

## Proposing an Anti-Human Trafficking Educational Program in Kazakhstan

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This paper argues that Kazakhstan's new anti-trafficking law will succeed only if it addresses the gap between policy and practice in higher education. Why do I think so? Because otherwise the law risks becoming what Matland (1995) calls a policy that looks strong on paper but fails in action. And what does "action" mean? It means teaching vulnerable groups how to protect themselves from trafficking and slavery. In my view, this can be done through special educational programs that teach students how to recognize fake job offers, how to protect their documents, and how to seek help if they find themselves in a situation of exploitation.

### Historical Background and Context

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Kazakhstan faced major social and economic difficulties (Silova et al., 2007). That includes rural economies that broke down, unstable jobs, and increased migration. As a result, Kazakhstan became a source, transit, and destination country for forced labor and sexual exploitation (Dyussenova et al., 2024).

For many years, it has been difficult to understand the real extent of human trafficking and exploitation in Kazakhstan due to the lack of national statistics. This was confirmed by a Winrock International expert, who stated that Kazakhstan has never conducted a nationwide study on vulnerable children, so no one really knows how widespread the risks of trafficking and exploitation are (Konyrova, 2024). A major study was conducted by UNICEF in 2012 (Haarr, 2012), and as Konyrova (2024) notes, policymakers still rely on outdated and incomplete data.

However, more recent studies contain actual statistics and, in particular, reflect the percentage of victims across different age groups. Unfortunately, according to the International Organization for Migration, between 2004 and 2020 "Kazakhstan was the leading destination country for human trafficking victims in Central Asia, with 1,741 cases of exploitation documented" (Danayeva, 2025, Kazakhstan's Role in Regional Trafficking Trends section). Moreover, in the first half of 2025 alone, 134 related crimes were identified, with labor exploitation being the most common form (Danayeva, 2025).

Although Kazakhstan adopted the new Law (On Countering Human Trafficking, 2024) in 2024 to combat these issues, as the US State Department's 2024 TIP Report shows, a critical gap between policy and practice remains (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Universities can fill this gap by preparing students not only to recognize manipulation and fake job offers, but also to develop the research capacity necessary to identify and address human trafficking and sex trafficking.

Thus, the proposed educational program becomes a vital response to the students' vulnerability. It translates the goals of the new law into concrete steps and draws on proven models that show that prevention is not

just possible but effective. The core of the problem is in the gap between the law and its implementation. According to the US State Department's 2024 TIP Report, "the government ... does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so" (U.S. Department of State, 2024, Kazakhstan Tier 2 section).

The report places particular emphasis on victim identification, stating "The government identified 21 victims ... compared with 24 in 2022" (U.S. Department of State, 2024, Protection section). This low number, against the estimated scale of the problem, demonstrates the systemic failure to protect vulnerable populations, including students. Also, it is important to note that, according to statistics, 35.8% of victims of human trafficking were between 18 and 25 years old (Danayeva, 2025).

Research by Chankseliani et al. (2020) shows that students from rural areas struggle when moving to urban universities. Many arrive academically underprepared, financially unstable, and socially isolated. Respectively, these very conditions make them easy targets for traffickers, who use fake job offers or the "lover boy" tactic to lure victims:

'Lover boys' are human traffickers who usually operate by trying to make young people fall in love with them. Once they have victims under their influence, they exploit them, for instance, in the sex industry or for other illegal activities. They are often kept in this situation through coercive control, including through a combination of affection, violence, and/or other threats against them and their families. (IOM UN Migration Romania, 2024, para. 2)

Since the most vulnerable groups of people (students) who are at risk of exploitation spend the majority of their time at schools and universities every day, I believe that educational systems are critical platforms for prevention. Who will teach students how to stay safe? The answer is clear to me: schools and universities. Children spend at least 9 to 12 years in school and 3-4 years at university. Teachers see them almost every day. It is therefore an educational responsibility to provide youth with the knowledge and tools to stay safe.

Finally, the new law itself suffers from what Matland (1995) identifies as a policy type "high in ambiguity and conflict." In Matland's (1995) terms, this law is a policy full of ambiguity (How should prevention actually work?), and conflict (Who should take responsibility?). This uncertainty risks reducing the law to a symbolic gesture. The consequences of this gap will determine whether the reform succeeds or fails. The introduction of the proposed program will enable the law to move from paper to practice. Such an initiative would strengthen the system where it is most needed (Fullan & Miles, 1992), offer direct protection to vulnerable students, and produce vital data to inform future policy.

In this sense, it will be a step toward coherent educational reform (Clune, 1993), integrating legal norms with the daily practices of universities.

If this problem is not solved, the 2024 law will risk joining other reforms that looked promising but failed in practice because the law punishes crimes only after the damage has been done, while new victims will continue to appear from the very transition to higher education, which should bring opportunity, not danger. In that case, the government's goal of prevention will fail, and the cycle of exploitation will go on.

Moreover, the 2024 TIP Report explicitly urges authorities to increase training for law enforcement and make sure that victims are aware of their rights:

Train law enforcement officers and labor inspectors to apply Kazakhstan's trafficking laws, particularly in the detection of cases involving psychological coercion and other less overt trafficking indicators ... Ensure victims are aware of their right to seek compensation, and train attorneys and law enforcement officials on how to assist in that process. (U.S. Department of State, 2024, Prioritized Recommendations section)

Respectively, this aligns perfectly with the proposed program: to help students better understand psychological coercion and thereby create a basic level of prevention that will support government measures.

Also, a striking international example is the kNOW MORE! program in California (Richie-Zavaleta et al., 2024). Instead of traditional lectures, it used Theater of the Oppressed (Boal, 2008), a method where students become "spect-actors" (participants/ actors) rather than passive spectators. They were asked to role-play real-life situations—for example, grooming or recruitment attempts—and to kind of "rehearse" various ways of resistance and intervention. This format provides students not only with theoretical knowledge but also with practical skills to resist human trafficking and sexual slavery.

A five-year evaluation of kNOW MORE! showed its effectiveness: participants were significantly better at identifying sex trafficking, and 87% of participants reported strong learning outcomes and high satisfaction scores ranging from 4.65 to 4.86 out of 5 for program quality and facilitator effectiveness (Richie-Zavaleta et al., 2024). One might wonder, so what if students learned about trafficking? But the program's strength is not only in its short-term achievements but in its design for longer-term impact: by engaging active supporters and joining forces with NGOs, law enforcement, and educators, it ensures that prevention becomes a community practice, not a one-time event.

Taken together, the evidence is clear: international models like kNOW MORE! show that prevention can work, global organizations confirm the scale of the

threat, the government itself acknowledges the crisis, and local stories show the devastating human cost of inaction. All the provided data clearly display that Kazakhstan needs an educational program on human trafficking prevention. It should not only raise students' awareness but also equip them with sustainable skills and allow for future evaluation of results.

My educational program against human trafficking will fill this gap by embedding mandatory, skills-based training in all higher education institutions. The program moves beyond theoretical awareness and ensures that every student acquires concrete knowledge for real-life prevention and survival. The program will cover, among other topics: identifying fake job offers, protecting personal documents, understanding that a passport is not required to seek help from embassies, consulates, or local law enforcement, emphasizing that even in countries where prostitution is illegal, trafficked persons will not be prosecuted as offenders, because they are recognized as victims of kidnapping and coercion. The 2024 TIP Report also emphasized the importance of educating victims about these rights, noting that "ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked" (U.S. Department of State, 2024, Prioritized Recommendations section). The program will integrate both lectures and interactive workshops with survivor testimonies, case simulations, and legal literacy sessions. Also, each student will receive a practical toolkit (digital or printed) containing emergency contacts, embassy procedures, and a checklist for evaluating job offers.

### Impact of Proposed Educational Program

For decades, the idea of a student leaving a rural village for university has symbolized Kazakhstan's hopes for progress and opportunity. Yet, for some young people, this journey ends in exploitation. The Law on Countering Human Trafficking (2024) is a step toward recognition of this problem. But a written law alone cannot guarantee protection. Without a preventative program inside universities, the law risks becoming another unfulfilled promise. The stakes are not abstract; they are impactful and concrete, and can create a positive future.

If Kazakhstan invests in this proposed educational program, it could make a real difference. California's kNOW MORE! program demonstrated how awareness campaigns can change behavior: students not only recognized trafficking more easily, but they became active defenders against it (Richie-Zavaleta et al., 2024). For Kazakhstan, such an initiative is especially important for rural youth, whose vulnerability has been documented again and again (Chankseliani et al., 2020). Training them to question fake job offers or manipulative relationships would narrow the gap between privilege and disadvantage, giving them tools to navigate both opportunity and risk.

The impact would not stop with students. University faculty, who currently often remain bystanders to crises, could be trained to respond effectively. This is what Fullan and Miles (1992) describe as true capacity building. And as the program gathered data on recruitment strategies and risk patterns, it would give policymakers the evidence

they currently lack. Instead of relying only on thin official statistics, Kazakhstan could finally plan, as Clune (1993) envisioned, with policies that prevent rather than react.

### **Conclusion**

To ignore the gap between policy and practice would mean accepting the opposite path: one where the 2024 law drifts into what Matland (1995) warned of as a state of “high ambiguity and high conflict” (p. 160)—a condition where policy goals are vague and contested, ultimately resulting in symbolic implementation: a document that signals intent but changes nothing in practice. The wider social costs of not implementing the practice are already visible. Education can serve as a frontline defense, protecting students and building social trust, or the classroom can become a place of danger where predators operate with impunity. To protect its youth and make its reforms meaningful, Kazakhstan cannot let this law stay only on paper. It must be applied to the classroom.

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