vulnerability. From this perspective, stringent immigration controls do not eliminate migration pressures but instead displace them into irregular channels, where individuals are more likely to rely on smugglers and, consequently, become exposed to trafficking and other forms of exploitation. This line of argument reframes trafficking risk as not solely the product of criminal intent but also as an outcome of policy environments that constrain safe mobility options.

Within this ethical framework, the expansion of safe and legal migration pathways is positioned as a key structural prevention mechanism. By reducing reliance on illicit networks, such pathways could mitigate the conditions under which exploitation flourishes. This perspective aligns with the United Nations New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (A/RES/71/1, 2016), which emphasises international cooperation and the development of more accessible, regulated migration systems. Taken together, these contributions underscore that the distinction between irregular migration and trafficking cannot be fully understood without considering the interplay between individual agency, legal frameworks, and the broader political and economic structures that shape global mobility.

2.3. Islamic Law and International Anti-Trafficking Norms

A distinctive contribution to the literature is the UNODC-NAUSS-Johns Hopkins study on combating trafficking in persons according to Islamic jurisprudence (Mattar et al., 2010). This work broadened the analytical scope of trafficking studies by situating the issue within a non-Western legal and ethical tradition, demonstrating that Islamic law had already articulated prohibitions against slavery and exploitative practices long before the emergence of modern international legal instruments. By tracing principles derived from the Qur’an, Hadith, and

classical juristic interpretations, the study showed that the protection of human dignity, the prohibition of coercion, and the condemnation of exploitation are deeply embedded within Islamic legal doctrine.

Importantly, the study challenged assumptions that international anti-trafficking frameworks are exclusively rooted in Western legal traditions. Instead, it provided evidence that Islamic jurisprudence offers a parallel and, in many respects, complementary normative foundation for combating trafficking. This alignment creates opportunities for greater legal harmonisation and legitimacy, particularly in regions where Islamic law plays a central role in shaping national legal systems. By demonstrating that core anti-trafficking principles – such as the prohibition of forced labour, protection of the vulnerable, and accountability for exploiters – are consistent across both frameworks, the study contributes to bridging perceived divides between international law and religious legal systems.

The research also highlighted the strong compatibility of victim protection principles under both Islamic jurisprudence and international conventions. Concepts such as the obligation to assist victims, ensure justice, and prevent further harm resonate across both systems, reinforcing a shared commitment to safeguarding human rights. This convergence is of considerable policy relevance for Arab and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, where aligning domestic legal frameworks with both international obligations and Islamic legal principles can enhance both compliance and social acceptance. Consequently, the study underscores the importance of culturally and legally contextualised approaches to anti-trafficking policy, suggesting that effective interventions are more likely to succeed when they are grounded in locally resonant normative frameworks as well as global standards.

2.4. Regional Perspectives

The ASEAN Practitioner Guidelines (Bawling et al., 2019) emphasised that effective anti-trafficking responses depend not only on formal legal frameworks but, crucially, on the quality of operational coordination between institutions. The guidelines argue that laws alone are insufficient if they are not supported by consistent enforcement practices, information sharing, and mutual trust among law enforcement agencies. In this regard, they advocate for the development of standardised investigative procedures, including common protocols for victim identification, evidence collection, and case management. Such standardisation reduces procedural inconsistencies across jurisdictions and enhances the ability of authorities to collaborate on complex cross-border

cases. Equally important is the emphasis on trust-building measures – such as joint training programmes, liaison networks, and regular inter-agency communication – which help overcome institutional fragmentation and jurisdictional barriers that often hinder effective cooperation.

For the MENA region, UNODC (2014) identified a distinct set of structural dynamics that shape trafficking patterns. A key finding is that many states in the region simultaneously function as countries of origin, transit, and destination, reflecting their position within global migration flows. This multidimensional role complicates policy responses, as states must address diverse forms of trafficking occurring both within and across their borders. The report further highlights how specific labour market structures contribute to vulnerability, particularly kafala-based sponsorship systems, which tie migrant workers' legal status to their employers. Within this framework, practices such as recruitment-related debt, restrictions on worker mobility, and the confiscation of identity documents can create conditions conducive to exploitation and, in some cases, trafficking.

By linking these regional characteristics to broader trafficking dynamics, the UNODC analysis underscores the importance of context-specific interventions. While ASEAN-focused approaches prioritise operational coordination and cross-border enforcement mechanisms, the MENA context requires additional attention to labour governance reforms and the regulation of recruitment practices. Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that combating trafficking effectively requires both strong institutional cooperation and a nuanced understanding of the structural conditions that enable exploitation in different regional settings.

2.5. Theoretical Synthesis

Drawing from this literature, five interrelated theoretical propositions emerge that collectively inform the analytical framework of the present study. First, structural inequalities – manifested through poverty, limited economic opportunity, gender disparities, and political instability – are identified as the primary drivers of both irregular migration and vulnerability to trafficking. These conditions create powerful incentives for individuals to seek opportunities elsewhere while simultaneously constraining their ability to do so safely, thereby increasing exposure to exploitation.

Second, trafficking networks are best understood as transnational criminal enterprises that operate in ways analogous to legitimate corporations. As highlighted in earlier scholarship, these networks exhibit organisational complexity, division of labour,

and adaptive strategies that allow them to operate across jurisdictions while minimising risk and maximising profit. This framing shifts the analytical focus from isolated criminal acts to systemic, networked operations embedded within the global economy.

Third, the boundary between smuggling and trafficking is conceptualised not as a rigid binary but as a fluid continuum. Individuals may move along this spectrum depending on changing circumstances, such as the emergence of coercion, debt bondage, or exploitation during transit or at the destination. Recognising this fluidity is essential for developing legal and policy responses that can adequately capture the lived realities of migrants, rather than forcing them into overly simplistic categories.

Fourth, effective responses to trafficking require multi-sectoral coordination that extends beyond traditional law enforcement approaches. While policing and prosecution remain critical, the literature underscores the importance of involving a broader range of actors, including labour regulators, social services, civil society organisations, and international agencies. Such coordination enhances victim protection, improves identification mechanisms, and addresses the diverse dimensions of trafficking that cannot be resolved through criminal justice measures alone.

Fifth, international cooperation is identified as a necessary but insufficient condition for addressing trafficking. Cross-border collaboration, information sharing, and harmonisation of legal frameworks are essential for tackling a transnational crime; however, these efforts must be complemented by sustained attention to root causes in countries of origin. Without addressing underlying structural drivers—such as inequality, lack of employment opportunities, and weak governance—anti-trafficking strategies risk treating symptoms rather than causes. Together, these propositions provide a coherent conceptual foundation for analysing trafficking as a complex, multi-layered phenomenon shaped by both global systems and local conditions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **mixed analytical methodology** integrating (i) systematic analytical review of primary international legal instruments; (ii) descriptive-statistical analysis of empirical data from UNODC, IOM, UNDP, and UNHCR reports; (iii) comparative legal analysis of national anti-trafficking legislation across Arab, European, and Asian jurisdictions; and (iv) critical evaluation based on direct field observations.

Field engagement was conducted at six major international scientific events: the Annual

International Criminology Symposium, Stockholm (2019); the International Criminal Police Exhibition, Singapore (2019); the UNAFEI International Seminar, Tokyo (2019); the 16th International Congress of Criminology, Stockholm (2022); the IALEIA Conference, Italy (2022); and the 6th IALEIA International Conference, Copenhagen (2023). These engagements provided direct access to practitioner knowledge, law enforcement insights, and emerging empirical findings unavailable in published literature at the time of data collection.

The study is guided by a critical realist ontology, acknowledging both the objective measurability of trafficking phenomena and the socially constructed nature of its governance responses. Data triangulation across quantitative statistics, qualitative legal analysis, and practitioner observations strengthens the validity and reliability of findings.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DEFINING IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

4.1. *The Continuum from Migration to Trafficking*

Migration is a fundamental human right enshrined in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The International Organisation for Migration defines a migrant as any person who moves across international borders or within a state away from their habitual place of residence, irrespective of legal status (IOM, 2019). The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016) further affirms the positive contributions of migration to sustainable development.

Irregular migration, as distinct from regular migration, encompasses three principal categories: (1) clandestine border crossing; (2) lawful entry followed by overstay beyond permitted duration; and (3) violation of employment contract conditions. The International Labour Organisation defines clandestine migration as movement that violates conditions established by bilateral agreements and national legislation. Crucially, irregular status does not equate to criminality on the part of migrants, who are frequently victims of structural conditions rather than willing participants in illegality.

The Palermo Protocol (2000) defines **trafficking in persons** as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons through threat, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or financial inducement, for the purpose of exploitation. Three analytical elements constitute the crime: the **act** (recruitment/transport/receipt), the **means** (coercion/deception/abuse), and the **purpose** (exploitation). Critically, the consent of the victim is rendered legally irrelevant when any prohibited means have been employed.

Figure 1 below illustrates the causal pathway through which structural vulnerabilities escalate to irregular migration and ultimately to human trafficking, with annotated intervention points.

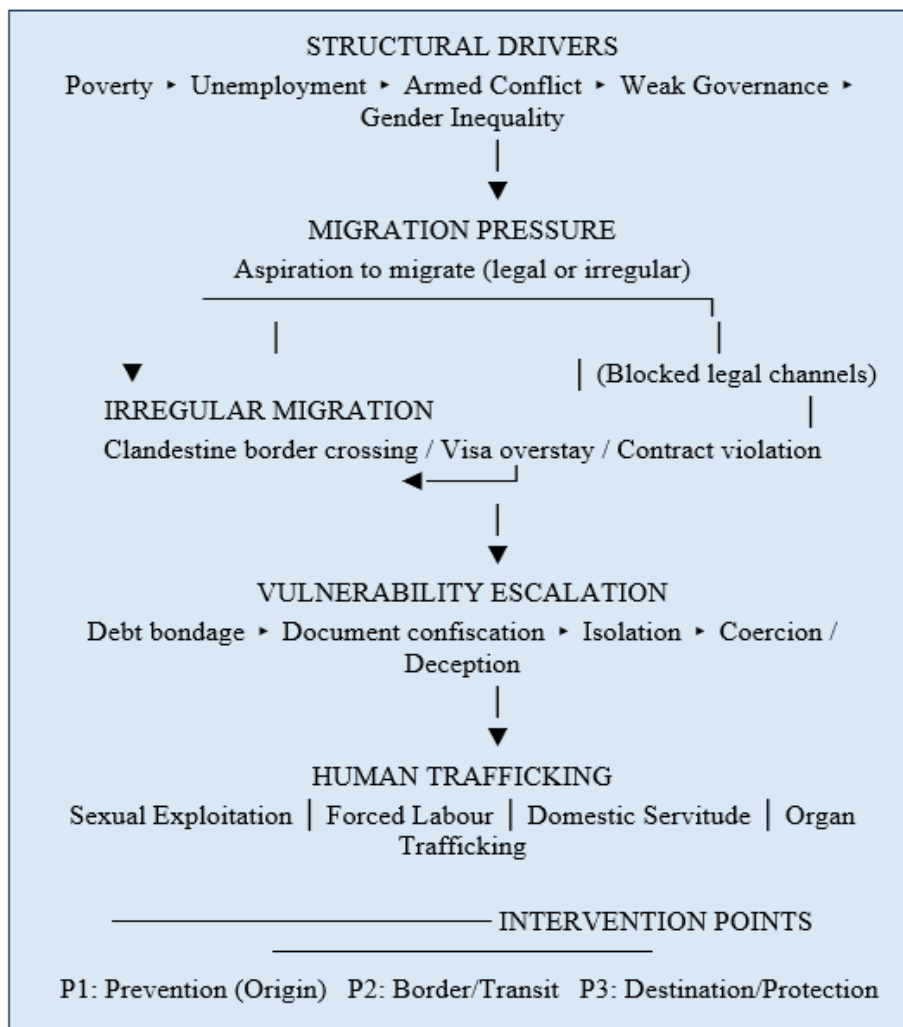


Figure 1: Causal Pathway from Structural Vulnerability to Human Trafficking

Source: Author’s analytical framework derived from UNODC (2018), IOM (2024), and Palermo Protocol (2000).

5. SCALE, DIMENSIONS, AND TRENDS OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

human trafficking has expanded substantially over the past two decades. Table 1 presents a longitudinal summary of key global indicators from 2000 to 2024.

5.1. Global Migration and Trafficking Statistics

The quantitative scale of irregular migration and

Table 1: Global Trends in International Migration, Irregular Migration, and Human Trafficking (2000–2024)

Year	Total Migrants (millions)	Irregular Migrants (millions /%)	Trafficking Victims (millions est.)	Annual Profit (USD billions)
2000	173	16 (9.2%)	150	~600
2005	191	19 (9.9%)	---	~800
2010	220	26 (11.8%)	---	1,000
2015	244	33 (13.5%)	---	1,200
2017	258	38 (14.7%)	---	1,350
2020	281	39.5 (14.1%)	---	1,410
2024	304	41.2 (13.6%)	---	1,480

Sources: IOM World Migration Report (2024); UNODC Global TIP Report (2022); ILO (2022); UNHCR Global Trends (2024). Trafficking victim and profit figures are estimates based on available data.

These statistics reveal that the ratio of irregular to total migrants has remained persistently high (approximately 13–15%), suggesting that legal migration channels have not expanded sufficiently to absorb migration pressures. Simultaneously, the growth of trafficking-related profits reflects the expanding commercial scale of exploitation operations.

5.2. Forms of Human Trafficking and Victim Profiles

Human trafficking manifests across multiple forms of exploitation, each characterised by distinct operational methods and victim profiles. Table 2 presents a systematic taxonomy of trafficking forms, their estimated global shares, and associated victim profiles.

Table 2: Forms of Human Trafficking – Global Distribution, Operational Methods, and Victim Profiles

Form of Exploitation	Est. Global Share	Operational Methods	Primary Victim Profile
Sexual Exploitation	59–75%	Forced prostitution, sex tourism, online exploitation	Women & girls, migrants
Forced Labour	15–18%	Construction, agriculture, domestic work, manufacturing	Men, women, migrants
Domestic Servitude	8–10%	Live-in workers with restricted movement and no pay	Women, girls
Organ Trafficking	1–2%	Illegal kidney, liver, cornea removal under coercion	Vulnerable adults
Child Labour/Begging	3–5%	Street begging, petty crime, armed recruitment	Children <18 years
Forced Marriage	1–3%	Fraudulent or coerced marriage, particularly cross-border	Girls & women
Other Exploitation	1–3%	Mercenary recruitment, forced criminal activity	Mixed populations

Sources: UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2022); ILO Global Estimates on Modern Slavery (2022); U.S. Department of State TIP Report (2023).

Sexual exploitation accounts for the overwhelming majority of detected trafficking cases, reflecting both the demand structures in destination countries and the particular vulnerabilities of women and children. Forced labour, while accounting for a smaller proportion of detected cases, is likely significantly under-reported due to its occurrence in less visible sectors such as domestic work and agriculture. The high representation of women and children across all forms underscores the gendered dimension of trafficking vulnerability.

5.3. Victim Identification Indicators

Effective victim identification is a cornerstone of both law enforcement intervention and victim protection strategies, as failure to recognise indicators of trafficking can result in individuals being misclassified as irregular migrants or offenders rather than victims in need of assistance. Drawing on the UNAFEI Tokyo Workshop findings (2017), a range of behavioural, physical, and situational indicators can assist practitioners in identifying potential victims across different contexts. Among the most prominent are an individual's inability to leave their workplace or living environment, which may signal coercion or control, as well as visible signs of fear, anxiety, or physical injury that suggest abuse or intimidation. The absence of travel or identity documents is another critical indicator, often reflecting deliberate confiscation by traffickers to restrict mobility and reinforce dependency.

Further indicators include communication restrictions imposed by third parties, such as constant supervision or limited access to phones and external contacts, and an inability to control personal

earnings, which may indicate financial exploitation or debt bondage. These signs, when observed collectively, can point to a broader pattern of control that is characteristic of trafficking situations, even if no single indicator is conclusive on its own.

Additional indicators are particularly relevant in cases of forced labour. These include the confiscation of identity documents, excessively long or abusive working hours, and employer-controlled accommodation that limits personal freedom and reinforces isolation. Such conditions often blur the line between exploitative labour practices and trafficking, underscoring the importance of careful, context-sensitive assessment by frontline responders.

For children, the indicators take on distinct forms that reflect their heightened vulnerability. Engagement in labour that is inappropriate for their age or developmental stage, denial of access to education, and the presence of unrelated accompanying adults are all critical warning signs. These factors may signal not only exploitation but also broader patterns of neglect, coercion, or abuse. Taken together, these indicators provide a practical framework for early identification, emphasising the need for trained professionals to assess situations holistically and to prioritise victim protection alongside investigative objectives.

6. INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

6.1. Evolution of International Anti-Trafficking Norms

International efforts to combat human trafficking evolved over nearly a century, progressing from early anti-slavery conventions to comprehensive

organised crime treaties. Table 3 chronicles the principal international legal instruments constituting the contemporary anti-trafficking normative framework.

Table 3: Principal International Legal Instruments Addressing Human Trafficking and Irregular Migration

Instrument	Year	Adopting Body	Primary Objective
Slavery Convention	1926	League of Nations	Abolish slavery and the slave trade
Forced Labour Convention	1930	ILO	Prohibit forced labour globally
Supplementary Slavery Convention	1956	United Nations	Abolish slavery-like practices
Convention on the Rights of the Child	1989	United Nations	Protect children from exploitation
Migrant Workers Convention	1990	United Nations	Protect rights of migrant workers
UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)	2000	United Nations	Criminalise organised crime incl. trafficking
Palermo Protocol (TIP)	2000	United Nations	Prevent, suppress, punish trafficking
Smuggling of Migrants Protocol	2000	United Nations	Combat migrant smuggling networks
UN Global Plan of Action against TIP	2010	UNGA	Coordinated global anti-trafficking response

Sources: United Nations Treaty Collection; ILO Conventions Database; UNODC Legislative Database.

The Palermo Protocol (2000) represents the most significant milestone in this evolution, establishing for the first time a globally agreed definition of trafficking, a comprehensive criminalisation framework, and victim protection standards. By August 2013, 160 states had ratified the Protocol, and more than 164 states had ratified UNTOC. However, the protocol's effectiveness is contingent upon faithful national implementation, which varies substantially across jurisdictions.

6.2. Assessment of Arab State Compliance

The annual U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report provides a widely referenced benchmark for evaluating national anti-trafficking efforts through a four-tier classification system. Table 4 presents the 2019 classification of Arab states, providing a snapshot of the region's compliance landscape.

Table 4: U.S. Department of State TIP Report (2019) – Classification of Arab States by Tier

Classification Tier	Compliance Criteria	No. of Arab States	Arab States Included
Tier 1	Fully compliant with TVPA minimum standards	1	Bahrain
Tier 2	Making significant efforts toward compliance	9	Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Morocco, Tunisia, UAE
Tier 2 Watch List	Tier 2 criteria but with declining anti-TIP efforts	3	Algeria, Iraq, Sudan
Tier 3	Not compliant; not making significant efforts	3	Saudi Arabia, Syria, South Sudan
Special Cases	Conflict zones / no functioning government	3	Libya, Yemen, Somalia

Sources: U.S. Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report (2019). TVPA = Trafficking Victims Protection Act standards.

The data reveal a fragmented regional picture. While Bahrain achieved full Tier 1 compliance, the majority of Arab states remain at Tier 2, indicating efforts but insufficient outcomes. Three states are classified under the Tier 2 Watch List and three under Tier 3, reflecting serious deficiencies. Conflict-affected states (Libya, Yemen, Somalia) are categorised as special cases due to the absence of functioning governance, rendering conventional tier assessment inappropriate. This classification pattern underscores the relationship between political stability and anti-trafficking capacity.

6.3. Gaps in the International Framework

Notwithstanding the breadth of the international normative framework, several structural gaps limit its effectiveness. First, international conventions rely entirely on national implementation mechanisms, creating significant disparities in enforcement

capacity. Second, the absence of an international enforcement body with jurisdiction to act directly against trafficking networks across borders leaves enforcement dependent on bilateral and multilateral cooperation, which is often slow and politically constrained. Third, the protocols focus primarily on *transnational* organised crime, excluding domestically contained trafficking. Fourth, border-focused enforcement approaches can inadvertently deepen the vulnerability of migrants by blocking legal channels and forcing reliance on criminal smuggling networks. Fifth, the significant financial proceeds of trafficking are rarely seized systematically, undermining the deterrent effect of criminal penalties.

7. THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES AS A MODEL OF BEST PRACTICE

The United Arab Emirates occupies a distinctive position in the global anti-trafficking landscape. As a

major destination country for labour migration from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, it faced significant structural vulnerabilities to trafficking and labour exploitation. Through a sustained and integrated legislative and institutional response, however, the UAE has emerged as a recognised regional model.

The cornerstone of the UAE's legal framework is **Federal Law No. 51 of 2006 on Combating Trafficking in Persons**, which was among the first dedicated anti-trafficking statutes in the Arab world. This law established criminal penalties for all forms of trafficking, specialised courts for trafficking prosecutions, and formal mechanisms for victim identification and protection. Subsequent amendments strengthened victim protection

provisions and expanded the scope of criminalised conduct.

Institutionally, the UAE established the **National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCHT)** in 2007, mandated with coordinating the national anti-trafficking response across government ministries, law enforcement agencies, and civil society organisations. National Action Plans – including the 2021–2026 plan – provide structured implementation frameworks with clear objectives, timelines, and performance indicators. Specialised victim shelters, legal aid services, and repatriation programmes complement the enforcement infrastructure.

Figure 2 presents the legislative and institutional evolution of the UAE's anti-trafficking framework, tracing key milestones from 1973 to 2023.

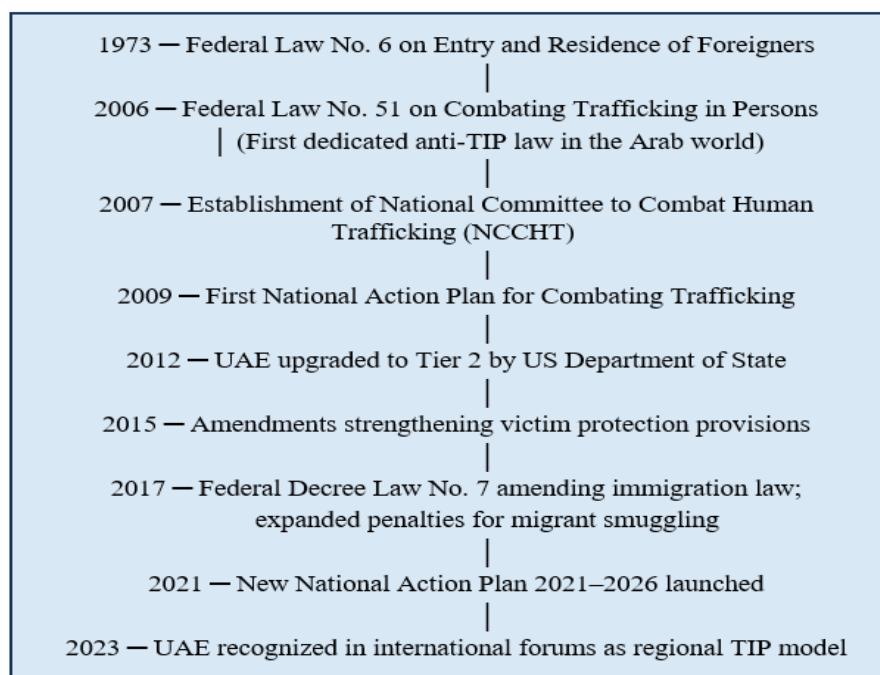


Figure 2: United Arab Emirates Legislative and Institutional Timeline for Combating Human Trafficking
Source: Author compilation based on UAE federal legislation and NCCHT reports (2007–2023)

Key features of the UAE model that may be transferable to other Arab states include: (1) a dedicated statutory framework rather than reliance on general criminal provisions; (2) an institutionalised interagency coordination mechanism with clear mandate; (3) integration of victim protection and social rehabilitation within the enforcement framework; (4) public awareness campaigns across multiple languages targeting migrant communities; and (5) bilateral labour agreements with source countries to regulate recruitment and reduce debt bondage. The UAE's elevation to Tier 2 in the U.S. TIP Report and its recognition at international forums in Copenhagen

(2023) and Stockholm (2022) reflect the measurable outcomes of this integrated approach.

8. DISCUSSION: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED FOUR-P FRAMEWORK

The preceding analysis reveals a fundamental asymmetry in current international anti-trafficking strategies: the overwhelming emphasis on *prosecution and border enforcement* at the expense of structural prevention, victim protection, and multi-actor partnership. This asymmetry is reflected in the persistent gap between the scale of legal frameworks and the continued growth of trafficking activities.

8.1. Structural Drivers Demanding Prevention

Economic disparities between origin and destination countries remain the dominant structural driver of both irregular migration and vulnerability to trafficking, shaping the broader context in which exploitative practices emerge. The World Bank (2019) documented that per-capita income gaps between regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and OECD destination countries, range from 15:1 to 40:1. These stark inequalities generate strong economic incentives for migration, as individuals seek improved livelihoods and greater economic security. However, the capacity of legal migration channels to absorb this demand is structurally limited, resulting in significant mismatches between aspiration and opportunity. As a consequence, many individuals are compelled to pursue irregular migration pathways, where exposure to smuggling networks and potential trafficking increases.

These economic drivers are further intensified by political instability and armed conflict, particularly in parts of the Middle East and Africa. Such conditions produce large populations of displaced persons who often lack access to stable livelihoods, legal protections, and secure migration options. In these contexts, trafficking networks exploit heightened vulnerability by offering deceptive opportunities for work or safe passage, thereby capitalising on the urgent needs of individuals seeking to escape conflict or deprivation. The intersection of economic hardship and political instability thus creates a high-risk environment in which trafficking can flourish.

Gender inequality and limited access to education in origin countries further deepen these structural

vulnerabilities. Women and girls, in particular, are disproportionately affected, as they often face restricted economic opportunities, social marginalisation, and discriminatory norms that limit their autonomy. These factors contribute to their overrepresentation among victims of sexual exploitation, as traffickers target those with fewer resources and limited access to information or support networks. Educational deficits also reduce awareness of risks and diminish the capacity to identify or avoid exploitative situations.

Addressing these root causes requires sustained, long-term development cooperation that extends well beyond the prevailing focus on border control and criminal prosecution. While enforcement measures are necessary components of anti-trafficking strategies, they do not address the underlying conditions that drive vulnerability. Effective responses must therefore include investments in economic development, education, gender equality, and governance in origin countries, alongside efforts to expand safe and legal migration pathways. By tackling these structural determinants, policymakers can move toward more comprehensive and preventative approaches to reducing both irregular migration pressures and trafficking risks.

8.2. The Four-P Framework as an Analytical Response

This study proposes the **Four-P Framework** – Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership – as an integrated analytical and policy structure for addressing the limitations of current approaches. Figure 3 illustrates the framework and its component relationships.

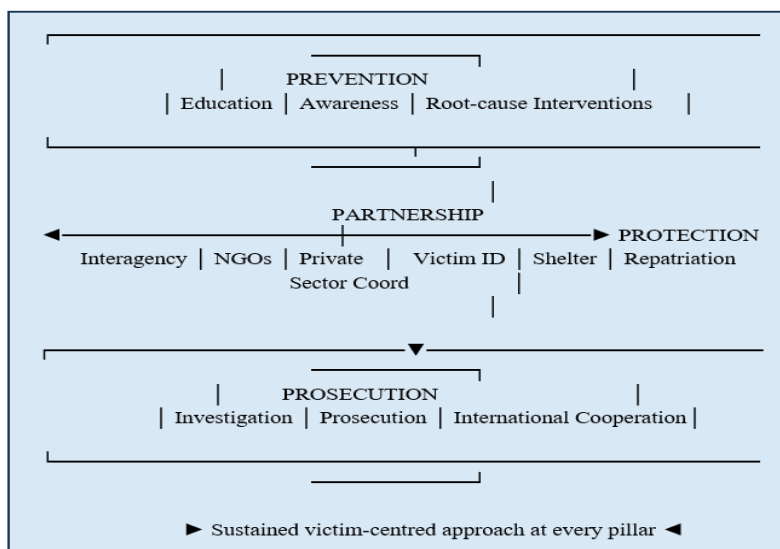


Figure 3: Integrated Four-P Anti-Trafficking Framework

Source: Author’s framework adapted from UNODC (2018), IOM (2019), and the Palermo Protocol four-pillar approach.

Table 5 evaluates the current state of each pillar, identifying achievements, persistent gaps, and recommended actions.

Table 5: Evaluation of the Four-P Anti-Trafficking Framework – Achievements, Gaps, and Recommendations

Pillar	Achievements	Identified Gaps	Recommended Actions
Prevention	Awareness campaigns, education, addressing root causes	Limited funding, unequal reach across developing states	Strengthen socio-economic development aid; target origin countries
Protection	Victim shelters, legal assistance, repatriation programmes	Inconsistent national implementation; victims criminalised in some states	Harmonise victim-centred national referral mechanisms
Prosecution	Dedicated anti-TIP units, joint investigations, extradition	Corruption, weak judiciary, limited cross-border cooperation	Build institutional capacity; strengthen MLAT agreements
Partnership	UNODC, IOM, NGOs, private sector, regional organisations	Fragmented coordination; data-sharing gaps	Establish unified global anti-trafficking data platform

Sources: Author's analysis based on UNODC (2022), IOM (2024), U.S. TIP Report (2023), and field observations.

8.3. The Role of Arab and Islamic States

Arab and Islamic states occupy a strategically important position in the global anti-trafficking response. Many are simultaneously origin, transit, and destination countries. As demonstrated by the UNODC-NAUSS study (Mattar et al., 2010), Islamic jurisprudence provides a robust normative foundation for anti-trafficking obligations that is fully compatible with international legal standards. This convergence creates a unique opportunity for Arab states to develop a **region-specific multilateral convention** on combating trafficking that builds upon the Palermo Protocol while incorporating Islamic legal principles and addressing the specific migration dynamics of the MENA region.

Furthermore, the UAE's experience demonstrates that economically prosperous Gulf states can leverage their humanitarian development capacity to address root causes of trafficking in origin countries through bilateral development agreements, humanitarian funds, and legal migration channel expansion. Such initiatives, if undertaken collaboratively under an Arab League or GCC framework, could constitute a transformative contribution to the global anti-trafficking effort.

8.4. Demand Reduction as a Critical Neglected Strategy

A significant lacuna in current international strategies is the relative neglect of **demand reduction**. Given that sexual exploitation accounts for 59–75% of all trafficking, addressing the demand for sexual services, particularly sex tourism and the explicit entertainment industry, is essential. The criminalisation of the purchase of sexual services – as implemented in Sweden, Norway, and Iceland – has demonstrated measurable reductions in trafficking for sexual exploitation. This approach, sometimes called the Nordic Model, warrants serious consideration by Arab and Islamic states as consistent with both religious values and evidence-based policy.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that irregular migration and human trafficking are structurally interconnected global phenomena driven primarily by economic inequality, political instability, armed conflict, gender inequality, and weak governance in origin countries. International legal frameworks, while increasingly comprehensive in their scope, remain insufficient in their impact due to: (1) reliance on voluntary national implementation with unequal enforcement capacity; (2) disproportionate emphasis on prosecution over structural prevention; (3) inadequate victim protection harmonisation; and (4) insufficient financial resources directed toward root-cause interventions in origin countries.

The United Arab Emirates' experience demonstrates that a coordinated, institutionally anchored, victim-centred legal and policy framework can achieve measurable progress even within a major destination country context. The Four-P Framework – Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership – provides a practical analytical architecture for bridging current strategic gaps.

9.2. Policy Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following policy recommendations are advanced:

1. The international community should substantially increase development cooperation directed at addressing socio-economic root causes of migration in origin countries, targeting unemployment, education, governance, and conflict resolution.
2. Demand reduction strategies, including criminalisation of the purchase of sexual services, should be incorporated into national anti-trafficking frameworks, particularly within Arab and Islamic states.
3. Arab states should consider adopting a dedicated regional multilateral convention on human

- trafficking, building upon the Palermo Protocol, incorporating Islamic legal principles, and establishing an Arab regional enforcement and cooperation mechanism.
4. National victim protection frameworks should be harmonised to ensure consistent non-criminalisation, shelter provision, legal assistance, and repatriation support across all states parties to UNTOC.
 5. A unified global anti-trafficking data platform should be established under UNODC coordination to improve data comparability, close reporting gaps, and enable evidence-based policy evaluation.
 6. The UAE is encouraged to lead an Arab humanitarian initiative addressing root causes of irregular migration through a dedicated regional fund providing development assistance to trafficking-origin countries.

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