

Processes of child trafficking in West Bengal: A qualitative study*

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A study of 35 trafficked children and young women found that trafficking is usually conducted through offers of false marriages and jobs, or through outright abduction and sale. In almost all districts and even some villages, the traffickers, who have a strong network, engage agents, who include: another person who herself is a victim of trafficking, unemployed persons, drug addicts/alcoholics or aged women with no income. Sometimes, these agents work under compulsion and/or are blackmailed into abetment.

Since poverty and illiteracy are the prime factors contributing to trafficking, income-generating and literacy programmes should be arranged for needy families. Local NGOs also need to take the initiative to raise awareness levels in *panchayats* in order to check trafficking. Training programmes and workshops need to be organised too, for the local administration, *panchayat* members and police officers.

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Increasingly, it has been recognised that past understandings of trafficking are outdated, ill-defined and non-responsive to the current realities of the trade in people, and to the nature and extent of abuses inherent in and incidental to it. Rather than clinging to outdated notions of the constituent elements of trafficking that date back to the early 19th century, there is a need for new understandings of trafficking to derive from an assessment of the current needs of trafficked persons in general, and trafficked women in particular. New definitions must be also specifically tailored to protect and promote the human rights of trafficked persons, with special emphasis on gender-specific violations.

At the core of any definition of trafficking must be the recognition that trafficking is never consensual. It is the non-consensual nature of trafficking that distinguishes it from other forms of migration. Thus, while all trafficking is, or should be illegal, all illegal migration is not necessarily trafficking.

Trafficking is an abuse of human rights. It not only abuses the human rights of the victim, but is a direct affront to mankind. People who are ensnared and entrapped are often kept in conditions of virtual slavery. As a contemporary form of slavery, this is a clear violation of international rights that are accepted worldwide.

Documentation and research shows that trafficking occurs for a myriad of exploitative purposes to which trafficking victims have not consented, including but not limited to forced and/or bonded labour, the sex trade, forced marriage and other slavery-like practices. The common elements are brokering, accompanied by the exploitative or servile conditions of work or relationship in which the trafficked person ends up, coupled with the lack of consent in arriving at that position.

Trafficking in persons means the recruitment, transportation, purchase, sale, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons by:

- Threat or use of violence, abduction, force, fraud, deception or coercion (including the abuse of authority), or debt bondage;
- Placing or holding such a person, whether for pay or not, in forced labour or slavery-like practices, in a community other than the one in which such a person lived at the time of the original act described above.

The first part of the definition covers all persons involved in the trafficking chain: those at the beginning of the chain who provide or sell the trafficked person, and those at the end of the chain who receive or purchase the trafficked person, hold the person in forced labour and profit from that

labour. Declaring the activities of all parties involved throughout the process of trafficking as 'criminal' would facilitate efforts to both prevent trafficking and punish traffickers.

Prostitution, the accompanying evil of the traffic in persons, is incompatible with the dignity and worth of human beings and endangers the welfare of the individual, the family and the community.

In 1974, the General Secretariat of the International Police Organisation prepared and submitted to the United Nations a report on 'Traffic in women'. It concluded that there is a trafficking trend emanating mostly in Thailand, but also in the Philippines. Traffic in women depends upon a market. Procurers work in the poverty-stricken countryside of Third World nations as well as the bus and train stations of major cities, acquiring girls and young women. They maintain a constant supply to serve the market.

According to David (1998), prostitution has become a very profitable trade and there is a global market involving millions of children, particularly girls, which generates billions of dollars in profit for the traffickers involved. The demand for cheap sex workers is a major motivating factor in the recruitment, by various means, of women and children for the extensive and lucrative sex industries of cities such as Mumbai, Karachi and Bangkok. Brothels in these cities are playing host to an increasing number of women and children from countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh, Burma, Laos and Cambodia, where poverty and income disparity, and a lack of economic opportunities render many women and families vulnerable.

The victims, mostly separated from their families and communities, end up in prostitution and other exploitative forms of work, such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing, fishing, begging and domestic service. They are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and traumatised by this accumulation of denied rights (Deb 2004). McIntosh (1995) remarked that Asian countries are prosecuting more offenders, but actual convictions are negligible, often because the police are in collusion with the syndicates. A major factor also sustaining the child prostitution industry is the belief that children are free of AIDS. In any case, instances of sexual abuse of children have surfaced of late in popular tourist destinations (Tandon and Sudarshan 1997).

Studies revealed a higher prevalence of trafficking in Asian countries like Nepal, India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Cambodia and Thailand due to a huge population, growing urbanisation and poverty (Bennett 1999).

Several government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have developed programmes to address the trafficking problem. In Nepal, the Maiti programme was organised to help victims return to their home country, while occupational alternatives and awareness campaigns were held for young women vulnerable to trafficking. In Thailand, greater penalties were imposed on customers compared to the sellers, so as to discourage and check trafficking. Other strategies have also been identified, such as prosecution of procurers, community awareness through campaigns, poverty alleviation and gender equalisation.

In a recently conducted study on short and long-term problems faced by trafficked children, Chatterjee *et. al.* (2005) categorised their problems as mental, physical and social. The dreaded HIV/AIDS was detected among 6 out of 41 trafficked children covered in the study. Depression, loneliness and loss of interest disturbed nearly every child. Worse, they are conscious of stigmatisation and family rejection. A further analysis of the after-effects categorised the problematic issues as short-term and long-term, of which minor health problems and resettlement in the future were the dominant ones, respectively. The findings also revealed that family members had developed a negative attitude towards these children and generally did not visit them.

The existing literature indicates that most of the earlier studies did not fully attempt to document the problems faced by trafficked children. Hence, it was felt necessary to conduct the present study.

OBJECTIVES

The broad objective of the study was to understand how children and young women are trafficked in West Bengal. It was intended to obtain a detailed insight into the various stages that trafficked victims go through till they reach a red-light area and eventually a rehabilitation centre. Another objective of the exploratory study was to gather information about the procurers and pimps, the strategies they adopt in trafficking, and the journey of the trafficked victims from their usual life to the world of the unknown. The study was purely a qualitative one that endeavored to understand the processes of trafficking of females in West Bengal.

SAMPLE AND SAMPLING

On discussing the purpose of the study with the coordinators of a few rehabilitation centres in Kolkata, a list of 35 trafficked girls was prepared.

All were inmates of Sanlaap, a rehabilitation home for trafficked children in Narendrapur, West Bengal.

STUDY TOOLS

Qualitative data collecting techniques like in-depth interviews and the case study method were applied. The in-depth interview focused on the child's age, education, parental background, family structure, parental occupation and the type of problems faced by them. Detailed case studies were also developed on all the trafficked children.

TARGET GROUP

The target for the study involved a group of trafficked girls aged 4-18 years. All of them were under rehabilitation centres and receiving education and vocational training.

DATA COLLECTION

The researchers and Sanlaap coordinators developed a tentative time schedule for data collection. On specified dates, the researchers collected data from the samples. The researchers met each girl individually and interviewed her personally. Altogether, 35 trafficked children were covered in the study. Content analysis was adopted for processing the qualitative data. Data collection was carried out over January and February 2004.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

There was initial resistance from the sample group to share their subjective experiences.

THE CASE STUDIES

The study revealed a variety of processes in child trafficking. In some areas, it begins with young girls and women being lured from their village homes with the promise of jobs in towns and cities. Where there is intense poverty, such promises hold new hope for a better life for the whole family. But the employment is not of the kind anticipated.

Poverty's push

Various law-enforcing authorities hold that economic hardship leads to trafficking. Trafficked women usually belong to the lower middle class.

Those willing to come to the cities hail from landless and agricultural labour households. Most rural areas offer few job opportunities for young girls and women, and it is therefore easy to convince them of better avenues in cities. Women victimised by procurers and traffickers are illiterate or less educated, divorced, separated, widowed or could not get married due to huge dowry demands that their families could not afford.

- Sapna's husband, an alcoholic, deserted her. Poverty compelled her to look for work. Her uncle assured her a job and brought her to Sonagachchi, where he sold her. The police rescued her from there after 10 days. Initially she was sent to Liluah where she stayed for three-and-a-half months; she has been housed in Sanlaap for the past one-and-a-half years.

Pimps & procurers

Procurers enter the scene in a variety of ways. *Indications are that families tend to trust persons known to them, and willingly send their women with them without a thought to possible consequences.* Sometimes unsuspecting girls adventurously agree to go holidaying with local *dadas*, *didis* and other familiar persons, who do not really have to do much to trap them. On being thus ensnared, they either escape or end up in prostitution.

- Raina was taken away from Dinajpur to Bombay to work in a house as a domestic servant, and was sold to a brothel instead. There were 20-30 other girls in a similar plight. The place was frequented by a lot of 'customers'. Raina did not like the atmosphere, and ran away in 5-6 days. The police caught her and sent her to Devenap (a home in Mumbai), where she stayed for a year. She returned home for sometime, but fell prey to traffickers again and was sold to a 'madam'. On their way to the city, the pimp offered a cold drink that knocked her senseless. She remembers nothing of what followed. Before the pimp could deposit her with the 'madam', Raina was rescued by the police. She was taken to the rehabilitation home where she continues to remain.

Mostly, the procurers are persons known to the victims and use enticements like better jobs and marriage.

- Rupa was 16 years old and studying in class VIIl when she met Moni. Being of the same age, he wanted to befriend her. Gradually, they became good friends. One day, Moni offered to take Rupa to Delhi to her aunt's place. Being very enthusiastic about seeing Delhi, she left

for Delhi with him without informing her parents. Moni's parents and grandparents joined the duo in the train to Delhi. On reaching the city, Rupa realised she had been trapped, for Moni's elder brother had built a network of girls and ran a premises for prostitution. Rupa would cry and wanted to go home. The family insisted that Rupa must 'work' if she wanted to survive – by entertaining customers. Rupa refused. Then a boy called Chhotu decided to help her. He offered to pay Rs 2,000 for visiting her daily. He never had any physical relations with Rupa, though he paid the full amount for her. He made every effort to rescue her. The family demanded Rs 1 lakh from him, or they would sell her elsewhere for a higher amount. Chhotu smuggled her out and took her to his home. His parents liked Rupa and got the two married. They lived happily for about 6 months, when Rupa's parents arrived with the police. They had traced Moni's family and now sought to rescue Rupa. She also felt it would be safer to join her parents, for fear that Chhotu may at a later stage rake up her past. At home she was ill treated, and again a man from her locality promising to take her to her husband took Rupa away. She was trafficked a second time. However, she was arrested by the police and sent to Sanlaap. Moni's family has been arrested and imprisoned for 12 years.

Some girls were astonished to find their own mother or father involved in trafficking, as in a village in the Jessore district of Bangladesh. When the mother is a prostitute, such cases are less surprising. The women are reluctant to put their children to school and educate them so that they can live a life of dignity different from their own.

- Other inmates of the brothel informed Anguri that her mother had sold her to another person. Even Anguri had seen her mother taking money from a 'bad' person. Stealing Rs 100 from her mother, she fled the place. A man at the station promised her decent work and escorted her to a house in Beliaghata. She stayed there for some time and finally was sold to another brothel-keeper. She had been there for hardly a week when police raided the premises. She was sent to a rehabilitation centre, and from there to Sanlaap.

Kidnapping

Kidnapping is another method of procuring girls. The kidnappers operate in different villages as well as cities, trapping little children and using them for their own nefarious activities or simply trafficking them for labour,

begging or prostitution. They frequent remote villages where fairs and gatherings are teeming with children. The processes of trafficking are so varied and surprising that they leave the victims traumatised. Children are picked up at such an early age that they almost forget their past. They do not clearly remember whether they were trafficked. Ismatun, for instance, has forgotten all her childhood events after being kidnapped. She cannot recall her mother's face, or the way she was brought away from her home.

- Ismatun barely remembers being kidnapped from her village in Bangladesh. She recalls going out shopping with her mother, where a man called out to her and offered her something to eat. She has no memory of what happened after that, except that she worked in a shop for a long time. She has never been sexually abused. She does not even know the address of her home, and can only faintly recall her brothers. The police detained her at a bus stand, and since she could not say where from she had come, she was put in the home.

Torture

Trafficked girls are beaten, raped, starved and abused and thus pressurised into entertaining customers. If they refuse to accept, they are tortured further.

- Khushboo came to Kolkata with a local resident for a job. He took her to Sonagachchi and forced her into sex with him. When she refused, she was beaten and starved for days and ultimately gave in. She decided to start with the profession, as she was already tainted. She rented a room and set up 'shop'. She would send home some of her earnings. About two years had passed when the police apprehended her in a raid. She was sent to Liluah where she stayed for six months. Later, she came to Sanlaap, where she has been chosen vice-headgirl. She is learning karate, English, dancing and block printing. She wants to stay here forever and earn a decent livelihood.

Need for counselling

Earnings from prostitution can be attractive, and in this context, sensitisation to risks, proper counselling, and alternative lifestyle options need to be built up, as these two case studies suggest.

- Scephali left home at the age of 16. Two women from her village took her to Delhi, where she had to work according to their whims. Some days later, they told her to refrain from all work and simply remain decked up always and take good care of her looks. They plied her with expensive clothes and cosmetics. She was imparted training in dance and music, and soon began getting 'customers'. Gradually she started liking the profession of prostitution and even enjoyed it. She was doing pretty well. 'I had very good customers; they came from very good families. Even policemen used to come. Everybody wanted me and I used to earn in plenty; I even received very good tips. Earning Rs. 10-15,000 was like nothing for me', she says. About two-and-a-half years later, police raided the place and Scephali was arrested. She had no desire to return home, for they would call her 'kothiwali' in the village. She was put into a home called Nirmalchhaya. There she picked up a lot of activities, and was offered a job for Rs. 2,000 per month. Scephali was not interested in the pittance, for at the brothel she used to earn much more. She wants to learn something that enables her to live respectably but also earn handsomely. The dance and music classes don't attract her. 'What will this block printing give me? I wish beautician courses were introduced here. I even want to learn fashion designing', Scephali stresses.

A point to be noted here is that the 'madams' or procurers take no responsibility for the unfortunates who fall sick, etc.

- According to Shilpa, 'Only because I was ill I am here today. I was doing very well in the profession But due to bad luck I had to lose everything and have been thrown out like this ... as if I am a disposable item that has been loaded on to a luggage train'.

CHILD TRAFFICKING STATISTICS

As table 1 shows, known persons play a major role in trafficking. There are indications that parents themselves initiate their young ones into prostitution or sell them to pimps. Mothers tend to send their sons to schools, but induct their daughters into the profession as early as possible. Though they themselves were pushed into this unsavory profession, they think nothing of dragging their children into it as well.

TABLE 1
Profile of people engaged/involved in trafficking (N=35) (Multiple Response)

Pattern of relationships	Frequency	Percentage
Local known faces	20	57
Friend (male)	10	28.5
Friend (female)	6	17.1
People from cities offering jobs in household	5	14.3
People from cities with proposals for marriage	12	34.2
Parents of friends	4	11.4
Friend's elder/younger brother	9	25.7
Parent (father)	0	0
Parent (mother)	1	2.9
Parent (both)	0	0
Prostitute mother	3	8.6

The treatment received by victims from procurers/pimps during the process of trafficking shows a diversified picture. Of the 35, 6 said they were forcibly detained by the procurer when they refused to obey orders, 20 were sexually abused, 5 were assaulted physically and tortured; none was starved, 2 were subjected to blackmailing; 15 received good food and friendly behaviour and 5 said medical help was given when required (Table 2).

TABLE 2
Nature of abuse trafficked children are subjected to (N=35) (Multiple Response)

Patterns	Frequency	Percentage
♦ 1. Use of tranquilisers	1	2.9
♦ 2. Forcible detention	6	17.1
♦ 3. Sexual abuse	20	57
♦ 4. Starvation	0	0
♦ 5. Physical assault	5	14.3
♦ 6. Blackmailing	2	5.7
♦ 7. Torture	1	2.9
♦ 8. Provision of good food	15	42.8
♦ 9. Medicinal help	5	14.3
♦ 10. Friendly behaviour	15	42.8

DISCUSSION

Trafficking of women and children, illegal immigrants, drugs and weapons is a multi-million-dollar industry directly and indirectly employing many people in India. Despite the fact that anti-trafficking measures are now high on the political agenda, there are still very few prosecutions. India is now a major transit country for the trafficking of thousands of foreign women every year from countries such as Moldova, Romania and Ukraine, and the crime networks continue to operate with virtual impunity.

While traffickers, many of whom are well known, continue to live within the community and their activities are tolerated, there is a continuing threat to girls. It continues to be one of the greatest social problems of the country. This situation will remain as such until the law is enforced and the prevailing conditions of poverty and lack of opportunity improve.

The most 'at risk' groups are children from poor and ill-educated families, in the 5-18 age group. Programmes and services to help victims are required, but these must be developed in conjunction with local NGOs and with government and community support. This is not possible until the government provides protection and security.

Awareness of trafficking is high in many areas as a result of media attention and the experiences of those who have returned. There is still an urgent need to warn those in the remote areas because the conditions there that make girls and women susceptible to the traffickers – poverty, unemployment, lack of education and fewer marriage prospects due to mass emigration of men – are as dire as ever.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The rural setting is the origin of child trafficking activities; therefore, awareness programmes should be organised in all block and district headquarters. A network should be developed among key community leaders like local teachers, doctors and police personnel for prevention of trafficking and for maintaining vigilance.

In each high-risk village, a core group comprising people from all walks of life should be constituted to identify families living below the poverty line. With the help of local NGOs, it should disseminate information among the poor about various welfare and income-generating programmes. It should also help them develop and sustain self-help groups to create income-generating activities as they lack the ability to seek financial support from banks.

Rehabilitation measures for trafficked victims must include emergency medical attention, food and safe shelter, vocational training, mental health services like counselling and legal support. Definite attempts must be made to reunite the affected children with their family members. NGOs can organise programmes in villages to remove perceptions of stigma among family members and encourage them to receive their child back. Being in the family alone can foster a better living for her.

It must be ensured that women and children in post-rescue situations are placed in homes or shelters. Grant-receiving organisations can use funds with some flexibility when assisting victims in complicated trafficking situations.

Clearly, there is still much work to be done by lawmakers, government authorities, civil society, and community-based organisations. It must at all times be borne in mind that the lives shattered by the horrors of trafficking and abuse of slavery will require a lifetime of healing. Political, civic and spiritual leaders as also others must denounce trafficking for the insidious evil that it is – an evil that destroys human dignity and reduces human life to a commodity. □

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