



Poverty, Cultural Practices, and Human Trafficking in Sumba: Unraveling Injustice and the Quest for Legal Protection

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Abstract

Background: Poverty is a persistent problem that fuels human trafficking, particularly in *Sumba*. Poverty refers to the condition of lacking essential needs, relying on others socially, and being unable to engage in a life of dignity within society.

Objective: This study aims to analyze the relationship among cultural factors, *poverty*, and low legal awareness in contributing to human trafficking.

Methods: This study employs a qualitative approach using ethnographic methods, with primary data collected through observation, interviews, and focus group discussions in *Lewa*, East *Sumba*. Secondary data were obtained from academic journals, legislation, and documentation of relevant past cases.

Results: The results reveal a strong interconnection among the *belis* cultural practice, economic pressures, and vulnerability to human trafficking. These interrelated elements expose deep injustice and human rights violations concealed beneath cultural legitimacy, forming a complex web that communities struggle to escape.

Conclusion: The study concludes that addressing human trafficking in *Sumba* requires integrated countermeasures targeting *poverty*, *belis*-related economic burdens, and customary exploitation. The state must enforce *TPPO* regulations, strengthen victim protection mechanisms, and pursue distributive, corrective, and social justice through law reform, access to education, and community economic empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty is an ever-present concern for the government. Poverty is understood as a lack of basic necessities, social dependence, and the inability to participate in a dignified life within society (Khairiroh, 2025). It is a condition in which a person is unable to fulfill their basic rights to survival. These basic rights include access to food, healthcare, education, employment, housing, clean water, a healthy environment, protection from the threat of violence, and the right to

participate in social and political life. The fourth paragraph of the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution states that one of the objectives of the Indonesian state is to promote the general welfare. This is also elaborated in Article 28C, paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution, which emphasizes that "Every person has the right to develop themselves through the fulfillment of their basic needs, has the right to education and to benefit from science and technology, arts, and culture, in order to improve the quality of their life and for the welfare of humanity." The issue of poverty is not only faced by developing countries but also by developed nations.

Poverty has become one of the root causes of the persistent problem of human trafficking (Soekanto, 2020; Uzoh & Udoka, 2023). One contributing factor to poverty is unemployment. Unemployment drives individuals to seek employment without adequate legal protection but with the promise of high wages, such as working abroad. The absence of legal protections increases the potential for human trafficking. Human trafficking refers to the buying and selling of people. Article 1(1) of Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of the Criminal Act of Trafficking in Persons (TPPO) defines trafficking in persons as the act of recruiting, transporting, harboring, transferring, or receiving a person through the threat or use of violence, abduction, confinement, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, debt bondage, or the giving of payments or benefits, thereby obtaining the consent of the person exercising control over that individual, whether committed within a country or across national borders, for the purpose of exploitation or resulting in the exploitation of that person (Hidayati et al., 2026; Law, 2007). Human trafficking seeks to exploit people through unlawful acts that constitute criminal offenses, including sexual exploitation, slavery, and trafficking of human organs, with the goal of unilateral profit. Human trafficking clearly violates human dignity and rights, which are guaranteed by Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution.

The issue of human trafficking is prevalent across various regions in Indonesia, including East Nusa Tenggara Province (NTT), which ranks first in the number of human trafficking victims. Field data obtained through focus group discussions indicate that in 2023, 120 bodies were repatriated to East Nusa Tenggara Province. In 2024, 16 people fell victim to human trafficking. In early 2025, cases were identified and processed by the East Nusa Tenggara Regional Police. This data indicates that human trafficking frequently occurs in East Nusa Tenggara Province. Recently, human trafficking has become a critical and tangible problem in NTT. In *Human Trafficking: Combating Human Trafficking Crimes in Indonesia*, Muhammad Kamal identifies five main causes of frequent human trafficking: economic factors, low education levels, unemployment, socio-cultural factors, and weak law enforcement (Windi et al., 2025). The rise in human trafficking in East Nusa Tenggara Province stems from the prevalence of poverty. Poverty has psychological effects on individuals, such as a sense of hopelessness that prevents them from escaping poverty and leads to unemployment (Khairiroh, 2025). Limited job availability tempts people to work without legal protection and to seek quick money (Karmilia et al., 2022; Karo et al., 2019). Additionally, rising poverty and human trafficking are influenced by the culture upheld by the customary laws of East Sumba.

The number of workers in NTT has reached an alarming level and requires immediate collective action, according to the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (*Kemensos RI*). Although migrant workers from NTT do not constitute a dominant group numerically, data from the Indonesian National Police's Criminal Investigation Agency (*Bareskrim Polri*) indicate that human trafficking cases in NTT rank among the highest in Indonesia. Since February 2014, civil society movements in NTT have highlighted serious issues regarding human trafficking. The increasing number of women in NTT, particularly those aged 15 and older, indicates an emergency, as underage girls are being recruited as female migrant workers (*TKW*) abroad in countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and others. Between 2014 and 2022, BBC Indonesia reported that 704 migrant workers from NTT died after being repatriated to Indonesia due to various factors. The Regional Police (*Polda*) reported that 1,667 prospective female migrant workers from NTT were illegally transported to other regions, such as Medan and Malaysia, by trafficking syndicates (Edwardus, 2020; Sofyan et al., 2025). Moreover, data from the Kupang Office of the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP3TKI) show that in 2017,

62 bodies, and in 2018, 71 bodies of trafficking victims were repatriated to NTT, 21 of which were repatriated to Sumba (Natar et al., 2022).

Law No. 21 of 2007 on TPPO governs the criminal offense of human trafficking in Indonesia (Hidayati et al., 2026; Law, 2007). This law defines the offense, its elements, penalties for perpetrators, and rehabilitation for victims. In recent years, human trafficking has become a pressing issue in East Nusa Tenggara Province. Human trafficking is increasingly prevalent in Sumba, with networks originating from NTT. In Sumba, trafficking operates through a well-organized and covert structure, employing evolving methods. In East Sumba Regency, the most common method involves recruiting victims under the pretext of offering domestic work abroad with high salaries. Various factors contribute to human trafficking including (1) Economic factors: People remain trapped in poverty due to difficulty finding work; dwindling incomes lead many to migrate quickly to increase earnings. (2) Low education level factors: Limited access to education contributes to human trafficking, as individuals seeking quick money are unlikely to critically assess offers. And (3) Law enforcement factors: Weak or delayed law enforcement enables human trafficking; both preventive and repressive measures are necessary (Windi et al., 2025).

Human rights must be guaranteed, and no one can deprive another of them. Human trafficking (recruiting, transporting, harboring, transferring, or receiving a person through threats, violence, confinement, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or debt bondage) violates human rights (Windi et al., 2025). Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; all forms of slavery and the slave trade are prohibited. Under national law, Article 297 of the Criminal Code stipulates that trafficking of women and children is punishable by imprisonment up to six years, protecting human dignity from arbitrary treatment.

Human rights protection requires that all individuals, regardless of cultural or social background, receive equal treatment under the law. Controversies over minority groups hamper the promotion of human rights. The principle that all people are equal before the law, without discrimination, must be consistently upheld (Chairul & Juniarti, 2019; Kango et al., 2025). The persistence of human trafficking in Sumba demonstrates suboptimal law enforcement, stemming from weaknesses in investigation and prosecution mechanisms against widespread trafficking networks. Better coordination among local government, law enforcement, and indigenous authorities is essential. NTT consistently ranks among provinces with the highest human trafficking cases, making NTT, and Sumba in particular, a primary target for trafficking networks and exploitation (Edwardus, 2020; Sofyan et al., 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in integrating an ethnographic approach with legal analysis to examine the intersection of poverty, customary law (belis and kawin tangkap), and human trafficking in East Sumba, an underexplored geographic and cultural context. Unlike prior studies focusing predominantly on macroeconomic or criminal justice dimensions of trafficking in Indonesia, this research offers an in-depth ethnographic account of how specific cultural practices become structurally embedded in cycles of exploitation. The study contributes a culturally sensitive analytical framework that can inform context-specific legal reforms and community-based prevention strategies in Eastern Indonesia and comparable customary law communities globally.

METHOD

This study employed an ethnographic qualitative research design to examine the lived realities of poverty, customary practices, and human trafficking in East Sumba Regency. Primary data were collected through direct interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Lewa, East Sumba Regency, on September 4, 2025. A total of 18 informants participated in the study, comprising 3 government officials from the Department of Manpower and Transmigration and the Department of Social Affairs, 4 traditional leaders, 3 religious leaders, 2 NGO representatives working in human rights, 4 victims' family members, and 2 community members. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in or knowledge of

human trafficking cases in East Sumba. Field observations were also conducted to understand the social and cultural context of the local community. Secondary data were obtained from literature reviews, including national and regional legislation, scientific journals, annual reports from government and non-governmental agencies, and documentation of relevant past cases, which were used to strengthen the normative analysis through comparative points against field findings.

Data analysis followed a five-stage thematic procedure: (1) transcription and initial reading of interview data, (2) open coding to identify recurring themes, (3) theme categorization and pattern identification, (4) data triangulation across informant groups and secondary sources to validate findings, and (5) conclusion drawing and verification. To ensure data validity, member-checking was performed by presenting preliminary findings to key informants for confirmation. All research participants provided written informed consent prior to participation, and all personal identifiers were anonymized to protect informant security, in accordance with ethical principles applicable to research involving vulnerable groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Njeri Mugwe & Runo, 2026).

The analysis was conducted by identifying and categorizing data based on key themes related to regulations on human trafficking, legal implications, and the roles and responsibilities of law enforcement officials, as well as religious and community leaders. The study aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of poverty on human trafficking and to serve as a foundation for more effective social interventions and policies in the future. Regarding the issues in NTT Province, particularly in East Sumba Regency, the authors formulated the following questions: First, how poverty and human trafficking in East Sumba Regency have become inextricably intertwined with customary practices; and second, what role the state has played through legal policies and social protection in achieving justice for victims of human trafficking who come from poor communities in Sumba.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sumba's Tangled Webs That Cannot Be Untangled

According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of East Sumba Regency, as of November 3, 2025, the percentage of the population living in poverty stood at 25.64% (BPS, 2025). TPPO occurs more frequently among women and children. Poverty in rural areas is typically caused by a lack of job opportunities, limited business prospects, low levels of education, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to technology, and cultural values that tend to be less open to innovation (rasid, 2024). Although the government has implemented several poverty alleviation programs, such as Direct Cash Assistance (BLT) and infrastructure development, the assistance provided has not yet fully addressed the root causes of poverty in rural areas. This reality of poverty is evident in Lewa, East Sumba, where the researchers conducted their focus group discussions. The results of the focus group discussions indicate that the poverty contributing to the rise in human trafficking is also influenced by local cultural norms that remain deeply entrenched in society and help perpetuate the community's economic vulnerability. A student at the Lewa Sumba School of Theology (STT Lewa) named Alfian stated that a weak understanding of the value of life makes him feel poor. Astuti, another STT student, also noted that limited access to education leads people in Sumba to choose work over education (Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat Kolaborasi FH UPH, FH Universitas Ngurah Rai, dan STT Lewa). In addition, poverty is also caused by a lack of job opportunities for people with limited education.

When poverty exists, opportunities for human trafficking also arise. People who lack access to education and face limited job opportunities are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking. This crime is committed by promising good jobs with high wages and through an easy and quick process, such as the creation of false documents. Ultimately, the workers fall under the control of the traffickers and are manipulated and exploited for profit, suffering both psychological and physical distress (Adnan, 2024). During the focus group discussion, one of the participants, named Ririn, also stated that parents often see their neighbors' children working abroad and returning home having achieved success; this encourages parents to allow their own children to seek work abroad without considering the risk of human trafficking. Poverty is the

primary cause driving criminal activity, not only human trafficking but also various other crimes. This is because poverty hinders access to proper education and makes it difficult to secure employment. Poverty creates a sense of urgency to obtain money or a job quickly, leading people to disregard administrative procedures and requirements, as well as the importance of having complete legal documentation ([Adnan, 2024](#)). The poverty situation in Sumba is complex, reflecting the difficulties individuals encounter in interacting with their environment as they strive to meet their basic needs.

Poverty in East Sumba is also influenced by a tradition that is still practiced today, namely, the tradition of arranged marriages, as stated directly by Ade Irma, one of the research participants, who is from the village of Kondamara in East Sumba (Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat Kolaborasi FH UPH, FH Universitas Ngurah Rai, dan STT Lewa, 2025). Kawin mawin, or what is known as marriage in East Sumba, requires a significant amount of money, for example, for the belis. The belis tradition is a customary wedding gift of the East Sumba tribe that serves as a symbol of respect and a prerequisite for the validity of the marriage under customary law, where marriage is not merely viewed as a union between two individuals, but as a familial bond between both families ([Ndolu et al., 2025](#)). The word “belis” comes from the root word “membeli,” which refers to the obligation to give and receive gifts from the bride’s family before the marriage procession ([Rodliyah et al., 2017](#); [Santono & Mafruhah, 2026](#)). Belis serves as a symbol of respect for women, governing rights and obligations, social status, and family relationships. Belis strengthens the bond between both parties, fostering a relationship built on mutual respect and support. Belis is not interpreted as a monetary exchange with a quantifiable value, but rather as an integral part of local cultural values and beliefs. Belis is a token of appreciation for the woman joining the man’s family and a form of respect for her role as a wife.

Belis is a dowry given by the groom’s family to the bride’s family through three stages: Ketuk Pintu, Karai Tau, and Pahamang. The belis tradition requires the groom’s family to bring offerings as a sign of responsibility and respect, while the bride’s family negotiates the value of the belis according to custom. During the Ketuk Pintu stage, the groom’s family brings coffee, sugar, betel nut, and mauli mas, or livestock. In Sumba, the animals typically used as belis are horses and buffalo. Next, during the Karai Tau stage, both families meet to discuss the amount of the belis, which may consist of livestock, cloth, or mamuli. The amount of the belis given reflects a person’s social status and is determined based on their family background. The larger the amount of belis given, the higher their social status in the community. According to research findings, the highest traditional belis amount recorded to date is 18 animals, with seven of them designated as sacred animals. The amount of the belis is determined by the bride’s family, specifically by her maternal uncle. This is not always the case, however; in some instances, the amount of the bride’s belis is determined based on the amount of her mother’s belis ([Leonardy & Bana, 2025](#)). When the negotiations result in an agreement, the host family seals the deal by slaughtering a pig, and the blood and meat are served to the guests. The Pahamang stage involves the payment of the previously agreed-upon belis and the bride’s pickup to be brought to the groom’s home. Once these three stages have been completed, the kinship between the two families is formally established according to custom, and the bride becomes part of the groom’s family.

Under customary law, the marriage is regarded as incomplete if the groom is unable to perform his duty of paying with belis. Consequently, the bride is not fully accepted as part of the groom’s family ([Mea et al., 2025](#)). While belis engenders a sense of solidarity, it is also seen as a financial burden by many, particularly younger generations. This can result in financial distress for those who cannot meet the demands of belis. Belis is to be paid in cash on the marriage day itself or in lieu of installments over an indefinite period. The belis payment constitutes a debt unless paid in full during the marriage ceremony. In the event that the groom dies before paying back the belis, expenditures are passed on to his children or grandchildren ([Rodliyah et al., 2017](#); [Santono & Mafruhah, 2026](#)).

Many Sumba villagers still perform the belis tradition as part of their cultural customs, but this activity often burdens families of limited means, particularly those economically less able to afford the belis. Even so, the Sumba people continue to follow this tradition because it has been

practiced since time immemorial and is considered sacred. The higher the value of the belis given, the greater the honor bestowed upon the woman. According to research conducted by the researchers, because the belis is so expensive, it is one of the factors driving people to work abroad to pay off their belis debts. The cost of the belis typically exceeds the assets owned by the groom's family.

Human trafficking does not only affect men. In fact, it occurs more frequently among women and children. Poverty tempts people to work as migrant workers, lured by the promise of high wages. Low levels of education are also a contributing factor to human trafficking in East Sumba. Ms. Ade Irma explained that this poverty stems from a lack of knowledge among the local community, particularly among women, who are often stigmatized by their own village communities. In East Sumba, there is a famous saying that women do not need a high level of education after marriage; their only job is in the kitchen. Residents of East Sumba view this as a common saying due to parents' lack of openness to modern developments.

The structural conditions of poverty in East Sumba are shaped not only by local customs but also by systemic barriers, including limited access to formal education, inadequate employment infrastructure, restricted information on safe migration pathways, and insufficient state support for rural communities. Sumba is known as a region with abundant agricultural potential and plays a vital role in Indonesia's national food security; yet this agricultural potential has not been fully utilized by the region's working-age population. Fundamentally, every individual has the potential to break free from the cycle of poverty and human trafficking through access to education, productive employment, and community empowerment. Therefore, communities, particularly in East Sumba, should be supported in developing their own capacity to boost productivity and escape poverty. However, reality shows that, due to structural inequalities and limited access to legal information, many people opt for informal overseas work that promises high wages but lacks legal protection, thereby increasing the risk of human trafficking. This situation indicates that poverty and human trafficking have become an intricately tangled web, caused not only by economic factors but also by cultural customs, structural inequality, and weak governance.

Human Rights Violations Cloaked in Traditional Customs

It is important to distinguish between the authentic cultural values of belis as a symbol of family bonds and social respect, and the distortion of this practice that has resulted in economic coercion and exploitation. The following analysis focuses on cases where belis has been misused in ways that potentially violate human rights, rather than characterizing all customary belis practices as inherently harmful. More specifically, human trafficking encompasses labor exploitation, sexual exploitation, and other forms of exploitation involving women and children as the most vulnerable groups (*Undang-Undang Nomor 21 Tahun 2007 tentang Pemberantasan Tindak Pidana Perdagangan Orang, Pasal 1*). Regulations regarding human trafficking are set forth in Law No. 21 of 2007 on TPPO, which covers penalties for TPPO and protection for TPPO victims. Forms of trafficking include trafficking for household assistance (ART), work in entertainment venues or clubs, and trafficking for sexual exploitation ([Hidayati et al., 2026](#); [Law, 2007](#)). Additionally, trafficking is frequently carried out for the pornography industry, where victims are forced to act as drug dealers, and women are subjected to forced marriage to produce offspring. Generally, the objective of human trafficking offenders is to sexually and economically exploit victims, as well as through other forms of exploitation.

Economic factors or generational poverty are the most dominant factors in cases of human trafficking. Additionally, low levels of education and deeply ingrained customs that hinder the development of the population's mindset also serve as contributing factors. Although this violates human rights, and while customary law is indeed recognized by the Indonesian state, such violations must be addressed firmly. The 1945 Constitution also mandates the protection of human rights (*Undang-Undang Dasar Negara Republik Indonesia Tahun 1945, Pasal 28A & 28J*). Furthermore, this is compounded by the government's lack of firm action regarding foreign workers and the lenient penalties for perpetrators of TPPO. Legal protection measures are crucial,

given that both individuals and groups within society can become targets of human trafficking (Okeoma et al., 2025).

Customary practices such as kawin mawin can be seen as selling a child to the groom's family, yet the motivation is often simply to obtain money from the suitor. This can be simplified as a sacrifice made by parents at the expense of their child, disregarding the child's inherent worth due to coercion and intimidation from the family. This violation is addressed in Article 4 of the Human Rights Law, namely: the right to life, the right not to be tortured, the right to personal freedom, freedom of thought and conscience, the right to freedom of religion, the right not to be enslaved, the right to be recognized as a person and to equality before the law, and the right not to be prosecuted under retroactive laws are human rights that cannot be diminished under any circumstances or by anyone (*Undang-Undang Nomor 39 Tahun 1999 tentang Hak Asasi Manusia, Pasal 4*) (Galbraith & Flatley, 2026; Law, 1999). This situation has been observed in East Sumba, where human trafficking involving women and children constitutes a violation of human rights in practice. Furthermore, the effects of human trafficking not only cause physical harm but also devastate the mental well-being of victims, resulting in deep trauma that often takes a long time to heal. Strengthening regulations and implementing the law on human trafficking require active outreach by local law enforcement officials.

Human trafficking is a crime that violates human rights and preys on many women and children seeking employment abroad; however, what actually occurs is human trafficking, including slavery and torture. Human trafficking is becoming increasingly widespread and has evolved into a transnational crime; this crime is managed in highly sophisticated ways using new methods to evade detection by law enforcement. According to Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade in any form must be prohibited (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 4).

In reality, human rights violations are often committed but justified under the guise of customary law. Belis often resembles human trafficking; it is not only the debt incurred to purchase the bride that contributes to human trafficking, but the practice itself. If the belis demanded by the woman's family is extremely expensive, or if it is exploited like taking advantage of a situation to maximize profit, belis can be considered a sale by the woman's family. Therefore, if belis is considered a sale, the man may feel that he owns the woman, which can lead to arbitrary actions (Ndolu et al., 2025; Rodliyah et al., 2017). Violence against women often occurs because men perceive the woman as property they have purchased, thus feeling entitled to act according to their will. This is no longer in keeping with proper customs. When belis is paid, these women may become slaves and victims of domestic violence. The actual role of belis should be to strengthen family ties, not commercialize children. A clear example of a human rights violation is how the meaning of belis has changed, yet it becomes a mere footnote in the context of the value placed on performing traditional customs.

Besides belis, there is also the tradition of forced marriage (*kawin tangkap*) in Sumba. Kawin tangkap is the custom of forcibly abducting a woman to marry her (Nurani et al., 2023). Locally, it is called "Piti Maranggangu", which translates to "We are taking you during the meeting." In the past, this practice of kawin tangkap was not undertaken lightly; it was not merely a matter of the man's will, but required waiting for a favorable sign from Marapu, a spirit revered and honored by its followers. In practice, there is also a belis that must be given as a sign of respect for the woman's family. Originally, this practice was carried out with the woman's consent, meaning the abduction occurred as part of a traditional custom; however, over time, it has become increasingly distorted and marked by intimidation, and the process has often been abused by the men involved (Salsabila, 2021; Nurani et al., 2023). Siti Aminah, Commissioner of the National Commission on Violence Against Women, stated that the practice of kawin tangkap constitutes sexual violence and is clearly against the law. This act deprives women of their freedom, constituting a violation of human rights (Kaha, 2020; Nurani et al., 2023). In practice, kawin tangkap is carried out by force, in the sense that it is cruel and inhumane. Women are forcibly taken and subjected to sexual violence on their way to the men's residence. In June 2020, a woman was forcibly taken by a group of men to be married. The victim screamed and resisted, but the act

was carried out anyway under the pretext of upholding a time-honored tradition (Nurani et al., 2023). Men who abuse the tradition of kawin tangkap are committing a grave human rights violation a violation of a woman's freedom, rights, and dignity. The consequence of kawin tangkap is that women are subjected to violence, both physical and psychological. Women who escape from kawin tangkap tend to face social sanctions, such as being looked down upon by society.

From a human rights perspective, this is a form of violation justified under the guise of upholding customary practices, even though, in reality, those practices have been manipulated. Article 1 of the Human Rights Law defines a human rights violation as an act by an individual or a group of people, whether intentional or unintentional, that deprives or violates human rights. Article 28B, Paragraph 1 of the 1945 Constitution clearly states that every person has the right to procreate through a lawful marriage, whereas the tradition of kawin tangkap currently involves coercion. This practice can be classified as unlawful due to the lack of consent from the woman, and it is categorized as a forced marriage. Under Article 10(2) of the Human Rights Act, a marriage is considered valid if it is entered into based on the free will of the prospective spouses. The rights violated against women in kawin tangkap involving violence include the individual right to freely choose a partner and the right to safety and protection from torture (Salim & Svinarky, 2024). Ideally, marriage should be entered into without coercion and by mutual consent. However, such violations are often justified on the grounds of following long-standing customs, even though this constitutes a serious violation of human rights.

Policies and Legal Protections to Ensure Justice for Victims of Human Trafficking

According to the aforementioned studies, regulations and law enforcement in East Sumba should be improved to preserve human dignity through preventive policies standardized in derivative Rules of Law No. 21 Year 2007 on TPPO (Articles 57–62) (Hidayati et al., 2026; Law, 2007), which set out the government's responsibility for conducting public awareness campaigns and education as measures of alertness toward the dangers of human trafficking. Furthermore, the government has a responsibility to identify and alleviate the factors of vulnerability that make people targets for victimization, including poverty, education, and gender inequalities. Economic empowerment programs, particularly for women and other vulnerable groups, are key strategies for preventing human trafficking.

Aiming to reduce or eliminate human trafficking and exploitation in Sumba, two complementary approaches can be taken: preventive and repressive measures. Preventive measures include fostering synergy among the central government through relevant ministries local governments, schools, universities, parents, and the community to reduce the incidence of these crimes. Steps may include increasing parental supervision of children, instilling vigilance toward strangers, and conducting regular outreach and campaigns regarding human rights, the prevention of human trafficking, legal work procedures abroad, and workers' rights. Repressive measures include imposing strict criminal penalties on perpetrators without exception and providing support to victims to facilitate their psychological recovery and ensure their rights are upheld (Karmilia et al., 2022; Karo Karo et al., 2019).

In addition, there are several other regulations and strategic decisions regarding the handling of human trafficking in NTT, namely:

- 1) NTT Provincial Regulation No. 14 of 2008 on the Prevention and Assistance of Victims of Human Trafficking, a regulation concerning efforts to address TPPO in NTT;
- 2) NTT Provincial Regulation No. 7 of 2016 on Services and Supervision of Indonesian Workers from NTT;
- 3) NTT Governor Regulation No. 35 of 2016 on the One-Stop Integrated Service Agency (LTSA) for the placement and protection of workers;
- 4) Decision of the Governor of NTT No. 294/KEP/HK/2014 on the Establishment of a Task Force on Combating Human Trafficking and the Prevention and Handling of Problematic or Non-Procedural Prospective Migrant Workers.

All these regulations are complementary to preventing the rise of TPPO. The NTT Provincial Government is actively strengthening synergy through the Joint Movement to Prevent

Violence Against Women and Children (*GEMA KELOR*) as an additional preventive measure beyond formal regulations. GEMA KELOR emphasizes prevention as the primary step, affirming that efforts must be carried out systematically, in an integrated manner, and involve all societal elements in NTT through cross-sectoral coordination forums. The movement aims to foster a culture that stands with victims, not perpetrators of violence, and to cultivate awareness that violence in any form is unacceptable. Through the GEMA KELOR coordination forum and declaration, the NTT Provincial Government hopes to produce practical strategic recommendations to guide the formulation of more effective policies and programs for the prevention of violence against women and TPPO throughout NTT.

In cases of human trafficking, the rights of victims are regulated under Law No. 21 of 2007 ([Hidayati et al., 2026](#); [Law, 2007](#)) on the Criminal Act of Trafficking in Persons, including: 1) the victim's right to receive compensation for suffering; 2) the right to refuse compensation if not needed; 3) the heirs' right to receive compensation if the victim dies; 4) the right to counseling and rehabilitation; 5) the right to recover property; 6) the right to refuse to testify if it endangers them; 7) protection from threats by perpetrators if the victim testifies; 8) the right to legal counsel; 9) the right to pursue legal remedies ([Abdullah, 2017](#); [Hidayati et al., 2026](#)).

The government provides legal protection through three primary mechanisms: (1) indemnification, under Articles 99(1) and 99(2) of the Criminal Code, allowing victims to claim compensation for material losses; (2) restitution, referring to the perpetrator's legal obligation to compensate all losses caused by criminal acts, enforced through sanctions under Law No. 21 of 2007 on TPPO; and (3) compensation, granted on humanitarian and human rights grounds when the perpetrator cannot fulfill restitution obligations ([Hidayati et al., 2026](#); [Law, 2007](#)). Collectively, these protections aim to realize justice and legal certainty by positioning victims as integral participants in the criminal justice process, ensuring their needs and rights receive institutional attention ([Abdullah, 2017](#); [Hidayati et al., 2026](#)).

Legally, human trafficking in East Sumba is also governed by Article 297 of the Criminal Code (KUHP), which criminalizes "the trade of women and absent boys" with a maximum prison penalty of six years. However, this regulation is insufficient, as it is limited to sexual exploitation. While sexual exploitation accounts for 95% of human trafficking cases, particularly concerning women and girls, other forms, such as forced labor or domestic servitude, also exist. Article 455 paragraph 1 of Law No. 1 of 2023 on the Criminal Code states that any person who recruits, transports, harbors, sends, transfers, or receives another person through threats, violence, abduction, confinement, forgery, fraud, abuse of power or vulnerability, debt bondage, or by offering payment or benefits even with consent from someone exercising control for exploitation within Indonesia shall be punished with imprisonment of 3–15 years and fines ranging from Category IV (IDR. 200,000,000) to Category VII (IDR. 500,000,000).

These cases in East Sumba, as revealed in focus group discussions, constitute serious violations of justice. Unscrupulous recruiters entice people with misleading promises of overseas employment, signaling a clear power imbalance against victims. Many families experience insecurity as migrant workers return only intermittently, violating principles of justice that demand equal treatment and protection from exploitation.

From a distributive justice perspective, welfare remains inequitably distributed, as human trafficking persists. East Sumba residents often seek employment outside their area or country without awareness of their rights or protections. This structural injustice is underpinned by inequalities in employment, education, and information access. Communities live under critical levels of poverty, enabling traffickers to exploit them. Corrective justice requires state and law enforcement agencies to restore victims' rights and enforce strict sanctions. However, justice cannot rely solely on enforcement; it must include preventive measures: labor recruitment oversight, education, and job transparency.

Community participation is fundamental; merely attending government and law enforcement awareness campaigns is insufficient. Communities must actively implement these initiatives. Religious leaders play a key role, while organizations should help individuals develop critical thinking to resist human trafficking deception. The community can also serve as the "eyes"

and "ears," monitoring suspicious labor recruitment schemes and unaccompanied youth recruits to prevent exploitation (Godoy et al., 2025; Nurlinah et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the interrelated factors of poverty, limited education, entrenched customary practices, and weak law enforcement constitute the primary drivers of human trafficking in East Sumba Regency, forming an interlocking "tangled web" of structural and cultural vulnerabilities. Such circumstances fuel injustices that render communities, especially women and children, susceptible to exploitation. In answer to the first research question, poverty and human trafficking in East Sumba are inextricably intertwined with customary practices, particularly the belis tradition and kawin tangkap, which impose severe economic burdens and normalize gender-based exploitation under the guise of cultural legitimacy. These practices, when distorted from their original intent, function as mechanisms that perpetuate cycles of vulnerability and trafficking. In answer to the second research question, the state's role through Law No. 21 of 2007 on TPPO and related NTT provincial regulations establishes a legal framework for victim protection; however, implementation remains inadequate without strengthened enforcement, cross-sectoral coordination, and community empowerment.

A holistic approach to mitigation is therefore imperative. Based on the findings, the following concrete recommendations are proposed: (1) local governments should establish dedicated anti-trafficking task forces with adequate funding and cross-agency coordination; (2) law enforcement agencies must prioritize prosecution of trafficking networks and ensure victim-centered justice processes; (3) traditional leaders should engage in cultural dialogue to differentiate authentic belis values from economically coercive distortions; (4) educational institutions should integrate human rights and safe migration curricula at primary and secondary levels; and (5) communities should be empowered as active participants in early detection and reporting of trafficking activities, supported by accessible legal aid services. As the holder of principal responsibility for protecting human rights, the state plays a key role in realizing distributive, corrective, and social justice through law, education, and community welfare.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Author 1, 2, and 3 conceptualized the study, conducted fieldwork, led data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Author 4 and 5 contributed to the literature review, legal analysis, and critical revision of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version for submission.

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