

MIGRANT CARE'S ADVOCACY IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING CASES OF INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA (2022- 2024)

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ABSTRACT

The increasing number of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia during 2022–2024 is accompanied by a persistently high vulnerability to human trafficking, particularly among non-procedural workers. Although national regulations, bilateral cooperation, and regional frameworks exist, protection efforts remain limited due to weak coordination and cross-border law enforcement, indicating the limitations of state-based protection mechanisms and highlighting the importance of non-governmental organizations within transnational advocacy networks. This study aims to identify and describe the role of Migrant CARE in advocating human trafficking cases involving Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia during the 2022–2024 period, using the Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) and human trafficking framework, which includes information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics. Using a descriptive-qualitative method through interviews and document analysis, the findings show that Migrant CARE plays a significant role in expanding protection by strengthening advocacy networks, elevating issues to the transnational level, and generating collective pressure. However, its optimization remains dependent on the political commitment of both countries and the consistency of cross-border law enforcement.

Keywords: Migrant CARE; Human Trafficking; Indonesian Migrant Workers; Malaysia; Transnational Advocacy Networks

ABSTRAK

Peningkatan jumlah Pekerja Migran Indonesia (PMI) di Malaysia pada 2022–2024 disertai tingginya kerentanan terhadap tindak pidana perdagangan orang (TPPO), terutama pada pekerja non-prosedural. Meskipun terdapat regulasi nasional, kerja sama bilateral, dan kerangka regional, perlindungan masih terbatas akibat lemahnya koordinasi dan penegakan hukum lintas negara, sehingga menunjukkan keterbatasan

mekanisme berbasis negara dan pentingnya peran organisasi non-pemerintah dalam jaringan advokasi transnasional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan mendeskripsikan peran Migrant CARE dalam mengadvokasi kasus TPPO pada PMI di Malaysia periode 2022–2024 menggunakan kerangka teori Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) dan konsep perdagangan manusia. Dengan metode kualitatif-deskriptif melalui wawancara dan studi dokumen, hasil menunjukkan bahwa Migrant CARE berperan dalam memperluas perlindungan melalui penguatan jaringan advokasi, pengangkatan isu ke tingkat transnasional, dan tekanan kolektif terhadap pemerintah. Namun, optimalisasinya tetap bergantung pada komitmen politik kedua negara dan konsistensi penegakan hukum lintas batas.

Kata Kunci: Migrant CARE; Tindak Pidana Perdagangan Orang; Pekerja Migran Indonesia; Malaysia; Jaringan Advokasi Transnasional

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known as one of the main sending countries of migrant workers in the Southeast Asia region. Almost half of the total of Indonesian migrant workers, particularly those dominated by female workers, choose to seek livelihoods abroad due to economic factors such as poverty, limited domestic employment opportunities, and the attractiveness of overseas job prospects (Hidayat et al., 2021). Overseas placement is intended as an effort to ensure equal rights and employment opportunities for workers to achieve better welfare (Kristiadi et al., 2022). It cannot be denied that the presence of Indonesian migrant workers makes a significant contribution through the remittances they generate, which is why they are often referred to as “foreign exchange heroes” (Safitri, 2020).

Based on data from the Data and Information Center of the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (2025), the number of Indonesian migrant workers during the 2022–2024 period further reflects this significance, showing a consistent upward trend. In 2022, the total number of Indonesian migrant workers reached 200,717 workers. This figure increased significantly in 2023 to 297,108 workers, marking a 48.02% increase from the previous year. In 2024, the total slightly increased again to 297,434 workers, representing a marginal increase of 0.11% from 2023.

The increasing deployment of Indonesian migrant workers overseas is not consistently accompanied by adequate protection measures. In practice, some Indonesian migrant workers still depart through non-procedural channels due to the high costs of official placement, limited access to information, and the presence of unlicensed agents offering faster processes at lower costs (Khoiriyah & Indarta, 2024). This situation places non-procedural Indonesian migrant workers in a highly vulnerable position to various forms of abuse, including labor exploitation, violence, document confiscation, and even human trafficking (Azzahra et al., 2023). Their irregular immigration status also deprives them of access to formal legal protection, making it difficult to fulfill their basic rights as workers and as human beings (Intan et al., 2025).

This high level of vulnerability is reflected in various complaint reports from Indonesian migrant workers, which indicate that Malaysia is one of the countries with a relatively high number of cases compared to other destination countries. Based on data from the Data and Information Center of the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (2025), Malaysia ranks third among destination countries with the

highest number of Indonesian migrant worker placements. This phenomenon suggests that although Malaysia remains a prominent destination in Southeast Asia for Indonesian migrant workers, it is also characterized by a significant level of vulnerability to violations of migrant workers' rights.

In response to these issues, various efforts have been undertaken through the establishment of national regulations, Indonesia–Malaysia bilateral cooperation, as well as regional instruments such as the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP). ACTIP is expected to serve as a collective instrument to prevent, address, and combat human trafficking across the Southeast Asia (Jaya et al., 2023). However, in practice, the effectiveness of this legal instrument remains constrained by weak inter-state coordination, differences in legal systems, limited law enforcement capacity, and the principle of non-intervention that restricts collective action (Najib & Juned, 2025; Mugiono et al., 2024). The implementation of ACTIP is often considered largely symbolic, lacking strong enforcement mechanisms (Jaya et al., 2023).

These limitations suggest that the protection of migrant workers cannot rely solely on state mechanisms or regional frameworks. In this context, non-state actors such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have become increasingly important in filling the protection gaps that states are unable to address. NGOs possess flexibility, close connections with communities, and the ability to build cross-border networks, enabling them to carry out advocacy functions more responsively (Alfadh, 2013). Moreover, complaint processes through NGOs are often perceived as faster and less bureaucratic compared to formal government channels (Susilo et al., 2013).

Among the various NGOs involved in migrant worker protection in Indonesia, several organizations have actively engaged in advocacy and assistance for migrant workers facing exploitation and human trafficking. One of the most prominent organizations in this field is Migrant CARE, particularly due to its active involvement in policy advocacy, victim assistance, and multi-party collaboration concerning Indonesian migrant workers (Arista et al., 2017). Previous studies have discussed the role of Migrant CARE from various perspectives. Arista et al. (2017), for example, examined Migrant CARE's advocacy efforts in protecting the interests of Indonesian migrant workers during 2014–2016, particularly in relation to policy advocacy and labor rights protection. Meanwhile, Kunarti et al. (2023) focused on strengthening Migrant CARE's role in ensuring migrant worker protection through a comprehensive rights-based approach. In addition, Zidhnie (2025) analyzed Migrant CARE's advocacy role in influencing the protection of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia during 2017–2022.

Although these studies have contributed to understanding Migrant CARE's advocacy role in general, there has been limited discussion specifically examining how Migrant CARE operates through transnational advocacy pathways in handling human trafficking cases involving Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia during the post-pandemic period. Therefore, this study aims to identify and describe Migrant CARE's roles in advocating human trafficking cases involving Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia during 2022–2024.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Human Trafficking

The concept of human trafficking in this study refers to the international legal framework established by the UN Trafficking Protocol, which forms part of the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and entered into force in 2003. Article 3 of the Protocol defines human trafficking through three main components, namely the act (recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons), the means (threat, use of force, coercion, fraud, or abuse of vulnerability), and the purpose, namely exploitation. Accordingly, a case can be categorized as human trafficking even if exploitation has not yet fully occurred, as long as there is an indication of exploitative intent within the process (Aronowitz, 2017).

In this study, the use of the concept of human trafficking is essential to emphasize that various forms of exploitation faced by Indonesian migrant workers are not merely labor violations but may fall within the category of human trafficking. This is consistent with findings that public understanding of human trafficking remains limited and is often associated solely with sexual exploitation, leading to the neglect of other forms of exploitation (Hansen & Johansson, 2025). Therefore, this concept provides a strong analytical foundation for the advocacy carried out by Migrant CARE, particularly in framing Indonesian migrant workers as victims of human trafficking.

Transnational Advocacy Networks

Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) explain that in global politics, non-state actors such as NGOs, activists, and cross-border networks have a significant role in influencing both domestic and international policies. These networks are understood as communication structures that enable the exchange of information, the construction of norms, and the exertion of pressure on target actors through transnational collaboration. In this context, global politics is no longer dominated solely by states but also involves complex interactions among various actors connected through advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Keck & Sikkink (1998) describe four main tactics within TANs that are used by networks to carry out persuasion, socialization, and pressure, namely information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics.

Information politics refers to the capacity to generate timely, credible, and politically useful information and deliver it to the points where it can produce the greatest impact. Symbolic politics involves the use of symbols, meaningful actions, or narratives that assign meaning to a situation for audiences who are often far removed from the context of the events. Leverage politics refers to the network's ability to engage more powerful actors to influence situations in which less powerful members have limited influence. Accountability politics refers to the ways in which networks hold powerful actors accountable to the policies or principles they have previously declared. Through these four tactics, advocacy networks can shape issue agendas, influence public discourse and policy, and ultimately drive changes at the level of procedures, policies, and state behavior (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

In the context of human trafficking involving Indonesian migrant workers, NGOs such as Migrant CARE play an important role within transnational advocacy networks by connecting victims, civil society organizations, media, and government institutions across borders (Alfadh, 2013). Through these networks, NGOs are able to disseminate information regarding exploitation cases, mobilize public attention, strengthen cross-border solidarity, and encourage institutional responses toward migrant worker protection (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). In addition, transnational advocacy enables NGOs to

elevate local human trafficking cases into broader human rights issues at the regional and international levels, particularly when state-based protection mechanisms remain limited. Therefore, the TANs framework is relevant for analyzing how Migrant CARE expands advocacy efforts beyond domestic mechanisms in handling human trafficking cases involving Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. This perspective is important because migrant worker protection issues often involve cross-border governance problems that cannot be addressed solely through state-centered approaches.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative design to examine the role of Migrant CARE in advocating human trafficking cases involving Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia during 2022–2024. Qualitative research is used to understand meanings assigned by individuals or groups to social problems, while the descriptive approach emphasizes presenting findings in narrative form that reflect actual conditions (Creswell, 2014; Bado, 2022). The study utilizes both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through interviews with key informants, including representatives from Migrant CARE's Legal Aid Division, representatives from the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, and a migration expert from the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Secondary data were obtained from document analysis, including reports, government policies, laws and regulations, academic articles, and relevant media sources. Data were analyzed using the interactive model, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014).

The informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement and expertise in migrant worker protection and human trafficking issues. Representatives from Migrant CARE were chosen due to their active role in handling advocacy and victim assistance cases. Representatives from the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers were selected because of their institutional responsibility in migrant worker protection policies, while the migration expert from the Asia Research Institute provided broader academic and regional perspectives regarding migration governance and trafficking issues in Southeast Asia. Then, the time span from 2022–2024 was chosen because it represents the post-pandemic recovery period, during which the mobility of Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia increased significantly following the reopening of labor migration channels.

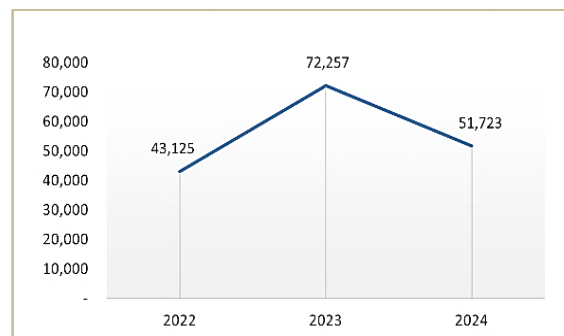
Ethical considerations were applied throughout the research process, particularly because this study involved sensitive information related to victims of human trafficking. In this research, the authors included reconstructed chronologies of several human trafficking cases involving Indonesian migrant workers that had previously been handled by Migrant CARE. However, all victim identities presented in this study were anonymized using pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy, confidentiality, and safety. Interview data and case information were used only with the consent of informants. The use of reconstructed case chronologies was intended to support analytical understanding of trafficking patterns and advocacy processes rather than to expose individual victim experiences.

RESULTS

Vulnerability of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia (2022 – 2024)

Despite Malaysia remaining one of the primary destination countries for Indonesian migrant workers, the increasing demand for labor has not always been accompanied by adequate protection mechanisms. As a result, many Indonesian migrant workers, particularly those departing through non-procedural channels, remain vulnerable to exploitation, labor abuse, and human trafficking. Based on the Indonesian migrant workers placement report issued by the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, as shown in Figure 1, the placement of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia during the 2022–2024 period exhibits a fluctuating trend.

Figure 1. Number of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia (2022-2024)

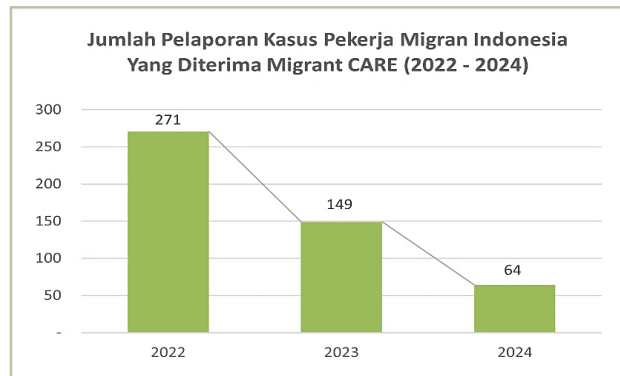


Source: Data and Information Center of the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (2025), processed by the authors

In 2022, there were 43,125 workers, a figure still influenced by the post-COVID-19 recovery, making it the lowest compared to the subsequent two years. This number increased significantly in 2023 to 72,257 workers, in line with the recovery of labor demand in Malaysia and the reopening of official placement schemes following the reimplementations of the One Channel System (OCS) MoU. However, in 2024, the number declined to 51,723 workers, which may reflect policy adjustments as well as strengthened protection measures aimed at reducing non-procedural migration. In addition, the declining attractiveness of Malaysia as a destination country, particularly in terms of wages and job security, has also influenced Indonesian migrant workers to consider alternative destination countries (Rohman & Halid, 2025).

The vulnerability of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is further reflected in case reports received by Migrant CARE during the 2022–2024 period. Based on internal case data, as shown in Figure 2, Migrant CARE received a total of 484 reports involving Indonesian migrant workers across various destination countries. Among these cases, Malaysia ranked second with 73 reported cases, following Cambodia with 212 cases and above Saudi Arabia with 62 cases. These findings indicate that although Malaysia remains one of the most significant destinations for Indonesian migrant workers, it also continues to present considerable risks of exploitation and rights violations.

Figure 2. Number of PMI Case Reports Received by Migrant CARE (2022 – 2024)



Source: Migrant CARE (n.d.), processed by the authors

In addition, the findings reveal that two dominant issues underlying the reported cases were non-procedural migration and indications of human trafficking. Based on the data collected by Migrant CARE (n.d.), cases involving indications of human trafficking reached 369 reports, while non-procedural migration cases totaled 440 reports. These two issues are closely interconnected, as the high number of trafficking cases is strongly associated with the vulnerability of migrant workers departing through irregular channels. Based on interview conducted with Migrant CARE's Legal Aid Division, insecure immigration status often places Indonesian migrant workers in vulnerable positions before formal institutions, causing many victims to hesitate in reporting abuses due to fears of arrest, deportation, or other legal consequences. Consequently, these conditions further restrict victims' access to formal protection mechanisms and reinforce the structural vulnerabilities experienced by Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia (Migrant CARE, 2025).

Modes of Human Trafficking Involving Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia

Based on interviews with informants, this study identifies five main modes of operation commonly used by traffickers to exploit prospective Indonesian Migrant Workers, as follows:

1. **Fraudulent Recruitment Practices**

Fraudulent recruitment involves promises of high-paying jobs, adequate facilities, and formal contracts, often disseminated through social media or informal networks. Prospective workers are then directed to unlicensed agents or brokers who are not officially registered. Perpetrators falsify information, conceal contract details, or offer unrealistic salaries, and may provide incentives to encourage departure (Migrant CARE, 2025).

2. **Non-Procedural Placement**

Non-procedural placement bypasses official mechanisms, leaving workers without legal documents and protection, often through informal or transit routes. Many of them use improper visas, resulting in undocumented status that limits access to legal protection and exposes them to threats of reporting or deportation (Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, 2025).

3. **Debt Bondage and Threats from Other Parties**

Debt bondage occurs when recruitment costs are manipulated into unclear and increasing debts, forcing workers into continued exploitation. Victims often lack debt transparency and face additional charges or threats against themselves and their families, trapping them in cycles of forced labor (Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, 2025).

4. Confiscation of Documents and Personal Identity

The confiscation of personal documents severely restricts victims' freedom by depriving them of their identity, mobility, and access to legal protection (Migrant CARE, 2025). Documents such as passports, residence permits, and employment contracts are often taken by agents, sponsors, or employers (Andreovski & Lyneham, 2014). Through this mode, the absence of documents exposes workers to the risk of arrest or deportation, even when their status results from unlawful confiscation (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

5. Transfer of Workers Between Employers

This mode often occurs after Indonesian migrant workers arrive in destination countries such as Malaysia. A migration expert from the Asia Research Institute at NUS, Yoga Prasetyo, said that in some cases, such transfers are initiated by the workers themselves, particularly when they experience job mismatches, violence, or safety threats. However, these transfers do not necessarily lead to improved conditions, as many victims continue to face similar forms of exploitation even after changing employers (Prasetyo, 2025).

Advocacy of Human Trafficking Cases Involving Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia by Migrant CARE (2022–2024)

In an interview with representatives of the Ministry of Migrant Workers Protection, it was explained that Migrant CARE, as an NGO, plays a strategic role within transnational advocacy, particularly when the state faces limitations in responding to human trafficking cases due to regulatory constraints and formal requirements (Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, 2025). Throughout the 2022–2024 period, Migrant CARE has handled numerous reports originating from migrant workers nor their families, highlighting its position as an alternative and responsive channel for reaching and assisting victims. Based on interview with Migrant CARE, this study reconstructs the chronology of several cases handled by them, including an overview of the handling and advocacy processes, while anonymizing the identities of victims to ensure their confidentiality and safety, as follows (Migrant CARE, 2025):

1. The Case of Yanti (2022-2023)

Yanti (pseudonyms) became a victim of human trafficking after being recruited through non-procedural channels with false promises of employment and high salaries in Malaysia. Upon arrival, she experienced labor exploitation, restricted communication, physical abuse, and wage withholding. Her family initially reported the case to government institutions, but limited information and administrative constraints hindered immediate intervention. Following the report submitted to Migrant CARE, the organization strengthened case verification, mobilized media advocacy, and coordinated with relevant state institutions, contributing to her eventual rescue and repatriation in 2023.

2. The Case of a Group of Indonesian Migrant Workers from West Nusa Tenggara and East Nusa Tenggara (2022–2023)

This case involved a group of Indonesian migrant workers from West and East Nusa Tenggara who were recruited through non-procedural channels with promises of plantation work, high wages, and rapid deployment to Malaysia. Upon arrival, they experienced labor exploitation in remote plantation areas, including unpaid wages, excessive control, and threats of being reported to immigration authorities due to their undocumented status. The case emerged after one victim managed to escape and report the situation through migrant networks and family members in Indonesia. Following the report, Migrant CARE verified the information, coordinated with networks in Kuala Lumpur, and collaborated with NGOs and government institutions to support victim tracing and evacuation. The organization also elevated the issue through regional advocacy forums to strengthen public attention and pressure relevant authorities, which eventually contributed to the victims' rescue and repatriation.

3. The Case of Yudi (2023)

Yudi (pseudonyms) became a victim of confinement, extortion, and violence after departing to Malaysia in 2023 under the promise of high-paying employment. Upon arrival, he was controlled by a fraud syndicate that restricted his communication and demanded ransom payments from his family. Initial police investigations faced difficulties due to limited location data and restricted victim communication. After receiving the report, Migrant CARE strengthened case documentation and mobilized transnational advocacy networks, including cooperation with the Migrant Forum in Asia and Tenaganita in Malaysia. The organization also utilized media exposure to increase public attention and institutional pressure, contributing to Yudi's eventual rescue, repatriation, and post-case assistance.

4. The Case of Sarto (2023)

Sarto (pseudonyms) became a victim of human trafficking after being recruited under a "deferred payment" scheme in which recruitment costs were later deducted from his wages. While working in Malaysia's construction sector, he experienced debt bondage, excessive wage deductions, dangerous working conditions, and restrictions on mobility under threats of deportation. Information regarding his situation was initially conveyed through migrant worker networks before being reported to Migrant CARE. Following verification and coordination with networks in Malaysia, Migrant CARE collaborated with government institutions and raised public awareness through advocacy campaigns, including social media statements during World Day Against Trafficking in Persons. These efforts contributed to Sarto's rescue, repatriation, and continued recovery assistance.

5. The Case of a Group of Indonesian Migrant Workers Recruited by an Organized Trafficking Syndicate (2023–2024)

This case involved a group of Indonesian migrant workers from Central Java who were recruited by an organized trafficking syndicate through false promises of formal employment and high salaries in Malaysia. Victims were transported through non-procedural channels using falsified documents and later transferred between multiple parties under exploitative conditions involving violence, intimidation, and

restricted freedom. Reports from several victims enabled Migrant CARE to identify broader trafficking patterns and compile a unified case chronology. Through coordination with regional advocacy networks, including the Migrant Forum in Asia, as well as collaboration with Indonesian government institutions and the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, the victims were eventually located, evacuated, and repatriated despite challenges in accessing their locations.

6. The Case of Mawar (2024)

Mawar (pseudonyms) became a victim of human trafficking after being recruited through non-procedural channels with promises of employment and high wages in Malaysia. Upon arrival, she was transferred between parties, forced into domestic work, and later subjected to commercial sexual exploitation while her communication and mobility were heavily restricted. The case was identified through reports from individuals near her location and subsequently forwarded to Migrant CARE. In response, Migrant CARE coordinated with networks and organizations such as SBMI, HRWG, JBM, and KontraS to strengthen advocacy efforts and victim tracing. Through cross-organizational coordination and institutional engagement, Mawar was eventually rescued and repatriated to Indonesia, although legal proceedings against several perpetrators remain ongoing.

Based on the chronology above, there are strong indications of human trafficking, including recruitment, job fraud, extortion, confinement, violence, and exploitation. Referring to the cases of Yanti, Yudi, Sarto, Mawar, as well as groups of Indonesian migrant workers from West Nusa Tenggara, East Nusa Tenggara, and Central Java, these three elements are generally fulfilled. In terms of act, all cases demonstrate recruitment, cross-border transportation, and placement, in some instances involving transfer between parties. In terms of means, patterns of deception, abuse of economic vulnerability, violence, threats, and debt bondage as a mechanism of control are evident. In terms of purpose, all cases result in exploitation, including forced labor, wage deductions, inhumane working conditions, and sexual exploitation.

DISCUSSIONS

Migrant CARE's Advocacy through Information Politics

Within the framework of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs), information politics refers to the strategic capacity of advocacy actors to produce, manage, and disseminate accurate, credible, and normatively framed information in order to influence policy actors. It functions not only as a means of conveying facts but also as an instrument to frame issues as urgent public concerns that cannot be ignored (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). The concrete roles of Migrant CARE within this dimension are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Migrant CARE's Advocacy Role in Information Politics

No.	Year	Case Name	Advocacy Role in Information Politics
1.	2022 - 2023	Yanti	Migrant CARE collected, verified, and documented information from the victim's family, compiled it into a case chronology, and disseminated it through mass media to strengthen reporting, advocacy, and case visibility.
2.	2022 - 2023	Group of Indonesian Migrant Workers from West and East Nusa Tenggara	Migrant CARE collected information from escaped victims, verified it, and coordinated with networks in Kuala Lumpur to trace locations and exploitation patterns, consolidating it as a basis for collective advocacy involving multiple victims.
3.	2023	Yudi	Migrant CARE collected and consolidated information from the victim and family, including communication evidence, extortion patterns, and location indicators, then integrated it with initial police tracking.
4.	2023	Sarto	Migrant CARE obtained initial information through informal migrant worker networks, verified and supplemented it with additional data, including the victim's work location via networks in Malaysia, and documented it before reporting to government authorities.
5.	2023 - 2024	Group of Indonesian Migrant Workers of Organized Trafficking Syndicate	Migrant CARE consolidated separate victim reports into a unified chronology by linking recruitment patterns, departure routes, and involved actors, enabling identification of the cases as part of an organized trafficking network.
6.	2024	Mawar	Migrant CARE collected and verified information from multiple sources, including individuals near the victim's workplace and networks in Malaysia, and consolidated it to identify patterns of exploitation.

Source: Interview data with Migrant CARE (2025)

The findings demonstrate that information politics became the most dominant advocacy strategy employed by Migrant CARE in handling human trafficking cases involving Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. Through the collection, verification, and dissemination of information, Migrant CARE transformed fragmented victim reports

into structured advocacy materials capable of attracting institutional and public attention. This finding supports the argument of Keck & Sikkink (1998), that information serves as a strategic political resource within transnational advocacy networks, particularly when victims possess limited direct access to formal protection mechanisms.

Migrant CARE’s Advocacy through Symbolic Politics

According to Keck & Sikkink (1998), symbolic politics refers to the use of symbols, narratives, and images to connect the concrete experiences of victims with universal moral values that transcend cultural boundaries and power structures. This approach functions to transform experiences that were previously hidden or perceived as “distant” into issues that can be widely understood by the public, policymakers, and other international actors. This is reflected in the advocacy role carried out by Migrant CARE in the previous cases, particularly in efforts to generate public attention and build cross-actor solidarity, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Migrant CARE’s Advocacy Role in Symbolic Politics

No.	Year	Case Name	Advocacy Role in Symbolic Politics
1.	2022 - 2023	Group of Indonesian Migrant Workers from West and East Nusa Tenggara	Migrant CARE held a side event titled “Questioning Human Trafficking in East Nusa Tenggara and Demanding State Accountability”, strengthened its symbolic meaning as protection mechanisms’s critique.
2.	2023	Sarto	Migrant CARE framed Sarto’s case as debt-bondage-based human trafficking and used World Day Against Trafficking in Persons to amplify the narrative through social media statements, raising public awareness of migrant worker exploitation.

Source: Interview data with Migrant CARE (2025)

The use of symbolic politics indicates that Migrant CARE not only focused on direct victim assistance but also attempted to construct broader public narratives regarding migrant worker exploitation and state responsibility. By linking individual trafficking cases with symbolic events and public campaigns, the organization transformed isolated experiences into collective human rights concerns, thereby strengthening public awareness and solidarity across actors.

Migrant CARE’s Advocacy through Leverage Politics

Leverage politics refers to the use of third-party influence to pressure target actors to change their practices or policies. Keck & Sikkink (1998) explain that this strategy is typically employed when domestic advocacy channels reach a deadlock, prompting networks to engage actors with greater political, economic, or moral authority to exert

pressure on states or relevant institutions. The concrete forms of Migrant CARE's advocacy role within this dimension are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Migrant CARE's Advocacy Role in Leverage Politics

No.	Year	Case Name	Advocacy Role in Leverage Politics
1.	2022 - 2023	Yanti	Migrant CARE used media exposure, including television interviews, to build public pressure and encourage responses from the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur.
2.	2022 - 2023	Group of Indonesian Migrant Workers from West and East Nusa Tenggara	A regional side event involving NGOs, government representatives, and ASEAN actors expanded support and pressured authorities to move beyond the initial verification stage toward a more serious response.
3.	2023	Yudi	Migrant CARE built pressure through transnational networks involving the Migrant Forum in Asia and Tenaganita, while media exposure increased public pressure and accelerated responses from the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur and Malaysian authorities.
4.	2023	Sarto	Migrant CARE, together with Migrant CARE Kuala Lumpur, mobilized support to strengthen information gathering and access to case handling, while digital exposure increased public pressure on government authorities.
5.	2023 - 2024	Group of Indonesian Migrant Workers of Organized Trafficking Syndicate	Migrant CARE expanded advocacy pressure through regional networks such as the Migrant Forum in Asia, strengthening its position and encouraging responses from the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, as well as coordination with Malaysian authorities.
6.	2024	Mawar	Migrant CARE expanded advocacy pressure through coordination with SBMI, HRWG, JBM, and KontraS, strengthening information outreach and encouraging responses from the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur and relevant authorities.

Source: Interview data with Migrant CARE (2025)

The findings further reveal that leverage politics played a crucial role when domestic protection mechanisms were insufficiently responsive. Through collaboration with transnational NGOs, media exposure, and regional advocacy forums, Migrant CARE expanded pressure toward both Indonesian and Malaysian authorities. This demonstrates how transnational advocacy networks enable NGOs to mobilize external influence in order to accelerate institutional responses.

Migrant CARE’s Advocacy through Accountability Politics

Accountability politics is a key element aimed at holding authoritative actors accountable for their normative commitments, particularly in relation to human rights standards and agreed policies. It goes beyond merely exposing violations by emphasizing the use of cross-border moral and political pressure to ensure that these commitments, whether embedded in international legal frameworks or bilateral agreements, are effectively implemented (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). In this context, Migrant CARE’s role in accountability politics is reflected in its case-handling practices, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Migrant CARE’s Advocacy Role in Accountability Politics

No.	Year	Case Name	Advocacy Role in Accountability Politics
1.	2022 - 2023	Group of Indonesian Migrant Workers from West and East Nusa Tenggara	Migrant CARE raised the case in regional forums to demand state accountability from Indonesia, Malaysia, and other ASEAN countries, emphasizing the need to fulfill commitments to protect migrant workers under regional and bilateral agreements.
2.	2023	Sarto	Strengthened reporting to government institutions and regular information updates reflect ongoing efforts to push state responsibility in case handling, while post-repatriation assistance demonstrates a commitment to supporting victims’ rights recovery after exploitation.

Source: Interview data with Migrant CARE (2025)

In terms of accountability politics, Migrant CARE’s advocacy reflects continuous efforts to encourage state actors to fulfill their normative commitments regarding migrant worker protection and anti-trafficking policies. However, the findings also indicate that NGO advocacy remains highly dependent on state responsiveness, particularly because organizations such as Migrant CARE do not possess formal legal enforcement authority.

Limitations of Migrant CARE in Advocating Human Trafficking Cases

Within the dynamics of handling human trafficking cases involving Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia during 2022–2024, Migrant CARE has played a significant role. In many cases, the organization has filled initial gaps when state responses were not yet forthcoming, particularly through information gathering, case verification, and

reporting to relevant institutions. Public advocacy and media engagement have also helped increase attention to specific cases and encourage faster institutional responses. This reflects the role of NGOs within transnational advocacy networks in mobilizing information and public attention to address issues that are insufficiently handled by state actors (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

However, a critical assessment shows that this role remains limited, as Migrant CARE is not always able to directly access victims in Malaysia independently. Migrant CARE's strength lies in its ability to activate transnational networks, including coordination with civil society organizations in Malaysia and regional networks such as the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA). These networks facilitate information exchange, access to victims, and cross-border responses. Nevertheless, their involvement is not always consistent across cases, making intervention outcomes variable.

In addition, Migrant CARE functions as an intermediary between victims and state institutions by strengthening case reports and advocacy efforts to encourage institutional responses. This intermediary role reflects one of the core characteristics of transnational advocacy networks, namely connecting local grievances with broader institutional and political mechanisms (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). However, this position also reflects structural constraints, as Migrant CARE lacks authority to directly enforce policy actions.

As a non-state actor, Migrant CARE does not possess formal legal authority to prosecute perpetrators of human trafficking. Its role is therefore limited to advocacy, victim assistance, and facilitating state-led legal processes. This demonstrates that while Migrant CARE is essential in filling protection gaps and mobilizing transnational advocacy, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the responsiveness and institutional capacity of state actors.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the high demand for labor in Malaysia does not necessarily correspond with the implementation of a safe migration system for Indonesian migrant workers. On the contrary, the mismatch between labor market demand and workforce capacity, along with limited access to procedural migration channels, has pushed some prospective migrants to choose faster but riskier non-procedural pathways. In this context, vulnerabilities to fraud, abuse of vulnerability, forced labor, and sexual exploitation should not be seen merely as deviations, but as structural consequences of a migration governance system that remains insufficiently inclusive and protective.

In such circumstances, the presence of non-state actors such as NGOs functions not only as a complement but also as a corrective to state limitations. Migrant CARE, in this regard, does more than provide victim assistance, such as it acts as an intermediary actor connecting victims with transnational advocacy networks, media, and international institutions. Through the framework of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs), Migrant CARE's main strength lies not in formal authority, but in its capacity to manage information, construct narratives, and mobilize cross-border support. However, the optimization of its advocacy remains dependent on consistent political commitment and law enforcement by the state. Therefore, transnational advocacy should be understood as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, the role of the state.

Despite the findings presented in this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. For example, access to primary data was relatively limited, as many human trafficking cases involve sensitive information and require protection of victims' confidentiality and safety. Furthermore, this study relied on a limited number of informants, which may not fully capture the broader dynamics of human trafficking involving Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. Nevertheless, these limitations also highlight opportunities for further research. Future studies could explore broader comparative perspectives, for example, by including the role of other NGOs, or human trafficking cases in other countries or continents, or by applying quantitative approaches to generate more measurable insights into the success of transnational advocacy for the protection of migrant workers.

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