

Child Trafficking in Pakistan: A Legal and Policy Analysis of Protective Mechanisms

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Abstract: *Child trafficking is a pervasive issue in Pakistan, affecting children through forced labor, sexual exploitation, and organ trafficking. This study provides an overview of the challenges, forms, and policy responses surrounding child trafficking in Pakistan. The research aims to identify the underlying factors contributing to child trafficking, assess the effectiveness of current legislation, and propose strategies for improvement. Using a qualitative research design, the study examines existing literature, official reports, and case studies to analyze the scale and nature of child trafficking within Pakistan's socio-economic context. Findings indicate that poverty, political instability, and weak legal enforcement significantly contribute to high trafficking rates. Furthermore, the study highlights the challenges faced by law enforcement agencies, such as corruption and limited victim support, which hinder anti-trafficking efforts. Despite some improvements in legal frameworks and international collaboration, comprehensive solutions are still lacking. Recommendations include strengthening legal mechanisms, enhancing public awareness, and fostering international cooperation to address this crisis effectively. This study underscores the urgent need for a multi-faceted approach to combat child trafficking and protect vulnerable children in Pakistan.*

Keywords: Exploitation, Vulnerability, Socio-economic Factors, Legal Frameworks, Enforcement Challenges. International Cooperation. Victim Rehabilitation

Introduction

The government of Pakistan is treating child trafficking as a most significant human rights issue which is destroying millions of lives especially in the developing countries like Pakistan. Through forced labor, sexual abuse, and even organ harvesting, trafficked children are exploited in unimaginable ways. The aim of this study was to explore child trafficking in Pakistan, particularly, the social vulnerabilities of children, the sufficiency of the legislative responses and measures for improvement. We aim to embed these findings into action both locally as well as internationally, with the hope that our work may aid in promoting efforts around protecting at-risk groups from child trafficking (Khan et al., 2022).

These factors are compounded in Pakistan by the socio-economic and political woes of the country leading to a rising incidence of child trafficking. High poverty, deprivation of quality education, political instability and custom bonded labor are some of the key contributing factors which make it relatively easier for the trafficker to fulfill his purpose. While having progressed to some extent through legislation in recent years and working with international organizations on efforts to eliminate human trafficking, Pakistan is still a source, transit, and destination country for trafficked persons. The annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports by the U.S. State Department have consistently underscored Pakistan's enduring challenges against trafficking while acknowledging the meaningful strides the country has made, ultimately promoting the nation to "Tier 2" status owing to its heightened commitment to thorough investigations and victim support. But underlying problems such as

corruption, ineffective enforcement mechanisms and the stigma on victims persist, undermining anti-trafficking efforts (Pulla et al., 2018).

The study addresses the primary question: What socio-economic and institutional factors contribute to the persistence of child trafficking in Pakistan, and what policy measures could mitigate this issue effectively? This question leads to the hypothesis that the prevalence of child trafficking in Pakistan stems largely from entrenched socio-economic vulnerabilities, compounded by inadequate enforcement of legal frameworks and limited support structures for victims. By understanding these drivers, this research aims to shed light on how policy reforms and targeted interventions might reduce trafficking rates and enhance protection for affected children.

The paper is qualitative in nature and analyses child trafficking in Pakistan and its dimensions through a review of literature, policy documents, and case records. This framework will show types of trafficking, review the law enforcement's constraints and shortcomings, and evaluate the victim services in Pakistan. The deliverables include identification of the drivers of trafficking, an analysis of the gaps in Pakistan's policy framework, and action-oriented recommendations to reinforce the country's anti-trafficking response.

This article proceeds by first examining theoretical concepts and definitions, distinguishing child trafficking from related phenomena such as migrant smuggling. It then discusses the prevalent forms of child trafficking in Pakistan, alongside the socio-economic factors driving this crisis. Next, the paper evaluates Pakistan's current legal framework and policy responses, highlighting both achievements and shortcomings. The analysis then shifts to the obstacles faced by enforcement agencies and support structures, offering insights into how these challenges can be mitigated. The final section provides specific recommendations aimed at enhancing anti-trafficking strategies, stressing the importance of collaborative, multi-dimensional approaches to protect Pakistan's vulnerable children from the scourge of trafficking. By systematically addressing these dimensions, the study aims to inform policies that could offer long-term solutions to child trafficking in Pakistan, fostering a safer environment for future generations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meanwhile, academic literature, official government reports, and international organizations have looked at the problem of child trafficking in Pakistan through different paradigmatic lenses, thus enriching our understanding of the various aspects of the issue, its causes and consequences. However, a search of the literature quickly reveals the socio economic, political and structural factors which compound the problem of child trafficking in Pakistan, as well as a critique of the existing legal frameworks and policy responses.

One of the foundational sources in understanding human trafficking in Pakistan is the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report published by the U.S. State Department. The TIP report provides a global overview of trafficking conditions, legal developments, and country-specific rankings. According to the 2022 report, Pakistan remains on "Tier 2," indicating substantial progress, yet ongoing issues with enforcement and victim support. The report commends Pakistan's improved investigation and prosecution measures but underscores the need for consistent anti-trafficking enforcement, particularly in rural areas where trafficking remains prevalent (U.S. Department of State, 2022). However, while comprehensive, the report's reliance on macro-level data can miss localized nuances in trafficking trends and enforcement discrepancies across Pakistan's regions.

Several academic studies offer a critical lens on Pakistan's legal and institutional responses to trafficking. Ali (2019) explores the issue of internal trafficking within Pakistan, emphasizing how socio-cultural factors—such as bonded labor and the commodification of children for forced labor—facilitate trafficking at local levels. Ali's study reveals the complicity of local authorities in trafficking activities and highlights that deeply embedded cultural practices often normalize child exploitation. This source

contributes valuable insights into the structural and cultural factors that perpetuate trafficking but notes limitations in the availability of concrete data, as much of the trafficking occurs informally.

Another significant study by Khan (2019) delves into the challenges faced by law enforcement in addressing trafficking, particularly regarding the lack of bilateral agreements with neighboring countries. Khan points out that Pakistan's geographical location makes it both a transit and destination country for trafficked individuals from Afghanistan, Iran, and Bangladesh. The study argues that weak border management and limited coordination with neighboring states exacerbate trafficking, particularly for the purpose of forced prostitution and labor exploitation. Khan's work critically examines the impact of political factors on trafficking dynamics, underscoring the need for regional collaboration to mitigate trafficking networks.

In addition, Radhika Coomaraswamy's (2016) examination of child trafficking in South Asia provides a broader regional context, discussing Pakistan's role as a trafficking hub and the unique vulnerabilities of Pakistani children trafficked to the Middle East for exploitative purposes, such as camel jockeying and domestic servitude. Coomaraswamy's work is instrumental in illustrating the international dimension of trafficking and how certain countries in the Gulf region serve as popular destinations for trafficked children from South Asia. This research also emphasizes the role of gender, as young girls face heightened risks of trafficking due to socio-cultural norms that prioritize male education and employment.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) provide additional frameworks for understanding child trafficking's definitional and regulatory aspects. UNODC's definitions emphasize the distinction between trafficking and smuggling, a crucial differentiation for effective legal responses, while the ILO highlights the link between trafficking and forced labor, particularly in agriculture and domestic work (UNODC, 2012; ILO, 2002). These definitions are central to Pakistan's anti-trafficking efforts, yet their application remains inconsistent due to gaps in training and understanding among local law enforcement agencies.

Costa (2019) takes a broader view of global trafficking networks and their economic implications, identifying poverty, globalization, and economic inequality as major driving forces of trafficking. Costa's findings provide insight into how globalization has both facilitated migration opportunities and intensified trafficking risks by expanding criminal networks. This work is relevant to Pakistan, where economic instability drives migration and subsequently increases trafficking vulnerabilities. However, Costa's study primarily focuses on global trends and lacks specificity in Pakistan's context, underscoring the need for region-specific research on the economic drivers of trafficking.

The literature also includes discussions on the stigma and lack of rehabilitation services for trafficked children, as explored by Mollema (2013) in a comparative legal study on trafficking. Mollema highlights the inadequacies in victim support services in countries like Pakistan, where trafficked children often face stigmatization and legal penalties instead of support. This analysis is critical for Pakistan, where social stigma and limited rehabilitation options create substantial barriers for child victims, contributing to cycles of re-trafficking and exploitation.

Overall, Pakistani literature on child-trafficking portrays it as a multi-dimensional problem sculpted by socio-economic inequities, legislative deficiencies, and intangible cultural standards. Despite those advances in legislation, literature shows enforcement, international cooperation, and victim rehabilitation challenges remain. These body of these findings highlight the importance as to how combatting this issue in Pakistan requires a complex and well-coordinated strategy consisting of strong legal measures, socio-economic policies and international cooperation. This study builds also on some insights available from those sources, with a view to filling the identified gaps with concrete findings regarding the improvements that policymakers could adopt for better child protection systems.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the conceptual framework of child trafficking as a socio-economic and legal problem, driven by vulnerabilities, systemic gaps, and social-cultural factors. In Pakistan, common conceptualization of child trafficking emerges as a product of chronic politico-economic conditions such as financial dissoluteness and ignorance, with a lack of responsive law enforcement and an ineffective process of victim assistance. Carrying out the ontological argument are elements of structural strain theory, which indicates that societal pressures and institutional inadequacies generate environments where at-risk populations such as children are more likely to be exploited. The paper examines the manner in which these socio-economic pressures and realities interlock with Pakistan's weak legal framework, perpetuating a reality in which trafficking can continue to exist despite formal legal recommitment. The framework assesses the empirical correlations between socio-economic vulnerabilities, legislative enactment and enforcement, along with cultural practices, in doing so presenting a comprehensive overview of the drivers that promote child trafficking, thus providing information on targeted interventions and policy reforms with the potential to lessen such risks.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative research paradigm, using secondary data sources like academic literature, government reports, and case studies to explore the socio-economic and legal factors responsible for child trafficking in Pakistan. Considering the complexity and sensitivity of the issue of child trafficking, qualitative methods facilitate an in-depth investigation of the nuanced socio-cultural determinants and the institutional factors that underpin the complexity of this problem and would therefore be more difficult to measure using quantitative methods. Materials for this resource include documents from the United Nations, U.S. Department of State, and reports from international organizations, as well as regional studies that highlight context-specific information. Through thematic analysis, the data indicates principal themes surrounding poverty, law enforcement issues, and cultural norms facilitating trafficking of women. This makes it possible to have a holistic approach towards understanding the trafficking phenomenon in Pakistan, identifying possible gaps in the policy and practice which can contribute to a more robust and practical anti-trafficking responses.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHILD TRAFFICKING IN PAKISTAN

Child trafficking in Pakistan is indeed a significant issue fueled by a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and political factors, as you've outlined. Here's a deeper look at these contributing factors:

Poverty and Unemployment

There are several root factors pushing children to be trafficked and these include extreme poverty and unemployment also one of the biggest which we must tackle in society as whole nation are ending up in poverty due to unemployment and child trafficking in Pakistan. As poverty levels are very high across the country, several families are unable to meet their most basic needs. Desperation leaves them open to traffickers as it makes them thirsty for better conditions to survive. Traffickers make promises of jobs, education, or financial support to the right answers of poor families that want a bright future. And these promises can help appear as a salvation to families already struggling and cause them to agree to send their son or daughter away believing that this will leave their lives better (Kanwel & Ayub, 2023). Yet often these children end up in forced labor, domestic servitude, or sex trafficking, rather than the opportunities they were promised. In the most desperate of situations, families who are simply unable to provide the most basic of needs may be driven to "selling" their child into either labor or an early marriage in the hope that it will help ease the burden of their financial woes. The impacted family members consider this substantial decision only if there are no other options available portraying the harsh economic hardship behind such a decision. Youngsters forced into these systems suffer from extreme physical and emotional abuse, deprivation of an education, and potential psychological damage intergenerationally. But solving this foundational problem goes beyond alleviating poverty and

developing the economy; it means giving specific help to families that are more susceptible. This is why social safety nets, access to employment, and education can prevent these harsh decisions from needing to happen in the first place, protecting children from potential exploitation (Yousaf, 2018).

Political Instability and Regional Conflicts

The crisis of child trafficking is compounded by political instability and conflict between neighbors of Pakistan. Parts of the country that are rife with insurgency or conflict—especially the border regions and conflict-prone areas in the resource-laden Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces—lack effective governance, coupled with high levels of international migration, thus, creating an enabling environment for traffickers. Weak or insufficient government presence in these regions invariably results in law enforcement being unable to reach those most at risk so they lack the protection they need, while traffickers can provide themselves with almost total immunity from prosecution. These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by forcible displacement due to conflict. When whole families must vacate areas where there is conflict, their housing situation is lost, their livelihood, their support and they are displaced to the extent that those resources built in their respective areas have failed them (Kanwel et al., 2023). This volatility raises the chances of children being lost from their families or being marked for traffickers who exploit their removing. Upon displacement, traffickers can take advantage of pulling apart families by pretending to take children away to provide a safe, education, or job perfect opportunities — only to bring them back into labor, sex, or trafficking. Some traffickers force children to adopt roles in drug trafficking or other forms of organized crime exploitation (Jabeen, 2016).

Also, displaced families, especially those of them in refugee camps or informal camps, commonly come across obstacles to education and healthcare. The lack of provision of essential services pushes children to be forced to work in hazardous places where they are open to traffickers, too. Traffickers operate within these dangerous climates and may also utilize violence as a threat, ensuring that fear plays a role in the vast cycle of exploitation. Tackling child trafficking in regions facing political upheaval demands an integrated response involving enhanced law enforcement, intensified humanitarian assistance to families displaced by violence and conflict, use of regional treaties to stabilize zones of conflict, and the forging of new global treaties, if necessary, to enhance the prospects for regaining stability. Safe housing, food, education, and psychological support for displaced families can prevent the risk of children being forced to work in dangerous conditions, which makes them prime targets for traffickers (Kumar, 2015).

Cultural and Traditional Practices

Some of the cultural and traditional practices in Pakistan, especially in the rural areas and marginalized communities, are a contributing factor to trafficking of children by legitimizing particular forms of exploitation. In bonded labor, families are tied into a cycle of debt repayment that ensures children go to work in agriculture, brick kilns or domestic servitude in extreme conditions of exploitation. Despite their illegality, such arrangements are widespread but poorly enforced and lack publicity and debts are common to be inherited from one generation to another. In some areas, families marry off daughters at young ages due to cultural norms and economic hardship — but the practice exposes girls to abuse, domestic servitude, and lifelong exploitation, working and other forms of forced labor; often viewed as a way to protect honor or lighten the family financial load, early and forced marriages are just as common as work (Kanwel & Shah, 2024). Besides, families suffering from poverty can also be tempted to employ the children on the basis of debt, organization or landowners to send children to work to repay the debt which will make the children work in critical and risky conditions, denying the children of their education and their rights. These deeply traditional practices are also difficult to counteract, and so they require culturally appropriate responses in the form of campaigns to raise awareness, education within the community and dialogue with local leaders. Such harm can be avoided with legal and financial support for indebted families, and more vigorous enforcement of anti-trafficking laws to

discourage the exploitation of vulnerable families and help communities move away from bad practices (Dhakal Adhikari & Turton, 2020).

Weak Legal Enforcement and Corruption

Although Pakistan has explicit anti-trafficking laws, ineffective law enforcement and corruption seriously undermine the ability of national authorities to combat child trafficking, in many remote and rural areas. Laws abound to prosecute traffickers, but issues such as resource difficulties, lack of police training, no anti-TIP (trafficking in persons) expert units, etc., are evident, hindering the laws from being easily enforced. The problem is also aggravated by the corruption in law enforcement where traffickers pay off authorities to not file charges against them or they simply leverage their personal connections to avoid arrest; this facilitates their continued ability to operate with impunity (Kanwel et al., 2024). Justice is elusive for victims and their families, who often contend not only with law enforcement's failure to focus on traffickers but also pressure to withdraw cases or remain silent. That massive socialism creates a sense of impunity for traffickers, who believe they can commit these crimes without facing consequences, and it traps victims in the cycle of exploitation. Bringing faith in the law that will be enforced on trafficker will only become successful if the law enforcement will not only rely with a firm legal enforcement but free from special treatment which will only strengthen the trafficking practice (Arslan, 2020).

Lack of Education and Awareness

Lack of awareness can also be blamed because as we are talking here about vulnerable communities in an underdeveloped country like Pakistan where there is hardly any access to education and schools amongst most of the population. Children that are being denied an education not only are closing the doorway to their own futures, but they are also closing the door to knowledge, and without this knowledge they are more vulnerable to the tricks and schemes that traffickers use, becoming easy prey. Education gives children the skills they need to think critically, forms support networks and creates safe employment opportunities, all of which weakens a person's risk of exploitation (Kanwel et al., 2024). But in several poor communities, schools are scarce, and people drop out often for economic, gender and cultural reasons. This is worsened by the lack of information currently circulating about the potential risks of trafficking, victims' rights and available support resources for families. At present, many families looking for better work either do not know what trafficking is or how others target them to trap their young children, unaware they could be sending them to their doom due to a false promise of a job or study prospect. This complacent goes relaxer your children to traffickers, knowing that the community is not aware of the fact. Building access to education and initiating local awareness campaigns can move in the right direction to strengthen the communities that can save children and establish environments that are less susceptible to trafficking (Ul-Haq et al., 2020).

Gender Discrimination

Short term sentence on child trafficking risk because of gender discrimination in Pakistan particularly for girl. In a few communities, cultural customs and poor economy spoil families to consider girls as their future liabilities and reserve the best resources such as education and healthcare regularly for boys. Seeing girls as costly members of the family can lead to marrying girls off early, as the earlier the girl is married off, the less the family must spend on her and the family honor can be secured. Tragically, early marriage can increase the risk of exploitation, with girls caught in violent homes or in abusive domestic work situations. Other times, families in need will place girls into labor arrangements that are notoriously underregulated and are exploitative. Similarly, the fact that girls are usually valued less leads to low investment cost in education and capacity development to improve resilience against trafficking. Absence of education and social support means that girls are voiceless and unaware of their resources and rights, hence they become easy prey for traffickers masquerading as employers or marriage agents. Avoiding this problem quickly calls for a change in public attitudes and policies that

promote equal opportunity for girls — inclusive education and neighborhood outreach will assist women make choices and end up being less at risk of being trafficked in return for bride or otherwise (Marchetti & Palumbo, 2021).

These complex, interrelated factors create a challenging environment for tackling child trafficking in Pakistan. Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted approach, involving poverty reduction, legal reform, education, and public awareness campaigns to protect vulnerable children and families.

Forms of Child Trafficking in Pakistan

Child trafficking manifests in various forms, each with unique exploitation methods:

Sex Trafficking

Sex trafficking is an essential and heart wrenching aspect of child trafficking in Pakistan where children, mostly girls, are subjected to exploitation at national and international level. Traffickers use deception to attract victims, exploiting the desperation of poor families and communities with false promises of jobs, education, or marriage. In other instances, traffickers operate through networks, cutouts helping them get children to hubs where they are compelled to sexual servitude. They are exploited by rowdy hotels and pimps but soon enough the traffic will drive into the behind-closed-doors, unseen and unregulated market where traffickers will make money selling children in dark and horrible places. Such abuse causes immense physical and mental harm to victims while also getting them stuck in cycles of violence and marginalization — which it makes it almost impossible for survivors to return to life. Its secretive characteristics, along with the absence of law enforcement, and negative views of the subject, makes it more challenging to notice and rescue its victims. Addressing the issue of child sex trafficking involves tough law enforcement, the need for international cooperation, raising community awareness, and having support systems available for those who have been victimized in order help them recover and rehabilitate into society. It is just as important to tackle the underlying issues that lead children to be susceptible to sex trafficking, including poverty and a lack of education (Gul et al., 2022).

Forced Labor

Forced labor, specifically bonded labor, is a prevalent and grossly ubiquitous reality in Pakistan, with children being exploited in agriculture, brick kilns, and domestics. Children are forced to work in these sectors in extremely inhumane conditions, either to pay off family debts or due to deals that their parents would have made causing children to fall into the cycle of debt. In agriculture, kids are exploited to work long hours when they must deal with dangerous pesticides, tough weather, and scanty food, rest or pay. In brick kilns, likewise, children do hard and dangerous work and are regularly treated badly by their employers as they may say that the children are working in lieu of the family debt. Another type of forced labor is underground servitude, whereby children (mostly girls) work in homes and act as maids but are instead exposed to long hours of household chores or face physical mischiefs as well as mental torture and psychological abuse with a minimal chance of being set free from this enforced slavery. These children are often deprived of education, basic rights and a chance for a better life. Bonded labor, while banned, continues to be prevalent because of poor enforcement of laws, ignorance amongst families who are most at risk, and rampant corruption. Fighting slavery means improving legislation and enforcement, providing education and resources to vulnerable populations, and safe options for families trapped in the cycles of poverty and exploitation (Zahid, 2023).

Organ Trafficking

Child trafficking does unfortunately happen, and it is not in order of magnitude as other forms of trafficking (e.g. for forced labor or sexual exploitation) but it has a reason in Pakistan where poverty among families rips them off their children and endangers them for organ use. Traffickers take advantage of this desperation by tricking families into believing that their son or daughter may receive medical treatment, or receive money, or some sort of opportunity that will help them end up living a

better life and attempt to convince them to abdicate their children to these traffickers. In extreme circumstances, they are kidnapped or purchased for organ harvesting, and have their organs taken and sold on the black market, resulting in death or life-long damage to the child. These kids are often sold to underground clinics or illegal medical centers where they are exposed to unregulated, unsafe practices. This exploitation is facilitated by poverty reality, inadequate accessibility to basic health efficient systems, and lack of knowledge amongst families themselves. Although this type of trafficking does not happen as often as labor or sexual trafficking, it is even more devious because it directly damages the child and his or her life. By fighting against organ trafficking through stricter enforcement of laws, better awareness of the associated dangers by vulnerable communities, improved actions to combat the illegal organ trade, and a wide-ranging commitment to root causes such as poverty and access to healthcare (Tunio & Somroo, 2024).

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND POLICY RESPONSE

Then, on the other hand, with the enactment of laws like the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, Pakistan is trying the best in the possible fields to combat trafficking of people, labour, sexual exploitation, organ harvesting and other forms of abuse; in this way, the legislation protects the rights of women from trafficking. The law outlines several forms of trafficking, victim protection, and trafficker penalties. It has become an important weapon in the country's anti-human trafficking strategy on the national and transnational dimensions. The government has also been involved in both regional and international cooperation to enhance anti-trafficking efforts. The rationale behind these partnerships — with the likes of the United Nations and bordering nations — is to improve information-sharing, develop norms and practices for protecting victims, and advance cross-border cooperation to address trafficking networks. These partnerships are created to create a single approach to trafficking, knowing that trafficking is a global issue that needs to be worked together to track and catch traffickers (Pulla et al., 2018).

However, implementation of these anti-trafficking laws remains uneven, which hampers their effectiveness. Economic one of the significant problems is lacking implementable of this law on bureaucracy. This includes the absence of training for law enforcement officials, poor resources and a poor infrastructure to handle trafficking cases effectively. Furthermore, government agencies responsible for different aspects of trafficking (e.g., police, border control, and social services) frequently do so in silos, with little coordination between them. This piecemeal strategy often leads to leaving gaps in identifying trafficking victims and human trafficker prosecution. Also, law enforcement corruption can also contribute to the problem, with traffickers bribing officials to evade prosecution or even assist the trafficking process. Often, this role of facilitating corruption erodes the capacity of the legal system to safeguard victims and prosecute traffickers (Rahman, 2018).

In order to effectively meet these challenges and improve coordination mechanisms to bolster a multi-agency legal response to trafficking, Pakistan must attract greater synergetic efforts of diverse actors dedicated to combating the trafficking trend. It could be accomplished through including dedicated anti-trafficking units in law enforcement, designated specialized training of officers, and assignment of officers who ideally would be trained to handle trafficking cases. Equally as important, law enforcement agencies must also strengthen accountability measures, as well as address corruption, so that traffickers can be prosecuted, and victims can find justice. Ensuring access of victim support services like shelters, legal assistance, and rehabilitation programs helps survivors to reintegrate into society and prevents their re-victimization, which is another important components for successful implementation of legal framework. Public awareness campaigns are also essential to educate communities about the dangers of trafficking, enabling people to identify and report trafficking activity, and building a more conscious and watchful society. Fighting against human trafficking in Pakistan requires a more comprehensive approach that combines rigorous legal enforcement mechanisms with support for victims, coordination between agencies, and public education (Khan et al., 2023).

CHALLENGES IN COMBATING CHILD TRAFFICKING

Several obstacles hinder Pakistan's ability to effectively tackle child trafficking:

Law Enforcement Issues

Deep-seated corruption bedevils Pakistan's police and judiciary, crippling efforts at arresting and prosecuting traffickers, as well as bending police to assist traffickers rather than protect victims. In many instances, law enforcement and court officials collude in trafficking or fail to intervene because they have been bribed, they are under political influence or some other form of corruption. And in these circumstances traffickers are able to take advantage of these weaknesses by bribing police officers to ignore their enterprise or even also collude with networks. Corrupt officials can affect court processes too, meaning cases can be dropped or traffickers freed as a result of political or financial pressure. The absence of accountability from law enforcement and the judiciary encourages traffickers who can repeat the cycle of exploitation without the fear of facing justice (Warria et al., 2015).

As such, corruption and ineffectiveness in the courts establish an atmosphere of impunity, in which traffickers are not prosecuted for their offenses, and victims seldom receive a fair trial or sufficient protection from harm. Even if survivors do emerge, they frequently encounter other difficulties in the justice system, such as fears of reprisal or re-trafficking. They also intimidate or bribe the victims to withdraw their complaints, while the police are also reluctant to investigate or detain them because they themselves involved or indifferent to the crime. These problems significantly diminish the overall effectiveness of current anti-trafficking legislation and consequently many traffickers successfully evade prosecution, allowing the cycle of exploitation to continue (Rafferty, 2016).

Corruption within law enforcement and judiciary needs thorough reforms addressing oversight, transparency and accountability. It is also important that police and judicial personnel receive special training on human trafficking laws and how to protect victims. Also, anti-corruption initiatives targeting law enforcement and judiciary are essential to restoring public trust and ensuring that traffickers are prosecuted. Effective and just anti-human trafficking in Pakistan cannot be achieved without strengthening the legal system and rooting out corruption at every level (Khan et al., 2021).

Lack of Victim Support

The absence of services around victim support however is a critical hurdle we face in terms of responding to the issue of trafficked children in Pakistan. We have laws that punish the traffickers and offer protection to the victims but the rehabilitation and reintegration services for these trafficked children are limited. Many of the victims who have been forced into prostitution, after they get rescued, end up with no proper psychological support, medical support or social support. Specialized care: young children, often, have experienced horrible physical and emotional external body trauma from the effects of being trafficked whether it be for forced labor, or sexual exploitation. But there are few rehab centers and shelters in Pakistan that can offer this kind of care, and most are underfunded. Absence of proper settlements leaves several survivors without safe housing, health care or injury counseling services to help them overcome their psychological scarring in their wake (Usman et al., 2021).

Moreover, along with scarcity in physical and mental health care happens to trafficked kids, heaps of trafficked kids have a ton of trouble in reintegration into society. Many have been out of school for long periods and are thus educationally disadvantaged and are mostly unable to develop or for that matter pursue a stable means of living. Lack of this educational backing or vocational training would prevent these children from securing decent and gainful employment, thus increasing their chances of re-trafficking or exploitation. Additionally, the social stigma associated with being a trafficking victim can lead to social rejection, which further complicates efforts made by survivors to rebuild their lives (Usman et al., 2021).

The absence of this support is also present in the legal procedure. Though children can technically get

legal assistance, many trafficked young people are without any form of legal representation or help in the judicial process, and as a result susceptible to exploitation and re-trafficked. They will not be able to seek justice if they do not have legal support, so they need it. In others, families may not know that their child has legal entitlement, or, what they must go through to protect and rehabilitate their child (Khan et al., 2020).

Pakistan should have developed comprehensive victim support programs that encompass immediate and long-term protections in various forms, that is assistance in form of short-term shelter or medical care and rehabilitation state services such as education, vocational training, psychological counselling and legal assistance. Such services should cater to the wholistic needs of victims of trafficking, enabling them to rebuild their lives and reintegrate as functioning and contributing citizens. Further, partnerships with NGOs and international organizations may be effective to build capacity of victim assistance systems and ensure that national authorities can provide proper support for victims to recuperate and prevent re-victimisation (Khan et al., 2020).

Stigma and Social Isolation

The undue stigma society inflicts on trafficked children — especially girls who have been sexually exploited — and the subsequent ostracization represents incredible hurdles to their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Once trafficked, children forced into sexual exploitation in Pakistan suffer extreme social ostracization, viewed as stained or dishonored by their very communities. Due to cultural taboos surrounding sexuality and victimhood, this societal stigma can hinder survivors from seeking help or reconstructing their lives. Trafficked children — most often girls — are frequently afraid to speak out about their experiences, terrified of being blamed for their circumstance or stigmatized as damaged goods. It can be equally true for their families, who may also experience stigma for feeling ashamed, guilty, and not managing to protect their children, making it even more difficult for victims to get the support services they require (Kanwel et al., 2020).

Stigmatization and vilification of trafficking victims and their families also discourage them from reporting trafficking cases in the first place. Many victims are too afraid to reach out because they are terrified of being treated like criminals, instead of the victims that they are. The distrust of law enforcement, eroding moreover by corrupt practices in the justice system, makes this fear worse. Because of this, trafficked children remain in a limbo that does not allow them to escape their ghosts of trauma or their past to reclaim a safer and more secure future (Khan et al., 2023).

These challenges are compounded by social isolation. Children who have been trafficked often face challenges reintegrating into their families or communities after their ordeals. Experiencing such trauma within themselves and receiving rejections most of the time plummets them to feel worthless, hopeless and depress. This can greatly impede their emotional recovery and ability to function normally. Others may find it hard to return to formal education, or work, because of the psychological damage caused or the lack of education and skills while held captive (Kanwel et al., 2023).

Combating the stigma and social isolation that trafficked children experience means fundamentally changing how society perceives victims and survivors and calls for a compassionate response to those in need of care. Understanding that many who may have been in this situation will react in a way that causes trauma – and if there is ever a film about this topic that needs to be shared, a blanket of public education campaigns ensues to eradicate the myths surrounding trafficking. It will also bring up safe spaces for survivors where they can heal within a non-judgmental rehabilitation center or a support group. Communities too need to be aware that victim protection was important - survivors should not be blamed or ostracized for crimes committed on them. A society that combats the stigma and provides supportive spaces for trafficked children to heal will allow them to move on without the baggage of shame and loneliness (Khan & Kanwel, 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION

- 1) Strengthening Legal and Institutional Frameworks: Pakistan should continue to strengthen its legal system to ensure stricter penalties for traffickers and comprehensive support for victims.
- 2) Enhancing Public Awareness and Education: Awareness campaigns targeting at-risk communities can inform families about the dangers of trafficking and promote safe migration practices.
- 3) International Cooperation: Pakistan's collaboration with other countries and international bodies, such as the UN and IOM, should be bolstered to prevent cross-border trafficking.
- 4) Economic Empowerment Programs: By addressing root causes such as poverty and lack of education, the government can reduce children's vulnerability to traffickers.

CONCLUSION

The issue of child trafficking in Pakistan is complex, driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, cultural, and legal factors. As outlined in this research, poverty, political instability, gender discrimination, weak law enforcement, lack of education, and societal stigma all contribute to the alarming rates of child trafficking in the country. While Pakistan has made strides in developing a legal framework to combat trafficking and engaging in international collaborations, these efforts are often undermined by inconsistent enforcement, corruption, and a lack of comprehensive victim support systems. Trafficked children, especially those subjected to sexual exploitation or forced labor, not only suffer physical and psychological trauma but also face profound social isolation and stigma, further complicating their recovery and reintegration into society. To address these challenges, several key actions are required. First, there is an urgent need to strengthen law enforcement agencies, ensure better inter-agency coordination, and tackle corruption within the police and judiciary. Implementing specialized anti-trafficking units and providing regular training for law enforcement officers will help ensure that traffickers are held accountable, and victims are protected. Additionally, expanding victim support services, including safe housing, psychological counseling, education, vocational training, and legal assistance, is essential to help trafficked children rebuild their lives and prevent re-trafficking. Public education campaigns and community outreach programs are also crucial in addressing the stigma surrounding trafficking survivors and promoting a culture of empathy and support.

Looking ahead, future research should focus on several critical areas. First, more studies are needed to explore the root causes of child trafficking in specific regions of Pakistan, as regional and cultural factors may require tailored interventions. Additionally, research into the effectiveness of existing anti-trafficking laws and victim support services can provide valuable insights into where improvements are needed. A deeper understanding of the role of corruption in trafficking networks and its impact on enforcement is also an area for further investigation. Finally, exploring the experiences of trafficking survivors post-rescue, and identifying the most effective methods for their reintegration, will help to ensure that long-term recovery is achievable. Ultimately, the fight against child trafficking in Pakistan is a multifaceted issue that requires coordinated efforts from government agencies, non-governmental organizations, international partners, and local communities. By addressing the root causes of trafficking, strengthening legal protections, and providing comprehensive support to survivors, Pakistan can take significant steps toward eradicating child trafficking and ensuring the safety and well-being of its children.

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