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UTBILDNINGS- OCH SAMHÄLLSVETENSKAP

# Collaboration and Contradictions

Examining public authorities and NGOs cooperation in anti-trafficking  
efforts in Thailand

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how public authorities and NGOs collaborate in anti-trafficking work in Thailand, and how this collaboration is experienced and negotiated in practice. The study focuses on two research questions. The first asks how local public authorities and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) collaborate in anti-trafficking work. The second asks how this dynamic can be understood using the theoretical perspectives applied in the study. Empirically, the study is based on ten qualitative interviews with actors working in the anti-trafficking field, analysed through thematic content analysis. The analysis is organised around three themes, which are collaboration in practice, priorities, and social hierarchies. The findings indicate that collaboration is widely described as necessary for victim identification, referrals and support, but also as consistently constrained by organisational conditions that actors cannot easily change. Collaboration is often enabled through informal relationships, personal trust and everyday digital communication, which can make coordination flexible but also person-dependent and vulnerable to staff turnover. The interview material also describes corruption and weak accountability as structural barriers shaping incentives, case selection and trust. Finally, the study suggests that victim recognition is influenced not only by formal legal definitions but also by social hierarchies related to gender, age, nationality and migration status, which has implications for who gains access to protection processes.

*Keywords: human trafficking, Thailand, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), public authorities, collaboration, cooperation, corruption, victim recognition*

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Human trafficking is a global crime found in every region. Most victims are identified within their countries, and when cases do involve cross-border movement, they typically remain within the same region. Trafficking is widespread and highly profitable, generating an estimated 150 billion USD each year (United Nations Thailand, 2024). The United Nations defines human trafficking as “*the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit*” (United Nations, n.d.). In Thailand, human trafficking is shaped by structural vulnerability and regional migration flows, which increases the need for collaboration across agencies and organisations. Implementation is complicated by corruption, limited resources and the transnational character of trafficking networks (Thammasiri, 2024, pp. 12-13). Vulnerability is linked to socio-economic conditions such as poverty and limited access to education, and gender inequality and uneven development can push people into informal and poorly regulated work (Thammasiri, 2024, p. 12). Trafficking affects both Thai nationals and migrants, and includes both sexual exploitation and forced labor, which places pressure on systems for identification, referral and support (United Nations Thailand, 2024). Given that many forced labor cases are linked to private-sector workplaces and supply chains, risks can also arise through business partners and subcontractors, not only through direct state contact (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025).

Thailand’s legal and policy response is grounded in the UN Palermo Protocol, which frames anti-trafficking work around prevention, protection, and collaboration between relevant actors (UN General Assembly, 2000). At the national level, the law Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E 2551 (2008) criminalises trafficking-related acts and assigns central responsibilities for implementation and victim protection to state authorities, including the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS). The Act also outlines key victim support measures such as shelter, healthcare, rehabilitation and legal assistance, as well as protections such as non-punishment for offences committed under force (Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E. 2551, 2008). However, how this framework functions in practice shapes the collaboration between the state and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Previous assessments and interviewees suggest that NGOs are not fully involved in victim identification, that communication can weaken once victims enter state shelters, and

that slow or complex procedures can delay coordination and limit information sharing between authorities and NGOs (Rapid Asia, 2022, p. 61). At the same time, the Thai government's own reporting presents NGO partnerships as a core strength, highlighting joint training and cooperation across prevention, protection and prosecution, including NGO involvement in developing guidelines for officials (Royal Thai Government, 2022, pp. 1-4).

## 1.2 Research problem

Despite formal laws, policy commitments and coordination mechanisms, several sources indicate persistent gaps in how anti-trafficking work is carried out in practice, particularly in areas that depend on cooperation between public authorities and NGOs. In the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report 2025, Thailand is placed in Tier 2, indicating that the country does not fully meet the minimum standards under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), while also indicating ongoing efforts to improve (U.S Department of State, 2025).

Interview-based research points to recurring cooperation problems such as unclear role division, incentives that prioritise measurable outputs over quality, corruption and misconduct that undermine trust, bureaucratic delays and weak continuity in leadership, and limited information-sharing capacity, including the absence of shared systems (Tuneekul & Chitsawang, 2023, pp. 14-15). Further reporting suggests that these challenges are visible in everyday case handling, including difficulties in detecting forced labor and recognising indicators such as debt bondage, excessive overtime and withheld wages, as well as concerns about corruption and official complicity that can weaken enforcement and protection efforts (Prajit, Rahman, & Yusuf, 2024, p. 16). Regional assessments also point to practical coordination barriers, including limited NGO involvement in victim identification and weakened communication once victims enter state shelters, which can slow information exchange and delay protection (Rapid Asia, 2022, p. 61). When coordination is slow, communication breaks down, or roles and influence are contested, consequences may include delayed victim protection, inconsistent support and reduced access to rights and services within the formal system (Rapid Asia, 2022, p. 61). Against this background, there is still limited empirical knowledge that centres how NGO actors experience and interpret collaboration with public authorities in practice in Thailand, and how they navigate the organisational obstacles and enabling conditions that shape cooperation in everyday practice.

### 1.3 Purpose and research questions

This study examines how NGOs collaborate with public authorities in anti-trafficking work in Thailand, with a focus on identifying the obstacles and enabling conditions that shape cooperation in practice. The study is guided by the following research questions.

- How do local public authorities and NGOs collaborate in anti-trafficking work in Thailand?
- How do the theoretical perspectives applied in this study help explain how this collaboration works in practice?

### 1.4 Concepts

This section clarifies how the main concepts used in this study are understood and applied. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are understood as formally organised, non-profit and non-state actors that work in the field of anti-trafficking in Thailand (Candid Learning, n.d.). In this study, NGOs include both local and international organisations active in victim support and anti-trafficking efforts. Public authorities refer to state actors with a formal mandate related to human trafficking in Thailand, such as the police, immigration authorities, social services and relevant ministries. Collaboration refers to how public authorities and NGOs work together in practice in the anti-trafficking field, including information exchange, coordination of activities, division of responsibilities and joint decision-making in individual cases as well as in broader policy processes. Collaboration is understood as involving both formal structures and informal relationships. The national referral mechanism (NRM) describes the formal system through which victims of trafficking are identified, referred and connected to appropriate services in Thailand, including the roles and responsibilities of different agencies and organisations (IOM, 2023, pp. 2-3). The concept window-dressing is defined as “things that are of no real importance and are said or done in order to make an attractive effect” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). Victims of trafficking are understood here in accordance with the United Nations definition of human trafficking presented in the first paragraph of the introduction.

### 1.5 Disposition

The introductory chapter presents the background to the study, outlines the research problem and describes human trafficking in Thailand and the collaboration between public authorities and NGOs. It then formulates the overall purpose and research questions and briefly introduces the key concepts used in the analysis. The second chapter introduces previous

research on human trafficking and collaboration. It then identifies important themes in the existing literature and shows how the study relates to them. The third chapter presents the theoretical framework of the study and how these theories are used to create the analytical tools and themes in the empirical analysis. The fourth chapter describes the methodology, validity and reliability in the study, and discusses ethical issues. The fifth chapter presents the empirical findings from the interviews and contains an analysis of how the findings can be understood in relation to earlier research and the specific institutional context of Thailand. The material is organised by themes that follow the analytical framework. The final chapter concludes with a discussion, a summary of the study's conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## **2. Previous research**

This chapter presents previous research that is relevant to this study. The aim was to situate the study within existing knowledge on human trafficking and on collaboration between public authorities and NGOs.

### **2.1 NGOs in anti-trafficking efforts**

This section summarises research on NGOs' roles in anti-trafficking efforts and highlights patterns that are directly relevant to this thesis' focus on collaboration and implementation in practice. In the Thai context, research suggests that NGOs have adapted their strategies in response to shifting governance pressures and constraints in state capacity. Kadfak, Wilhelms and Oskarsson (2023) show how reforms linked to “modern slavery” agendas in Thailand's seafood sector have coincided with donor withdrawal in a middle-income context, while expectations for stronger labor rights and improved standards for marginalised migrant workers have increased. Their study also indicates that NGOs have increasingly combined two roles that shape how they interact with other actors. First, NGOs act as labor-rights “watchdogs”, producing evidence-based reports to push the Thai government on policy and enforcement. Second, NGOs increasingly collaborate directly with domestic companies in supply chains, using ethical-trade and “ethical consumerism” pressures to influence market practices and make migrant workers more visible, rather than just labor inputs. These dual roles as both critical monitors of the state and partners of business allow NGOs to diversify their alliances and funding while remaining key actors in promoting migrant workers' rights within a changing governance landscape (Kadfak et al., 2023, pp. 571, 591-595).

Beyond Thailand, a regional study from the Greater Mekong Subregion also underlines how NGO roles in anti-trafficking often depend on coordination across organisational boundaries and on access controlled by other actors. The study is based on interviews examining NGOs' work against trafficking of women and children in Cambodia and Vietnam. The results showed that NGOs' anti-trafficking actions frequently rely on cooperation and referrals from local authorities, law enforcement and other community-based actors rather than direct access to victims. The same study also highlights how support structures and responsibilities can be divided between the state and NGOs, for example describing shelters as primarily managed by government agencies while NGOs contribute to funding or technical support, which makes close collaboration central if victim support is to work as a chain rather than isolated interventions. In addition, the study documents recurring constraints that limit what NGOs can achieve even when formal commitments exist, including difficulties accessing victims, short-term funding, referral problems, and corruption as threats from traffickers, all of which affect coordination and continuity in practice (Gan, Thi Thuy Ha, Kao & Poch, 2014, pp. 71, 81, 83-85).

Finally, research on Thai-based NGOs indicates that external incentives can shape not only what NGOs do, but also how anti-trafficking work is defined and measured, with implications for collaboration with authorities. Jones, King and Edward (2018) argue that donor funding can reward visible "raid-and-rescue" interventions that produce quantifiable outputs, while potentially diverting attention from long-term prevention and from forms of exploitation that are harder to "count". They also note that raid-and-rescue approaches can be harmful and rights-violating and may reinforce a narrow gendered focus on women and children in the sex industry. Their findings also emphasise that irregular migrants and undocumented victims may fall outside legislative frameworks, which limits protection and creates dilemmas for NGOs that assist people who do not fit formally recognised categories (Jones et al., 2018, pp. 232-233, 235, 240-241, 249). For this thesis, these findings are relevant because they illustrate how institutional incentives and categories can shape cooperation dynamics, priorities and trust between NGOs and public authorities in practice.

## 2.2 Collaboration

Previous research shows that collaboration between public authorities and civil society actors is central to anti-trafficking efforts, since authorities often depend on NGOs for victim support, referrals and complementary expertise. Collaboration therefore becomes an

important subject of study in its own right. Foot, Sworn and Alejano-Steele (2019) show that NGOs working against human trafficking often operate under heavy legal and administrative burdens and may face hostile or indifferent state attitudes as well as corruption or inefficiency in public agencies, which can limit their ability to protect victims and support prosecutions. Their findings are analytically relevant for this thesis because they highlight how collaboration can be constrained not only by formal structures, but also by trust, access and state behaviour, and they also introduce the risk that government-led task forces can function as “window-dressing” rather than changing practice. Factors like these can limit their ability to protect victims and support prosecutions, because time and energy are spent on complying with unclear rules instead of doing core work. These dynamics provide a comparative lens for examining whether similar patterns appear in the Thai context, where cooperation is formally emphasised but repeatedly described as difficult in practice (Foot et al., 2019, pp. 31-32).

In Thailand specifically, research points to structural obstacles that can weaken coordination across institutions and, by extension, collaboration with NGOs. Tuneekul and Chitsawang (2023) argue that Thailand’s criminal justice response to trafficking is affected by a lack of clear policy leadership and systematic planning, while agencies operate as closed bureaucracies with long chains of command that slow down case responses. They identified cooperation problems between police, prosecutors, courts, the Ministry of Social Development and the Department of Special Investigations (DSI) before, during and after legal proceedings, including delays in case files and data entry, slow prosecutions, funding difficulties, weak victim protection and delays in enforcing judgements, linked to bureaucracy, limited trust and communication, numerical targets and corruption. This is directly relevant to the present study because it suggests that even when collaboration is formally mandated, organisational design and incentives can create an implementation gap that shapes everyday cooperation between authorities and NGOs (Tuneekul & Chitsawang, 2023, pp. 12-14).

Comparative research from other settings also helps specify what “effective collaboration” can entail at an operational level, which is useful for analysing Thai practices without assuming that formal cooperation mechanisms automatically work. Pajón and Walsh (2022), studying police work in England and Wales, show that officers routinely work with multiple partner agencies and that NGOs and charities are most consistently relied upon for victim-related support, while state agencies tend to hold the main roles in intelligence and

enforcement. Their findings suggest that victim-centered and intelligence-led investigations depend on coordinated cooperation across specialised actors with different mandates. For this thesis, the analytical relevance is that it helps frame collaboration as a division of labor and information-sharing process, which can then be examined empirically in Thailand by asking how roles are distributed in practice, where coordination breaks down, and how NGOs experience their position within that system (Pajón & Walsh, 2022, pp. 302-304, 306).

### 2.3 Research gap

Taken together, previous studies show that collaboration between public authorities and NGOs is widely seen as essential, but also constrained by legal, structural and power-related challenges. Rapid Asia's ACTIP (2022) study and The Royal Thai Government's own country report are mainly treated here as sources that describe the formal system and the official framing of anti-trafficking work, including how collaboration is intended to function and how the state presents its own performance. By contrast, the academic work by Kadfak et al., Foot et al., Tuneekul and Chitsawang, and Pajón and Walsh provides more independent analyses of how cooperation is enacted in practice, pointing to tensions that may remain less visible in policy texts, such as contested roles, uneven influence and challenges in coordination between sectors. Together, this literature indicates a research gap in that there is still limited empirical work that centres how NGO actors themselves experience collaboration with public authorities in Thailand. More specifically, while existing research often maps institutions, policies and formal coordination mechanisms, less attention has been paid to the interactional level of collaboration in everyday practice, including how information is shared or withheld, how trust is built, how discretionary decisions shape access to protection, and how NGOs experience their influence within the system. There is also a need for research that captures variation across NGO roles and types of cases, since NGOs' involvement can refer to different forms of work and relationships with authorities. This thesis contributes by addressing this gap through an empirical focus on NGO perspectives in Thailand. By examining how NGO actors interpret and navigate collaboration with public authorities in practice, the study adds knowledge about the concrete mechanisms through which cooperation is enabled or constrained, and about how implementation challenges are experienced at the point where formal frameworks meet everyday casework and coordination.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

This chapter presents the theoretical framework used to analyse collaboration between public authorities and NGOs in Thailand. It combines collaborative governance, street-level-bureaucracy and Christie's ideal victim theory together with intersectionality. Together, these perspectives explain how priorities around institutional collaboration, frontline discretion and social hierarchies shape victim recognition, access to protection, and the practical strengths and gaps of anti-trafficking collaboration.

#### **3.1 Collaborative Governance**

Collaborative governance is used as a focused analytical lens to examine how public authorities operate in a fragmented welfare system where multiple actors and levels are involved, which makes coordination of responsibilities, knowledge and resources necessary. In this thesis the concept is used narrowly to capture how collaboration is organised and governed in practice, rather than to map all possible forms of coordination. The perspective therefore directs attention to both formal arenas, role structures and how coordination can be more or less formalised in practice, for example through information exchange across organisational boundaries. Collaborative governance highlights interdependence between actors with different mandates and resources and is particularly relevant in anti-trafficking work, where responsibilities are distributed across organisational levels and where cooperation failures can create practical breakdowns in continuity, with individuals at risk of falling behind chairs when coordination is missing (Melke, Svensson & Svensson, 2024, pp. 12-14).

In this thesis collaborative governance is further specified through the collaborations governing arrangements, understood as the practical structures that stabilise and enable joint action across organisational boundaries to solve problems. This includes how participation is organised, how mandates and decision authority are distributed and what agreed routines shape coordination over time, such as how actors share information, follow up decisions and allocate tasks. The theoretical point is that these arrangements shape whether interdependent actors translate shared intentions into consistent implementation, particularly in fragmented policy settings where coordination failures risk producing gaps in referral and protection chains. When formal agreements or written procedures exist, they are treated as manifestations of these governing arrangements that are indicators of role expectations,

accountability and coordination routines rather than as the analytical object in themselves (Johnson, Willis & McGinnis, 2020, pp. 3-6).

In contrast to classic hierarchical steering models collaborative governance highlights interdependence between actors who hold different mandates and forms of expertise, and whose institutional roles make collaborative problem solving necessary in shared problem spaces and supporting the co-production of coherent policy outcomes (Melke et al., 2024, pp. 13-15). A complementary definition is provided by the National Policy Consensus Center (2020) where collaborative governance is described as an approach to public problem solving that brings cross-sector stakeholders together in a neutral setting to share views and resources in order to accomplish a goal (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3,7). The perspective is particularly relevant when analysing anti-trafficking work in Thailand as a setting where responsibilities and service delivery are distributed across multiple organisations and levels, where public, private and civil society actors may need to combine complementary competencies across organisational boundaries. Collaboration is therefore not only a technical response to complexity but an organisational arrangement that must manage overlapping regulations and responsibilities. It must also handle situations where actors contest who should carry costs and deliver interventions, which can create a risk that affected individuals fall between organisational “cracks”. This is why coordination functions and more structured forms of collaboration, from information exchange to deeper forms of joint organising are described as practical mechanisms for making cooperation workable in everyday life (Melke et al., 2024, pp. 12-14).

This study uses Johnson, Willis & McGinnis (2020) concept of collaborative governance framework as an operational guide for what to examine empirically. Collaborative governance is described as the organisational structure a group relies on to steer and facilitate meetings, govern the group, assign work, interact with stakeholders outside, fulfil agreements, meet procedural agreements and monitor and evaluate progress in order to adjust the collaboration when needed. The framework is typically codified through various formal or informal instruments, such as interagency contracts, organised bylaws or agreed upon operational protocols. These documents vary in their legal weight but serve the common purpose of defining the group's essential parameters. This includes clarifying the partnership's overarching objectives, its legal structure and the specific authorities to its members. In addition they provide a roadmap for practical administration, covering aspects like decision

making processes, address meeting rules, timelines, a communication plan and an evaluation plan. The guide emphasises that the formality and complexity of such arrangements varies with the group's composition, purpose and accountability (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 4-7).

### 3.2 Street-level bureaucrats

Street-level bureaucracy (SLB) is used in this study to explain why Thailand's anti-trafficking system can look coherent on paper but become uneven in practice, even when formal collaboration structures exist. The perspective focuses on the frontline points where public authority and victims' needs meet under time pressure, limited resources and organisational constraints, which is also where collaboration with NGOs becomes practically decisive. In this study the SLB is therefore used to analyse how routines and discretionary judgements by police, immigration officers, labor inspectors, social workers and shelter personnel shape whether potential victims are identified, treated as eligible for protection and successfully referred through the NRM. This helps explain why outcomes can differ across places and cases can despite the same overarching policy framework.

Following Lipsky (2010) street-level bureaucrats are public servants who interact directly with citizens and exercise substantial discretion, their individual decisions taken together add up to what agencies actually do and thereby what policy becomes in practice. In anti-trafficking work this implies that frontline actors do not merely "apply" policy through repeated case decisions they effectively produce on daily practice, especially under persistent workload pressure where routinisation, screening and other work-processing shortcuts shape clients are handled, and how. This mattered for the research problem because the most consequential failures and successes were likely to occur in routine encounters and handovers rather than in formal agreements, since SLB policy delivery was immediate, personal and ventred on the individual case. Analytically, SLB was used in the analysis to trace collaboration outcomes to specific frontline decision situations, showing how vulnerability assessments, interpretations of legal categories and credibility judgements shaped what happened to cases in practice. It also shows how discretionary choices at the frontline could either facilitate coordinated protection or generate gaps in which victims were delayed, misclassified or dropped from the process (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 3-4, 9-10, 18-20).

This argument was reinforced by Lipsky's (2010) emphasis on how street-level encounters were shaped by the immediacy of decision making and the fact that policy was delivered in

direct interactions where assessments were made on the spot and centred on individual case. Further he showed why discretion was difficult to eliminate, since frontline work involved complex tasks that could not be fully reduced to rule based procedures and therefore required situational judgement in response to the human dimensions of cases. Under these conditions resource constraints and time pressure became central features of street-level work, since heavy caseloads and limited time constrained how much information could be gathered and assessed before decisions could be made (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 11-16, 29-30).

### 3.3 Victim recognition

This section uses Christie's (1986) concept of "the ideal victim" together with an intersectional perspective to analyse how victim recognition and access to protection are shaped within anti-trafficking collaboration in Thailand. In this study, victim recognition is understood as a practical, institutional process rather than a self-evident label. Empirically, it refers to whether and how a person is treated as a trafficking victim by relevant actors, and what consequences this recognition has for access to formal protection measures. In the results chapter, victim recognition is therefore operationalised through interviewees' descriptions of decision points and routines in case handling, such as how potential victims are identified, what indicators are treated as credible, who has influence over classification decisions, and how recognition affects referrals, shelter admission, access to legal aid, and the willingness of authorities to proceed with investigation and protection.

Christie (1986) argues that victim status is shaped by social expectations rather than automatically given. The "ideal victim" is not necessarily the person who suffers most, but the person who most easily receives legitimate victim status in public and institutional eyes. This status depends on social expectation where the ideal victim is perceived as weak, engaged in a respectable activity. The ideal victim is also located in a place where they cannot reasonably be blamed for being, and harmed by an offender who is big, clearly "bad" and unknown to them. By contrast, someone who is seen as strong, in a morally ambiguous setting, or harmed by someone they know may struggle to gain the same recognition even if the harm is serious (Christie, 1986, pp. 17-20).

In contrast, "non-ideal victim" is someone whose suffering is stigmatised or blamed, making society less likely to grant them legitimate victim status even when serious harm occurs. Furthermore Christie (1986) argues that recognizing victims can be necessary to reduce

suffering, but the “ideal victim” status is built on weakness and dependence, so greater equality can actually reduce society’s tendency to grant that status. Focusing too much on “ideal” victims and offenders can create fear and simple stories, while real prevention comes from changing social conditions and reducing isolation (Christie, 1986, pp. 23, 28-29). In this study, the ideal victim framework is used as an analytical tool to interpret how credibility and deservingness are constructed in collaboration. Concretely, it is used to analyse how interviewees describe which individuals are “easy” versus “difficult” to identify as trafficking victims, what kinds of narratives or signs make a case convincing to authorities, and which circumstances trigger doubt, stigma, or reclassification into other categories. The concept also helps interpret how different actors frame borderline cases, for example when exploitation is treated as a workplace conflict or an immigration matter instead of being recognised as trafficking.

Intersectionality adds a structured way to analyse why some individuals are more likely than others to fit the expectations associated with victim recognition. De los Reyes and Mulinari (2025) emphasise intersectionality as an approach for analysing how multiple power relations interact to produce social hierarchies and exclusion through institutions and everyday practices, rather than as a descriptive account of individual identity. The central contribution of intersectionality is its ability to develop a theoretical perspective that links power and inequality to individuals' possibilities to act as subjects within existing structures, institutional practices and dominant ideologies. The focus moves away from single categories to how they intersect, which makes it possible to see how institutions, structures and everyday practices reproduce inequality (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2025, pp. 13-14, 20-23). In this study, “social hierarchies” are operationalised as patterned differences in how victimhood is interpreted and acted upon depending on intersecting positions such as gender, nationality, legal status, migration status, socioeconomic position, and ethnic belonging. In the results chapter, this is examined by comparing how interviewees talk about “typical victims”, high risk groups, and by tracing whether certain profiles are described as receiving faster recognition, smoother referrals, and more consistent support than others. It is also used to analyse where collaboration appears to function well for some groups but breaks down for others, for example when undocumented migrants are framed primarily through control-oriented institutional logics rather than protection-oriented logics.

This analytical approach emphasizes that social positions cannot be reduced to single, isolated categories without producing fragmented knowledge that ignores the cumulative nature of inequality. By focusing on the interplay between power structures, intersectionality uncovers the “sorting processes” that consistently construct certain individuals and groups as deviant or subordinate within institutional frameworks. Consequently the perspective allows for an investigation into whose voices remain unarticulated or silenced in policy encounters, highlighting how the “doing” of gender and nationality is always inextricably linked to “doing” of race, class and legal status (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2025, pp. 81-83). Combined, Christie’s (1986) framework and intersectionality are used to analyse whether recognition occurs and how it is negotiated across organisations. Applied to human trafficking in Thailand this perspective means that trafficking victims cannot be understood as a homogeneous category. Exposure to trafficking and access to protection are shaped by how gender, migration status, legal status, socioeconomic position and ethnic belonging are combined in specific local situations. In the analysis, this perspective is used to compare how interviewees describe “typical victims”, high-risk groups, and who is seen as deserving support. It helps identify whether certain combinations of gender, nationality, legal status and class are treated as more credible or more urgent than others. It is also used to identify where collaboration works smoothly for some victim profiles but breaks down for others, for example when undocumented migrants are framed mainly as immigration cases rather than trafficking cases.

### 3.4 Analytical framework

The study’s analytical framework was designed to function as the explicit bridge between the theoretical perspectives and the qualitative content analysis described in chapter 4. Instead of treating the theory as a general background, the framework served as an operational tool that translated abstract concepts into empirically observable indicators in the interview material and into a structured coding logic. In practice this meant that each theoretical perspective was linked to concrete guiding questions in the transcripts. These questions guided how meaning units were identified, coded, compared and finally organised into themes. The framework thus structured both data reduction and interpretation and narrowed the empirical focus to specific dimensions of collaboration and victim recognition, while also providing concepts to explain why cooperation sometimes functioned smoothly and sometimes broke down.

The first pillar of the framework consisted of collaborative governance which is used to analyse how cooperation between public authorities and NGOs was formally organised and practically coordinated. On an operational level, collaborative governance was translated into indicators that captured the "architecture" of collaboration and the mechanisms that enabled coordination across organisational boundaries. In the interviews, this was identified by coding descriptions of formal arenas and structures for example committees, provincial subcommittees, multidisciplinary teams, referral structures, written agreements, assigned roles and mandates. Descriptions of informal coordination mechanisms such as routine communication channels and personal relationships were coded. The key analytical question here was not only whether collaboration existed, but what form it took and how it was governed such as who convened, who set agendas, who possessed decision authority and what routines were used for joint work. Collaborative governance thus functioned as a lens for identifying institutional enablers and barriers in the anti-trafficking chain.

The second pillar was street-level bureaucracy (SLB) which was used to explain why Thailand's anti-trafficking system could appear coherent on paper yet become uneven in practice, even when formal collaboration structures existed. While collaborative governance highlighted the intended structure of the system, SLB focused on what happened at the frontline where public authority and victims' needs met under time pressure, limited resources, organisation constraints and where collaboration with NGOs became practically decisive. The perspective was used to examine how routinised and discretionary judgements by police, immigration officers, labour inspectors, social workers and shelter personnel shaped whether potential victims were identified, treated as eligible for protection and successfully referred through the NRM. Further was the perspective operationalised in the analysis by coding statements that described decision points and systematic constraints in case handling, including how victims were identified, what criteria were used to define a situation as trafficking and how limited resources shaped the actors' actual conduct. Analytically, SLB was used to connect macro-level structures to micro-level outcomes and it helped explain why the same formal system could generate different results depending on the province, case or victim group.

The third pillar concerned victim recognition where Christie's (1986) ideal victim theory was combined with intersectionality to analyse how credibility, vulnerability and deservingness were constructed and how these constructions affected access to protection. This was

translated into indicators that captured the evaluative language and categorisations used by interviewees when describing victims, “typical cases”, and groups perceived as difficult or ambiguous. In the interview material, the negotiation of victim status was coded such as who was framed as innocent versus blameworthy, what markers of “respectability” were invoked and how responsibility was attributed between victims, perpetrators and institutions.

Intersectionality was used to identify which social positions mattered in these processes and how they intersected gender, nationality, ethnicity and legal status. Concretely this involved coding when interviewees described differences in treatment between Thai nationals and migrants, or how undocumented status shaped referral procedures. The combined use of these theories provided the tools to analyse unequal recognition as patterned outcomes produced through institutional practice.

Through these three pillars the analytical framework was directly connected to the study's qualitative analysis. The coding process was theory-informed (deductive) in the sense that the main dimensions were derived from the framework, but it remained open to refinement when the empirical material introduced patterns that were not fully captured by the initial categories. In practical terms, the framework functioned as the coding logic that ensured all interviews were analysed through the same conceptual lens, enabling systematic comparison between public authorities and NGOs. This is where the bridge between theory and method became visible. Collaborative governance, SLB and victim recognition were not merely theories to be discussed but constituted the organising principles of the coding frame and the subsequent thematic structure of the analysis chapter.

To ensure the coherent presentation of the analytical framework it was divided into three themes in the empirical analysis, the first theme *Collaboration in practice (5.1)* used collaborative governance to analyse formal structures and SLB to explain how these functioned or failed in everyday work. The second theme *Priorities (5.2)* examined how prosecution, protection and prevention were balanced and applied the ideal victim theory to analyse which cases were treated as urgent or “worth” pursuing. The third theme *Social hierarchies (5.3)* used intersectionality together with victim recognition to analyse differences in access to protection based on the victim’s profile. This thematic organisation corresponded to the logic of the coding frame and served as an analytical guide for how the theories were used for specific purposes in the analysis. In table 1, the coding frame shows the main categories and subcategories and how these are linked to the theoretical framework.

*Table 1: Coding frame*

<b>Main category</b>	<b>Subcategory 1</b>	<b>Subcategory 2</b>	<b>Subcategory 3</b>	<b>Theory</b>
Collaboration in practice	Formal structures and informal relationships	Corruption	International collaboration	Collaborative Governance, SLB
Priorities	Prosecution	Protection	Prevention	Collaborative Governance, SLB, The ideal victim
Social Hierarchies	Who is seen as a victim	Gender	Legal status and nationality	Intersectionality, The ideal victim

## **4. Method**

This chapter presents the methodological choices that guide the study, including the research design, sampling and data collection, transcription and data management, data analysis, validity and reliability, and research ethics. The overall aim is to provide a transparent account of how the empirical material was produced and how analytical conclusions were reached, so that the reader can assess the study's quality and limitations.

### **4.1 Research design**

The study adopts a qualitative research design in order to examine how collaboration between NGOs and public authorities in anti-trafficking work in Thailand is experienced, interpreted and enacted in practice. Since the research questions focus on interactional dynamics, organisational obstacles and enabling conditions, a qualitative approach was suitable for capturing meanings and practical routines that are difficult to access through quantitative measures. Anti-trafficking collaboration is also shaped by informal relationships, discretion, and case-by-case variation, which means that formal descriptions of the system do not necessarily reflect how cooperation functions in everyday work. Qualitative approaches are designed to explore how people think, feel and act in their specific contexts by collecting rich

descriptions through for example interviews and text analysis, which makes them well suited for examining what happens, how it unfolds and why (Ahrne & Svensson, 2022, pp. 9-11). The purpose is not statistical generalisation, but depth, nuance and contextual understanding through a limited number of information-rich accounts, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, differences and shared themes linked to the dynamics of collaboration.

Qualitative methods further provided a transparent and systematic way to develop a convincing argument from complex material by documenting procedures, coding interview data and showing how interpretations connect to the analytical framework. Qualitative research also required transparency about limitations, such as how the scope of the sample and conditions of access may shape what can be said, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen approach (Halperin, 2022, pp. 6-7). This study is based on semi-structured interviews. The choice of method is grounded in the need to gain a deeper understanding of a complex social issue. Interviews were conducted with individuals working in NGOs and other relevant actors who have experience addressing or working with issues related to human trafficking in Thailand. This type of interview material is well-suited to capturing the interviewees' perspectives on how these issues are handled in practice, what challenges exist, and how they perceive the effects of political measures and legislation in Thailand (Esaiaasson et al., 2017, pp. 262-263).

The method involved using an interview guide with predetermined themes while allowing interviewees to speak freely and share their own experiences. This allowed for more detailed and thoughtful responses. The flexible structure also enabled follow-up questions and exploration of new themes that arose during the conversations (Bryman, 2018, p. 563). The study was approached as primarily exploratory and theory-informed, meaning that the aim was to develop understanding of collaboration in practice while using the analytical framework as a guide for interpretation. Therefore, the participants were treated as interviewees rather than informants or respondents, since the focus lay on how the interviewed persons thought about, experienced and interpreted collaboration. According to Esaiaasson et al. (2017, p. 273), this makes it possible to analyse how these perspectives relate to the existing legal and policy framework, and how interviewees describe collaboration in relation to formal expectations.

## 4.2 Sampling and data collection

The empirical material for this study consists mainly of interviews with representatives from local and international NGO, and public authorities. A strategic sampling method was used to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience of human trafficking work in Thailand. An inclusion criterion was that interviewees had current or recent experience of working with trafficking cases or policy implementation in Thailand. This enabled the study to capture perspectives from actors who often collaborated but held different positions, resources and priorities. The interviewees were mainly identified through public information on organisational websites and expanded during the course of the study through snowball sampling, where participants recommended other relevant individuals to contact. A large number of potential informants were contacted by email, primarily staff at law-enforcement agencies, relevant ministries and NGOs, such as shelters, legal aid and outreach teams, as well as named contact persons identified through public reports. Response rates were lower than expected, likely due to workload, language barriers and the sensitivity of the topic of human trafficking. Recruitment therefore proceeded iteratively, with interviews scheduled continuously as contacts responded, and follow-ups and referrals were used as additional participants. The original plan was to conduct at least eight semi-structured interviews to refine the guide and coding frame, followed by further recruitment until thematic saturation was observed. Thematic saturation refers to the point at which new interviews no longer added substantively new themes (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2022, pp. 63-64).

In table 2, the recruitment process is outlined. Twelve interviews were conducted, but only ten were used in the analysis because two of them could not be included for analytical reasons. One interviewee was not working with human trafficking, but collaborated with the public authorities in other ways. The other excluded interview was with a public authority. That interview was excluded because a language barrier arose that prevented the questions from being fully asked and answered. In this case, an interpreter would have been required, which was realised too late. As a result, only one interview with a public authority is included in the analysis.

*Table 2: Interview recruitment and response overview*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Total number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Total mail addresses	66	100%
Total answers	15	22.7 %
Number of interviews conducted	12	18.2%
Number of interviews used	10	15.2%
Direct contact (of conducted interviews)	5	41.7%
On recommendation (of conducted interviews)	7	58.3%

The interviews were conducted from October to December 2025, either face-to-face in Bangkok, Chiang Mai or Phuket, or online via Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 30-90 minutes. Table 3 provides an overview of the interviewees included in the analysis, covering organisational type and role. The sample includes mainly NGO representatives, complemented by one public authority interview, one in the private sector and one expert interview. The categories “expert” and “private sector” indicate interviewees who do not currently work in an NGO but have previous experience in the NGO sector. All individual interviewees remain anonymous to ensure confidentiality.

*Table 3: Interviewees*

<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Workplace</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Interview length</b>
Interviewee 1	Government	Law enforcement	42 min
Interviewee 2	International	NGO	1 hour, 17 min
Interviewee 3	Local	NGO	43 min
Interviewee 4	Local	Private sector	1 hour
Interviewee 5	Local	NGO	55 min
Interviewee 6	International	NGO	46 min
Interviewee 7	International/Regional	NGO	59 min
Interviewee 8	Local	NGO	52 min
Interviewee 9	Local	NGO	52 min
Interviewee 10	International	Expert (Human Trafficking)	30 min

#### 4.3 Transcription and data management

All interviews except one were, with the interviewees' consent, recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts made it possible to examine the language closely and to return to the material repeatedly during the analysis, which also made the material more open to review and less dependent on personal impressions. When an interviewee did not consent to recording, the interview still took place, as it could still contribute relevant information. Because the written transcripts formed the basis for the analysis, transcription quality was treated as important. Errors could occur during listening, and even small mistakes could change the meaning of a statement. For this reason, the recordings were listened to carefully and the transcripts were quality-checked. The transcripts reflected as closely as possible what was said. If parts of a recording were unclear or words were missing, this was marked in the transcript. Light editing of obvious fillers and repetitions was also made as long as the

meaning was not altered. Certain details, such as the exact workplace and role, were removed to protect confidentiality (Bryman, 2018, pp. 577, 580-581).

#### 4.4 Data analysis

The primary method of analysis used for the interview data was qualitative content analysis. This type of analysis was suitable because the aim was to systematically search for, and identify, underlying themes and patterns present in the material (Bryman, 2018 p. 667). Qualitative content analysis was especially useful for identifying patterning in large volumes of material, such as transcribed interview material that was used in this study (Boréus & Kohl, 2018, pp. 51-52). This method was chosen because it balances interpretive depth with analytic focus. It also kept the analysis focused on aspects that were relevant to the research question rather than aiming for a total reading of all meanings. This focus was flexible enough to add new categories when important themes emerged during analysis. The procedure followed standard steps in which the material was coded systematically using a structured coding frame. A structured coding was developed to organise and reduce the interview material in a transparent way, by focusing the analysis on a few defined aspects. These defined aspects formed the coding frame, main categories and subcategories, which were derived from the three analytical focuses presented in section 3.4 *Analytical framework*. Keeping the subcategories focused yet sufficiently detailed allowed all interview transcripts and documents to be coded in a uniform way, revealing patterns between organisations and across cases. Quality was supported through an audit trail documenting rules and changes, clear operational definitions and cross-checks between interviews and documents plus continual testing of categories against new data. This helped with the reliability and validity, which are presented in the next section (Schreier, 2022, pp. 3-6, 51-52, 58-61).

#### 4.5 Validity and reliability

When doing this research, it was important to consider whether what was measured really captures what was claimed to be studying and whether it was reliable. Validity means how strong the connection was between concept and the indicators used to measure it. In this study it could for example be a question whether the chosen indicators actually reflect the level of collaboration between NGOs and public authorities. Validity also concerns whether the way collaboration is operationalised aligns with the theoretical expectations used in the study, for example that patterns of information-sharing, role division and trust reflect the collaboration dynamics discussed in the analytical framework. In this study, a key validity

question was whether the indicators used in the interviews and coding actually reflected collaboration between NGOs and public authorities in practice. Especially when concepts like these are broad and complex, it was important to be clear about how they are defined and measured. Otherwise the results easily become vague and difficult to trust (Halperin & Heath, 2022, pp. 189-190).

In addition to validity, this study also had to consider the reliability of the data and of the indicators used to capture collaborations between public authorities and NGOs. Reliability means how consistently and accurately the indicators were measured. A measure was reliable if it would produce the same or very similar results when applied repeatedly or by different observers. The more stable and consistent the results were, the higher the reliability (Halperin & Heath, 2022, p. 191). Because the material is dominated by NGO interviewees, there was a risk that collaboration and protection were described through a particular organisational perspective. NGO interviewees may focus on gaps and problems, while state officials may stress formal procedures and recent improvements. To limit this bias, statements were compared across organisations and assessed in relation to the legal framework and previous research, using the same theory-based coding frame for all interviews. Contradictions were treated as empirical findings rather than errors, and reflexive notes were kept during coding to make the researchers' own assumptions and choices visible.

An important aspect of reliability concerns how consistently assessments of collaboration were produced and interpreted. For example, if interviewees from different organisational positions described the same patterns in radically different ways, this may indicate that the underlying indicator was not being measured reliably. Similarly, when the interview material was coded, intercoder reliability became relevant. When there was agreement on how key segments were coded, this strengthened the reliability of the analysis (Halperin & Heath, 2022, p. 192). An interpreter was used in one of the interviews, while the remaining interviews were conducted without an interpreter. Interpretation may have affected nuance and wording, since answers could be condensed or reformulated across languages. The interaction could also have become less fluid, which may have limited follow-up questions. The interpreter's presence may also have influenced what the interviewee chose to share in a sensitive context. At the same time, using an interpreter made it possible to include an otherwise inaccessible perspective. In the analysis, this interview was treated with greater emphasis placed on overall themes and substantive meaning rather than exact phrasing.

#### 4.6 Research ethics

Given the subject of human trafficking, the study was guided by the duty to avoid harm and to place the safety and autonomy of participants first. Participants were given clear information in advance about the purpose of the study, the responsible institution, how the material would be used, and any possible risks and benefits. Consent was voluntary and informed in a language the participant understood. The participants were informed that they could skip any question and could stop the interview at any time without giving a reason and without any negative consequences, but this did not occur. There was also a separate consent for recording. Privacy and confidentiality were protected throughout the process. Personal data were limited to what was necessary and directly identified, such as names were removed as early as possible. Indirect identifiers such as workplace, unusual roles or exact dates were also carefully handled because in combination they can reveal identity. Pseudonyms are used and results are presented in a way that prevents recognition of individuals. Of all the interviews, one interpreter was involved and was bound by confidentiality. The interviews do not include direct victims but only staff at NGOs working against trafficking. Because the topic is sensitive, a trauma-aware approach was important. However, since interviews were conducted with NGO staff rather than trafficking survivors, the interviews did not centre on trauma-specific questioning. There was preparedness to pause or end the interview if signs of distress emerged, but this did not become necessary. Participants were prepared for the themes that arose, and questions were phrased with care. Interviews were conducted in a place the participants found safe and the practical arrangements did not increase risks. Relevant laws and guidelines were followed, and all ethical decisions were documented so that the process was transparent, participants' rights were protected and the credibility of the study was strengthened (Halperin & Heath, 2022, p. 303).

### **5. Results and analysis**

This chapter presents the main findings from the ten interviews and links the findings to the theory and analytical framework. The findings are organised into three main themes, which are collaboration in practice, priorities and social hierarchies.

#### 5.1 Collaboration in practice

The operational framework for anti-trafficking work in Thailand was organised around state-led collaboration between public authorities and NGOs. Rather than a horizontal partnership, the interviews depict a model where NGOs are incorporated into a state-defined

coordination chain whose legal mandate and coercive capacity remain firmly public. In practice, NGOs described how they lack investigative authority and therefore depend on state agencies to access formal enforcement processes and to move cases forward (Interview 9). Analytically this power asymmetry is not a contextual detail but a defining condition of the collaborative arrangement, it shapes what NGOs can do, when they can act, and which problems are recognised as actionable within the system. While the framework invites non-state actors into the process the state maintains a monopoly on legal mandate and coercive power, making NGO participation conditional on public authorisation. This dependence helps explain why collaboration is repeatedly framed by interviewees as necessary for predictable victim referrals, information sharing and entry into the protection and justice chain, but also why NGOs room for manoeuvre is structurally constrained (Interview 9). The committee structure and written agreements reflected a specific logic of collaborative governance where public authorities create formal arenas for cooperation (Melke et al., 2024, pp. 11-12). Within these arenas, NGOs primarily contributed operational knowledge, continuity and victim-facing capacity, while the state set the boundaries of participation, defined procedural rules and retained decision authority. In collaborative governance terms the “arena” therefore functions as a mechanism for coordination and control at the same time (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4).

The interviews showed that this collaboration was institutionalised through a clear state framework in which the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) functioned as the hub and secretariat for several platforms for referral and case management. Interviewee 2 described a multi-level structure where national coordination is mirrored at the provincial level through multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) and provincial anti-trafficking subcommittees (Interview 2). Gubernatorial orders established these committees and delegated roles, while meeting frequency was adjusted to local needs (Interview 2). This matters because it embeds collaboration inside Thailand's territorial administration, where coordination becomes an extension of state steering rather than an independent joint forum. This institutional “architecture” functioned to reduce transaction costs by creating predictable, standardised pathways for interaction between the state and NGOs (Melke et al., 2024, pp. 11-13). However by embedding NGOs into these provincial committees, the state effectively funnelled non-state expertise through existing bureaucratic channels, thereby ensuring NGO knowledge was harnessed without ceding governmental control (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 4-5).

These formal arenas were sustained by informal relationships. Across interviews day to day coordination is described as relying heavily on informal digital communication (e.g., Line and WhatsApp) for rapid updates, invitations and case-related coordination within task forces (Interview 1, 2). This reliance suggests that formal structures alone do not meet the tempo and uncertainty of implementation, actors therefore develop informal coordination mechanisms to maintain continuity in the chain when formal procedures are slow or fragmented. The combination of formal forums and informal contact points illustrates that coordination in complex policy fields requires both institutional structures and workable relationships (Melke et al., 2024, pp. 11-15). In other words, the formal “arena” provides legitimacy and role clarity, while informal channels provide speed, responsiveness and practical problem solving capacity together shaping how collaboration actually functions in practice. Positive instances of collaboration were visible in routines where some NGOs established emergency response mechanisms together with the police (Interview 6). The state also actively used NGOs as essential partners in case referral systems and in the transition of survivors from government shelters to NGO vocational training (Interview 9). At the policy level, NGOs work with ministries and international organisations to draft policy papers, review laws and provide capacity building including training frontline officers and first responders in identification and protection protocols (Interview 2). Certain actors also signed formal agreements with state agencies such as the Department of Special Investigations (DSI) and received mandates to develop national training curricula (Interview 6, 10). In terms of collaborative governance this shows how the state relies on NGO expertise for both casework and knowledge production while maintaining control over roles, accountability and decisions (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 5-6).

The effectiveness of collaborative governance is challenged at the implementation level and can be understood through Lipsky's (2010) theory of street-level bureaucracy. The national referral mechanism (NRM) is designed to channel victims into protection in line with universal rights, but its operation depends on frontline discretion in identification, categorisation and referral decisions (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 13-14). Interviewee 6 shared an example where DSI intervened to standardise victim identification interviews and found that local officers were not only untrained but in some cases undermined the NRM by accusing victims and asking inappropriate questions (Interview 6). Read through SLB this is not a minor “deviation”, but a practice that produces policy in everyday implementation. Local

interview practice becomes the gatekeeping device that determines whether the rights-bearing “victim” category is activated at all (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 11-14). This is also where victim recognition enters the analysis, following with Christie's (1986) point that victim status is socially constructed, accusatory questioning can push victims outside the “ideal victim” template by framing them as less credible, less innocent or partially irresponsible, which makes recognition and therefore protection harder to obtain (Christie, 1986, pp. 19-20). The conflict escalated when the provincial governor restricted an investigator access to a province unless a formal invitation was issued (Interview 6). This shows how local administrative resistance can block the top-down coordination that collaborative governance presupposes and shift the effective centre of decision making to street-level actors. In collaborative governance terms, this case illustrates how “the rules of the arena” are not only written in national agreements but can also be renegotiated through territorial authority and access control at the provincial level, limiting the reach of national coordination even when mandates exist (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4).

From a collaborative governance perspective, the anti-trafficking system worked more like a shared chain than a service delivered only by the state. In practice NGOs took on linking roles for connecting referral, protection, transport and legal follow-up so that cases did not stall between organisations. Interviewee 6 made this clear when describing how the organisation supported victims through protection and legal proceedings while working alongside DSI and the Cyber Crime Investigation Bureau (CCIB). This constituted a form of co-production where the state maintained formal authority but was dependent on the practical capacity and flexibility of NGOs (Melke et al., 2024, pp. 13-15). Because NGOs were involved in daily coordination their staff acted as “informal co-bureaucrats” who translated rules into action and negotiated with officials on behalf of victims. This suggests that street-level discretion was negotiated and enacted across organisational boundaries rather than confined within a single agency (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 14-16). Collaboration is not only a formal structure but an ongoing practice where NGOs and public authorities together shape how anti-trafficking policy is carried out. However, the interview material indicated that this co-production can create dependency, when NGOs sustain continuity in the chain they partly compensate for state capacity gaps which can stabilise the system without necessarily resolving underlying bottlenecks that produce delays and unevenness in the first place (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 19-20).

Variation between NGOs becomes analytically important here rather than descriptive. Interviewee 6 says that their organisation is closely involved in complex investigations and legal processes while working alongside specialised agencies in demanding cases. The intersectional perspective helps explain why this variation matters, vulnerability to trafficking is shaped by combined factors such as migration status, age, gender and class (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2025, pp. 82-83) and organisations working with young migrant workers in rural border areas often meet different forms of risk and exploitation than NGOs supporting adults in the urban context of forced labor and sexual exploitation. These differences in target groups and exposure help explain why some NGOs become tightly connected to formal case structures, while others mainly contribute through long-term community work and prevention.

Geography further exposed the limits of what formal cooperation could achieve and Interviewee 5 described an origin area and noted that indicators of exploitation were so common that “no one even considers it trafficking” because irregular travel and informal work are seen as part of everyday life. Through the lens of Christie's (1986) ideal victim theory, this lack of recognition can be explained by the absence of a “clear” victim-offender narrative in the local context when the exploitation is normalised the “ideal victim” does not emerge (Christie, 1986, pp. 19-20). The interviewee further explained that their organisation had not coordinated any cases with public authorities in the past year, as previous reporting led to a “ridiculous circus” where procedures were prioritised over the individuals best interests (Interview 5). This experience led the NGO to consciously exercise its own discretion by bypassing the NRM. In terms of SLB, the NGO acted as a “gatekeeper” that chose to decouple from the formal system to protect victims from what they perceived as harmful bureaucratic processes.

Resource and systemic constraints appeared as a significant limit on collaboration where Interviewee 1 explains how a shortage of police staff reduced the ability to handle several trafficking cases simultaneously (Interview 1). NGO interviewees also highlighted language and translation as recurring obstacles with one stating that the “biggest barrier is the language” and emphasising the cost of professional interpreters (Interview 3). The lack of interpreters (Interview 3) illustrates a fundamental resource inadequacy that reshapes policy delivery. When the cost of obtaining reliable information is too high, frontline actors are forced to simplify and prioritize their work. Language barriers thus become a decisive

environmental factor that can increase the cost of handling complex cases, which in turn can contribute to cases being deprioritised for reasons unrelated to protection need (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 29-30). When interpreters or staff are lacking, the “cost” of handling a complex case increases, leading officials to use their own discretion to de-prioritise certain groups. This lack of resources directly shaped who was recognised as a victim illustrating how practicalities of street-level work undermined the universal goals of the framework (Christie, 1986, pp. 19-20).

### *5.1.1 Corruption*

In the interviews, corruption is described less as an isolated phenomenon and more as a condition that directly shapes how NGOs and public authorities relate to each other and what kinds of collaboration become possible. Instead of enabling routine coordination around shared goals and predictable procedures, corruption is portrayed as making cooperation risky, selective, and often dependent on specific individuals. This aligns with previous interview-based research suggesting that corruption and official misconduct undermine trust and contribute to fragmented cooperation in Thailand’s anti-trafficking work (Tuneekul & Chitsawang, 2023, pp. 14-15). In this material, nine out of ten interviewees raised corruption, while the only interviewee who did not mention it was a state employee, which may reflect the sensitivity and positional constraints involved in speaking openly about official complicity. When NGOs suspect that some actors may be involved in trafficking networks, or may prioritise cases based on informal payments, it becomes difficult to treat coordination as a stable institutional relationship. One local NGO said that “*you can’t do trafficking in Thailand if you’re not the state, if you’re not the police and the army*” (Interview 5), and another described money flowing “*top to bottom and bottom to top*” and that the problem is “*too big to fix*” (Interview 4). In practical terms, such perceptions shape how NGOs engage, where they may limit what information they share, avoid certain officers, seek “safe” counterparts, and approach collaboration as harm reduction rather than partnership. From a collaborative governance perspective, this undermines the conditions required for sustained coordination across sectors, particularly trust, accountability and credible commitments (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4).

Corruption is also described as affecting collaboration through discretionary decision-making in everyday implementation, meaning that whether cooperation works depends on the choices of individual officials rather than on the formal framework. One interviewee noted that

people can pay around 8,000 baht to travel illegally through checkpoints (Interview 5), and another reported that police may choose which cases to pursue based on “*under the table money*” (Interview 8). Read through street-level bureaucracy, discretion becomes a key mechanism through which formal anti-trafficking policies are translated into practice (Lipsky, 2010, p. 13). In collaboration terms, this reshapes the “rules of engagement” between NGOs and authorities. NGOs cannot assume that referrals or reports will be handled consistently, and they may adapt by routing cases strategically, documenting more heavily, or relying on informal personal ties to secure action. It also influences victim identification pathways, since discretionary gatekeeping can determine who becomes visible to the system and who does not, which resonates with reporting that labor trafficking indicators are sometimes overlooked (Prajit et al., 2024, p. 16).

Several accounts also suggest that corruption creates a form of conditional collaboration, where access and cooperation can be granted or withdrawn depending on local power dynamics. One international NGO described a situation where provincial authorities were able to block or expel a national investigative actor after corruption and weak implementation were highlighted, and noted that the actor “*has to be invited to come back*” despite a national mandate (Interview 6). This illustrates how collaboration can become politically contingent, where NGOs and reform-oriented state actors may face risks when raising problems, and cooperation may depend on keeping relationships workable rather than challenging entrenched interests. In collaborative governance terms, this points to an imbalance in power and control over access, which can make cooperation conditional and politically risky for both NGOs and state actors attempting reform (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4). One NGO described cooperating with the police as “*dancing with the devil*” while still needing to “*dance with the devil to create a system*” in order to protect children. They further link corruption to a lack of accountability, arguing that “*when you don’t have accountability at the top level, you don’t have accountability anyway*” (Interview 5). The collaboration problem here is not simply lack of communication, but a relationship structured by fear of retaliation, uncertainty about motives and limited alternatives for getting victims into protection.

At the same time, the interviews describe that NGOs sometimes function as informal accountability mechanisms in a context of weak internal control. One local NGO argued that when NGOs are involved “*they have eyes on them that something happens*”, which can reduce the likelihood that police take “*enough money to forget this*” (Interview 9). This

suggests that NGO presence can sometimes change the behaviour of public actors by increasing visibility and reputational risk, functioning as a form of external monitoring when internal control is weak (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4). However, the same dynamic also highlights structural limits, where NGOs may provide oversight, but they rarely control key decisions in identification, shelter placement and prosecution, which regional assessments describe as areas where NGO involvement is limited and communication can deteriorate once victims enter state shelters (Rapid Asia, 2022, p. 61). In practice this can create collaboration patterns where NGOs are relied upon for support and oversight, yet remain dependent on authorities for formal decisions, which keeps cooperation asymmetrical.

A further collaboration effect discussed in the interviews is that corruption was described as encouraging symbolic compliance rather than actual change, in ways that distort what collaboration looks like externally versus internally. One interviewee suggested that authorities may do “*a minimum to maintain the fact that they do things*” mainly to look good in reports (Interview 10), which corresponds to the idea that some state-led task forces can function as “window dressing” (Foot et al., 2019, p. 32). For NGOs, this can mean that formal coordination structures exist but do not reliably translate into practical support or shared problem-solving. In response, the same interviewee described that experienced actors try to work around the system “*by finding honest prosecutors, judges and lawyers*” and using such loopholes to bypass corruption (Interview 10). As a result, success depends on finding “good” individuals rather than on the system as a whole. That emphasis on individual integrity over system reliability again fits with street-level perspectives on how outcomes become dependent on discretion, informal networks and selective enforcement (Lipsky, 2010, p. 13). A local NGO gave a similar picture when they said that:

*“It's strange how it's presented in the media that Thailand's kind of helping and rescuing people. There's no way that many people could get there in the first place without the same people being part of it...I think there are very powerful forces in Thailand who can do what they want. And even when the police are seen to act or the army is seen to act, I think that's just something on the surface to make it look good”* (Interview 5).

A local NGO adds that in one year, the official statistics showed only one registered trafficking case in their area, while they themselves had helped around five people that year (Interview 9). This shows that the official numbers and the reality on the ground can look

very different. It suggests some anti-trafficking work is mainly done to look for compliance, rather than to fully reflect or address the scale of abuse. Finally, the private sector was largely absent from most interviewees' accounts of corruption, which is analytically important given that labor trafficking is often built into supply chains and subcontracting systems (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025). Only one interviewee discussed companies in detail and argued that:

*“They don't do much with the private sector. When in fact, that's really where they should be spending more of their time, because most of the cases are forced labor cases and most of them have to do with private companies, and suppliers that aren't being scrutinized significantly in a way that would allow for the government to really influence the private sector. Having said that, on the outside, the companies that come into Thailand to get the goods from Thailand, are putting a certain amount of pressure on the private sector in order to kind of move things forward. The private sector element is much stronger than the public sector. The public sector really doesn't know what to do with the private sector side of things (Interview 10).*

This perspective links to previous research showing how labor NGOs in Thailand increasingly engage private actors through global supply-chain pressure and ethical trade initiatives, using buyer influence and reputational mechanisms to push improvements from migrant workers (Kadfak et al., 2023, pp. 592-594). Analytically, this indicates that everyday collaboration talks tend to locate “corruption” mainly within the state's interface, for example bribes, blocked cases and selective enforcement, which can obscure how exploitation is also sustained through market structures in contexts of weak regulation. From a collaborative governance perspective, that blind spot matters because it limits the scope of cross-sector coordination and can keep collaboration focused on reactive case handling, rather than on preventive governance across public, private and civil society actors (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4). At the same time, the fact that only one interviewee mentions the private sector suggests a blind spot in everyday collaboration narratives, where corruption is mainly seen as bribes and blocked cases, rather than companies profiting from cheap, exploited labor in a system where state control is weak.

### 5.1.2 International collaboration

The interviews included several accounts where cross-border collaboration was described as necessary but complicated, particularly in cases where victims moved across jurisdictions or were exploited in border areas and regional scam economies. One state actor described a case that illustrates how complex these chains of collaboration can be. They explained that the case started with an NGO receiving “*a request from a victim to assist them from a scam compound in Cambodia*” and that the NGO then contacted Thai authorities for help (Interview 1). The same interviewee described how the response moved into formal diplomatic channels, saying that “*as soon as the NGO asked me for assistance of the victims I sent a letter to the Thai embassy, and I made a request to the Cambodian authority to assist to rescue victims*” (Interview 1). According to the same interviewee, similar cross-border cases are common. This shows how the international cooperation described in the Palermo Protocol, where prevention, protection and collaboration are central pillars, is carried out mainly through state channels even when NGOs start the process (UN General Assembly, 2000). It also reflects the way Thailand’s national framework places responsibility on authorities to support and protect victims in practice, including non-citizens, but that such support often depends on diplomatic channels and the willingness of other states to cooperate (Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E 2551, 2008, Section 33-44).

A second pattern is that some interviewees framed trafficking as transnational by default rather than the exception. One international NGO actor described that trafficking patterns have become “*more than bilateral, it’s regional, and more than that, it’s worldwide*” (Interview 2). The same interviewee also described standardised international screening forms for vulnerability and trafficking status used to communicate assessments to “*key government stakeholders who are considered the frontline*” (Interview 2). This connects to previous research on anti-trafficking governance, where collaboration is understood as a multi-actor process requiring shared information, coordination routines and trust between organisations (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4). At the same time, the interviewee stressed that cross-border collaboration is constantly shaped by politics by saying that “*every country has its own agenda, and bilateral relationships between the two countries*” (Interview 2). From a collaborative governance perspective, this indicates that the conditions for cooperation, shared goals, stable relationships and agreed procedures, can be difficult to sustain when collaboration is filtered through migration control priorities, diplomatic sensitivities and uneven willingness to act across borders (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4).

Several interviewees also described practical barriers in cross-border enforcement and identification. One civil society actor described weak digital infrastructure, the use of Thai SIM cards and internet lines from the Thai side, and the ease of opening phone numbers with only a photo of an ID card (Interview 4). They described that when IP addresses were traced, “*the addresses would lead to a Thai national but that person would not even be in a house*”, arguing that cross-border cable connections and weak registration practices allowed crime groups to hide behind Thai identities (Interview 4). This illustrates how national systems for identification and control, which in theory should support protection and accountability, can also be exploited in ways that blur responsibility between states and undermine effective enforcement (United Nations, 2024).

Another local NGO argued that cross-border cooperation often remained state-to-state rather than with local organisations at the border by saying “*Thai government, Myanmar government, normally they don't cooperate with the local NGO. They just cooperate with the country where the victims come from*” (Interview 3). A similar dependency on cooperation and referrals is also described in regional research, where NGO’s anti-trafficking actions often rely on access controlled by authorities (Gan et al., 2014, p. 81). This perspective is consistent with regional assessments that describe limited NGO involvement in key stages of identification and referral, and where institutional routines can constrain non-state actors precisely when timely coordination matters most (Rapid Asia, 2022, pp. 59-61). One interviewee working on cyber-scam trafficking stressed the lack of a coordinated response describing that:

*“There's a lot of complicity in Southeast Asia to coordinate this. So you don't have an international body or task force focusing on this issue either. You have little pockets. So you might have one or two countries that have collaborated or signed an MOU, and they're going to address forced criminality or cyber scamming the three of them, and leave everybody else out. So then they might be collaborating together but they're not communicating with anybody else. Unless we get some kind of coordinated effort globally, then get the countries involved that are being targeted for their finances. So I think this last count for us was 135 nations involved”* (Interview 6).

This quotation is best treated as the interviewee's assessment of how cooperation was organised and why they experienced it as insufficient, rather than as a general description of all cross-border collaboration. Finally, one interviewee with many years of experience in the field of human trafficking, described a different form of international collaboration. An NGO was hired by the Thai government to design a national training curriculum for officials, covering law, prosecution, prevention, victim handling and referrals (Interview 10). This account illustrates that NGOs can also act as institutional partners and knowledge providers, translating standards and training content into state practice rather than only operating in the margins of the system (Interview 10). Overall, the interview material suggests that cross-border anti-trafficking work could involve both formal diplomatic coordination and more indirect forms of collaboration, while still being constrained by national interests, technical barriers and unequal access to decision-making arenas (UN General Assembly, 2000).

## 5.2 Priorities

The interview material indicates that prosecution, protection and prevention are not prioritised equally in practice, and that the balance between them is shaped by both institutional incentives and organisational mandates. A recurring theme was that protection is seen as the most developed and most visible area of anti-trafficking work in Thailand. One interviewee described it as *“much of what you see in terms of success in Thailand related to human trafficking is on the protection side”* and adds that this is *“not so much on the prevention side or the prosecution side”* (Interview 10). From a collaborative governance perspective, this reflects a challenge for cross-sector collaboration, since effective coordination requires aligned goals and shared understandings across actors, while the interviews instead suggest that actors are pulled towards different parts of the anti-trafficking chain (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4).

Across interviews, prevention is described as systematically under-resourced despite being framed as efficient and necessary in the long term. Interviewees emphasised that prevention is cheaper than recovery and that funding is often directed towards reducing vulnerability upstream (Interview 7, 8). One local NGO linked this to a *“hero complex”* where rescues give visible rewards and recognition, while successful prevention rarely does (Interview 8). This pattern can be understood as a visibility logic where prevention is harder to demonstrate, count and reward, while protection and rescue produce clearer outputs and public narratives.

This resonates with research on donor incentives that can favour measurable “raid-and-rescue” interventions over longer-term prevention (Jones et al., 2018, pp. 232-233, 240-241). It also connects to Christie's (1986) “ideal victim” theory, where systems are drawn towards morally simple stories of identifiable victims and offenders, while prevention requires addressing structural conditions that are less dramatic and less easily attributed to individual wrongdoing (Christie, 1986, pp. 27-28). Read through street-level bureaucracy, such prioritisation is reproduced through everyday discretionary choices where frontline actors and organisations adapt their work to what is feasible, rewarded and institutionally supported, which can push practice towards short-term, visible interventions rather than long-term prevention (Lipsky, 2010, pp. 14-16).

Prosecution is described as formally central but comparatively weaker and uneven in practice. Interviewees suggested that prosecution capacity often depends on NGO resources and specialised functions such as translation, victim support and referrals, meaning that prosecution is not fully carried by state structures alone (Interview 1). The interviews also pointed to practical and institutional limits on prosecution. A local NGO noted that access to official case-tracking systems remains limited to government agencies, which can limit transparency and make sustained joint follow-up difficult for non-state actors (Interview 9). Another interviewee strengthened this picture by arguing that the number of people arrested and the number of cases addressed is “*relatively low*”, and that visible success is concentrated in other parts of the system (Interview 10). They also described that prosecutions are mostly focused on sex trafficking, while forced labor is not sufficiently reviewed across sectors such as fishing, agriculture and manufacturing (Interview 10). This pattern can be linked to collaborative governance challenges, where shared goals across sectors are harder to maintain when resources, authority and incentives are unevenly distributed (Johnson et al., 2020, pp. 3-4).

Overall, the interviews suggest a prioritisation where protection is favoured because it is more institutionalised, more measurable and more compatible with existing coordination routines. Prevention is deprioritised because it is long-term and less visible, and prosecution remains uneven because it is resource-intensive and constrained by information asymmetries and sectoral blind spots. This helps explain why collaboration is described as functioning most smoothly in protection-related processes, while prevention and prosecution are more dependent on discretionary effort, external incentives and case-by-case cooperation.

### 5.3 Social Hierarchies

In this material, social hierarchies of nationality, migration status and gender shape who is seen as a “real” victim. Several interviewees described that people exposed to similar forms of exploitation could be treated differently depending on whether they are Thai or foreign, documented or undocumented, male or female, child or adult (Interview 3, 6, 8, 9). This reflects Christie's (1986) idea of the “ideal victim”, where those who fit dominant moral expectations are more easily recognised and protected, while others are more easily framed as offenders, threats or “problems” (Christie, 1986, pp. 19-20). An intersectional perspective further highlights that categories such as gender, class and migration status can shape who is seen as more or less worthy of help (De los Reyes & Mulinari, 2025).

One recurring theme concerned how foreign nationals in cyber-scam compounds and other similar forced labor situations were described as being treated as criminals and illegal immigrants, rather than as potential victims. One international NGO interviewee describes that “*The main focus for Thailand right now is to arrest criminals. And the majority of authorities, not all, think that anyone in the scamming compound is a criminal. So they want foreigners to be arrested and to get out. They want any illegal immigrants to be out of the country, and they want Thai people to stop being scammed*” (Interview 6). This creates a hierarchy where Thai citizens appear closer to Christie’s (1986) “ideal victim”, while migrant workers and regional migrants are more easily treated as security threats. Earlier research similarly highlights that irregular migrants and undocumented victims may be overlooked within protection frameworks, which creates dilemmas for NGOs that assist people who do not fit formally recognised categories (Jones et al., 2018, p. 249). In practice, this implies that trafficking control can slide into migration control, which is also consistent with regional assessments that describe identification and referral as practical constraints and note that some cases risk being handled outside a trafficking framework (Rapid Asia, 2022, p. 61). At the level of formal rules, Thailand’s Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (2008) defines trafficking without limiting victimhood by nationality and contains victim-protection provisions that explicitly apply to foreign victims, including access to assistance and potential temporary stay under certain conditions (Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E 2551, 2008, section 33-41). The tension here is therefore not primarily about the absence of a legal framework, but about how categories of “victim” and “offender” may be applied in practice when migration priorities dominate.

Gender norms and expectations also appeared in the material as shaping which victims became visible and which forms of exploitation were rendered less visible. One local NGO interviewee described how gender and class shape who is seen as a victim in the Thai sex industry by stating that *“Thailand is famous for Patong, for all the girly bars. But that’s for western men, and that’s the smaller part of them. We think that’s the sex industry in Thailand. That’s the smaller part. The bigger part is for Thai men, but it’s very discreet. It’s private clubs...that’s where most of the industry is”* (Interview 5). The same interviewee linked this to strong gender norms for wealthy Thai men by saying that *“If you’re a wealthy Thai man, you’re almost expected to have a second wife or even three. And of course, the second wife will be much younger”*, concluding that *“the inequality is, it’s not a small gap, it’s massive”* (Interview 5). Analytically, these accounts can be read as illustrating how structural gender and class hierarchies shape both demand and social acceptance, and how some forms of exploitation become normalised and less publicly contested. Here, male demand and male privilege are treated as normal, while many women in prostitution are not seen as “real” trafficking victims unless they are very young or clearly forced. This fits Christie’s (1986, pp. 19-20) theory that men with power and money do not fit the image of offenders who prey on “ideal victims”, and adult women who sell sex do not easily fit the ideal victim image either. Several interviews focus mainly on women and children as victims. Interviewee 3 explicitly says their organisation is focused on women and children, and provides services and awareness for these groups.

The interviews also suggested that organisational priorities and available resources could reproduce these hierarchies in practice. Several accounts centred women and children as primary victim categories in both outreach and protection, when especially migrant men were less frequently described as potential victims (Interviews 3, 8, 9). One international NGO interviewee explicitly connected this to the support infrastructure in a border area by saying that *“this area has a history of child trafficking, so we have a lot of children’s homes...and we have no shelters for men. Men generally are put in lockup and not identified as victims or they’re deported straight away because there’s nowhere else for them to go”* (Interview 6). Regional research also points out that responsibilities for victim support are often split between the state and NGOs, with shelters primarily managed by government agencies while NGOs contribute funding or technical support (Gan et al., 2014, p. 85). This pattern reflects an intersectional perspective that de los Reyes & Mulinari (2025) describe, where gender and

migration status together decide who is treated as a victim and who is treated as an offender. Furthermore, children fit Christie's (1986) "ideal victim" template more easily and are more likely to be routed into care settings, while adult migrant men can be routed into detention or deportation pathways (Christie, 1986, p. 20). It also aligns with concerns in regional assessments that coordination and protection can weaken at key interfaces in the system, affecting who is practically able to access support (Rapid Asia, 2022, p. 61). Taken together, the material suggests that victimhood in Thai anti-trafficking practice is not only a legal category but also a social judgement.

Within these accounts, Thai citizens, children, and women are more often described as being positioned closer to the "ideal victim" and more likely to receive protection. Meanwhile, undocumented foreign nationals and adult men were more often described as being treated as offenders, security concerns or irregular migrants (Interview 3, 6, 8, 9). This helps illuminate how some groups may be more likely than others to reach identification and protection pathways, even when formal principles and legal provisions are intended to apply broadly (Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E. 2551, 2008, section 33-41). This finding connects directly to the study's research questions by showing how collaboration between NGOs and public authorities is shaped not only by procedures and coordination mechanisms, but also by who is practically recognised as a victim within those interactions. When victim recognition is patterned by nationality, migration status and gender, collaboration becomes uneven across case types and groups. NGOs may succeed in securing identification and referrals for some profiles, while struggling to activate protection pathways for others who are framed through migration control or security logics. In this sense, social hierarchies operate as an organising condition for collaboration in practice, explaining both where coordination appears to function smoothly and where it breaks down, and clarifying how NGOs navigate enabling conditions and obstacles when attempting to secure protection within state-led processes.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

This chapter brings together the study's main findings and places them in relation to the research questions. Section 6.1 summarises the central conclusions about how collaboration between public authorities and NGOs is experienced and negotiated in practice, and highlights the organisational obstacles and enablers identified in the interviews. Section 6.2 then offers a closing discussion of what these findings imply for how anti-trafficking governance is understood, as well as the study's limitations and directions for future research.

### **6.1 Conclusions**

This study shows that collaboration between local public authorities and NGOs works in practice in Thailand's anti-trafficking work, and what they experience as the main organisational obstacles and enablers. Across the interviews, collaboration is described as necessary for identification, referrals and victim support, yet consistently limited by conditions that actors themselves cannot easily change. The study shows that collaboration is a core condition for how the anti-trafficking system functions in everyday practice. NGOs were described as filling important gaps in the national referral mechanism (NRM), providing specialised knowledge and practical support to victims, and sometimes initiating cross-border collaboration. At the same time, interviewees described how corruption, a divided bureaucracy, unclear priorities and social hierarchies limit how much this collaboration can achieve in practice. A first key finding is that collaboration depends on informal relationships, personal trust and direct contacts, even though collaboration is formally presented as a formal state-led system. Digital messaging channels were repeatedly described as crucial for collaboration, which can make collaboration flexible, but also person-dependent and vulnerable to staff turnover and shifting political priorities. From a collaborative governance perspective, the material points to interdependence in practice but a fragile institutional design, where formal structures do not consistently translate into predictable routines, shared follow-up or secure information flows.

A second conclusion is that corruption and weak accountability were described as structural barriers that shape incentives, case selection and trust, making it difficult to sustain stable collaboration and to ensure protection pathways are applied consistently. A third conclusion concerns the imbalance between protection, prosecution and prevention. Protection work was described as most visible and developed, prevention as underfunded and undervalued, and

prosecution as formally prioritised but uneven in practice, sometimes depending on NGO resources and capacity. This imbalance shows how incentives and mandates shape what collaboration delivers, where cooperation works most smoothly, roles are clearer, and outcomes are countable, while other parts of the anti-trafficking chain remain more fragile. Finally, the analysis suggests that victim recognition is shaped not only by legal definitions but also by social hierarchies linked to gender, age, nationality and migration status. Thai citizens, women and children were described as easier to recognise as victims, while undocumented migrants and men were more often framed through migration control or security categories. This has practical consequences for collaboration because NGOs that support migrants or less “ideal” victims may struggle to have the people they assist recognised within state-led procedures, which in turn affects access to protection and services. The contribution of this study is to empirically demonstrate how collaboration in the anti-trafficking work in Thailand is both necessary and structurally limited. It also shows how these limits operate in everyday practice, where informal dependence, discretionary gatekeeping, incentive-driven prioritisation and socially patterned victim recognition. By focusing on NGO perspectives, the study adds detail about how collaboration works in everyday practice and helps explain why implementation gaps remain even when policy and reports stress cooperation.

## 6.2 Ending and closing discussion

Methodologically, qualitative interviews made it possible to capture everyday routines, informal collaboration and dilemmas that are difficult to detect through policy documents and quantitative indicators alone. The thesis should nonetheless be read as a situated account rather than a complete picture of all anti-trafficking actors in Thailand. The interview material includes more NGO perspectives than state perspectives, and the political sensitivity of trafficking and corruption may have shaped what participants felt safe to disclose. The findings therefore do not support statistical generalisations, but they do provide an empirically grounded interpretation of how collaboration is experienced and negotiated under the conditions interviewees described. A key implication is that improving collaboration in anti-trafficking work is not only a technical issue of designing better committees or guidelines, but also a governance issue tied to trust, accountability and the categories through which victimhood is recognised.

The study's limitations also point directly to where future research is most needed. Since only one public authority interview is included in the analysed material, future research should examine how public officials at different administrative levels interpret collaboration, including how they experience incentives, constraints and risk in day-to-day case handling and coordination. Because the study relies on professional perspectives, future work could also incorporate survivor perspectives to better understand how collaboration and recognition practices shape lived access to protection, services and long-term support. In addition, while forced labor is often linked to supply chains and subcontracting, the private sector was largely absent from most interview accounts. Future research should therefore investigate how employers, recruiters and business partners shape both exploitation and the practical possibilities for prevention and detection, and how cooperation between public authorities and private sector functions in labor trafficking cases. Finally, the empirical findings suggest that collaboration is often sustained through informal networks and digital messaging channels. While this can enable quick action in specific cases, it also makes collaboration uneven and difficult to sustain over time, particularly when staff turnover and shifting priorities disrupt trusted contact points. Future research could therefore examine digital communication practices as part of governance infrastructure by tracing how information flows, responsibility and accountability are organised through these channels, and what risks this creates for transparency and continuity. Taken together, the study highlights that collaboration between public authorities and NGOs is a necessary condition for anti-trafficking work in Thailand, but its outcomes are shaped by contradictions between formal commitments and the practical realities of governance.

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## 8. Appendix

### *Appendix 1: Interview guide.*

<p><b>Background &amp; role</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is your role, and which anti-trafficking tasks do you handle most often?</li></ul>
<p><b>Collaboration mechanisms</b> (referrals, meetings, case conferences)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In the last 12 months, how did your organisation coordinate with public authorities on case referrals? Which authorities (police, labor inspectors, immigration, prosecutors) and through what channel (secure email, meetings)?</li><li>• Do you have any written agreements that describe roles and timelines?</li><li>• How often do coordination meetings take place, and who usually initiates them? (Weekly/monthly)</li></ul>
<p><b>Case walkthrough</b> (step-by-step process)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thinking of one typical case from the past six months (it's okay if the timing isn't exact), could you walk us through the steps-from first contact to referral and support?</li></ul>
<p><b>Barriers &amp; enablers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In your experience over the past year, what made collaboration easier? (shared SOPs, joint training, personal relationships).</li><li>• Over the same period, what made collaboration harder? (staff turnover, unclear mandates, incompatible IT, funding delays, language, evidence standards).</li><li>• How do you know collaboration is working well? (examples of indicators-time from identification to referral, correct victim identification, access to services, court progression, survivor feedback).</li></ul>
<p><b>Resources &amp; recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Which resources are most lacking for collaboration (staff, interpreters, transport, IT, legal aid)?</li><li>• If you could change one policy or practice tomorrow to improve collaboration, what would it be, and why?</li></ul>