**Forum:** The Human Rights Council

**Issue:** The Question of Human Trafficking in Developing and Vulnerable Regions

**Student Officer:** Aakanksha Pai

**Position:** Deputy Chair

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**Introduction**

‘A crime that shames us all’ is the epithet given by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to human trafficking. Also known as ‘modern slavery’, human trafficking is the use of force, fraud or coercion to force victims into labour and commercial sexual exploitation[[1]](#footnote-0). An estimated 600,000 to 800,000 people are smuggled across international borders every year[[2]](#footnote-1). It is imperative to take action immediately and effectively to compensate the existing victims and prevent individuals from becoming victims of human trafficking.

Every year, thousands of persons become victims of human trafficking. Trafficking trends show that perpetrators tend to target only some socio-economic classes. This selective recruitment is largely guided by exploitable vulnerabilities. Often, the poorest families from rural areas are more likely to become victims of trafficking. Gender, age and pre-existing stigmas are also factors that contribute towards making an individual more likely to fall prey to human trafficking. Marginalised and vulnerable socio-economic groups are more likely to yield to force, coercion or fraud and are more likely to accept minimal wages[[3]](#footnote-2).

Trafficking and exploitation are most often used synonymously. This is owing to the fact that an individual can never ‘consent’ to trafficking, making it forced labour. Often, victims of trafficking are sexually abused, physically violated and have immense psychological trauma. Thus, one can see why a victim-centered and human-rights based approach is imperative to combat human trafficking[[4]](#footnote-3).

Since trafficking is widely condemned, has severe human rights consequences, is illegal and has degenerative economic effects on the source countries - countries which have the most number of victims of trafficking, why does trafficking continue to plague international authorities? Put simply, trafficking benefits the perpetrators. It is done purely for economic gain. Perpetrators capitalise on profits as they can exploit the trafficked persons. Owing to the fact that trafficking is largely an underground crime[[5]](#footnote-4), the number of trafficked persons who are found by authorities are just a fraction of all victims of trafficking.

In the year 2000, the United Nations formally defined ‘trafficking in persons’. This was a vital first step in the direction of combatting human trafficking. Since then, international, governmental and local organisations have sprung up to eradicate this deplorable crime. In the mid 2000s, these efforts seemed to bear fruit when rates of human trafficking had declined overall. However, trafficking trends have yet again seen a spike. A collaborative effort by international governments to put an end to this shameful crime is necessary to uphold human rights of the vulnerable.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Human Trafficking[[6]](#footnote-5)**

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, ‘Human Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.’ Also known as modern slavery, human trafficking almost always encompasses forced labour and sexual exploitation since it completely lacks the worker’s consent.

**Vulnerability**

According to the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight human Trafficking (UNGIFT), vulnerability is ‘a condition resulting from how individuals negatively experience the complex interaction of social, cultural, economic, political and environmental factors that create the context for their communities[[7]](#footnote-6).’ Put simply, vulnerability is the combined effect of socio-economic and political marginalisation on a community, putting it at a disadvantage.

**Illegal Migration**

It is important to understand the distinction between illegal migration and human trafficking. Illegal migration is defined as the undocumented entry of non-citizens into a country. Illegal migration is in accordance with the consent of the immigrant[[8]](#footnote-7). Human trafficking, on the other hand, can occur within one nation itself and between nations and is the smuggling of persons against their consent.

**Source Country[[9]](#footnote-8)**

A source country of human trafficking is one where the population is extremely vulnerable to cross-border trafficking. The country faces huge losses in terms of human resources as the output is greater than the input. Although there exists no formal definition for a source country for human trafficking, it is used in the sense of a source country of migration.

**Organised Crime**

According to the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organised Crime, the implied definition of organised crime is ‘virtually all profit-motivated serious criminal activities with international implications[[10]](#footnote-9).’ The definition has been made extremely broad so as to allow a wide range of international collaboration in combating organised crimes. Human trafficking is an organised crime.

**Rehabilitation and Assistance**

Rehabilitation of a human trafficking victim is multi-dimensional, encompassing legal, medical and psychological rehabilitation. In the legal sense, rehabilitation involves restoration of the human rights of the affected party. Under this broad definition, psychological rehabilitation involves providing assistance to individuals who have trauma based mental health issues. In summary, rehabilitation can be defined as re-empowering the disempowered individuals who have been victims of human trafficking in order to prevent them from falling into the cycle again and make reparations for harm already caused.

**Key Issues**

**Vulnerability and Vulnerable Groups**

As mentioned previously, the likelihood of an individual becoming a victim of human trafficking rests on several factors or ‘vulnerabilities’. Based on global trends in human trafficking some groups in society have been consistently vulnerable to trafficking more than others.

Women

According to the UNODC around 71% percent of human trafficking victims are women and girls. Women and girls are more likely to be victim to human trafficking due to demand for domestic work, sexual exploitation and even forced marriage. Trafficking of women and girls for illicit purposes often proves to be an extremely difficult issue to address as it stems from deep-rooted gender ideologies. Poverty and sexism often exacerbate the vulnerability and ensue an inherent victimisation of women and girls[[11]](#footnote-10).

Children

Children account for 27% of trafficking victims worldwide. They are often trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation, forced labour and even to fight in conflicts. According to the ‘Save the Children’ initiative, Daulatdia - one of the largest brothels in Bangladesh has girls as young as 10 engaged in commercial sexual exploitation. Of these, most are trafficked into the town with hopes of a better life while others are forced into the trade across generations[[12]](#footnote-11). Child trafficking, both within countries and transnationally is closely linked with demand for cheap labour. Furthermore, children are more likely to be docile and submissive as well as less likely to participate in protests. Children are also more likely to be employed in some of the most hazardous forms of labour[[13]](#footnote-12).

Certain Marginalised Classes

Due to pre-existing social stigmas, some marginalised classes are more likely to face condemnation from their own family and friends, often forcing them to live alone and fend for themselves from an early age. Due to lack of access to healthcare services as well as minimal support by state parties due to prejudices, marginalised classes often have a lack of choices in terms of employment. Therefore, many marginalised youth in the US are becoming easy prey for sex trafficking. Further, 57% of marginalised individuals feel uncomfortable asking for police help. This makes the process of emancipating such victims of trafficking even more difficult[[14]](#footnote-13).

Persons of Colour

According to a UCLA Law Review article by Cheryl Nelson, ‘*Today’s anti-trafficking movements have failed to address the racial contour of domestic trafficking*.’ Additionally research proves that hyper-sexualised stereotypes attached to teenagers of colour act as a driving force for their persistent trafficking and sexual exploitation. Objectification of girls from minorities on mainstream media outlets is also common. Deep-rooted racial prejudice and generational inequalities often force people of colour to take up some of the lowest-paying jobs, possibly becoming victim to human trafficking[[15]](#footnote-14).

**Violation of Human Rights**

Human rights laws forbid debt bondage or forced labour. This means that an individual cannot be persuaded to work against their consent to relieve debts that have carried over across generations. Additionally, forced marriage, sexual exploitation and child labour - all violate basic human rights. The entire concept and perpetuation of human trafficking stems from structural inequalities in society. Racial prejudice, gender bias and perceived (submissive) are factors which make an individual more vulnerable to human trafficking[[16]](#footnote-15).

There exists a state responsibility to address trafficking. However, in many countries, victims of human trafficking have no adequate legal recourse or remedy[[17]](#footnote-16). Furthermore, even states which are party to UN treaties and hence oblige to solve the issue of human trafficking, have no concrete programme to address human trafficking, adequately redress victims and equip them with vocational skills.

Often anti-trafficking programmes implemented by state parties almost completely exclude commercial sex workers. An important point to note here is that a large number of sex workers are inducted into the trade through human trafficking. Excluding commercial sex from anti-trafficking programmes leaves a large number of victims uncompensated[[18]](#footnote-17).

**Medical and Psychosocial Implications**

The overall health of victims of human trafficking has consistently been an international concern. Due to pre-existing vulnerabilities as well as the underground nature of human trafficking, most victims have little to no access to adequate health care facilities - both for mental and physical health. Furthermore, victims of human trafficking are extremely vulnerable to mental health issues due to the traumatic nature of their experiences.

HIV/AIDS[[19]](#footnote-18)

Due to the surreptitious nature of human trafficking it is quite difficult to have an exact estimate of the number of HIV/AIDS cases. However, general trends show that trafficked persons who are forced into sexual exploitation are most likely to contract the diseases due to lack of use of contraceptives and obligate engagement in risky sexual behaviour. Further, they are also more likely to use injected drugs either by free will or by force. Additionally, due to lack of access to established medical services, they are more likely to engage in unsafe surgical practices and can thus contract HIV/AIDS. They do not have sufficient medical assistance to combat the disease due to financial reasons and are often refused treatment due to stigmatisation.

PTSD

An independent research group’s findings indicate that over 39% of adults and 27% of children who are victims of human trafficking are diagnosed with PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder. However these numbers just scratch the surface. Around 75% of trafficked children have been or are subjected to abuse and over 60% of trafficked adults have been or are subjected to abuse[[20]](#footnote-19). Further, female victims of human trafficking are exceptionally difficult cases according to psychiatrists in the field. Oftentimes, policies for rehabilitation and recovery exclude addressing the psychological trauma suffered by victims of human trafficking. PTSD can be a difficult experience and expert assistance is of essence on the road to full recovery.

Substance Abuse

Traffickers often target people with a history of drug abuse and lure them with promises of limitless supply of drugs, perpetuating substance abuse pattern. Additionally, victims of sex trafficking are often drugged forcefully to induce addiction and sedation. Once the victim is addicted to the drug, the traffickers keep them in a vicious cycle - promising to give them drugs against the surety that they’ll continue to work[[21]](#footnote-20).

**COVID-19 and Human Trafficking**

Traffickers are taking an advantage of the global chaos, mass unemployment crisis and increase in number of digital media users to trap more individuals in human trafficking. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased vulnerabilities, creating more opportunities for traffickers to poach individuals for human trafficking. Lockdowns have put limitations on anti-trafficking services[[22]](#footnote-21).

Worldwide lockdowns have made it difficult for organisations to identify victims of trafficking and provide them with suitable aid. Victims are now unable to have access to basic healthcare services, safe shelter and other support systems[[23]](#footnote-22). Additionally, the pandemic has brought forth a spike in online activity of traffickers luring vulnerable individuals with lucrative prospective job offers.

According to reports by GRETA, ‘*In Germany, following a decision to temporarily close brothels and other businesses involving prostitution throughout the country, there has been an increase in hidden prostitution, accompanied by more exploitative conditions and violence.*’ Countries world-over are facing similar challenges. Identification of victims of trafficking has become even harder and accessibility of support systems has also reduced for the victims.

Trafficked persons are also more vulnerable to COVID-19 due to poor sanitary conditions and lack of access to COVID-specific healthcare. Thus, they can also act as carriers for the contagion[[24]](#footnote-23). Further, poor families who do not have the resources to access healthcare services have been extremely vulnerable to child trafficking. Many children lost their parents to COVID-19 and their vulnerability is exploited by traffickers[[25]](#footnote-24).

**Recovery and Rehabilitation[[26]](#footnote-25)**

Rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking has been a pressing issue faced by nations across the globe. The layered nature of the problem implies that rehabilitation oftentimes involves a plethora of subsidiary programmes. These may be - repatriation, medical and psychological assistance, financial assistance, vocational training and so forth. Often, there exists no established way for victims to seek assistance. Thus, in the fight against human trafficking, countries must make sure to include adequate rehabilitation measures.

A major obstacle in the path to rehabilitation of victims of trafficking is whether they are to be assisted in the destination state or they are to be repatriated and assisted thereafter. In fact, rehabilitating the victim in the destination state is the best case scenario as they could actually have a better lifestyle and more income as this would be the reason they got lured into being trafficked in the first place.

Rehabilitation of victims of trafficking is an exhaustive process as it involves a variety of measures including reinsertion into education, vocational training, job placements and so forth. In fact, such assistance programmes can be implemented even for individuals assessed to be at-risk for trafficking in order to prevent them from becoming victims. To illustrate, in Nigeria a pilot microfinance project was carried out for women who were believed to be at risk for human trafficking. NGOs provided each woman with case-specific assistance till they reach long-term financial security.

**Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

**UNODC**

Established in 1997 with the agenda of tackling organised crimes, the United Nations Office on Drugs and crime has been a pioneer in combatting human trafficking globally[[27]](#footnote-26). UNODC has published several exhaustive reports on human trafficking. It also supports countries through the process of implementing ‘UN Protocol on Trafficking in Persons’. Further, the UNODC collaborates with international, governmental and non-governmental organisations to investigate trafficking crimes.

**Anti-Slavery International[[28]](#footnote-27)**

Anti-Slavery International is a UK-based international organisation that has been working towards abolishing slavery by targetting three primary routes to the same - forced labour, bonded labour and human trafficking. Anti-Slavery International has worked towards mitigating human trafficking in the Middle East and Mauritius by holding awareness campaigns on ways to avoid getting trapped in human trafficking for migrants. The organisation has also helped rehabilitate women and girls in Nepal who were victim to trafficking.

**Thailand[[29]](#footnote-28)**

‘According to the Global Slavery Index, Thailand is home to about 610,000 human trafficking victims.’ Victims are usually trafficked for domestic sexual exploitation or smuggled internationally. Due to complex and expensive legal migration procedures in Thailand and its surrounding countries, migrants are more likely to enter Thailand illegally. These migrant workers are the most vulnerable to trafficking. In recent years, there also seems to be an increase in child trafficking for sexual exploitation.

**China**

Due to stringent one-child policies and a preference for male children, China has a shortage of women and girls. Women and girls from neighbouring countries are smuggled into China as brides for Chinese men. The government has ignored all allegations about the authorities being complicit in this crime. However, the magnitude of the problem continues to increase. The Human Rights Watch holds a critical view of China’s inadequate response to the same and the government’s propaganda-peddling[[30]](#footnote-29).

**Hawaii**

Hawaii seems to be act as an intermediate between source countries and destination countries, to funnel victims of human trafficking. In a shocking finding, more than 23% of sex trafficking victims in Hawaii are children. 26% of victims reported a family member as a sex trafficker, 25% a friend and 25% a boyfriend[[31]](#footnote-30). Hence, sex trafficking in Hawaii is often camouflaged.

**United States of America**

According to the Polaris Project’s data, available evidence on human trafficking in the United States suggests that persons of colour and members of stigmatised communities are most vulnerable to human trafficking. Generational trauma, historical oppression, social stigmas and hate crimes are often the cause of such a person becoming a victim of human trafficking[[32]](#footnote-31). Demand for such vulnerable persons leads to cross-border smuggling. Thus, the US is a major destination country for human trafficking.

**Timeline**

| **Date** | **Event** | **Outcome** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **15/11/2000** | Palermo Protocol adopted[[33]](#footnote-32). | Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children took the first step towards formally defining human trafficking and classifying it as a transnational organised crime. This was an important first step in combatting human trafficking. |
| **26/03/2007** | UNODC launches ‘UNGIFT’ - United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking. | The UNGIFT programme has helped build awareness regarding trafficking in persons and state parties in taking effective response measures against human trafficking[[34]](#footnote-33). |
| **13/02/2008** | Vienna Forum to Fight Human Trafficking[[35]](#footnote-34) took place. | The forum focused on identifying factors which make people vulnerable to human trafficking, its impacts and formulating innovative policies to combat human trafficking. |
| **30/07/2010** | Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons[[36]](#footnote-35) adopted by the UN General Assembly. | The plan marks the establishment of the UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking. The Trust Fund provides specialised on-ground assistance to victims of trafficking via NGOs world-over. |

**Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

**Fines Imposed on Traffickers in Azerbaijan[[37]](#footnote-36)**

In a bid to combat human trafficking, the Azerbaijani government imposed heavy fines. If an individual or a group was found guilty of trafficking, they were to be fined. However, it was observed that this did not change the trends in human trafficking. Traffickers saw the fines as collateral damage and only a minimal ‘fee’ that they had to pay in order to continue business. Therefore, it can be concluded that a financial crackdown on the oppressors might not be an effective solution for reducing human trafficking. Instead, helping vulnerable groups become financially independent and secure could go a long way in preventing human trafficking as seen in the Nigerian model.

**Microfinancing as a Preventive Measure**

In Nigeria, around five NGOs collaborated with the authorities to develop a suitable microfinancing scheme specifically targeting women vulnerable to sex trafficking. The goal was to completely eliminate the factors which make the women vulnerable to trafficking. Therefore, the microfinancing scheme not only focused on providing financial security but also case-specific assistance to reduce inequalities. The success of this intensive model in a small group of women provides hope for more such models to be implemented in the future. The strength of this solution lies in the fact that the organisations have completely understood the factors making an individual vulnerable and have worked to target each vulnerability separately. The model focuses on empowering possible victims, hence preventing them from getting trafficked. Further, it is not a blanket solution as it is quite flexible and can be altered to fit an individual’s requirements.

**The Swedish Model to Combat Sex Trafficking[[38]](#footnote-37)**

The Swedish government’s approach to sex trafficking was based on eliminating gender-based inequalities. In order to impose a crackdown on sex trafficking, the government criminalised both buying and selling sex in 1999. This programme showed immediate results and there was a drastic reduction in the number of victims of sex trafficking however over a decade later, the rates of sex trafficking soared higher than those before 1999. Identifying the traffickers this time was made even more difficult as buyers of commercial sex were reluctant to reveal if an individual was trafficked in order to escape criminal responsibility. Therefore, the government tried a new approach- segregating prostitution and sex trafficking. Street prostitution was decriminalised, buyers were more willing to identify individuals who could have been trafficked and although commercial sex work continued, sex trafficking rates reduced considerably.

**Possible Solutions**

**Consumers Against Human Trafficking**

An innovative manner in which each individual can help combat human trafficking is boycotting companies which employ trafficked persons. As the financial stimulus reduces, the number of victims of trafficking also reduces as it is no longer seen to be profitable. However, this method does not offer any help to the victims financially or socially. Nevertheless, it is a step towards reducing the number of traffickers by reducing the profitability of human trafficking[[39]](#footnote-38). By simply making consumers aware of what really goes into the process of producing a product enterprises can be pressured to commit to certain protocols and treaties demanding employment of only willing workers.

**Movements Led by Victims to Raise Awareness**

Survivors can give implementable input to combat trafficking as they have been at the receiving end. They have knowledge of the tricks used by traffickers to lure victims, exploitation and who they tend to prey upon. A movement led by survivors of sex trafficking in Mumbai, India help raise awareness among the vulnerable, preventing them from becoming victims of human trafficking. Street plays, storytelling sessions and art pieces created by survivors of human trafficking helped raise awareness among the vulnerable groups. Additionally, making survivors the face of anti-trafficking movements helps administrators create more practical anti-trafficking policies and gives them a real view of the hardships faced by victims. Empowering survivors to help other victims to pull through their trauma can also be an excellent method of rehabilitation as victims would be more likely to open up to someone who has experienced something they have[[40]](#footnote-39).

**Comprehensive Rehabilitation Programmes**

Rehabilitation programmes can be made more comprehensive so as to provide victims with all possible assistance and equip them with suitable skills to make reintegration into society easier. State parties can partner with NGOs to provide victims with financial assistance, give them vocational training and in cases where it is required, basic education can be given to victims. The process of rehabilitation must also involve professional psychiatrists all throughout to help victims work through mental health issues like PTSD and depression and in specific cases substance abuse.

**Nullifying Criminal Accountability for Victims of Trafficking**

Sex work is criminalised in many countries making the process of providing assistance to victims of trafficking much harder. Additionally, human traffickers often use victims as drug mules and make them commit other crimes. If countries scrap the accountability of a victim of trafficking as the crime is committed under duress, the path to assisting victims of trafficking and emancipating them becomes easier. Additionally, the accountability then shifts on the perpetrator - the trafficker, making the trafficking business more risky and less profitable[[41]](#footnote-40).

**Improving Training of Officials in Destination Countries**

A solution which is often looked over is training officials in destination countries to combat human trafficking better. One way to do this is increasing their wages, making them less susceptible to accepting bribes from traffickers. Further, special task forces can be trained to identify victims of trafficking and tracing the trafficker thereafter.

**A Collaborative Model to Combat Human Trafficking**

Due to the transnational nature of human trafficking, the international community needs to work together to effectively eradicate it. An important method of achieving this is through collaborations between destination and source countries in anti-trafficking movements. They must work together to emancipate victims of trafficking as well as track down traffickers and bring them to justice. This may be done through financial assistance, sharing intelligence about crime syndicates, etc.

**Financial Intelligence to Detect Cases of Human Trafficking**

State parties could engage in public-private partnerships to trace money laundering cases related to human trafficking. The private enterprise thus provides the state party with actionable financial intelligence in exchange for tax rebates[[42]](#footnote-41).

**Providing Specialised Attention to Victims of Child Trafficking**

Child trafficking may be suitably addressed by firstly ensuring all children have access to primary education and secondly, holding individual sessions for each student with child psychologists. This is because a majority of children who are victims of human trafficking are trafficked by their own family members and regular interactions with professionals could help identify such victims. The school should have a referral system in place to inform the authorities and help suitably rehabilitate the child.

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